

Improving Performance in the Multilateral Humanitarian System: New Models of Donorship

Patrick Saez, Lewis Sida, Rachel Silverman, and Rose Worden

Abstract

The humanitarian system has undergone three series of reforms over the past couple of decades, with mixed results. Multilateral agencies play a central role in the system. Faced with the prospect of growing humanitarian needs as a result of conflict, climate change and pandemics, the elusive quest to improve their performance continues. Yet while donors agree on the benefits of a strong multilateral system to respond to humanitarian crises, they diverge when it comes to measuring performance and providing financial incentives. A political economy defined by co-dependence and information asymmetry complicates the picture. Donors should unbundle their funding of different multilateral functions and measure their performance accordingly. Commonly agreed core functions and capacities should be supported by a greater proportion of core rather than earmarked funding. Performance of these core functions should be measured using multi-donor assessments and functional reviews. Independent measurement of outcomes should be linked to pooled mechanisms that would channel a significantly greater proportion of funding earmarked to specific crises.

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1. The multilateral humanitarian system and the elusive quest for performance

Humanitarian action broadly defined is often local—led by governments of countries struck by disasters, local civil society organizations, and people in crisis themselves and their immediate support networks. When national and local capacities are overwhelmed, international humanitarian organizations often provide support. Since the aftermath of World War II, multilateral institutions, their primary donors, and several large international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have loosely consolidated into the contemporary ‘international humanitarian system’. Multilateral agencies, particularly of the United Nations (UN), play a specific role. Specialized UN agencies, funds, and programs—each mandated by member states to address particular needs under specified circumstances—have expanded their operational capacity and geographic scope over time, in accordance with shifts in the political, economic, and security landscape (Annex 1). Agencies have developed expertise and adopted common technical standards to carry out their mandates, buoyed by international frameworks including the UN Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, the 1951 Refugee Convention. In turn, member states have increasingly relied on the mandate, expertise, and impartiality of the UN system and the Red Cross Movement to respond to a growing number of complex emergencies.

Despite the system’s documented success in mitigating the impact of some of the worst humanitarian crises,¹ varied complaints from donors, advocates, governments, and the media about the system’s performance have been pervasive and persistent.² These have ranged from general grumblings about inefficiency to more pointed charges of mismanagement, corruption, and abuse. Donors have periodically withheld funding in response to real or perceived performance issues, and sometimes conditioned funding on reforms or performance improvement.³

The humanitarian sector has undergone a series of reform processes aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness—both for the system as a whole and for its constituent agencies (Box 2). The roughly 5-year cycle of reforms since the passage of GA resolution 46/182 has aligned with major crises that prompted system-wide reflection and consolidation within the sector. The most consequential has been the roll out of humanitarian clusters and pooled funds, developed after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, and rolled out in response to the 2005 earthquake that struck Kashmir and Pakistan. Subsequent crises and evaluations have

¹ See for instance evaluation of the Rohingya refugee response at: <https://www.unhcr.org/5e453ea64.pdf> and Sida and Schenkenberg, “Synthesis of Rohingya Response Evaluations of IOM, UNICEF and UNHCR”; Sida et al., “Independent Evaluation of UNHCR’s Emergency Response to the Rohingya Refugees Influx in Bangladesh August 2017– September 2018.” <https://www.unhcr.org/5c811b464.pdf>

² Overseas Development Institute (London and Humanitarian Policy Group, *Cluster Approach Evaluation Final Report*. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy_files/Cluster%20evaluation%20final.pdf

³ United Kingdom, “Multilateral Aid Review 2011.”

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224993/MAR-taking-forward.pdf

yielded similar conclusions regarding the efficacy of the cluster system. A review of the Tsunami response noted that international agencies tend to formal arrangements at the national rather than local level.⁴ Effective strategies to 'localize' humanitarian response, increase accountability to affected populations, and improve partnerships between multilateral agencies and national/local organizations remain elusive and are the focus of contemporary reform efforts.

The most recent round of reforms, known as the Grand Bargain, was launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 in response to rising conflict, protracted crises, disasters exacerbated by climate change, and pandemic threats. The Grand Bargain brings together some of the largest donors and aid agencies around nine shared commitments, including more predictable and flexible funding; increased transparency; reduced duplication and management costs; more support to national and local actors; greater use of cash as a modality; joint and impartial needs assessments; and better participation of affected populations. Thus far, however implementation of the Grand Bargain has been slow⁵—and, as with previous rounds of reform, has done little to change perceptions of suboptimal “performance” from donors and advocates.

In this policy paper—and within the broader context described below—we draw from the literature and stakeholder interviews to explore how donors seek to influence and improve performance of the multilateral humanitarian system. We first seek to understand how donors define and measure “performance”; and subsequently, how they seek to influence or improve different dimensions of “performance” using funding conditionalities, formal governance structures, and other potential leverage points. We consider the political economy of the broader humanitarian sector and discuss how perverse incentives may slow or preclude performance improvement. We conclude with a set of recommendations to address observed challenges and improve the overall efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness of the system and constituent agencies to evolving humanitarian challenges.

Methodology

Our findings and recommendations draw from a literature review, a round of key informant interviews and two virtual workshops. We consulted with 22 institutional representatives of donors (8), UN and red Cross agencies (6) and NGOs and independent experts (9). We sought to interview representatives from the largest donors to capture perspectives on how the bulk of humanitarian resources are channeled and performance managed. We targeted donor and organizational representatives who are involved with managing relationships between institutions, the focus of the research. The independent experts we interviewed had extensive backgrounds working on humanitarian and development finance issues.

⁴ Tsunami Evaluation Coalition -TEC, *Synthesis Report and Thematic Evaluation Set*, 28.

⁵ Metcalfe-Hough et al., “Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2020.”<https://odi.org/en/publications/grand-bargain-annual-independent-report-2020/>

We deliberately limited the scope of the research to focus on the relationship between the most active humanitarian donors and UN agencies. Interviews were mainly conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, which limited the capacity of some potential interviewees to participate, particularly representatives of affected governments and local civil society organizations. However, this paper is also informed by consultations and findings from CGD’s broader project on humanitarian reform,⁶ which include all types of informants.

2. Paying for the humanitarian system: A handful of donors hold the purse strings

Humanitarian multilateral agencies are a complex mixture of funds, programs and specialized agencies all governed in different ways, and subject to different funding models and accountability structures. Overall, the multilateral humanitarian system is primarily funded by member states, through two channels:

1. Core, unearmarked funding; and/or
2. Bilateral funding through multilateral humanitarian organizations earmarked to specific crises, regions, countries or projects.

Donors channel most of their funding (roughly two thirds of OECD DAC humanitarian funding) through multilateral agencies. Importantly, the vast majority of this funding comes as voluntary contributions, subject to donor discretion, rather than assessed contributions, which are mandatory from all member states and which usually goes to fund core administrative support.⁷ Only 14% of voluntary contributions are core, unearmarked, with the rest earmarked at some level.⁸ Two percent of funding to the multilaterals also passes through so called ‘pooled’ mechanisms, including Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).

⁶ Center for Global Development, “Rethinking Humanitarian Reform: Toward Demand-Driven Action | Center For Global Development.”<https://www.cgdev.org/project/rethinking-reform-toward-demand-driven-humanitarian-action>

⁷ Development Initiatives, “Effectiveness, Efficiency and Quality.”<https://www.devinit.org/publications/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2019/effectiveness-efficiency-and-quality/>

⁸ <https://www.devinit.org/documents/776/Global-Humanitarian-Assistance-Report-2020.pdf>

Table 1. Sources of funding for seven UN agencies and programs

	Institution	Voluntary contributions	Assessed contributions ⁹
Funds and Programs	UNICEF	100%	N/A
	WFP	100%	N/A
Specialized Agencies	WHO	83%	17% ¹⁰
	FAO	61%	39% ¹¹
Other entity	UNHCR	98%	2% UN Regular Budget ¹²
Secretariat Office	OCHA	95%	5% UN Regular Budget ¹³
Related Organization	IOM	94%	6% ¹⁴

Note: The ICRC and IFRC are not multilateral institutions so do not receive assessed contributions. Their funding is 100% voluntary. Other UN agency members of the IASC beyond the scope of this research include the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), and UN Habitat.

Despite its explicit multilateralism, a notable feature of the system is its heavy reliance on just a few large donors. The US, UK, Germany, and EU institutions together account for over two thirds of total resources for most agencies (Figure 1). Within this group, the US dominates—providing 33 percent of total humanitarian finance in 2020, 42 percent of total donor contributions to UNHCR and 43 percent to WFP. A handful of smaller donors, including Sweden, Japan, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland, also provide regular support to the system; their cumulative contributions are substantial, but individually they are likely to have less direct financial leverage.

⁹ The UN Regular Budget is funded with assessed contributions.

¹⁰ World Health Organization, “Audited Financial Statements 2019 (A73/25).”<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/10665339656>

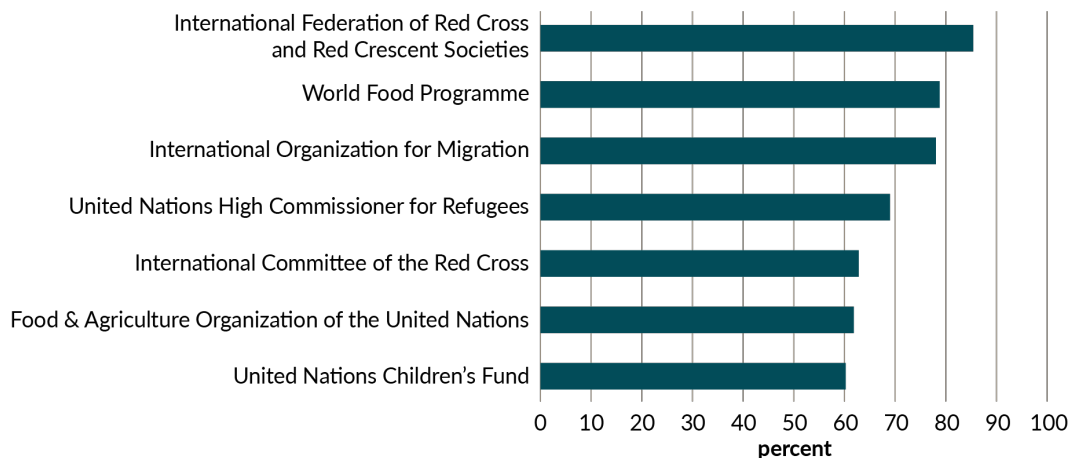
¹¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Strategic Planning | FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.”<http://www.fao.org/about/strategic-planning/en/>

¹² <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Global%20Funding%20Overview%2031%20December%202019.pdf>

¹³ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “UNOCHA Funding.”
<https://www.unocha.org/funding>

¹⁴ International Organization for Migration, “C/111/6—Programme and Budget for 2021.”
<https://governingbodies.iom.int/system/files/en/council/111/C-111-6%20-%20Programme%20and%20Budget%20for%202021.pdf>

Figure 1. 2020 Paid and committed contributions as a % of total
Funding from US, UK, EU institutions, and Germany



Source: Data is taken from FTS OCHA database: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Total Reported Funding 2020 | Financial Tracking Service.”

