



INCEPTION REPORT

**THE STATE OF THE
HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM (SOHS)
– FIFTH EDITION (2018–2021)**



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1. SUMMARY

The ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System Report (SOHS) is an independent study that analyses the size and scope of humanitarian entities and activities, and assesses the overall performance and progress of humanitarian policies and responses. This Inception Report describes the aims and scope of research for the fifth edition of the SOHS.

The fifth edition will assess performance over the period January 2018–December 2021. It will also compare its findings with the four previous editions, in order to capture key trends covering a 12-year period. The main objective of the Report remains the same as previous editions: to gather and synthesise evidence to form an overall picture of the global humanitarian system, and indicate how well it is serving the needs of people affected by conflict and crises. As with previous editions, the report will be primarily descriptive and evaluative, rather than prescriptive.

The fifth edition retains core elements of the existing methodology in order to support meaningful longitudinal comparisons across previous SOHS editions. This study will continue to use an adapted version of the evaluation criteria for humanitarian action (Beck, 2003; EHA Guide), and many of the research components – field research, evaluation synthesis, descriptive statistics of the system – will remain.

This Inception Report also details new approaches and components introduced to improve the study framework. First, new thematic research components will be introduced in order to provide a greater depth of analysis on particular trends and issues in humanitarian performance. The balance of these new components and the existing research components will be calibrated towards providing insights based more on statistical analysis and process or outcome data than on perception-based data, such as key informant interviews.

Second, the performance criteria used in this the fifth edition will be modified based on the recent revision of the DAC (Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD) evaluation criteria and ongoing discussions on updating the adapted version of these criteria for humanitarian action. This will include a particular focus on how best to assess performance on localisation and connectedness to development and peacebuilding efforts.

Third, the fifth edition will incorporate a participatory method to solicit views from crisis-affected people on how humanitarian entities should be assessed. This is in addition to existing participatory research methods (focus group discussions and aid recipient survey), and will enable the research questions to better reflect the mental models of crisis-affected populations.

Finally, the exceptionally dynamic issues shaping the humanitarian context at present – in particular the effects of COVID-19 – will necessitate a highly adaptive research approach.

In line with the changes to approach and method, the fifth edition of the SOHS will not only seek to reach organisations that work directly in, or with, the international humanitarian community but also be aimed at a broader audience.

This Inception Report outlines the research framework and approach for the fifth edition of the SOHS. It does not present an outline of the structure and content of the final report.

Options for the structure of the final report have been discussed with selected key informants during the inception phase. Drawing on these discussions, and on audience analysis conducted as part of the State of the Humanitarian System communications plan, a new approach to the structure is being developed. This will largely be correlated to the revised DAC criteria, but will

frame these under key sets of questions and challenges facing the humanitarian system, for instance, how it has handled severe malnutrition and famine, forced displacement and COVID-19.

Longitudinal analysis will be woven throughout these sections, where possible and appropriate, to highlight changes in performance against the criteria since the previous SOHS report. For ease of reference, a short summary analysis organised by DAC criteria will also be provided in a supplementary section or annex.

2. AIMS AND SCOPE

This section outlines the aims and overarching research questions for the SOHS. It describes the intended audience and sets the scope of the research by defining the core unit of analysis: the humanitarian ‘system’.

2.1. Aims, research questions and audience

2.1.1. Aims and research questions

As with previous editions, the three primary research objectives for the SOHS are:

- i) **To define and describe the architecture of the humanitarian system(s):** What are the current levels and trends in funding flows? What is the distribution of human and financial resources? What are the numbers/types of agencies involved? How has the composition of the humanitarian system and its boundaries changed over the past decade? What are the trends?
- ii) **To assess the humanitarian caseload:** How many humanitarian responses took place in the study period? What are the locations and types of emergency? What are the approaches to making a reasonable estimate of people in need of humanitarian assistance, those for whom humanitarian assistance is intended, and people actually receiving humanitarian assistance? What are the trends?
- iii) **To assess performance:** How has the humanitarian system performed on the basis of adapted OECD DAC criteria (see 4.1), both at the programme/project and at the policy/structure level? How well is the humanitarian system meeting the expectations of crisis-affected populations? What are the trends and how does this period compare with previous periods? What are emerging key policy issues and shifts in practice?

2.1.2. Function and Audience

The SOHS Report serves both a learning and an accountability function for the humanitarian system. It is intended broadly as a global resource for individuals and organisations with an interest in how humanitarian assistance is provided, and who wish to know whether humanitarian action is meeting expectations. The SOHS findings aim to address a broad audience that includes organisations that work in, or with, the international humanitarian community, members of the public in donor countries, and crisis-affected populations – although the way in which these findings are communicated will differ accordingly.

The more immediate and direct aim of the SOHS Report is to inform policy and practice across constituencies in the humanitarian system: from donor governments, United Nations (UN) agencies, INGOs and national/local NGOs to the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, academics

and consultants. Thus, the SOHS Report seeks to provide a robust and evidence-driven analysis of humanitarian performance and trends, which can be used by decision-makers and change agents to hold humanitarian actors to account, motivate improvement and identify pathways to get there. While the Report’s analysis will be relevant for those seeking to bring evidence-driven change and improvement to the humanitarian sector, it does not aim to make concrete recommendations to that end.

2.2. Unit of analysis: definition of the international humanitarian system

The SOHS Report aims to provide a longitudinal analysis of the size, shape and performance of international humanitarian action. To do this, it uses the concept of a ‘system’ to define its unit of analysis. There is no firm consensus on how to define humanitarian action and the humanitarian system – both terms are contested and changing. Our working definitions of international humanitarian action and of a ‘system’ are set out below. We explain our understanding of the boundaries between this system and the wider crisis response environment, and describe how the study will deal with entities that straddle or lie beyond the boundaries of this system.

Defining international humanitarian action

Humanitarian action is the principled provision of assistance and protection in order to save lives, prevent and reduce suffering and preserve people’s dignity, in crises arising from armed conflict, natural hazards and other causes (ALNAP 2016; IASC 2015; Development Initiatives 2020). Humanitarian action is international when these activities involve resources (financial, technical or in-kind) provided by an agency in one country to respond to a crisis in another. International humanitarian action excludes responses that are fully resourced within the country experiencing the crisis, which fall within the domain of domestic crisis management.

Defining ‘system’

A common definition of a system is a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole working toward a common set of objectives’. The humanitarian system is formed of elements that have agency and can respond and change based on their interactions with one another. As such, it can be understood as a ‘complex adaptive system’ (Knox-Clarke 2017: 41):

- It is non-linear: the very large number of interacting elements makes it almost impossible to predict how the system will behave.
- It is emergent: the system itself may develop characteristics as a result of multiple interactions which are more than the sum of the component parts.
- It is nested: the system comprises elements (such as organisations) which themselves are systems, and it sits within, and overlaps with, larger national and international systems.

Defining international humanitarian system

To provide guidance for the research and a clear understanding for users of the Report, the SOHS study team adopts a working definition of the international humanitarian system as:

the network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian action is undertaken when local and national resources are, on their own, insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis.

These entities are operationally or financially related to each other and share common overarching goals, norms and principles in humanitarian action. These include: national and international NGOs conducting humanitarian activities; UN humanitarian agencies; the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement; host government agencies and authorities; regional intergovernmental agencies; multilateral agencies; government aid agencies and other offices that provide humanitarian funding and coordination. As other SOHS Reports have indicated, the shape and composition of the humanitarian system is constantly changing, and includes an increasing diversity of actors. The definition of the humanitarian system used in the SOHS Report encompasses these entities to the extent that they receive institutional international humanitarian funding, whether this is direct or indirect.

Fuzzy ‘boundary’ cases and understanding efforts outside the international humanitarian system

There has never been consensus on the boundaries of humanitarian action. Disagreements spring from differing views on the ‘what’, ‘who’ and ‘how’ of humanitarian action. The ‘what’ includes where to draw the line between humanitarian and longer-term development assistance. The ‘who’ includes live discussion about which entities are considered humanitarian and the power dynamics behind inclusions and exclusions. The ‘how’ includes debates about the importance of the humanitarian principles and the funding sources that drive action.

Since the second edition of the SOHS Report (2015), a number of trends have contributed to a blurring of the boundaries that define the humanitarian system. These include growth in the role of multilateral development banks in crisis and risk management and response; the recognition of the primacy of local, national and regional humanitarian actors; and new forms of mobilisation of global networks of direct action in crisis response. At the same time, there are increased calls to better understand the significant resources and agency that crisis-affected people exercise in their own survival and recovery, as well as the multiple sources of support outside the formal humanitarian system that are used to respond to crises. This understanding is critical in order to properly locate the kind of contribution – or lack thereof – that international humanitarian action can, does and should offer.

The fifth edition of the SOHS will incorporate these concerns into its scope in three main ways.

First, the SOHS Report will include in its descriptive analysis a mapping of crisis response and prevention efforts that share either humanitarian intentions or objectives aligned with humanitarian outcomes. The Report will identify general trends in the types and configuration of these efforts and the relationships between them. As well as including international development actors, it will also explore domestic disaster management and crisis response, as well as civil society actors that claim a humanitarian imperative but do not receive international funding. These efforts will not be included as part of the system being assessed against the performance criteria, but will be mapped out more comprehensively than in prior Reports in order to better locate and understand the role that international humanitarian action plays within a crisis response.

Second, the SOHS Report will continue to use international humanitarian funding flows as its primary criterion for inclusion in the unit of analysis. This funding comes primarily from official development assistance (ODA) but also includes institutional and private financial flows as reported to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service. The reasons for this are threefold: (i) a performance assessment of all efforts to respond to human suffering in a crisis would widen the scope of research beyond feasibility; (ii) widening the unit of analysis would make it impossible to make longitudinal

comparisons across previous SOHS Reports; and, most importantly, (iii) the SOHS Report aims to provide a critical accountability function for how international humanitarian resources are used. The reason to focus on this ‘formal’ system is precisely because it commands significant resources and power, and therefore is under greater obligation to account for its performance than the efforts of private citizens in crisis-affected countries.

Third, this SOHS Report will examine the ways in which the international humanitarian system is engaging, or failing to engage, with other efforts to save lives, reduce suffering and preserve human dignity in crisis.

3. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

This section describes the overall research approach for the SOHS Report, followed by an overview of the methods used for data collection and analysis. A more detailed description of the framework guiding the performance assessment is provided in [section 4](#), and a detailed description of individual research components is given in [section 5](#).

3.1. Research approach

3.1.1 Overview

The SOHS Reports document a longitudinal study using a concurrent mixed-methods approach, where data analysis is primarily deductive. This means that qualitative and quantitative data is collected, analysed and triangulated concurrently over a period of 18 months according to a pre-existing set of themes that have been applied in the four earlier SOHS research periods. The main themes of the SOHS research approach are the performance criteria, which reflect the areas of merit or value that humanitarian action is expected to meet. Each performance criterion is defined by a set of research questions (see [Tables 1 and 2](#)). A list of qualitative and quantitative indicators, provided in the detailed [SOHS study matrix](#).

, defines how the research methods will answer these questions. Interpretation and analysis of the data are supported by a triangulation method that outlines how qualitative and quantitative data will be compared, and a matrix that is used to code all qualitative data according to the performance criteria and a list of sub-themes.

Owing to the more open-ended approach taken for the fifth edition of the Report (see below: Adaptive approach to the fifth edition), a full [study matrix](#) – including indicators – will be published online a quarter of the way through the primary data-collection phase. This Inception Report provides the initial themes and research questions, which will be adapted based on initial exploratory research.

3.1.2. Assessment of progress

The SOHS Report is a longitudinal study which both assesses performance for a particular period of time, and also compares this performance against previous periods to understand whether – on the whole – humanitarian policy and response is improving, declining or unchanged.

While the SOHS research draws equally on qualitative and quantitative data for its analysis of performance, the quantitative data sources play a larger role in longitudinal comparison. Since the third edition of the SOHS in 2015, the research has used the same questions in its surveys and assesses the same core set of indicators for each of the criteria, outlined in the [study matrix](#).