These twin forces—first, heavy reliance on voluntary, largely earmarked contributions; and second, the outsized contribution of a handful of large donors—shape the overall functioning of the humanitarian system and how individual donors engage with it. In the next section we consider the approaches donors use to improve system performance within the context of their respective financial contributions and leverage.

3. The diffuse approaches to measuring and influencing performance of the multilateral humanitarian system

Donors deploy a range of strategic approaches and donorship models to influence the humanitarian system and achieve agency and system-level objectives. We categorize approaches to performance and accountability measurement/management into four broad buckets, which we consider and discuss in turn:

1. Individual agency accountability to governing boards and donors,
2. Project-based performance measures,
3. System wide performance measurement, and
4. Outcome measurement.

Individual agency accountability to governing boards and donors

Donors can seek accountability from individual humanitarian agencies via conditionalities or requirements on core contributions, and/or via their participation in formal governance structures. All humanitarian multi-laterals (HMLs) are ultimately accountable to their respective governing boards. UN agency boards are comprised of a broad set of UN Member States where donors are present but do not have a dominant share of the membership. Southern states, including countries where the agencies operate, have an equal representation.

OCHA, as part of the UN Secretariat, is ultimately accountable to the UN General Assembly and thus does not have a dedicated governing board. A donor support group (ODSG) composed of the 30 largest donors to OCHA meets annually and acts as a ‘sounding board’ and a source of advice on policy, management, budgetary and financial issues. Discussions include a review of results, but the group is not a formal accountability mechanism.

States are not members of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. However, agencies in the Movement meet with States party to the Geneva Conventions every four years for an International Conference. Its main purpose is to deliver joint commitments, not to act as an accountability mechanism. Both ICRC and IFRC have established donor support groups functioning in a similar way to OCHA’s.

Donor-specific accountability

A persistent challenge in achieving individual agency accountability via boards and agency-wide funding conditionality lies both in defining and measuring “performance.” A 2002 study found donors disagreed on how to define or measure performance and observed that donors tend to view accountability in a narrow sense as it pertains to finance.¹⁵ In practice, performance management of individual agencies is cobbled together from a patchwork of different reporting and accountability approaches.

Several donors we interviewed manage this tension by imposing donor-specific reporting and performance measurement, even when supplying core funding. These frameworks underpin dialogue on performance between the donor and the agency. The degree to which they are bespoke varies greatly from one donor to another and within the same donor, from one agency to the other. Priorities against which results are measured can range from a selection of the agency’s own priorities that are particularly important to the donor, to areas where the donor wants to see change or reform. Reform priorities are sometimes linked to non-core funding.

For instance, the US provides flexible but geographically earmarked funding to UNHCR, while also measuring progress against reform priorities.¹⁶ Only the UK attaches measurable financial consequences to the achievement of predetermined targets. This donor provides core unearmarked funding to UN humanitarian multilaterals, ICRC and IFRC but requires reporting against bespoke reform targets linked to reform priorities; some funding is conditioned under a “payment by results” approach.¹⁷ Bespoke arrangements generally

¹⁵ Donal Cronin and O’ Regan, *Accountability in Development Aid*, 2002, 5. In 2002, the *Ireland Aid Review* defined the concept of accountability in a narrow sense, as “value-for-money, impact assessment, and the strengthening of financial and domestic reporting mechanisms.”

¹⁶ US Department of State / PRM, “US State/PRM-UNHCR Framework Agreement.” <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201210-US-Framework-Full-Agreement-508.pdf>

¹⁷ UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, “Humanitarian Reform of the United Nations through Core Funding (2017–2020).” <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300339>

demand a greater level of results information from agencies, typically in the form of results frameworks (or logical frameworks).

Scrutiny of multilateral performance depends to a large extent on the capacity of each donor. The US, ECHO, UK, Switzerland for instance have large numbers of program management and technical staff in headquarters and in missions abroad to oversee their multilateral and bilateral funding to UN and Red Cross agencies. This includes triangulating performance reports with in-country observations. Others, such as the Netherlands, rely on much smaller capacities.¹⁸

Agency regular self-reporting

Other governments provide multi-year, core, unearmarked funding without requiring donor-specific performance reporting. Sweden is the largest practitioner of this approach; others include Belgium and Canada. These types of funding arrangements generally rely on the UN agencies' own reporting—primarily in the form of annual reports. Public annual reports thus serve as a primary accountability mechanism for at least some donors; they are also one of the few ways that external observers/the general public can understand agency performance.

While the form of annual reports varies across agencies, all feature a high-level set of results, often arranged around corporate strategic objectives or functional departments. Though not explicitly stated, a critical examination suggests that they are intended to serve primarily as fundraising tools by positively showcasing agency results and discussing resource needs and gaps. Most results are aggregated at a very high regional or global level and show large-scale reach (see table 2 for selected examples).

Table 2. Selected results from UN multilateral annual reports

UNICEF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition: 1.5 million children treated for severe acute malnutrition. • Health: 3.4 million children vaccinated against measles • WASH: 14.2 million people accessed safe water for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene
WFP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 97.1 million beneficiaries reached through WFP food and CBTs. • 17.3 million school children reached through school feeding interventions • 17.2 million people reached through malnutrition prevention and treatment programs.
UNHCR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refugee status determination: 2.3 million new and appeal asylum applications were registered globally (including 120,000 by UNHCR). • Shelter: 116,527 people of concern received emergency shelter.

¹⁸Taylor and Harvey, “Review of the Netherlands’ Humanitarian Assistance 2009-2014.” <https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/406-iob-overview-study-dutch-humanitarian-assistance-humanitarian-outcomes.pdf>

Although this is not the only reporting of results within annual reports, it is the most prominently featured. Some agencies do go into more detail on what might be termed outcome measurements—for instance WFP discusses its food consumption scores in several (although not all) of the country sections, although it does not link these explicitly to program interventions.

Internal audit

Probably the most robust system of scrutiny for the UN humanitarian multi-laterals, and the UN in general is the audit and independent oversight function. All the agencies discussed here have internal audit departments that routinely carry out inspections of country operations. These are rigorous and independent and taken extremely seriously within the agencies.¹⁹ They are much relied on by donors as a result; their willingness to expose uncomfortable truths leads to confidence and trust.²⁰ The same is true to a lesser degree for the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) which carries out inspections, evaluations and audits²¹.

Donor-led corporate performance assessments

In addition to both general and donor-specific results reporting, some donors either commission or seek insight via organizational assessments of corporate performance. The Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN), a network of 19 donors launched, conducts a rolling set of assessments of the organizational effectiveness of multilateral organizations on behalf of its members. Humanitarian multilaterals were included as such in 2011. The MOPAN underlying theory suggests that a well-performing organization will produce better results, and so an assessment looking at systems, practices and behaviors will be a good proxy for humanitarian and development effectiveness. MOPAN considers five key areas: strategy, operations, relationships, performance management, and results²². Evaluation of this final performance area—results—relies exclusively on secondary data, primarily using an organizations' own evaluation reports and results reporting.

MOPAN assessments have been complemented by formal, publicly available corporate assessments from individual donors, probably originated with the UK's Multilateral Aid Review (MAR) in 2011, which considered institutional performance measures such as governance, strategy, procurement, value for money and so on, against the strategic fit with the UK's priorities. Similar approaches have since been adopted by other like-minded donors, although they have not all been made public.

¹⁹ See for instance the 2016 JIU report on internal audit functions: https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2016_8_English.pdf

²⁰ Internal audit report documenting misuse are quite often cited in the press. See for instance a recent FT report on allegations of corruption in UNDP: <https://www.ft.com/content/054a529c-e793-489b-8986-b65d01672766>

²¹ <https://oios.un.org/node/26355>

²² "MOPAN | Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network. <http://www.mopanonline.org/ourwork/themopanapproach/>

Agency-commissioned evaluations

Evaluation reports offer a final element of individual agency performance measurement. Practice varies widely across agencies. Typically, multilateral agencies include an evaluation office that examines a rolling set of issues. Evaluations cover a huge variety of topics—there are individual project evaluations, response-wide evaluations, thematic evaluations, evaluations of functions, and so on. Some agencies, such as WFP, consolidate evaluation evidence and learnings into a single annual report; others do not. Some organizations have decentralized evaluation practice, with Country Offices or Regional Bureau commissioning most evaluations; others host a centralized commissioning authority. Some present evaluations to their boards, while others do not. None of the humanitarian multilaterals have independent evaluation offices, a practice that has changed in recent years (previously some evaluation offices reported directly to boards, bypassing agency management). The quality of evaluations is highly variable, as are the methods used and the degree of uniformity required.

Project-based accountability to funders

In addition to performance management at the agency level, donors also seek to drive performance of the individual projects they earmark for funding.

The most used tool for project-based performance management is the logical framework or ‘log frame’, also known as a “results framework.” It suggests a logical progression where inputs lead to outputs, outcomes, and impact. Agreed best practice suggests that reported results should be concentrated at the higher end of the logical progression (e.g., outcomes and impact). Yet in practice most results reporting focuses on lower-level results (activities and outputs), which are more easily measurable and more clearly within the implementing agency’s control.²³

Donors internally score projects and may discontinue underperforming long-term commitments, but do not appear to systematically account for the performance of cumulative investments in a particular agency or sector, although some donors might do so internally, particularly if they centralize all funding to an agency. If such efforts exist, they are not always publicly available and aggregated. MOPAN assessments remain the only framework for multi-donor performance measurement for humanitarian multilateral organizations.

In addition to regular project reporting, donors often require project or program evaluation by a third party as a condition of their funding support. Some donor agencies further draw on this evidence base to support wider conclusions about agency performance. However, there is no equivalent for response-wide performance, or sector-wide performance. Donors may also require project-specific financial reporting and/or audit reports.

²³ Dillon, “Breaking the Mould: Alternative Approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation.” <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/breaking-the-mould-alternative-approaches-to-monitoring-and-evaluation>

Though donors typically require project-specific results reporting, the link between such reports and funding decisions is loose and indirect. Most donor projects use input-based financing, where disbursements are linked to disbursement rates rather than achievement of the results; in theory, poor performance against the log frame could result in project discontinuation or a lower likelihood of project renewal, but such decisions are reportedly rare and mostly made on an ad hoc basis.

System-wide performance

Abstractly, the performance of any individual agency or project cannot be fully assessed in isolation; its success in contributing to humanitarian goals and objectives depends on its contribution to the broader humanitarian system, with constituent parts working collaboratively and with complementarity to deliver for people in need. Yet donors rarely measure and analyze system-wide performance as an accountability strategy.

There are a few partial exceptions or efforts to consider system-wide operations and approach. The humanitarian multilaterals most obviously come together in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Chaired by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), it comprises all the major UN agencies active in humanitarian operations, as well as the Red Cross and Crescent family and NGO coalitions. The IASC makes collective strategic and operational decisions and sponsors several thematic workstreams, but it steers clear of performance-related issues. Likewise, the humanitarian segment of ECOSOC debates policy but not performance.