3.1.3. Adaptive approach to the fifth edition

Capturing emerging themes

The scope and depth of the SOHS research typically requires an 18–24-month timeframe from inception to final publication. This also necessitates an adaptive approach in order to capture developments during the research period. Previous editions of the SOHS Report have sought to incorporate emerging evaluations of performance in response to major new crises (for example, Ebola in the 2018 SOHS) as well as significant policy shifts (for example, the Grand Bargain).

ALNAP anticipates that the 2020–2022 period will be a highly dynamic one for the humanitarian system, given current economic, geo-political and social changes (particularly those shaped and accelerated by the COVID-19 Pandemic) as well as technological and climate shifts. The research approach will therefore build in space for ongoing monitoring of emerging events and trends, with periodic reviews to adapt the research framework accordingly. At the outset of the research, a horizon-scanning matrix will be developed to log anticipated or potential scenarios or events, and the research team will maintain this as a live document. It will include known global moments (such as the 2016 United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP 22), anticipated trends (such as a major drop in volumes of ODA), as well as major unanticipated humanitarian crises. This will form the basis for ongoing decisions on how to integrate these issues into the research questions and components.

Participatory approach to assessing performance

A significant source for every SOHS Report is the perception-based data from aid recipients and people living in crisis-affected areas. ALNAP developed one of the earliest perception surveys of crisis-affected populations for the 2012 SOHS, and has steadily increased the number of aid recipients consulted in each successive edition. This has been done by translating the DAC evaluation criteria into a set of questions for use in remote surveys, as well as face-to-face focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews. For example, the DAC criterion of ‘Effectiveness’ is assessed by asking aid recipients ‘How timely was the aid you received?’ and ‘Did the support provided address the problem?’.

For the fifth edition of the SOHS, ALNAP will strengthen the use of perception data from crisis-affected populations by incorporating this into the design of the research framework. The views of crisis-affected populations will be sought from the outset and used to shape the research questions and framework that will then guide the rest of the data collection.¹ Qualitative data will be collected in the early phase of the research to understand what crisis-affected populations think are the areas of merit or value against which humanitarian action should be assessed. Sampling will take place first at the level of country or context: as in previous SOHS Reports, ALNAP will work with field research consultant leads to identify a sample of crisis contexts for the field research component. The aim is to achieve a good balance across different characteristics that are believed to significantly shape humanitarian response, such as: geographic

¹ In the event of being unable to conduct face-to-face FGDs in the early phase of the research due to COVID-19 restrictions, ALNAP will draw on existing secondary data on the perspectives of aid recipients to identify one or more potential new performance criteria. This data will be collected from ALNAP Member agencies.

location; the type of crisis (complex/natural hazard); length of crisis; urban/rural; degree to which the response is well resourced or ‘forgotten’; and the orientation and attitudes of state institutions in the affected country. Within the five contexts selected for the field research component, a sampling frame will be used to identify aid recipients for a series of FGDs, seeking a balance across age group, gender and ethnic identity. The type of organisation engaged with and type of aid provided will also be included in the sampling frame, to elicit a wide set of experiences with humanitarian assistance. Owing to within-country access issues arising from COVID-19, a snowballing approach will be used in order to identify aid recipients to fill the sampling frame and there may be a need for a wider set of smaller FGDs or one-to-one interviews.

The research framework will then be adapted on the basis of initial FGDs with aid recipients in the first quarter of the research period. This may take the form of adding new indicators to existing performance criteria, or adding one or two entirely new performance criteria if it appears that their concerns are not adequately captured in the existing framework. This will enable the assessment of performance through the idiom of aid recipients and improve the relevance of the findings for this crucial group.

3.2. Overview of data collection and research components

This section describes the eight existing research components, or methods, used in the SOHS research approach. It then describes the new thematic studies, a set of research components that will be developed for the first time in this fifth edition.

3.2.1. The core research components

Since 2012, each edition of the SOHS Report has drawn on eight methods of data collection and analysis. Data collection across these eight components is integrated, using a shared research framework outlining the questions and indicators related to each area of performance assessment. The research framework is described in [section 4](#), and the individual research components or methods are described in further detail in [section 5](#).

Primary data collection and analysis

Field-level research: Focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), along with relevant context-specific documentation and observations, are collected for a minimum of five crisis contexts over the study period.

Aid recipient survey: ALNAP conducts an SMS text message and interactive voice response (IVR)-based mobile-phone survey of aid recipients in four to six crisis contexts to elicit their assessment of humanitarian performance. The previous edition surveyed 5,000 aid recipients.

Practitioner and host government survey: A web-based survey is used to elicit the perceptions of humanitarian practitioners and host-government representatives on humanitarian performance.

Key informant interviews (KIIs): Humanitarian leaders and key thinkers are interviewed to assess performance and identify important trends. These interviews are also used to identify potential sources to address key evidence gaps.

Organisational mapping and analysis: Data is collected from individual organisations as well as through a desk-based review to provide an overall picture of the number of humanitarian staff and organisations worldwide.

Analysis and synthesis of secondary data

Evaluation synthesis: A synthesis of findings from humanitarian evaluations published in the study period, weighted according to quality.

Financial analysis: ALNAP works with experts in humanitarian financing to produce and analyse statistics on humanitarian financing and compare this to previous SOHS Report periods.

Literature review: Review of research reports and academic work published within the study period on a sub-set of themes related to humanitarian policy and practice.

3.2.2. New research components: thematic studies

The SOHS Report has been monitoring humanitarian performance for over a decade. In this period, performance on some of the criteria – for example ‘Sufficiency & Coverage’ and many elements of ‘Effectiveness’ – has not changed significantly, and the constraints to change are fairly consistent over the previous four Reports. At the same time, a number of shifts both within and outside the humanitarian system in recent years have led to greater momentum on other performance criteria, such as localisation, and the relationship between humanitarian aid and efforts that focus on peace and development. The implications of COVID-19 and examinations of diversity in the aid sector are expected to drive further change in some of these areas.

At the same time, persistent gaps in evidence and performance data have inhibited a satisfactory assessment of performance on ‘Efficiency’, some elements of ‘Effectiveness’, and ‘Impact’. Several of the components of the SOHS draw primarily on perception-based data – either through surveys and KIIs, or through a synthesis of evaluations that are also predominantly perception-based.

While the perceptions of certain groups are fundamental to understanding humanitarian performance – particularly those of crisis-affected populations – much humanitarian research and evidence still rely on perception-based data collected from humanitarian aid professionals. This can potentially distract attention from the fact that objective measures are lagging far behind where they should be.

The SOHS Report uses significant desk-based research to ensure that findings are based on the best available evidence, including in-depth literature reviews and documented learning identified by leading experts. Despite this, several questions remain unanswered, simply because the necessary data is not being gathered, or because of a lack of adequate primary research. These evidence gaps – particularly related to the performance criteria of ‘Impact’, ‘Effectiveness’ and ‘Efficiency’ – were raised repeatedly in over 30 global launch discussions for the SOHS Report 2018. After a decade of system-wide monitoring, there the humanitarian sector still knows too little about its performance in terms of outcome or process data.

To address this, the fifth edition of the SOHS will reduce its collection of perception-based data from humanitarian professionals on certain performance criteria, in order to release more resources to collect primary data, conduct an analysis of outcome, and process data addressing another set of core themes. These themes will be honed during the inception phase of the research. The potential themes are described in [section 5.7](#).

4. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The role of the research framework is to guide data collection and analysis. When complete, the full research framework comprises five components: (i) research questions; (ii) [study matrix](#); (iii) coding matrix; (iv) data-collection tools (e.g. interview protocol); and (v) interpretation and analysis plan.

The following section outlines the research questions (i). The study matrix (ii) is [available online](#). The remaining elements of the framework (iii–v) will be published alongside the final report.

4.1. Assessing performance: the DAC criteria

For nearly two decades, the DAC criteria have served as the common language for evaluating and assessing humanitarian action: they are reflected in performance and quality frameworks across the sector, including ALNAP’s Evaluating Humanitarian Action Guide, many donor evaluation frameworks and the Core Humanitarian Standards. Several of the DAC criteria are broad, encompassing multiple concepts or themes. As norms and expectations of what constitutes ‘good’ have evolved in the humanitarian sector, ALNAP has made slight adaptations to the DAC criteria for use in the SOHS Reports, in order to bring out the analysis of key performance issues more clearly.

In 2020, after detailed consultation, the OECD DAC published a revised set of evaluation criteria for the development community. Over 2020–2021, ALNAP will work with the DAC and ALNAP Members to update the definitions and guidance on applying these criteria in humanitarian evaluations. These are not expected to lead to significant changes in what is evaluated in humanitarian settings. Rather, these efforts are focused on clarifying and harmonising terminology and understanding of what issues are covered and where – for example, whether examining the quality of the support provided by international humanitarian actors to local and national actors falls under the criterion of ‘Coherence’ or ‘Connectedness’, or cuts across both.

The norms and qualities captured by the DAC criteria are far more important than the terminology, however. Therefore, in the working analytical framework provided below (section 4.3), we have for now listed the performance criteria in plain, non-technical language. These will be used to construct the detailed study matrix. The precise matching of these performance issues to the DAC criteria will be modified later.

4.2. Assessing performance at programme and system level

The SOHS research assesses performance at both the project/programme level and the structural/systems level. The first looks at how individual projects or programmes have performed against the DAC criteria (for example, whether a WASH project has achieved its objectives, or whether a multi-year food-security programme was relevant and appropriate). The second level examines humanitarian policies and strategies, as well as the structural elements that affect performance (for example, whether system-wide processes and support for WASH technical standards are adequate, or whether overall country strategies and configurations for humanitarian response and recovery are relevant and appropriate). In previous SOHS editions, these two levels have not been clearly separated and structural/policy issues have largely emerged through analysis of the constraints at project or programme level.

Given the importance of structural questions for the humanitarian system, the significant reform initiatives that have taken place since 2014, and the potentially higher number of policy and strategy evaluations that will be available for the fifth edition of the SOHS, this research framework specifies separate research questions for each of the two levels.

4.3. Research framework

The research framework will form the main structure for presenting and synthesising the findings on system performance, in order to make these as clear and comprehensible as possible. It will be complemented by a more detailed study matrix which will detail the research sub-questions and indicators and match the research components to these questions. Each research question will involve a disaggregation of performance for different profiles of recipients, including by sex and age.

Table 1: SOHS research framework: Research questions tied to the DAC criteria

Descriptive statistics	Research questions	
System & responding actors	What is the profile/composition of humanitarian system actors? How has the configuration of actors within the humanitarian system changed? What are the wider networks and systems of crisis response? What is the relative contribution of the international humanitarian response?	
Crises & needs	What have been the key crises in the study period? How does the system decide what is or is not a humanitarian situation and how has this changed? What is the scale and location of humanitarian need?	
Broader landscape	What shifts in geopolitics have occurred during the study period?	
Performance area	Programme/implementation questions	Policy/structure/strategy questions
Sufficiency & Coverage	Are the volume and distribution of resources sufficient to meet needs? Is the frequency and predictability of aid adequate?	To what extent do policies, processes and organisational structures enable or constrain humanitarian needs to be covered?

	<p>To what degree are needs covered?</p> <p>Does coverage differ according to key population groups or levels/types of crisis?</p> <p>Are funding mechanisms of good quality?</p> <p>How significant is the problem of aid diversion?</p> <p>Are targeting decisions consistent and needs-based?</p> <p>What (if any) are the constraints to sufficiency/coverage?</p>	
<p>Relevance & Appropriateness</p>	<p>Do humanitarian assessments adequately capture the priority needs of the affected population?</p> <p>Do interventions address the priority needs of recipients?</p> <p>Does appropriateness/relevance differ according key population groups or levels/types of crisis?</p> <p>Do humanitarian interventions change over the course of a crisis?</p> <p>What are the constraints to appropriateness and/or relevance?</p>	<p>To what extent do policies and organisational structures enable or constrain the priority needs of targeted populations to be met?</p>
<p>Accountability & Participation</p>	<p>To what degree does humanitarian action support the dignity of people affected by crisis?</p> <p>To what extent are affected people able to hold humanitarian actors to account for the decisions that are made on their behalf?</p> <p>What (if any) are the constraints to greater accountability?</p> <p>To what extent do policies and organisational structures enable accountability to affected people?</p>	<p>To what extent do policies and organizational structures enable or constrain the participation of affected people?</p> <p>What are the challenges/ constraints to greater participation/influence?</p>