In recent years, the OCHA-led Global Humanitarian Overview has evolved from a fundraising appeal to a more strategic document; it attempts to both define global humanitarian need and convey the system's global reach. Its final chapter offers high-level, system-wide figures on the number of people reached and services delivered. These figures are exclusively output-oriented. Forthcoming MOPAN assessments are due to consider some aspects of system-wide operations, but so far appear to focus on implementation of development coordination reforms versus the humanitarian system and/or outcomes/impact.

Prior to 2012, an IASC consensus suggested that larger emergencies should be subject to system wide evaluations—so-called “real time evaluations” (RTEs), although they typically took place at least a year after the debut of the emergency. For the two (arguably) most significant emergencies of recent times up to that point—the Rwandan genocide and the Indian Ocean Tsunami—the ‘system’ agreed to subject itself to extraordinary evaluations organized by the Danish development Ministry.²⁴ These evaluations were large in scale and

²⁴ For the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR), see various ODI blogs at: <https://odihpn.org/blog/twenty-years-on-the-rwandan-genocide-and-the-evaluation-of-the-humanitarian-response/> For the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, see: <https://www.tsunami-evaluation.org>

ambition and had a major impact on the policy discourse once delivered. However, these were the exception rather than the rule, and not every response was subject even to an RTE.

In 2012 a system of Operational Peer Reviews (OPR) was introduced. Managed by the Peer-To-Peer Support Project (P2P, formerly Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team or STAIT), it was pitched to surface ‘lessons learned’. Under the OPR approach, a group of senior, experienced UN humanitarian inter-agency staff would be convened to visit an ongoing Level 3 humanitarian response, understand the issues, and suggest areas for improvement. The framework for analysis was loosely structured on transformative agenda themes. Recently, ‘Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations’ commissioned by the IASC have also looked at the performance of the inter-agency response within the first year of a scale-up activation. Evaluation reports are addressed to the Emergency Directors Group. The evaluation reports and management responses from the EDG are made public.

Aside from these periodic evaluations, the only other system-wide tool for performance measurement is the State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) exercise run by ALNAP, an evaluation network. The SOHS was introduced in 2010; now in its fourth iteration, it has evolved to incorporate additional metrics and sources including ALNAP’s extensive humanitarian evaluation database; bespoke surveys; key informant interviews; and some data (usually on financials).

Whilst not exclusively system-wide performance focused, in recent years a healthy ‘ecosystem’ of technical measurement agencies, approaches and datasets has sprung up, partly in response to the gaps discussed above. Agencies like ACAPS and REACH have worked to improve independent needs assessment, developing the tools and methods as well as building robust datasets. Famine early warning systems such as FEWSNET and IPC provide data on food insecurity, from early warnings to trends over time. Ground Truth has developed innovative work on seeking the views of affected populations. Development Initiatives produce their annual Global Humanitarian Assistance report. Some of these have grouped together to form a network called H2H, and collectively the various information systems and change initiatives provide the potential for a more rounded picture of system performance.

Outcome measurement

Almost all humanitarian emergencies inspire studies, research, and data collection exercises that look at outcomes. However, these are not systematically organized or commissioned, and as a result vary from response to response; nonetheless, they have the potential to collectively offer a reasonable picture of whether humanitarian action has been effective.

One reliable metric is typically data on malnutrition and the nutrition response, which is often one of the major issues facing populations and especially children. Nutrition operations usually take baseline data—often at a population level using statistically robust methods (SMART surveys)—and then periodically retest the population to see whether or not nutrition levels are improving. Nutrition agencies also record reliable data on numbers attending nutrition clinics, their improvement trajectory (or otherwise), and other metrics

such as drop-out rates. Typically, these measures will be held at the cluster level—more or less capturing system-wide nutritional status. In countries like Ethiopia where malnutrition has been a long-standing concern, ministries of health maintain national datasets drawing on thousands of clinics with nutritional services.²⁵ These datasets are also longitudinal, meaning there is potential to see the impact of various types of interventions. WFP has also evolved and routinely deploys strong measurement of food security, using data such as household debt as a proxy for coping.

Health and epidemiological data is also relatively robust. Where communicable diseases are potentially life-threatening the national Ministry of Health, the health cluster, WHO, or another knowledgeable health agency (for example UNHCR or UNICEF, will typically designate a number of diseases for regular monitoring; health posts will report case counts on a weekly basis, allowing the system to identify and respond to outbreaks. This system is called EWARNS by WHO and DEWS by USAID. Once again, this offers a rich data source for understanding the impact of the system-wide response to a humanitarian emergency. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)²⁶ is another such system with major potential for understanding outcomes and impact (see below for more on this).

A practical example where communicable disease outcomes and impact can be linked to interventions—and therefore performance of the humanitarian system-wide response—is prevalence of diarrhea and cholera (where endemic). The epidemiology is well understood, and health interventions can be mapped onto case data, telling us a rich story about how the system is performing. Mortality is more difficult to record accurately when national institutions are weak or absent but can also be estimated.

Evaluations will sometimes analyze this outcome data to inform conclusions about performance. This is neither systematic nor guaranteed. There is little or no link between this type of outcome/impact data and the results reporting described in prior sections about agency or project performance. And perhaps because of the complexity involved in taking country-based systems and combining them to tell a story about globally mandated agencies, there is as yet no system that attempts to link agency performance (and especially financing) to these types of outcomes or impact. Of course, there are also many variables outside agencies' control that affect population-level outcomes, meaning any such attempts to link outcomes with agency or system performance would require careful contextualization.

A final approach to note, mostly by its fledgling nature, is to use perception or satisfaction surveys among the intended beneficiaries of humanitarian intervention. These are gradually being attempted, both at the project and response level, but are not yet at a level of coverage

²⁵ Ethiopia probably has the best example of nutritional data and associated household food security data from the bi-annual joint government-UN assessment. However, many national governments in the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa have good data, and in South Asia this is even more true.

²⁶ Integrated Food Security Classification System, “IPC Overview and Classification System | IPC Global Platform.”<http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/ipc-overview-and-classification-system/en/>

or reliability to robustly assess system-wide performance.²⁷²⁸ Organizations like Ground Truth Solutions are pioneering these approaches; initial efforts show significant promise in better illustrating performance, especially when combined with social media.

4. What do donors want? It's complicated

A main confounding issue with performance measurement, underpinning the fragmentation noted in preceding analysis, is that donors are not consistent in what they ask of multilateral agencies. Our interviews revealed significant divergence between donors with respect to their expectations and needs, resulting in mixed messages for what the humanitarian multilateral system needs to deliver.

Where donors agree

To be clear, our interviews also revealed major areas of donor consensus, albeit with different levels of emphasis. First, the positive: all donors we spoke with share a common objective to save lives and alleviate suffering in crises. They also have a common imperative to account for the use of taxpayer money, and thus broadly pursue efficiency and effectiveness in delivering humanitarian outcomes. Most donors support a rules-based international order; using the multilateral agencies as their principal humanitarian partner is thus symbolic of their support for the existing international architecture. As member states of the UN they have a stake in the UN agencies and are thus committed to their success. Some smaller donors in particular articulated their support for the multilateral system as part of a broader foreign policy strategy; they believe the rules-based international order offers a degree of security against larger nations who might not otherwise be constrained. Put simply, support for the multilateral system is often a high-level foreign policy and national security imperative, not a narrow investment decision based purely on performance-based considerations.

A second area of broad donor consensus is that humanitarian multilaterals offer scale, reach and legitimacy. Organizations like WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR have large scale supply chains and can deliver goods and services at a volume simply not available to individual donor agencies or smaller organizations (large INGOs are also able to deliver at scale). Because the crisis-affected countries are also members of the UN, these agencies are also well-placed to work with host governments. Their perceived legitimacy thus offers several practical benefits, ranging, for example, from expedited import procedures for humanitarian goods to technical support in key ministries. This legitimacy can often also be an umbrella under which national organizations from donor countries can operate, especially in sudden onset emergencies where time is critical.

²⁷ Konyndyk and Worden, "People-Driven Response." <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/people-driven-response.pdf>

²⁸ van Praag and Sattler, "Humanitarian Practice Network." <https://odihpn.org/blog/everyones-doing-stuff-but-nobodys-accountable-will-grand-bargain-2-0-set-us-right/>

The reach afforded by the UN can also be attractive to donors without a bilateral footprint in a particular geographical area. Funding the UN allows for a donor country to contribute to the humanitarian effort, however distant it might be. Even quite modest funds are enough for a country to be considered a participant in the humanitarian response, which may be desirable vis-à-vis a domestic audience. Much humanitarian action is driven by public support in the donor countries. Having a ready-made outlet to relieve domestic political pressure to act is useful, especially when the alternative might be both costlier and more difficult to get right.

Donors also appeared to have a “soft” consensus on the importance of the UN’s and Red Cross’ normative role on humanitarian issues, i.e. the development and monitoring of norms and standards. In interviews, donors acknowledged the importance of this function, yet when pressed were relatively vague in their expectations and lacked clarity on how these functions should be financed. As with support for the rules based international order, performance within the norm-setting and enforcement role is difficult to measure. How should success in child rights or refugee protection be measured, and over what period? How to account for delicate behind the scenes advocacy in annual reporting?

There are also areas where donors are united in their frustration. The two frustrations most frequently cited in our interviews were 1) lack of transparency (by the UN system, primarily about finances but also the detail of results); and 2) the ability of humanitarian multilaterals to effectively pass funds through to partners (see below for more on this). Both of these will be explored in the latter sections.

Where donors diverge

Alongside these areas of relative consensus, there are also areas where there is less donor consensus or outright divergence. Perhaps the most significant area of divergence relates to policy priorities. This is also the area where donors are most active, leading to greatest fragmentation.

Most donors prioritize specific issues among their biggest policy goals. These are often dictated by elected politicians overseeing the aid budget, although they can also be enduring issues such as gender equality. As different political leaders take charge of aid budgets and ministries, so new initiatives are born and promoted—for example, girls’ education, disability, value for money, or psychosocial and mental health. All are extremely important issues. Some such issues find their way into multilateral governance processes, leading to consensus to make progress. Others are promoted via funding, often leading to specialized units within multilateral agencies. Yet without donor consensus it is difficult to achieve traction on a long list of policy goals, and commensurately difficult to measure progress against them.

Other areas where donors told us they diverge in interviews were:

- Geographical prioritization/resource allocation priorities: several donors give priority to certain countries or regions that they consider to be within their ‘area of influence’. Others give precedence to objective measures of need when allocating resources.
- Organizational and financial reforms: different donors put varying levels of emphasis on reform objectives related to results-based management; reducing management costs; decentralization/localization; speed/responsiveness. This is often (but not only) related to the issue(s) they have taken the lead for as part of the Grand Bargain.
- Localization and accountability to affected populations are given different levels of emphasis by different donors.

5. The political economy of co-dependence

The picture painted so far in this policy paper is one of donors being supportive of multilateral agencies but pulling them in different directions. Yet this overly simplistic picture elides the complicated dynamics between donor agencies and their multilateral counterparts, who often are united in a de facto relationship of mutual co-dependence. It is obvious that multilateral agencies rely on donors for the discretionary funding that enables them to mount humanitarian responses, fulfil their mandates, and pay staff salaries. Less obvious, but nonetheless deeply impactful, are the many ways in which donors rely on the multilateral agencies. Donor dependence on the multilateral agencies is reflected across several different dimensions.