	<p>To what extent are affected people safeguarded from abuse and exploitation?</p> <p>To what extent are affected people able to participate in/influence decisions that affect them?</p> <p>What difference does the participation of affected people make to the effectiveness of humanitarian action?</p>	
<p>Effectiveness</p>	<p>How well were programme objectives met?</p> <p>To what degree were programme outcomes achieved?</p> <p>To what degree did humanitarian action support the recovery and resilience of crisis-affected people?</p> <p>How well is the system responding to rapid-onset disaster?</p> <p>What were the humanitarian contributions to reducing excess mortality and morbidity?</p> <p>Is the system prepared?</p> <p>Does the system act at an early stage/anticipate?</p> <p>Was the response timely?</p> <p>Was the response of acceptable technical quality?</p> <p>What (if any) were the major constraints to effectiveness?</p>	<p>How well were system-wide strategy or policy objectives met?</p> <p>To what extent do policies and structures enable or constrain the timeliness of humanitarian support?</p>
<p>Efficiency</p>	<p>Do results reflect most rational and economic use of inputs?</p> <p>What (if any) are the constraints to rational and economic use of inputs?</p>	<p>To what extent do policies and structures enable or constrain rational and economic use of inputs?</p> <p>To what extent have system-wide initiatives resulted in collective efficiency gains?</p>

<p>Complementarity/Locally led</p>	<p>Do humanitarian programmes and activities appropriately consider and support national and sub-national domestic authorities?</p> <p>Are there differences in performance between international, national and local actors?</p> <p>What are the impacts of COVID-19 on supporting national/local NGOs?</p> <p>What are the constraints to supporting national/local NGOs?</p>	<p>Do humanitarian policies and structures support, enable or constrain localisation to local/national NGOs and state actors?</p>
<p>Humanitarian principles / Coherence</p>	<p>Are humanitarian efforts guided by core humanitarian principles?</p> <p>Is IHL respected in humanitarian settings?</p> <p>What are the constraints to respecting IHL and humanitarian space?</p>	<p>To what extent do policies and structures promote or constrain adherence to IHL?</p> <p>To what extent do policies and structures promote or constrain coherence with core principles?</p>
<p>Connectedness</p>	<p>Do humanitarian activities appropriately engage with efforts to address longer-term vulnerabilities, risks and root causes of crisis?</p> <p>To what extent do humanitarian activities appropriately engage with the informal humanitarian ecosystem?</p> <p>What are the constraints to connecting outside the formal humanitarian system?</p> <p>What are the constraints to connectedness on longer-term vulnerabilities, risks and root causes of crisis?</p>	<p>To what extent do policies and structures enable or constrain connectedness on longer-term vulnerabilities, risks and root causes of crisis?</p>
<p>Impact</p>	<p>What are the longer-term and broader results of the humanitarian response on the population?</p> <p>What is the environmental impact of the humanitarian response?</p>	<p>To what extent do policies and organisational structures enable or constrain an understanding of the longer-term results of humanitarian response?</p>

<p>Cross cutting</p>	<p>What has been the impact of major change initiatives in the system, e.g. Grand Bargain?</p> <p>What has been the impact of COVID-19 on how humanitarian programmes are implemented?</p> <p>What are the perspectives of non-traditional humanitarian actors on key issues of humanitarian performance?</p> <p>To what extent do coordination structures and mechanisms enable effective and efficient assistance and protection?</p>	
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Table 2: Case study/thematic component questions

Theme	Research questions
<p>Innovation</p>	<p>How has the uptake of technology-based solutions by humanitarian agencies or crisis-affected people influenced the performance of humanitarian action in terms of reach, efficiency, relevance or effectiveness?</p> <p>How have investments in innovation in humanitarian agencies affected their performance?</p>
<p>Nexus</p>	<p>How is the nexus understood and interpreted by humanitarian practitioners?</p> <p>To what extent is the humanitarian system changing as a result of triple nexus/NWOW commitments? How can these changes (or their absence) be evidenced and explained?</p>

Mortality	<p>What is the current situation with respect to collecting and analysing mortality data in humanitarian settings? (e.g. who collects it, what is the quality, how comprehensive is it, how is it analysed, what are the gaps)</p> <p>What are the comparative rates of excess mortality across key humanitarian crises (ideally measured over the period 2018–20)?</p> <p>Is it possible to understand a causal relationship between humanitarian action and a reduction in excess mortality? If so, how?</p>
Protracted displacement	<p>What are the key strengths and challenges in providing humanitarian support to refugees and IDPs?</p>
Food insecurity	<p>How well is the humanitarian system able to reduce severe food insecurity and avert famine?</p>
Conflict	<p>Is the system protecting people in active conflicts?</p>
Health crises	<p>How effective have humanitarian actors been at addressing the humanitarian implications of COVID-19?</p>

5. Detailed description of research components

5.1. Statistical analysis

As in previous editions, the SOHS study team will measure the size and scope of the humanitarian system by quantifying its organisational, human and financial resources and comparing these with quantified measurements of need. This statistical analysis will have two strands: one to examine the funding of the global humanitarian system; and another to map the organisational configuration of the system. This analysis will be used in the SOHS research both as descriptive statistics to outline the shape of the system and recent shifts, and as evaluative statistics to support performance assessment against specific criteria.

5.1.1. Financial flows to humanitarian emergencies: 2018–2021

The full set of financial analysis questions will be finalised as part of the initial consultations. The initial areas for data analysis are:

Descriptive analysis

- Total International Humanitarian Assistance (IHA) 2018–2021
- Proportion provided by donor governments, including breakdown by government and any significant changes²
- Proportion of IHA provided by private sector and private donations (including trends in specific types, e.g. Islamic Social Financing)
- Top 20 recipient countries over reporting period of past 10 years
- Funding volumes to types of emergencies – complex emergencies, natural hazard-related disasters, refugee displacement (desirable, but difficult to define types of emergencies)
- Funding volumes to types of emergencies compared with stated requirements (appeals) (desirable, but difficult to define types of emergencies)
- ‘Humanitarian’ funding from multilateral development banks. (Note: to be featured separately rather than as proportion of total flows)
- Volume of funds through the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), country-level pooled funds, Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF) and START Fund, 2018–2021
- Overview of delivery channels: UN agencies, NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, private organisations (as implementers, depending on what data allows), host governments, unspecified
- Total stated requirements and levels of funding to UN coordinated appeals, 2018–2021

Evaluative analysis

1. Sufficiency/coverage

- Changes in distribution and concentration over the past 10 years; how many countries account for 50% of IHA and how many countries occupy the ‘tail’ of emergencies that received less
- Total stated requirements and levels of funding to UN-coordinated appeals, 2018–2021
- Requirements and funding per intended recipient in UN-coordinated appeals, 2021
- Requirements and funding per technical sector in UN-coordinated appeals

2. Relevance/appropriateness

- Total IHA for cash and voucher programming
- Proportion of IHA for cash and voucher programming compared to all other IHA

3. Effectiveness

- Which countries have been receiving large volumes of IHA for the longest period and have consecutively featured in the top 10 recipients (i) every year; (ii) 8–10 times; or (iii) 5–8 times
- Multi-year funding: 2018–2021 trends in volumes and recipient countries and sectors
- Volumes of IHA for disaster risk reduction (DRR), disaster preparedness, broken down by donor

² Turkey’s expenditure within its own borders is not included in the total IHA figure. The global figure includes Turkey’s in-country spending, and highlights this specific spending.

- Unearmarked funding: 2018–2021 trends in volumes, donors and recipient agencies

4. Efficiency

- Cost data on particular aspects of humanitarian distribution and comparison in-country, e.g. cost of transporting a particular relief item, cost of fuel, in order to highlight differences in operating costs across countries

5. Localisation

- Total flows to national and local NGOs, direct and (where possible) indirect
Proportion of aid to national and local NGOs compared with other groups, such as the UN agencies, ‘Northern’-based international NGOs

6. Connectedness

- Size of humanitarian financial flows compared to other significant financial flows in largest recipient countries of IHA in 2021 and in case-study countries: national governments’ non-grant revenue, peacekeeping, remittances, ODA, including expenditure on DRR and climate-change adaptation (CAA)
- Cross-analysis of top recipient countries against Human Development Index (HDI) and against funding flows for DRR/resilience, development and peacebuilding
- Humanitarian-related funding from multilateral development banks

5.1.2. Organisational mapping and analysis

The fifth edition of the SOHS will build on past analysis to provide a picture of the size and shape of the humanitarian system. As noted above (2.2) the humanitarian system on which the SOHS focuses has evolving and ‘fuzzy’ boundaries with other organisations and types of action, and is ‘nested’ within other systems. This organisational mapping will include a typology and mapping of the humanitarian system within this wider ‘eco-system’.

Focusing on the current state and trends over the past decade in the configuration of the humanitarian system, the research will include original data collection and analysis to provide statistics on:

- Number of organisations engaged in humanitarian action worldwide
- Largest humanitarian organisations, based on staff and annual humanitarian expenditure
- Total international staff
- Total national staff

Organisational data collection (where available) and analysis will, wherever possible, be disaggregated according to the balance of gender, ethnicity and local/international staff and at different levels of leadership or seniority across organisations. Gaps in the availability of such data will also be noted.

5.2. Evaluation synthesis

The evaluation synthesis is designed to condense and synthesise findings from the large number of evaluations conducted throughout the international humanitarian system each year, revealing a broader picture of overall system-level performance. It will summarise findings of evaluations undertaken between January 2018 and December 2021.

The study team will compile documents primarily from the ALNAP database of evaluations, as well as other public and non-public (i.e. internal organisational, or ‘grey’ literature) sources, and record the findings for each using a specific matrix for the evaluation synthesis. This matrix will retain the same basic structure as in the SOHS 2018, including a rating system to weight findings based on evaluation quality. Although the synthesis analysis must clearly remain mainly qualitative, the matrix will help to ensure the greatest possible degree of comparability across the findings and avoid potential bias.

The evaluation synthesis method will include two steps:

Step 1:

Categorising and coding the (mostly qualitative) findings and recommendations from each evaluation report in an evaluation synthesis matrix. The matrix and coding framework will build on the protocol used in the evaluation synthesis for the SOHS 2018, as well as being informed by other evaluation syntheses and the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), OECD DAC and other guidance. It will include the following fields (some of which may be refined, omitted or added to during the course of the research):

- ID#
- evaluation title
- year
- evaluator
- published/unpublished
- quality score
- commissioning agency
- evaluation type
- scope and timeframe
- subject area
- findings against criteria and indicators presented in the SOHS study matrix (see [Tables 1 and 2](#))
- core conclusions
- summation
- weaknesses
- good practices
- priority recommendations

Step 2:

Synthesising findings against each indicator in the SOHS study matrix listed as relevant to the evaluation synthesis in a Summary Report. The synthesis findings will be presented in a structure based on the analytical framework presented in [Tables 1 and 2](#), drawn from all relevant areas of the evaluation synthesis matrix (findings, conclusions, recommendations). The synthesis will take into account the strength of evidence for each finding on the basis of the number, breadth and quality of evaluations supporting it.

5.3. Aid recipient surveys

The aid recipient surveys carried out in previous editions of the SOHS provided valuable insights into how recipients actually experience humanitarian assistance. They shed light on the effectiveness of the mechanisms used by humanitarian actors to improve the quality, relevance and accountability of their work, and facilitate comparisons of the perspectives of humanitarian professionals and aid recipients on the quality of aid.

The fifth edition will again use text-based and IVR survey instruments to collect data from aid recipients in selected humanitarian response settings, using the same survey questions from previous editions to provide consistent comparisons over time. Aid recipients will be asked for their opinions of the timeliness, quantity and quality of aid, whether it addressed their priority needs, and how it could be improved.

The surveys will aim to reach at least 5,000 aid recipients overall, though the number of settings and final number of respondents will depend on budget and access considerations, as well as the value they add to the analysis. The sample will have a gender and age balance and seek to be as representative as possible of different social sectors and geographic locations.