At the institutional level, donor agencies need vehicles through which to spend their funds and therefore fulfil their own mandate and mission. As discussed above, multilateral agencies work at scale and can manage onward disbursement of funds on behalf of their donors. Their ‘blue chip’ status as safe and financially sound partners offers a low-risk option for large-scale donor spending. Even better, accounting rules allow money disbursed to UN agencies to be considered “spent,” contributing to that year’s ODA tally. In contrast, contributions to NGOs can only be considered “spent” once they file financial reports. Delays in implementation and subsequent reporting can thus lead to major accounting complications. This combination—scale, low risk, and reliability of disbursement—can often make multilaterals the only realistic option for donors.

Donors also use the multilateral system to leverage their individual contributions into a larger, collective whole. This means that they seek and encourage contributions from other donors to the same agencies, thereby helping fund a more comprehensive humanitarian response. Other donors are more likely to sustain and expand their contributions if the overall program/response is perceived as effective; this imperative for collective action discourages any public recognition of performance deficits, and indeed encourages each donor to positively represent agency performance.

At the individual and more operational level, there is a principal-agent tension between individual donor representatives and the stated interests of the entire agency. Individuals may be interested in expanding their bureaucratic power, easing their personal workload, and advancing their own career interests within donor agencies; the steps taken to do so may not be fully aligned with the agency's institutional interests.

First, bureaucratic power is often determined by budgets: the larger the budget, the larger the influence of a particular department or manager. To maintain large budgets, donor representatives know that funds need to be spent down; if not, unspent budgets will be clawed back and likely subjected to cuts in subsequent years. Individual representatives may thus have a strong interest in funding UN agencies to effectively dispose of their budget and maintain their institutional power.

Second, individual donor representatives are subject to personal performance reviews and metrics based on the perceived performance of their respective portfolios. Performance criteria often include disbursement rate, which adds to the overall institutional pressure to fully disburse against budgets and likely serves as a strong disincentive from withholding funds. Donor representatives also have an interest in positively portraying results achieved from their investments/portfolios, which in turn positively reflects their own performance as managers, and thus a disincentive from identifying, highlighting, or penalizing performance deficits among the multilateral agencies they manage.

Third, it may be easier and safer for individual donor representatives to disburse funding via the UN system than directly to local responders. There is a common business axiom that “no one ever got fired for hiring McKinsey”; McKinsey is considered the safe choice, even if the firm may or may not deliver business value. In the humanitarian system, the multilateral agencies are the McKinsey analogue; performance of the investment may vary, but the program manager would never be penalized for their selection. And in addition to being relatively “safe”, funding the UN is also relatively easy. The UN works at scale and funding can therefore be disbursed in large chunks, implying a smaller volume of grants to negotiate, reports to review, administrative procedures to follow, and so forth—and thus a relatively smaller workload and associated administrative costs.

Most importantly, all stakeholders have a strong vested interest in achieving and reporting “good” results and strong “performance.” This does not necessarily lead to data manipulation, nor does it imply that people within UN agencies or donor agencies are less diligent or scrupulous in their work. Yet it is important to recognize the clear incentive for all parts of the system to understand and present a positive picture of interventions, agency, and system performance. This includes aid ministers, who want to assure taxpayers that their money is well spent. Over time, this helps elevate reporting that promotes the positive narrative while deprioritising inconvenient counterpoints, especially in contexts where evidence is scarce and multiple confounding factors make it difficult to say anything with certainty.

This co-dependence has evolved over time and is now deeply embedded. Donor agencies and the main humanitarian multilateral agencies have become deeply intertwined, connected

by years of co-evolution. Various leadership positions within the UN system are *de facto* controlled by specific powerful member states, and core staffing is made up on a national allocation basis.

This deep inter-connectedness is likely to complicate any reform efforts. Major changes in the architecture of the UN humanitarian system would leave donor structures necessitating change too; put another way, vested interests within donor agencies may resist change just as vested interests within the multilateral agencies do the same. This applies equally to the way that performance is measured. For example, introducing cross-cutting, system-wide metrics might threaten departmental budgets tied to specific agencies.

6. Information asymmetry and the “illusion of control”

While donors are often incentivized to view results positively, aid departments are also under pressure to keep tabs on partner agencies. Several donor countries have widespread popular and political distrust of the international system, which is seen in some quarters as bloated, wasteful, captured by special interests, and often politically inconvenient. These pressures push donor agencies to “follow the money” and ensure that taxpayers receive a strong return on their investments. Whilst this could and should drive a desire for better performance measurement, in reality it typically manifests in escalating requests for implementation details, particularly about financial management.

The focus on financial management is itself a consequence of the political co-dependence described in the previous sections. If UN agencies are, “the only game in town,” then the conversation naturally becomes about how to make them better. If results are consistently reported as positive, and questioning them is inconvenient, then the focus naturally turns to efficiency and value for money.

In consultations with donors, they expressed dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of information they receive from UN agencies. Even the most “generous” and multilaterally-minded donors—those who give unearmarked “quality” funding and accept only annual reports in return—express complaints in this respect.

For most donors, dissatisfaction stems their perception that agencies are sharing only a small portion of the information available to them. Donors feel that as the “payers” they are entitled to know precisely how their funds are used and are frustrated by their inability to “follow their money.” They are also unable to disentangle satisfactorily expenditure on support costs vs. the funds that reach affected populations. This is exacerbated by the reality that most multilateral humanitarian agencies are themselves donors, parsing larger funds onward to ‘partners’, often NGOs.

In addition, donors are often frustrated by the lack of information they receive relative to their specific policy priorities, as outlined in section three. Civil servants are often under pressure from politicians to demonstrate where and to what extent these have been advanced. This requires operational agencies to record and share results by area, region, or

sub-population, e.g. disaggregated data. They are often unable or unwilling to do so to the satisfaction of each donor.

From the perspective of a multilateral agency, fulfilling donors' requests for information is complex and demanding. Each donor has different reporting requirements (both narrative and financial) reporting, driving duplication of efforts. Tracking the use of donor-specific funds becomes exponentially more complex as they are co-mingled with other funding sources and pass on to ground-level implementers. Tracking a particular donor's dollar to a particular geographical area or activity can be almost impossible unless it has been earmarked to that level, which is equally undesirable.

And despite the co-dependence outlined above, each side of the donor-multilateral relationship questions the other's motives. Donors sense agencies' desire to "hide" information and believe they know more than they share; they are particularly suspicious that they want to avoid sharing bad news or showing themselves to be poor value for money. In turn, agencies suspect that donors want to use information for control and micromanagement—for example, to get agencies to prioritize actions or particular populations in line with a political objective.

Whatever the merits of these perceptions, the information asymmetry between operational agencies and donors is an immovable reality.²⁹ Operational agencies are doing the work on the ground and can access informational details about those same operations. The same holds true for financial data. Whether or not the agencies record income and expenditure in donors' preferred format, they have internal systems to receive and spend the money so must at least record detailed information on those transactions, even if those data remain largely unanalyzed. Even if the UN agencies threw open their books and made all this data available to donor agencies, most or all would struggle to parse and analyze it due to lack of capacity. Currently, however, carefully negotiated agreements do not require UN agencies to share this detail and changing this would require such agreements to be revised.

It is perhaps the information asymmetry itself—and donors' implicit or explicit recognition of the power imbalance—that drives their frustration. This has led to what one interviewee described as the "illusion of control," wherein donors place ever-greater demands for information in a futile effort to correct this imbalance.

In economics, one way to address information asymmetry in markets is to pay for outcomes (results) without getting involved in the detail of how these were achieved.³⁰ This is most effective for simple transactions where the customer is only interested in receiving a particular service or good, e.g. construction of a fence. The customer and supplier agree to a price, and payment is made once the good or service is delivered.

²⁹ The idea of information asymmetry first appeared in, Akerlof, George A. (1970). "The Market for 'Lemons': Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. The MIT Press.

³⁰ Contract theory is derived from Akerlof's original work on information asymmetry and looks at various models to optimise the relationship between Principal (those commission work) and Agent (those implementing it).

A more sophisticated variant of this thinking has recently found its way into public policy and development financing. Results based aid (RBA) and Results based financing (RBF) and its many linguistic variants—cash-on-delivery, outcome-based financing, payment by or for results and so on—has become a standard operational approach for some types of development programs.³¹ RBF is now being trialed in humanitarian multilateral financing by the UK, although the experiment is still in its early days.³²

RBF has been hypothesized to work for projects with a clear and measurable desired outcome paired with a sufficiently strong incentive.³³ However, there is no evidence that such an approach works for more complex goals. Imposition of RBF on multilateral agencies would at minimum require clarity and agreement among donors about a shared outcome (which is limited); a credible threat of withholding funds (which does not exist); and an agreed and transparent way of measuring outcomes (which again, does not exist).

7. A chicken and egg problem: More and better money vs. better performance

A recurring theme throughout the discourse on donor policy and agency performance is the question of whether there is enough money in the system. This is a polarizing issue and is used as an argument by both sides to make their case. Crudely, agencies say that there is insufficient money in the system to do the bare minimum; further, existing funds are given in such a complicated, fragmented, and prescriptive way that they fall short of achieving their potential. Donors, in contrast, contend that appeals are unreliable, and it is impossible to say whether the funds are sufficient because of opaque reporting.

Although there is a general consensus that needs continue to outstrip resources, the impasse is compounded by a dearth of objective information. One of the absolute fundamentals in determining whether there is enough money in the system should be the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance, but until recently this figure was not even recorded. Since the WHS in 2016, the OCHA Global Humanitarian Overview has started to tally this figure, but the numbers remain highly subjective. More complex data on the severity, duration, and prioritization of needs hardly exists, despite prioritization via the Grand Bargain process, as well as considerable financial and political backing.

Moreover, improving this data has proven difficult because of competing visions of the limits and purpose of humanitarian action. At heart is a tension between an expansive view of humanitarianism that looks to safeguard people's rights, and a minimalist view of humanitarian financing as "off-government" support to be deployed via international organizations when governments are either unwilling or unable to help. These competing versions of humanitarianism make a solid count of humanitarian 'needs' almost impossible,

³¹ See for instance Rita Perakis and William Savedoff (2015). Does Results-Based Aid Change Anything? Pecuniary Interests, Attention, Accountability and Discretion in Four Case Studies.

³² See for instance: <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300339> And also recent ICAI report on this approach at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/html-version/humanitarian-reform/>

³³ See for instance, Clist (2017). What works for payment by results mechanism in DFID programs. UAE.

although it is undeniably the case that there is massive unmet humanitarian need. Although resolving the technical issues around a better ‘count’ of humanitarian need would not make the resources magically appear, it would at least be the basis for a better conversation—donors would find it more difficult to argue about financing gaps if there was highly regarded and widely verified data.

Beyond the quantity of financing is the question of “quality” financing that could more effectively support humanitarian responses. The Grand Bargain did not define ‘quality financing’ precisely, but it did set out the parameters. These include:

- Reduced earmarking
- Reduced reporting, and
- More use of flexible, multi-year funding frameworks.