Since the previous SOHS research period, there has been an increase in mobile-based surveys with affected populations, particularly in connection with COVID-19 and the rise in remote data collection. Bearing this in mind, ALNAP will seek to minimise the risk of respondent fatigue and, as with the 2018 edition, will explore opportunities to partner with operational NGOs to disseminate the survey. ALNAP will also produce a small study exploring differences in demographic access between mobile phones and in-person surveys and the potential effect of such differences on the representativeness of surveys with crisis-affected people.

5.4. Global aid practitioner survey

The purpose of the global aid practitioner survey is to gather qualitative and quantitative information from the widest possible range of humanitarian aid practitioners, while allowing trends to be tracked from previous SOHS editions. The survey will seek to elicit a current appraisal of the system as it relates to respondents' direct experience, as well as an assessment of whether and how these areas have changed over the past two years.

Questions in the online survey will therefore remain largely the same as in the SOHS 2018 in order to maintain a baseline comparison across years, although some questions may be omitted depending on whether they proved useful in the previous edition.

The survey will be available online in English, Spanish, French and Arabic. Each link will serve as an entry point for the survey version in that language. Depending on the answer to the

introductory questions, the respondent will be directed to the appropriate questionnaire for their institutional type. Support and Advisory Group (SAG) members will be identified to promote and disseminate the survey among their respective organisations and networks.

The links to each survey will be disseminated by the study team and SAG members, and placed on the ALNAP website. In addition, the team will seek permission to place the online survey and links on the following websites: ReliefWeb, DARA, Development Initiatives, ICVA and OCHA. The survey will also be disseminated through targeted use of social media.

In order to increase the number of respondents from host governments, there will be a systematic effort through the use of direct contacts, including relevant links provided by SAG members. Interviewees at the field level will be asked to forward the survey link to relevant contacts in the host government and/or national NGOs. The field research teams will also encourage interviewees to complete the online survey.

The survey will be launched by December 2020 and kept open until September 2021. The analysis will be completed by the end of November 2021.

5.5. Key informant interviews: HQ/global level

The HQ/global or regional-level KIIs are designed to gather perception-based data from key stakeholders in the humanitarian system at these levels (a much wider group of stakeholders will be interviewed as part of the field-level research described below in 5.6). The study team will conduct interviews with 55 key informants by telephone, or in person where travel is not required.

The interviews, which will be conducted concurrently with other study activities, will be finalised in October 2022. Interviews will be held across the period August 2020–October 2022, to allow the team to conduct both broad-based and exploratory interviews at the start of the data-collection period, and a second round of interviews to support analysis later in the process. This approach will allow the team to focus on a more specific group of interviewees later in the research process in order to explore themes emerging from the survey findings.

The initial selection of interviewees will be designed to achieve broad representation from across the humanitarian system, as indicated in Table 3. It is important to note that national authorities and national NGOs will be interviewed in the field-level research and practitioner surveys (see below). Development/DRR/peacebuilding actors are also likely to be consulted in more depth and breadth under the thematic research component on complementarity and connectedness (see [section 5.7](#)).

Table 3: HQ/global-level key informant interviews (KIIs): interviewees by organisation type

Organisation type	Minimum target for interviews
Regional bodies	3

UN humanitarian agencies	10
'Northern'-based international NGOs	10
Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement (ICRC, IFRC, National Societies)	5
Donor representatives, including non-DAC	10
Cluster heads and sub-clusters	5
Academic experts in related topics	3
Private-sector representatives	3
Donor government military representatives (where relevant)	3
Development/DRR/peacebuilding actors (UN, INGOs)	3

5.6. Field-level research

The purpose of the field studies is to provide a more in-depth understanding of the performance analysis and key trends and themes in humanitarian operations in specific crisis responses. In particular, the field studies will be used to understand how the humanitarian system operates on the ground, and how it performs in different crisis contexts. They will also be used to understand the specific constraints and features of the different context types, and the role these play in how assistance is planned, coordinated and provided.

In the first research phase, ALNAP will work with the field research leads to identify five contexts, with the aim of achieving a representative balance of the main characteristics that shape the crises to which humanitarians respond. These will include:

- An even spread across geographic regions
- At least one urban context
- At least two protracted/long-term crises
- At least one 'forgotten' or underfunded crisis
- At least one context featuring strong coordination leadership by the crisis-affected state
- At least one context focusing on COVID-19 response (this will potentially be a theme across all field studies)

As with the 2018 edition, the field studies provide a critical opportunity to consult with national stakeholders and ensure that the views of national authorities and national and local civil society organisations (CSOs) are represented in assessing the performance of the system. The field research will include interviews, FGDs (some with aid recipients) and documentary research. Similar to the global KIIs, the field-level research will be designed to achieve broad representation from different humanitarian actors and the entities and individuals engaged in crisis response within a given country.

Table 4: Field-level key informant interviews (KIIs): interviewees by type (per country)

Organisation type	Minimum target for KIIs & FGDs
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Aid recipients	30
Government/National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)	5
National/local civil society actors involved in humanitarian action	8
National/local civil society actors involved in human rights and democratisation	3
UN humanitarian agencies	5
'Northern'-based International NGOs	8
Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement (ICRC, IFRC, National Societies)	2
Donor representatives, including non-DAC	4
HC/HCT/Cluster leads	5
National/local academics and researchers	2
Private-sector representatives	3
Military representatives (where relevant)	2
Development/DRR/peacebuilding actors (Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), NGOs)	8

In contrast to the 2018 edition, an initial round of exploratory field-level research will be used to inform the SOHS study matrix. As described above, inputs from aid recipients will be used to add indicators to existing performance criteria, or possibly add a new performance criterion. This work will be conducted primarily by researchers based regionally or locally.

Field-level KIIs and FGDs will be conducted with a minimum of 200 individuals (120 interviews and 80-plus individuals in FGDs across at least six humanitarian crises to gather qualitative information from key stakeholders in the humanitarian system, including governments, practitioners, donors and affected people. KIIs and FGDs are expected to take place between mid-2020 and late 2021.

KIIs and FGDs should be conducted according to an interview protocol designed on the basis of the SOHS study matrix, which will be outlined in the SOHS research framework. They will be audio recorded with the prior permission of the interviewees, transcribed and then coded using MaxQDA according to a coding matrix provided by ALNAP which will be used for consistency across all of the SOHS Study components.

Countries will be selected with the aim of achieving geographical spread and representation of different crisis types, as well as a reflection of the range of activities that comprise humanitarian action. Selection of the sites for field studies will remain open and flexible in order to accommodate any crises that arise during the study period. Final decisions will be confirmed between the ALNAP Secretariat and the consultant(s).

5.7. Thematic studies

This edition of the SOHS will include thematic studies, a new component that will feature a combination of evidence synthesis and primary data collection, with an emphasis on objective (not perception-based) performance data. Topics for thematic research components identified during the inception phase include the following:

Effectiveness: humanitarian contributions to reducing excess mortality

Reducing excess mortality and morbidity – ‘saving lives’ – is arguably the most fundamental of humanitarian objectives (albeit by no means the only one).³ Despite this, few evaluations or other research provide insight on whether humanitarian actors are achieving this objective. There are many reasons why such a fundamental question remains unanswered: data collection can be hindered by significant political barriers, as well as methodological challenges when assigning a cause of death in crises, all of which is further impeded the low institutional capacity and instability of most humanitarian settings.

The aim of this research component is to plot a path through these challenges and, in doing so, to provide a better understanding of the humanitarian contribution to reducing excess death and avoidable suffering in conflict and crises. The draft research questions to be answered by this component are:

- 1) What is the state of play with respect to generating accurate mortality statistics in humanitarian settings?
- 2) Is there evidence that humanitarian action has led to a reduction in excess mortality in one or more crises during the 2018–2022 study period?
- 3) What are the ways forward/what needs to be done to generate a better evidence base for humanitarian effectiveness with respect to reducing excess mortality?

Complementarity and connectedness

The recent emphasis on the nexus and localisation raises important questions on how the performance of the system has shifted with respect to ‘Complementarity’ and ‘Connectedness’.

With regard to the nexus, in recent years the ‘New Way of Working’ and Refugee Compacts have sought to make strategic connections between humanitarian, development and domestic frameworks, plans and projects. At the same time Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) have begun to routinely highlight their links with national government plans and development frameworks, and modalities including shock-responsive social protection have been entry points for common action. In 2019, the DAC published its recommendation on the triple – humanitarian, development, peace – nexus, with the ‘aim of strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity’, seeking ‘to capitalize on the comparative advantages of each

³ ALNAP’s working definition of humanitarian action for the SOHS Report (Section 2.2) also recognises the goals of protecting lives and preserving dignity. For several humanitarian actors, preserving dignity means not only saving lives, but also creating the necessary environment for crisis-affected people to continue their lives with dignity and in freedom.

pillar ...in order to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes of conflict’.

With regard to complementarity, both COVID-19 and greater attention to power dynamics and inequity in the aid sector have brought to the fore the significance of locally led humanitarian action as part of a reform agenda. Using the NEAR Localisation Performance Framework, ALNAP will seek to understand the degree of progress in improving the relationship and nature of support between international humanitarian agencies and their national and local counterparts.

Both the nexus and locally led thematic research will seek to clarify the frameworks for understanding the influence of these reform agendas on humanitarian action; review the state of available data and evidence; and review system performance related to these policy shifts.

Cross-cutting

Technology, innovation and performance

Since the first pilot edition of the SOHS in 2010, attention to innovation in humanitarian policy and practice has grown significantly, as has the use of technology. It is clear that these trends have had an enormous impact on the way humanitarian action takes place, yet there is little understanding of what influence these have had on performance. To what extent has the adoption of new technologies made humanitarian action more efficient and effective? What are the implications for protection and privacy? Have technology and innovation improved relationships and services to crisis-affected people, or are they primarily used as funding strategies for aid agencies? This component will aim to understand trends in technology and innovation in humanitarian action over the past decade, and its influence on humanitarian performance.

Engagement and performance

Engaging with crisis-affected populations has been embedded in the norms of humanitarian action and is widely recognised as an issue of moral importance for humanitarian agencies. The SOHS 2018 found that, although there had been an increase in feedback mechanisms and other forms of engagement, and that, overall, aid recipients were more positive about their opportunities for consultation and complaint, agencies still faced persistent challenges and failures in making real or meaningful changes based on feedback from those they serve. Another key finding, however, was that feedback makes a difference to how aid recipients assess performance: for the first time, a statistically significant relationship was found between consultation and feedback practices, and positive perceptions of the quality and relevance of the aid provided. Building on this, the fifth edition of the SOHS will explore in more detail the relationship between engagement and performance, in particular:

- 1) What difference do feedback and consultation mechanisms make to humanitarian effectiveness and relevance?
- 2) What is the impact of the design or approach to engagement with affected people on the relationship between engagement and performance?

6. Final report

ALNAP plans to present a shorter report for the fifth SOHS edition, summarising the findings of the size and shape of the system, and its performance against the DAC criteria.

1. First draft to be shared with SAG: Quarter 1–2 2022

2. Final report to be published: Quarter 2–3 2022

7. Management arrangements

Management arrangements for this edition of the SOHS will be similar to the previous edition, engaging a consortium of consultants with particular expertise in the various components of the Study. The consortium will work in partnership with researchers from the ALNAP Secretariat. The ALNAP Secretariat will take the lead in writing the final report.

ALNAP and the SOHS consortium will remain in close contact throughout the research, consolidation, writing and dissemination phases of the Report. This will be in the form of quarterly bilateral check-in meetings between ALNAP researchers and consultants working on specific components, as well as mid-term and final meetings for the consortium to address emerging findings and evidence gaps in the research.

As in previous years, the Study will be supported and guided by a Support and Advisory Group (SAG) of about 10 people, mainly ALNAP Members. Its main function will be to provide guidance and advice on substantive issues and content, primarily through written and verbal comments on consultants' write-ups. The consultancy team will prepare a table of comments and responses to show how comments have been addressed. Where possible, the SAG will also provide assistance and support to the field-based research.

The ALNAP Steering Committee will receive regular updates on the Study and provide advice throughout the process.

The Head of Research and Impact and ALNAP's Project Manager will coordinate the research study, and the Director will provide oversight of the SAG.