While the last of these has improved in recent years, the first two have, if anything, regressed. This speaks to the issues outlined in preceding sections of this policy note. Donors—especially big donors under political pressure to prove the worth of internationalism—feel they cannot afford to reduce earmarking because without it they will not get needed information.

This has led to a curiously back-to-front incentive system. Agencies give the lowest amount of information at the lowest frequency to the donors who are providing the highest ‘quality’ funding. The most demanding donors—those who earmark and demand ever more detail, ever more prescriptively—are rewarded with an exclusive treatment consisting of relatively rich information and higher agency responsiveness.

Some of the respondents to this research have argued that different donors currently get what they require from the system; those content to give quality funding do so because they believe quality funding makes the system work better. Those that need to “follow the money” earmark and get the information needed to keep resources flowing. In this argument the system is as optimal as it can be.

However, the proportion of ‘quality funding’—core unearmarked funding along with other variants such as pooled funding, and multi-year ‘flexible’ funding, is still too low to affect the overall financing picture. The Grand Bargain workstream on quality funding concluded in their annual report for 2020 that “the volumes currently provided fall well short of the critical mass required to drive change.”³⁴ Multi-year funding, pooled funds and new financial instruments constitute a single figure percentage of the overall humanitarian envelope. This

³⁴ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, “Enhanced Quality Funding (Increase Collaborative Humanitarian Multi-Year Planning and Funding and Reduce the Earmarking of Donor Contributions) | IASC.”<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-06/Workstream%207%268%20-%20Grand%20Bargain%20Annual%20Meeting%202020%20Statement.pdf>

is not enough to shift behavior, nor is it enough to accrue the sorts of benefits that might prove quality funding more effective than bilateral, earmarked grants.

8. Theory of change

Our key hypothesis set out in this review of multilateral performance in humanitarian contexts, is that performance measurement remains suboptimal. This is eroding the trust in the system and leading to ever greater demands for information. An achievable set of adjustments to measurement, reporting and financing could reverse this trend, not only improving trust in the system, but potential enhancing impact as well.

Another hypothesis is that if the multilateral agencies were clear about the outcomes they were trying to achieve, and progress against those outcomes could be measured objectively, then donors would have more confidence in the performance. More confidence in the outcomes being achieved by the system would translate into less demand for detail and more stable financing overall.

One key principle runs through our proposed theory of change: to improve performance, and performance measurement, donors should unbundle their funding of humanitarian multilaterals by function. Instead of pre-determining which multilateral agency they should be funding based on the legacy of co-dependence outlined above, donors should first outline the humanitarian outcomes they want to contribute to, unpack the functions required to achieve those outcomes, and only then determine which partner is best placed to perform those functions.

The multilateral humanitarian agencies are currently funded to perform an aggregation of different and sometimes conflicting functions. Some functions clearly fall within their comparative advantage, some might have been artificially spurred on by their cluster lead roles and the dominance of earmarked grants as a financing model.

- **‘Core’ functions:** in addition to support functions such as those related to management, communications and fundraising, these may include the normative functions of some UN and Red Cross agencies, including 1) their role in developing and monitoring legal norms and standards; 2) the role of OCHA in supporting the leadership, coordination and financing in the response; and 3) the role of cluster lead agencies, but also the responsibility of agencies—theoretically as providers of last resort—to maintain capacity to surge personnel and equipment, to maintain stockpiles of predictable inputs, and to provide common emergency procurement pipelines and logistics services. At the country level, core functions should also include needs analysis, prioritization and targeting.
- **‘Intermediary’ functions:** The multilateral agencies and pooled funds allow bilateral donors to pool funds, make allocative decisions and manage risks on their behalf, acting as an intermediary between them and frontline actors whom they often do not know or trust. Currently this function is mainly carried out by

operational UN agencies (as opposed to pooled funds) who, as part of their sectoral programs, channel resources to the activities of international and local NGOs.

- **‘Delivery’ functions:** at the country level, these relate to implementation itself, and monitoring. Currently these are usually all performed by the same agency which raises concerns related to accountability.

A better arranged, more predictably financed system would ensure that core multilateral capacities and functions are sustained: UN agencies, OCHA, ICRC and IFRC must be able to maintain core capacities and deliver their mandated functions in a predictable and cost-effective way.

When it comes to delivery, funding allocation should ultimately be driven by accountability for humanitarian outcomes. This can be achieved if the definition and measurement of crisis-level outcomes improves. One way to improve the quality of outcome measurement is to make it an independent function.

The intermediary functions should be rebalanced away from single-mandate agencies so that funding reaches a broader set of local responders more quickly, according to priority needs and comparative advantage defined locally.

To achieve these changes, this paper recommends three areas for action. These mirror policy proposals made in another CGD paper that looked at broader reforms humanitarian financing:³⁵

- **Independent outcome measurement:** reversing the information asymmetry through outcome measurement, especially if this is independent. Better outcome measurement would allow for delivery models to be compared and lead to greater understanding of the costs and risks of different delivery strategies. One principle is clear: performance measurement must be conducted by a third party, not the implementing agency, to facilitate independence and meaningful accountability. Better outcome information would allow for program interventions that worked to receive future investment, and those that were less optimal to gradually be phased out. This would be in contrast to the current system where the competitive nature of funding drives agencies to “sell” their solution, and the co-dependence discussed earlier often leads to that solution being funded. At a minimum there needs to be greater transparency and comparability of some key metrics.
- **A core funding compact:** offering core financing for core functions could help reduce the perverse incentive in the current system that larger delivery portfolios mean more sustainable organizations, leading to agencies expanding the scope of

³⁵ Saez, Konyndyk, and Worden, “Resourcing the Humanitarian Public Good: Towards a More Effective Humanitarian Financing Model.”

their areas of intervention. The aim here would not necessarily be to reduce levels of funding to specific multilaterals, but to provide a greater proportion of their funding as multilateral/unearmarked to support their core functions and capacities, rather than earmarked for in-country delivery. Guaranteeing more predictable core funding has the potential to make the multi-lateral humanitarian agencies less dependent on securing delivery contracts to pay overheads, and as a result less reluctant to measure performance transparently. With core, mandated functions funded more predictably, the multi-lateral agencies would be less compelled to compete for funds, and more likely to play the objective role of determining needs and whether these were met.

- **Rebalancing pooled delivery models at the country level:** pooling donor funding, in a variety of possible ways, has the potential to achieve a broader set of objectives and a wider scale and reach. Currently resources are mostly channeled through large multilateral agencies that combine all functions, but only within their mandate or the sector they coordinate. Donors should instead channel a majority of their country-earmarked funding through pooled mechanisms that can allocate resources across a range of sectors and to a broader ecosystem of frontline responders. UN-managed country-based pooled funds are an immediately available choice to do this but flaws in their current design should not restrict ambition. Multi-donor cash programs that fund delivery separately from assessment and monitoring functions have been tested and could be replicated. More flexible pooled funds able to provide multi-year, multi-partner grants to a broader range of actors, including where appropriate local government or private sector, could also be explored. More transparent performance and cost metrics would allow for such systems to evolve optimally.

We outline each of these proposals in following sections.

Assumptions:

One overarching assumption underpinning any future change in humanitarian donorship models is political will. Options for change in the financing of the multilateral humanitarian system exist but are limited by the factors discussed in this paper, in particular the co-dependence between bilateral donors and MHAs. The proposed options do not necessarily require radical structural changes. Changes in donor models along those recommendations can be implemented more or less completely depending on the will for change in donor agencies.

In particular, the proposed changes assume that donors are willing to invest in the core mandated competencies of the humanitarian multi-laterals as global public goods. This would see a reverse in recent trends of increased earmarking and results monitoring at the country level. Similarly, we assume that donors are willing to test delivery models that deliver to frontline responders more efficiently, even if it means shifting some resources away from their longstanding multilateral partners.

An equally significant assumption is that the agencies would be willing to offer more financial information about what constitutes core functions in exchange for such predictable finance. The current business model is deeply entrenched and such changes could be seen as disruptive and resisted as a consequence.

A lesser assumption is that a meaningful system of outcome measurement can be constructed—either with the humanitarian multilaterals, or independently of them. This area offers the most promise as it can be started modestly by individual donors or groups of like-minded donors in pilot countries. This would also be the least disruptive to ongoing operations.

Investing in independent outcome measurement

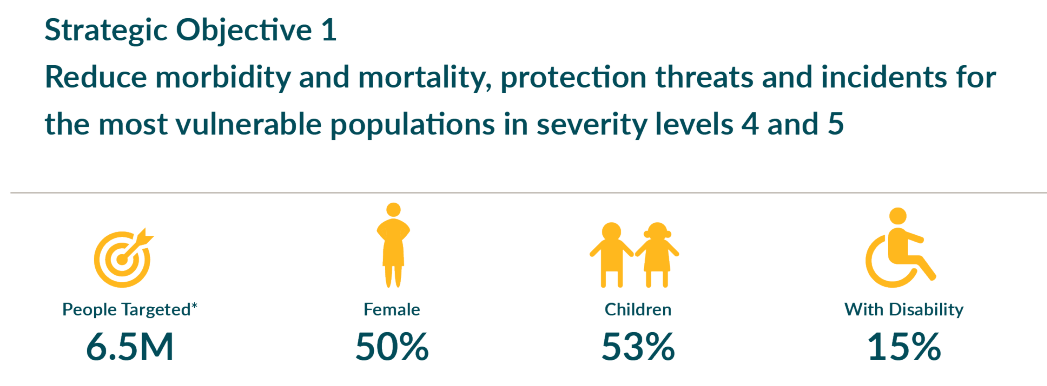
The current system of performance measurement is not so much flawed as fragmented. The fragmentation is driven by historical precedent and a kaleidoscope of competing rationales and aspirations for the multi-lateral system. Taking a step back, there are broadly two sets of metrics that define the performance of the system. First, there are what we are calling ‘outcomes’—the degree to which identified problems are addressed. Without knowing if identified problems have been adequately addressed, donors and those affected cannot be sure the system is working for the people it serves. Second, there is organisational effectiveness, which encompasses efficiency and value for money. As mentioned earlier, donors—in particular through MOPAN—have made more progress on measuring the latter than the former.

This paper has already made clear in its analysis that performance measurement (as distinct from organisational effectiveness) currently exists on several levels—from project to system—and largely is organised by agency (following the money). Moreover, it is a jumble of different types of measurements, most often counting items purchased and delivered, or training completed rather than what the effect of this has been. These are most often called inputs and outputs. As we have seen there are also systems in place to measure changes in the population, such as levels of malnutrition, which very much count as outcomes. In fact, as this paper has also set out, many other outcomes are measured, but those measures are not routinely connected to the projects and programmes run by agencies and funded by donors. And where they are connected, there is very rarely any attempt to combine outcome measures to build a holistic picture of system performance.

The system of UN humanitarian appeals is highly illustrative of this reality. These have become increasingly strategic and sophisticated in their analysis of needs. Each country appeal is underpinned by a Global Needs Overview (GNO) that sets out who is in need, and what the relative severity of these needs are. There are also outcome metrics of the type called for here in the GNO and often in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). However, when it comes to measuring how well agencies have done on these metrics, there is almost no information. Appeals have a few figures summarising ‘number of people reached’ in the previous year, but no detail on how the outcome metrics were met or otherwise. Nor could we find this detail buried in other information products.

The South Sudan humanitarian appeal demonstrates this challenge clearly. This HRP is coherent, well formulated, strategic and a good example of the improving quality of these appeals. However, two graphics reveal where outcome measurement is a challenge. First, the metrics: strategic objective 1 is reproduced below (figure 2). It is one of three objectives, all of which are quite clear in their formulation. The first is the most humanitarian, the second about access to basic services, the third resilience. Under the first (humanitarian) objective there are five key metrics—all of them precisely the type of outcomes this paper calls for. And yet of the five specific objectives, only two have actual targets—the rest are ‘to be determined’. Nor are the targets themselves particularly clear, at least quantitatively.

Figure 2. Strategic objective 1 and its key metrics from the South Sudan 2021 HRP



Specific objectives and people targeted

#	Specific Objective	Targeted
1.1	Reduce critical food insecurity levels for 2.58 million people across all 78 counties projected to be in IPC phase 4 and 5 at the height of the 2021 lean season (from the November 2020 baseline)	2.6M
1.2	Decrease in prevalence of global acute malnutrition among children under the age of 5 years and pregnant and lactating women in counties below [percentage] by the end of the year	TBD
1.3	Decrease excess morbidity and mortality rates from illnesses, such as malaria, diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, and vaccine preventable illnesses, such as measles, among [number] [target population] by [percentage] by the end of the year	TBD
1.4	Provide access to life-saving essential healthcare, including mental health to women, men, girls and boys, including ability-challenged persons	120K
1.5	Reduce vulnerability of people at risk of mortality and morbidity as well as protection incidents/threats in priority areas through protection monitoring, advocacy, awareness-raising and risk mitigation, including explosive ordnance clearance	TBD

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2021 (March 2021)—South Sudan.” <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-response-plan-2021-march-2021>

The summary of the response in 2020 is an issue of even greater relevance. Figure 3 shows the sole presentation in the HRP of the previous year’s response. In fact there is just one column of relevance: “people reached” which crudely tells us by sector (which is basically by UN multi-lateral agency) how many people have received some form of input. It tells us nothing of the quality or value of that input. It is just as likely that attendance at a one-hour

hand washing talk in a displaced camp is counted as ‘one person reached’ as receiving a month’s food ration, or receiving life-saving complex surgery.

Figure 3. People reached in 2020 in South Sudan

Response in 2020						
Sector	People in Need	People Targeted		People Reached	% Target Reached	Financial Requirements (US\$)
Camp Coordination & Camp Management	1.93M	804K		571K	71%	\$18.2M
Education	2.81M	806K		331K	41%	\$56.8M
Food Security & Livelihoods	6.45M	6.9M		5.04M	73%	\$817M
Health	3.60M	2.15M		3.32M	100%	\$214M
Nutrition	1.81M	1.21M		1.09M	84%	\$230M
Protection	5.74M	3.22M		1.41M	44%	\$96.5M
Shelter & NFIs	1.98M	1.21M		1.02M	84%	\$39.6M
Water Sanitation & Hygiene	5.71M	3.00M		2.06M	69%	\$170M

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2021 (March 2021)—South Sudan.” <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-response-plan-2021-march-2021>

However, looking at targets from the 2021 HRP and focusing on the principal one—that food insecurity levels for 2.58 million people in IPC phase 4 and 5 are reduced—there is in fact a way of seeing how the system has performed with regard to this target. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system has—as already touched on above—a well-regarded and robust methodology and routinely runs surveys to understand the situation in food insecure countries. South Sudan has been analyzed since 2017 and the results are available on the IPC tracking tool (table 3).

Table 3. IPC tracking tool data for South Sudan January 2017–2020

Analysis Period	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		Phase 4		Phase 5	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Jan 2020 - Jan 2020	2,545,000	22%	3,875,000	33%	4,140,000	35%	1,110,000	9%	40,000	0%
Aug 2019 - Aug 2019	1,870,000	15%	3,480,000	30%	4,640,000	40%	1,700,000	15%	10,000	0%
Jan 2019 - Jan 2019	1,805,000	16%	3,420,000	30%	4,780,000	42%	1,360,000	12%	30,000	0%
Sep 2018 - Sep 2018	1,065,000	10%	3,225,000	29%	4,320,000	42%	1,695,000	16%	47,000	0%
Jan 2018 - Jan 2018	1,860,000	17%	3,940,000	35%	4,340,000	39%	1,010,000	9%	0	0%
Sep 2017 - Sep 2017	1,580,000	15%	3,155,000	29%	3,980,000	37%	2,020,000	19%	40,000	0%
May 2017 - May 2017	2,320,000	19%	4,030,000	33%	4,015,000	33%	1,495,000	12%	20,000	0%
Jan 2017 - Jan 2017	3,505,000	30%	4,490,000	38%	3,045,000	26%	700,000	6%	80,000	1%

Source: Integrated Food Security Classification System, “IPC Overview and Classification System | IPC Global Platform.” <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/population-tracking-tool/en/>

What this clearly shows is that there is little movement between the IPC categories, with the exception perhaps being IPC 5 (the worst) where there are lower numbers and these do fluctuate over time. The target of 2.6 million in 2021 seems somewhat disconnected from the picture the data shows, but there could well be many and detailed explanations for this superficial lack of connection. Similarly, the 5 million people ‘reached’ feels a rather unanchored number—but this is the point. This paper is not arguing that the multilateral system has no impact in South Sudan, merely that the reporting of that impact is invisible. It is this, we contend, that ultimately and fundamentally erodes confidence in the system.

The South Sudan example presented here also highlights another aspect of humanitarian data: it can be highly politicized. The latest IPC designations in South Sudan were contested and fraught and a technical team from the global unit had to be deployed to resolve in-country disagreements.³⁶ Governments quite often suppress data showing the worst aspects of humanitarian needs, and this can complicate UN reporting of such data as it is an inter-governmental body and subject to the will of member states, as well as the practical considerations of staff safety. However, even these political hurdles do not have to get in the way of sensible outcome reporting, and these complexities are well understood by donors. In explaining why outcome targets might be sensitive in a particular context, the system arguably gains greater trust, rather than less.

As this example shows, the system is becoming ever better placed to report on outcomes. The outcome metrics are now being routinely specified in HRPs, and although they can certainly be improved on, they are a good basis to start. The information systems for collecting data on outcomes also exist, as demonstrated by the IPC example here. Moreover, a new system of HRP reports is already tentatively trying in a handful of cases to move beyond ‘numbers reached’ (Yemen for example attempts in its 2019 report to account—albeit at a high level—for outcomes achieved against strategic objectives).

It is this paper’s contention that a simple, trusted, system of outcome reporting will begin to reverse the trend toward ever greater demands for detail by donors. Rather than a mass of information that is difficult to make sense of, clear compelling numbers that tell a story about where the humanitarian system is making a difference, how the money going into the system achieves that difference, and which types of intervention work best will reset the relationship entirely.

In addition to system-wide monitoring systems such as IPC, many organisations have developed high quality indices and methods to measure them. WFP has already been cited for its work on coping mechanisms and vulnerability analysis. These have been used to excellent effect in Turkey whilst it oversaw with the Turkish Red Crescent the introduction of the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), the world’s largest humanitarian unconditional

³⁶ See Integrated Food Security Classification System, “South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for October–November 2020 and Projections for December 2020–March 2021 and April–July 2021 | IPC Global Platform.” <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/multi-partner-real-time-quality-review-and-famine-review-south-sudan-ipc-acute>

cash transfer. The Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise (CVME)³⁷ in particular collected trend data showing clearly how the ESSN had stopped the socio-economic situation of refugees from deteriorating. For donors, we contend, such powerful evidence that their funds are preventing suffering or stabilising challenging contexts makes it much easier to justify expenditure to their public.

Other examples include the nutrition programme in Ethiopia, co-led between the government and UNICEF that has generated a lot of solid data (although it can be hard to access); and the low incidence of diarrhoeal disease in the Rohingya camps, a solid achievement for UNHCR together with WHO, IOM and the government of Bangladesh. These are both individual agency achievements and contributions to system achievements. With time it should be possible to connect these sector approaches and data to tell even more compelling stories about success. Technically it is well known there is a strong connection between access to health services, water, food availability and nutrition, social protection even humanitarian protection and education, in contributing to overall health. For instance, outcome measurements of water quality, nutritional services and food security can be combined to tell a story about both wasting and stunting in a particular crisis or country context. While this type of outcome monitoring exists primarily at the agency level, it is not done routinely or systematically. It does not feature prominently agencies' public and donor facing reporting.

The political economy of the system discussed earlier in this paper remains a barrier. The only way to counter this is to separate outcome measurement from the delivery system. A body that can sit somewhat outside of the day-to-day pressures, can find a way to systematically build an evidence base, and to build the routines and methods that underpin this. Factors such as access, government capacity, and the mix of donors, multi-laterals and NGOs will play a part in what the optimal system might look like, as will the nature of the crisis itself. This function could be performed by OCHA or UN agencies as long as, as mentioned above, they are not involved in delivering aid themselves. In some countries, it could be performed by strong civil society organizations. The measure of independence will be that those measuring outcomes do not have an incentive to report results positively or downplay areas where little progress is being made.

Pilots could initially be designed and tested in a small number of countries facing different types of challenges, exploring what is possible in conducive environments but also in difficult contexts with unreliable data sources. id recipient feedback should be added from the outset to gauge user satisfaction alongside more technical measurements.

A relatively simple set of service delivery metrics could be developed, or existing metrics adopted. These could be arranged on sector lines with cross-sector effectiveness metrics looking at factors such as timeliness, coverage, adequacy, dignity and fairness. Contextual

³⁷World Food Programme, "Turkey—Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise | World Food Programme." <https://www.wfp.org/publications/turkey-comprehensive-vulnerability-monitoring-exercise>

and environmental factors could be taken into account. Experience could also be reviewed from NGOs like CARE and World Vision who have both experimented with global impact systems for in recent years and will better know some of the challenges and pitfalls.³⁸

Over time, it will be important to be able to compare results across crises and this could require an independent global organization pulling together country-based outcome findings and make them accessible. OCHA seems an obvious candidate to do this, but currently it needs harmonious relations with the big delivery agencies to fulfil its core coordination functions. This might hold it back in reporting where things have not gone well, an essential part of a trusted system. Such a system could start as light touch—a portal for data to be made available. Over time there would be a need for standardized methodologies and increasing lessons learned to be shared, necessitating some form of standing capacity.

Recommendations to donors:

Donors should invest in outcome measurement systems at the country level, with a view to establishing such reporting as routine both at the agency and the system wide level. This would involve:

- In a selected group of pilot countries, working with OCHA and the agencies to define SMART outcome-level objectives and indicators in the HRP and agencies country strategic plans, and design a system to collect data to measure progress against the indicators.
- In the same group of selected pilot countries, fund an independent organization or consortium to analyze the data and report it in an accessible way, including prominently in the following year's HRP.
- Consider how such country-based measures of outcomes can be aggregated at a global level, and what international entity would be the best custodian of such a system.

A core funding compact

There is a significant mismatch between what donors value from the multilateral humanitarian system and the way they finance the various functions of the system. As told to CGD during consultations, donors value the core capacity of the multilateral agencies to lead and coordinate the response to humanitarian emergencies predictably and at scale, and to deliver on their mandated role, including their normative functions at both the global and country levels. Core capacities in the humanitarian system do not only benefit aid recipients, but they are also an essential safety net in complex crises that helps minimize risks to global health, peacebuilding and sustainable development, effectively providing a global public good.

³⁸ Both systems relate to the work of the organisations, rather than the system, and both arguably suffer some of the same characteristics critiqued here (an over emphasis on reporting high 'results' numbers without the context). But both also are interesting attempts to quantify the impact of the organisations beyond simple input-output formulations. CARE's work can be found at: <https://www.careinternational.org.uk/who-we-are/our-impact> World Vision 2014 and 2015 reports can be found here: <https://www.wvi.org/child-well-being-reports>

By contrast, the way these core capacities are financed is haphazard. Unlike peacekeeping operations, core humanitarian capacities are not funded through assessed contributions from member states, with the exception of those received by WHO and FAO as specialized agencies. As mentioned earlier in this paper, UN and Red Cross agencies are primarily financed through discretionary grants, the vast majority of which are bilateral in nature, i.e. earmarked towards specific programmes or projects. This is because donors have traditionally been reluctant to be seen to be funding ‘back office’ or normative functions, preferring to direct their resources as close as possible to front-line response.

Their assumption is that doing so will guarantee that a higher proportion of their funding will reach people in need, making that funding more acceptable to legislators and taxpayers at home. As a result, core capacities, e.g. maintaining offices, procuring predictable inputs such as food or medicines or mandated normative functions (developing and monitoring international law, norms and standards, cluster leadership) are often funded using overheads charged to the earmarked, unpredictable grants. This reliance on program overheads provides incentives for large agencies to dominate delivery, undermining locally led humanitarian responses. It also makes preparedness—a key enabler of multilateral humanitarian responses—difficult.

Relevant commitments under the Grand Bargain have focused on increasing the predictability and flexibility of donor grants (donors have agreed to provide 30% of funding unearmarked or loosely earmarked) in exchange for greater transparency on how core unearmarked funding is allocated internally. These efforts have largely failed so far. As mentioned earlier in this paper, while the volume of unearmarked funding has remained relatively stable, it has decreased as a proportion of total humanitarian finance. It has remained the practice of a very small group of donors whose contributions end-up subsidising bilateral, earmarked grants from others.

This lack of progress is in part explained by the pressure in donor capitals to account precisely for how contributions are spent, which agencies find difficult to do as they often use unearmarked funding in various ways to smooth over financial gaps rather than allocate them specifically to specific costs. Some donors have also referred to the importance of agencies delivering on other commitments of the quid pro quo underpinning the Grand Bargain before they may consider increasing levels of unearmarked funding, particularly more collaborative needs analysis and programming.³⁹ Evidence that unearmarked grants lead to better outcomes is mixed. Funding provided in this way does help increase preparedness and response speed as it circumvents the need for grant applications in the early stages of a response. However, when funding is passed-on to partners it is usually often in short-term and projectized again.

There is an alternate model, focusing on aligning multilateral core funding with defined core functions. Rather than focusing on maximizing levels of unearmarked funding in exchange

³⁹Metcalfe-Hough and Fenton, “Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2019.”
<https://www.odi.org/publications/11387-grand-bargain-annual-independent-report-2019>

for elusive allocation information, this would focus instead on providing the right level of core funding to cover the right cost of core functions. The idea is that by providing adequate levels of core funding, donors reduce incentives for multilateral organizations to capture the majority of frontline delivery, regardless of their comparative advantage in a given local context. They allow multilateral agencies to focus on setting and monitoring norms and standards, maintaining preparedness and response capacities, assessing needs and coordinating the response, while delivery is done by those best placed, most efficient and most knowledgeable (which in some cases may still be multilateral agencies).

This would require identifying core functions and costing them separately from delivery. While there is no common definition of ‘core’ functions and costs across agencies, it is far from being an impossible task. For example, it would seem logical to count all OCHA activities as ‘core’, since it is not involved in delivery. When the World Health Organization stood up its new Health Emergencies Programme (known as WHE) in 2016,⁴⁰ it chose to budget for its emergency operations separately from its emergency core services—central management, financial, communications and fundraising services -, the agency’s normative, technical assistance and information management role in emergencies, and its Contingency Fund for Emergencies. This makes the price tag for the agency’s core functions much more transparent.

The quid pro quo for more predictable core funding would be greater transparency on those costs, and better measure of the effectiveness of these functions of information. Instead of each donor requiring bespoke reporting, MOPAN assessments of multilateral agencies could be adapted to serve as the main tool of donor scrutiny. Alternatively, independent systematic reviews could also be commissioned. Carrying-out these reviews across humanitarian agencies could be helpful in identifying duplications and proposing consolidating some functions wherever possible.

Ultimately, the main pre-requisite will be a commitment from donors to provide core funding. Framing core funding as resourcing efficient core functions that have been proven to provide a global public good, rather than unearmarked funds that cannot be traced to end beneficiaries, could be the key to generate the necessary political will.

Recommendation for donors:

- Increase where possible the proportion of funding to UN and Red Cross organizations provided as core/multilateral funding, as a reflexion of the value of the core capacities and functions of each agency. Provide it on a multi-year basis.
- Link the increase to greater transparency from multilateral agencies on core costs, and work with agencies and other donors to adopt a common definition of those functions and costs.

⁴⁰World Health Organization, “WHO | Programme Budget Web Portal.” <http://open.who.int/2018-19/our-work/category/12/about/key-figures>

- Use MOPAN assessments and independent systematic reviews to make informed judgements about the value for money and effectiveness of the core functions. Use such reviews as the basis for conversations with agencies about core funding levels.

Rebalancing crisis-level financing models

As mentioned above, most donors lack the capacity to issue a multitude of bilateral grants to individual national or local responders. They therefore value the ability of multilateral agencies to absorb funds, make allocative decisions and manage risks on their behalf, acting as a trusted intermediary between them and local frontline actors whom they often do not know. The vast majority of funds earmarked at the country or crisis level are channeled through the UN agencies, with three in particular (WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR) being the main recipients. However, our consultations with donors reveal that they rate the performance of UN agencies in performing this intermediary function poorly. Donors are in particular frustrated by the lack of transparency and accountability for how funds are passed through to downstream partners, and at what cost.

Donors are wary of inefficiencies in the multiple pass-through layers. Currently available data is not sufficient to quantify the value for money of the delivery chain through UN agencies, nor determine what proportion of the resources contributed by donors ends-up with local organizations, let alone final beneficiaries. UN agencies are themselves donors to international or national NGOs, or other local organisations because of their capacity and proximity with affected people. These long delivery chains create delays and multiple layers of transaction costs (which are often not readily available), with no systematic measure of the value-added of intermediaries in the chain.

There are other reasons why UN agencies might not be the best choice as intermediaries. NGOs complain that many benefits of ‘quality’ donor funding to UN agencies—multiyear funding, overhead levels, and flexibility—are not passed down to implementing partners; they also feel that they are held to a higher standard of reporting and detail than the agencies that fund them.

Ultimately, using agencies as intermediaries contributes to a fragmentation. Funding to UN agencies is pre-emptively earmarked to a technical sector or population group, reducing the flexibility to adapt to context-specific needs. Because larger agencies have the capacity to fundraise aggressively outside of collective plans and appeals, and to absorb large volumes of funding, they distort the financing picture in their favour.

While a majority of donors are frustrated with the performance of agencies as intermediaries, an increasing number are turning to multilateral humanitarian pooled funds, in particular the CBPFs.

Pooled funds offer a more efficient and effective intermediary function. They allow donors to make block grants towards a particular crisis, reducing the number of grants and associated costs at the donor level. Because that is the only function they perform, the cost of transferring donor contributions to implementers can be specifically identified. In the case

of CBPFs, OCHA charges the actual cost of managing the funds rather than percentage overhead cost applied by UN agencies. At around 2% CBPFs cost less than a third of the overhead usually charged by UN agencies (7%).

There has been continuous improvement⁴¹ in CBPF grant management systems to ameliorate allocation speed and risk management. They are twice as quick as bilateral grants in being disbursed to implementers. When they fund frontline responders directly, pooled funds reduce the delivery chain and associated costs, with more resources reaching aid recipients. Data on grant allocations can also be much more transparent than is the case of UN agencies acting as donors. CBPFs for instance have made great progress publishing this data through an online Business Intelligence portal.⁴²

Pooled funds have more potential to adapt to needs in each crisis context. Unlike agencies with a specific mandate, they support programs across sectors and population groups. CBPFs are aligned with the entire HRP and contribute to a strong coordination architecture and the prioritization of responses to those most in need. Some of the funds have developed allocation strategies that follow an area-based or cross-cutting theme-based logic. They identify 'best-placed' partners, be they national, international NGOs or UN agencies.

Importantly, CBPFs have the ability to fund local and national responders more directly and have made increasing levels to those partners a policy priority, almost tripling allocations over the past four years. This helps CBPF donors meet their Grand Bargain localization commitments. Unlike UN agencies, they fund the overhead costs of local partners, contributing to their core capacities. Pooled funds can support multi-purpose modalities such as cash transfers that cut across sectors. The governance of CBPFs is inclusive, with advisory boards composed in equal parts of donors and recipients, including local actors.

However, the full potential of crisis-level pooled funds has not yet been fully realized. At 6% of total humanitarian funding, CBPFs remain a marginal rather than strategic mechanism. Because they are so closely aligned with HRPs, CBPFs tend to reproduce their flaws, such as the sectoral siloes of the clusters or the dominance of UN agencies. While there has been an increase in real terms, only 25% of grants go to local actors. While there might be specific cases where UN agencies are the only delivery option, using a multilateral fund to pass on money to a multilateral organization might reduce the cost-efficiency of the funds.

The close alignment to HRPs also reduces the opportunity to fund government and civil society responders who might not be included in the plan but might be well positioned to respond to certain needs. While multi-sector and multi-partner projects are in theory possible, they are still a minority. CBPFs provide short-term funding (as short as six months) by design, which is ill adapted to respond to protracted and build resilience and

⁴¹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, "IASC." <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/humanitarian-financing/ocha-evaluation-cbpf-update-rg5-meeting-15-october-2019>

⁴² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Welcome to Country Based Pooled Funds Data Hub." <https://cbpf.data.unocha.org>

preparedness. They rely on results reporting from the clusters, which are focused on activities and outputs rather than the monitoring of outcomes this paper recommends.

There are alternative models to the CBPFs. For instance, between 2013–2020, EU Trust Funds (EUTFs) outside the EU budget have been established to link humanitarian relief, rehabilitation, and development.⁴³ The Bêkou Trust Fund in the Central African Republic is often cited as an example of how pooled funds can deliver effectively across the humanitarian-development ‘nexus’, while also recognizing downsides limitations in terms of efficiency, coordination and accountability. Other examples are program-specific, such as the EU’s Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) in Turkey—the largest unconditional cash transfer program ever delivered, serving at its peak 1.75 million Syrian refugees, which could only be achieved through the pooling of EU member states resources or WFP’s multi-purpose cash program in Lebanon, set-up with support from the EU, UK, Germany and Norway.

It should be possible to adapt the design of existing pooled mechanisms to address the issues mentioned above. However, investing in these changes only make sense if they are supported by a significant increase in the proportion of donor funding for specific crises channeled through pooled mechanisms. Currently, CBPFs only represent between 3–12% of total funding to HRP. For them to become strategic instruments of crisis response, that proportion would need to increase dramatically, to at least a third of the response.

Recommendations for donors:

- In the short-term, increase the proportion of crisis-specific funding channeled through existing multilateral pooled funds such as the CBPFs to help reach a critical mass, ideally through multi-year contributions.
- Test and scale-up of other pooled delivery models such as multi-donor cash transfer programs.
- Link the increase in resources to:
 - further enhancements of the effectiveness of the funds by making them more adaptive to context-specific needs and capacities. For example, the ability of the funds to provide area-based, multi-year, multi-sector and multi-partner grants should be tested and scaled-up.
 - Improved monitoring of outcomes, such as proposed in section 8.1 of this paper.

9. Conclusion

The multilateral humanitarian system is a lifeline for millions around the globe. It provides humanitarian protection and assistance in some of the most difficult situations. Humanitarian assistance is often a safety net of last resort in countries and regions

⁴³ These have now largely been replaced in the new EU Multi-year Financing Framework with the Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

experiencing crisis, providing essential goods and services when no-one else can. It helps reduce development losses and can contribute to stability. As such, it provides a global public good and its financiers are rightly seeking to justify their investment of taxpayer resources by accounting for its performance.

An effective approach to measuring and driving performance improvements across the system is made difficult by competing institutional interests of both agencies and donors, and a legacy of co-dependent relationships. The Grand Bargain attempted to reset the relationship between multilateral (and other) humanitarian agencies and their donors. The process has delivered some efficiency gains, but it has not fundamentally changed donorship and performance management models.

As the future of humanitarian reforms post-Grand Bargain is being considered, this paper argues that progress will remain limited unless the ongoing trust deficit between donors and multilateral agencies is addressed. This deficit cannot be overcome simply by greater and more detailed programmatic and financial information—it must also address the way humanitarian outcomes are accounted for. Only when donors can report clearly with confidence the difference the system is making can value be ascribed and trust restored.

This paper recommends a modest set of actions that can be implemented immediately to design and test independent outcomes measurement. This is evolution rather than revolution, capitalizing on the momentum built in countries like Yemen and South Sudan. Increasing monitoring capacities, bringing in independent actors, systematically capturing the view of affected people and reporting routinely and transparently would go a long way to demonstrate the benefits of the system.

Achieving more durable change, however, requires rebalancing financial incentives and therefore modifying donorship models. Donors should unbundle their multilateral humanitarian funding and resource core, intermediary and delivery functions separately. Multilateral organizations have no predictable way to resource the core activities they are mandated with and rely instead on overheads on delivery programs and projects to secure their stability. This fuels perverse incentives to channel as much funding as possible through the large agencies, which in turn leads to well documented inefficiencies. Adequate and predictable financing for defined core functions and capacities is the only way to break this cycle.

Without the pressing imperative to secure project funds for institutional survival, more efficient and transparent ways of financing the intermediary function at national level can be envisaged. Multilateral pooled funds have shown great potential to do this while providing high standards of accountability and visibility to donors. Such funding mechanisms would naturally tend to measure success at a system level, allowing donors, affected populations and national governments to understand the difference the multilateral system is making. To bring about a strategic shift, they should be scaled-up significantly.

Donors and agencies need to act decisively to improve the way the various functions of the multilateral humanitarian system are resourced and to demonstrate its impact more

objectively. The alternative is to risk undermining an essential provider of public good and losing the lifeline so many depend on.

Annex 1. Agencies of the multilateral humanitarian system

United Nations

One of the purposes of the United Nations, as stated in its Charter, is "to achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character." The UN is relied upon by the international community to coordinate humanitarian relief of emergencies due to natural and man-made disasters in areas beyond the relief capacity of national authorities alone.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) of the UN Secretariat is responsible for coordinating responses to humanitarian crises. The Head of OCHA is Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). They chair the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, whose members include the UN system entities most responsible for providing emergency relief and leading the sectoral 'clusters' across the system.

The main operational agencies are:

World Food Programme: established as a UN program in 1965; provides food assistance to countries during emergencies and on a long-term basis; separately, serves a key logistical function for the UN aid delivery system. WHO co-leads the food security and leads the logistics clusters.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: established in 1949; UNHCR is specialized agency mandated to provide international protection and assistance to refugees and people in refugee-like situations, and to seek permanent solutions for them; states are obligated through refugee convention and protocol to participate with UNHCR. UNHCR leads the protection, shelter and camp management for internally displaced persons in conflict situations.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund: established as a UN fund in 1946, UNICEF in emergencies focusing on advocating for the protection of children's rights, meeting their basic needs and expanding their opportunities. UNICEF leads the nutrition, WASH, education and child protection clusters and co-leads the education cluster.

World Health Organization: WHO is a specialized agency of the UN established in 1948. Its mandate is to "furnish appropriate technical assistance and, in emergencies, necessary aid upon the request or acceptance of Governments." It responds to outbreaks and coordinates the response to health emergencies in conflict and disasters.

Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations: established in 1945, FAO is a specialized agency and has a dual mandate to defeat hunger through emergency action and promotion of sustainable agricultural practices as global public goods. FAO helps farmers re-establish production following emergencies. Its Global Information and Early Warning

System identifies countries threatened by food shortages. FAO co-leads the food security cluster.

International Organization for Migration: established in 1951, IOM is a UN-related multilateral organization of 173 member states focused on migration management. Its mandate has shifted over time from a primarily logistical focus, to interacting with governments and civil society on migration issues. IOM assists migrants in emergencies including internally displaced persons and former combatants. It leads the camp management clusters in natural disasters.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA): established as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, provides services to some 5 million Palestinian refugees in the region.

Other UN agencies involved in humanitarian aid include the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), who leads the early recovery cluster; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) who leads the protection cluster in natural disasters. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA), in emergencies, focuses on sexual and reproductive health support. UN Habitat also participates in the IASC.

Red Cross / Red Crescent

Although not technically multilateral organizations (states are not members), the international agencies of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement have a mandate based in international humanitarian law and are often treated by donors on par with multilateral agencies.

International Committee of the Red Cross: established in 1863, ICRC is an independent, neutral, impartial organization that seeks to protect and provide dignified support to victims of armed conflict and violence. As the custodian of the Geneva Conventions, the ICRC has a permanent mandate under international law to visit prisons, organize relief operations, reunite separated families, and undertake other humanitarian activities during armed conflicts.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies: founded in 1919, IFRC is a humanitarian and development network of 192 National Societies. Together with the ICRC these complete the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement. Field delegations assist and advise National Societies in the field and encourage regional cooperation. The IFRC is involved in disaster response, development, and promoting peace through dialogue. It leads the shelter cluster in natural disasters.

Annex 2. Timeline of humanitarian crises and reforms

1991	UN 46/182 established the core UN humanitarian architecture including the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, a global pooled fund, and the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP). It also extended the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) mandate to cover complex emergencies and made the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination.
1992–1996	Throughout the early 1990s, crises including war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and famine and conflict in Somalia, prompted international responses. In Somalia, a failed US-led Chapter VII mission superseded the goal of famine alleviation, causing intervention ‘fatigue’. The US reversed plans to intervene following a coup d’état in Haiti, and in 1994 declined support UN peacekeepers in Rwanda. In 1996, the US Army enforced the Dayton Accords in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
1997	UNSG Kofi Annan initiated UN reforms of management and coordination to reflect the growing complexity of crises since the implementation of 46/182. OCHA replaced the DHA with an expanded response coordination mandate, and the ERC role was elevated to Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.
2003–2005	Crises continued to mount ahead of the 2005 reforms. The situation in Darfur deteriorated into armed conflict and genocide against ethnic Darfuris, spurring mass displacement and acute need. In December 2004, The Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami devastated around ¼ million people. In <u>October 2005</u> , a massive earthquake struck Pakistani & Indian Kashmir causing two waves of casualties, the 2nd from inaccessibility and inadequate funding.
2005	Following the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the ERC and IASC initiated the Humanitarian Reform Process to enhance predictability, accountability, responsibility and partnership in humanitarian responses. Reforms modernized the CERF, strengthened the role of Humanitarian Coordinators and introduced the “Cluster Approach” which organized large UN agencies in technical sectors and clarified their roles in aid coordination. Nine clusters mobilized in response to the disaster, which simplified coordination, although NGOs were generally excluded. ⁴⁴ OCHA managed Country-based Pooled funds were established as distinct types: Emergency Response Funds in 1994 (Angola) and Common Humanitarian Funds in 2005 (Sudan). These tended to differ in scale and allocation modality, and since 2014 have been harmonized as CBPFs. There are 18 in operation today.
2010	In January 2010 an earthquake struck off the coast of Haiti. By February, nearly 3 million people had been affected, and death estimates stood around a quarter million. Then, in July Pakistan experienced country-wide flooding which caused major infrastructural damage and displacement and affected ~20 million people.

⁴⁴ALNAP, “Real-Time Evaluation of the Cluster Approach—Pakistan Earthquake—Pakistan.”<https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/real-time-evaluation-cluster-approach-pakistan-earthquake>

2011	The ERC launched The Transformative Agenda in 2011 following crises in Haiti and Pakistan. Reforms consolidated emergency assistance requests into a single appeal and committed new pooled resources to reduce emergency response times. The Transformative Agenda put the humanitarian system-wide L3 designation in place in 2012. The Transformative Agenda rolled out concurrently with UNSG Ban Ki-Moon’s January 2012 5-year action agenda to create more ‘accountable, robust’ humanitarian system, which also called for a World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). ⁴⁵
2013–2014	In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan triggered an L3 humanitarian response. In 2014, Ebola broke out in West Africa, and the situation in Syria produced millions of refugees and IDPs. Conflict also escalated in CAR and South Sudan. The Haiyan and Syria responses were considered largely successful due to their L3 designations, though lack of accountability and of engagement with local response capacities were cited. ⁴⁶ Other crises had less impactful responses over the same period. ⁴⁷
2016	Crisis response evaluations over the Transformative Agenda period revealed similar issues with leadership and lack of accountability to aid recipients. The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 produced an Agenda for Humanity and the <u>Grand Bargain</u> —commitments between aid agencies and donors designed to address ongoing efficiency and effectiveness challenges.

⁴⁵ UN General Assembly, “One Humanity.” Feb 2, 2016

⁴⁶ Stoddard et al., *The State of the Humanitarian System*. 2015

⁴⁷ Stoddard et al.

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