IOB Evaluation

Trust, Risk and Learn

Humanitarian Assistance Given by The Netherlands – Funding and Diplomacy 2015-2021

February 2023

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Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
CBPF	Country Based Pooled Fund
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DCHI	Dutch Coalition for Humanitarian Innovation
DDE	Sustainable Economic Development Department
DG DEVCO	European Commision's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development
DGIS	Directorate-General for International Cooperation
DGPZ	Directorate-General for Political Affairs
DRA	Dutch Relief Alliance
DREF	Disaster Response Emergency Fund
DSH	Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid
DSH-HH	Humanitarian Aid Division within the DSH
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ELRHA	Enhancing Learning & Research for Humanitarian Assistance
EU	European Union
FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FTE	Full-time Equivalent
HAG	Humanitarian Advisory group
HIF	Humanitarian Innovation Fund
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFRC	Internal Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
IOB	Policy and Operations Evaluation Department
IPC	Integrated Phase Classification
JR	Joint Response
MAC	Multi-Annual Country Strategy
MDF	Management for Development Foundation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MERIT	Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology
MFA	Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MOPAN	Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network
mVAM	mobile Vulnerability, Analysis and Monitoring
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NLA	Non-Lethal Assistance
NLRC	The Netherlands Red Cross
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	Official Development Assistance
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
PSEAH	Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment

RCRC	Red Cross and Red Crescent
RVO	Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCHF	Syrian Cross-border Humanitarian Fund
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SSHF	South Sudan Humanitarian Fund
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNDAC	United Nations Development Assistance Committee
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNU	United Nations University
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	United Nations World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit
YHF	Yemen Humanitarian Fund

Executive summary

Trust, Risk and Learn

Humanitarian Assistance Given by The Netherlands – Funding and Diplomacy 2015-2021

Dutch humanitarian policy is founded on the humanitarian imperative and follows a needs-based approach. This means that nothing should override the principle of taking action to prevent or alleviate humanitarian suffering arising from disaster or conflict. It also means that priorities are determined by the humanitarian needs of people affected by crisis.

From 2015 to 2021, the Netherlands spent close to EUR 3 billion on humanitarian assistance, more than 15% of its entire official development assistance expenditure. IOB has evaluated to what extent Dutch policy succeeded in achieving its humanitarian goals in the six-year period 2015 – 2021.

We looked at two means for achieving better outcomes for people in need: funding and diplomacy. We also assessed Dutch performance on three newer policy demands that are growing in importance: *localisation* (interpreted as locally led humanitarian action), *innovation* (understood as innovative activities that provide improved solutions for people in crisis) and the *nexus* (ways of working that strengthen links between humanitarian aid and long-term development).

The research was intended to shed light on three significant aspects of "good humanitarian donorship": striking a balance between (1) **the trust** invested in experienced humanitarian partners, (2) **the risk** associated with their work and (3) the need **to learn** to share that risk, resources and influence more fairly with local partners, so as to improve the support given to the people who need it.

The main question guiding the evaluation was

> To what extent does Dutch humanitarian policy contribute to achieving humanitarian goals, and how does it do so?

IOB found Dutch humanitarian policy to be generally effective in contributing to achieving humanitarian goals of timely, needs-based and principled humanitarian action in demanding contexts. The Netherlands has as its partners experienced humanitarian organisations – UN, Red Cross, Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) – that are reasonably effective in delivering timely aid that arrives where it is most urgently needed, provided that humanitarian access is guaranteed by those in power. This support has saved many lives. The largely unearmarked and multi-annual character of Dutch funding was found to be an important enabler of timely, needs-based and principled humanitarian action. It has also helped to shield a large part of the humanitarian budget from ad hoc interests.

The Netherlands and its humanitarian partners have been less effective in contributing to two intermediate goals of humanitarian policy: localisation[1] of humanitarian action and coordinating humanitarian assistance with broader development goals. Localisation and the nexus[2] require tailored solutions and a strong commitment to complement and strengthen the capacities of local actors. IOB found the NGOs (such as those united in the DRA) and the Red Cross (particularly the national societies and International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC)) to be better allies in these efforts than the UN. Donors like the Netherlands need to monitor their humanitarian partners more actively on the equality of their partnerships with local organisations. To ensure that the localised response is more relevant and focuses more on the needs of affected populations, the focus on accountability to the affected populations should be strengthened.

On humanitarian diplomacy, IOB found the Netherlands to be effective in influencing humanitarian partners and stakeholders whenever there was a solid narrative[3] and enough capacity to work strategically towards deliberate change. Positive examples are Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), conflict and hunger, and the Grand Bargain agenda on humanitarian reform.[4]

This summary presents the main findings and recommendations of this policy evaluation.

1. **Dutch humanitarian policy has been generally effective in facilitating a timely needs-based humanitarian response guided by humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality.**

In 2021, the Netherlands was the world's tenth humanitarian donor in terms of size of support, and it was one of the five donor countries that together accounted for 69% of all funding Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) received that year.[5] Unearmarked and multi-annual funding increased from an average of 41% of the total Netherlands' humanitarian aid budget in 2015 to 55% in 2021.[6] Sufficient evidence was found that Dutch assumptions about the strengths and weaknesses of its main humanitarian partners hold, and therefore IOB has concluded that the trust the Netherlands invested in a limited number of experienced partners is justified.

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1 The localisation of humanitarian action generally refers to shifting resources and decision-making to local and national responders in humanitarian action.

2 The nexus is defined as an approach that favours linking humanitarian activities to development activities, indicating the need for longer-term development to address the root causes and structural drivers of crises. In 2015, the triple nexus approach was introduced, which aims additionally at implementing actions that are conflict-sensitive and work towards averting conflict and achieving peace.

3 IOB defines narrative as a policy rationale in terms of established policy objectives and pathways towards clearly defined change.

4 The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit resulted in the "Grand Bargain", an agreement among the 15 biggest donors of humanitarian aid and the 15 biggest implementing organisations to reform their ways of working.

5 Development initiatives | Global Humanitarian Assistance. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022.

6 Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: strengths and weaknesses, IOB report, 22 Sep 2021.

Overall, based on available evaluations and fieldwork, IOB found the Netherlands' main humanitarian partners (UN agencies, the Red Cross family and NGOs) to be reasonably effective in delivering timely, needs-based and principled humanitarian action in challenging environments of conflict. Dutch money has contributed to the many lives saved, the enhanced resilience and restored dignity reported in independent evaluations and reports since 2015.

2. Current ways of working at the MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) generally enable Dutch humanitarian assistance to reach those who need it the most.

IOB is positive about the system for centrally managing the humanitarian budget from The Hague. IOB found the MFA has acted in response to the IOB evaluation of 2015 and has strengthened its basis for decision-making and priority setting. Central decision-making is now supported by a set of technical indicators to inform and justify funding allocations. Limiting the number of experienced partners and partnerships to manage was the correct decision, given the MFA's capacity constraints. The practice of the Netherlands to support experienced humanitarian partners with flexible funding in the form of unearmarked multi-year arrangements, core funding and pooled funds has helped to shield a large part of the humanitarian budget from ad hoc interests.

3. MFA has developed funding relationships and partnerships that generally enable the effective delivery of timely and principled humanitarian aid.

Regarding multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding, the Netherlands sets the example.[7] IOB's fieldwork in Syria, South Sudan and Yemen led to the conclusion that the reliably predictable multi-year unearmarked funding for UN agencies, Red Cross and NGOs has allowed for more efficient and effective aid delivery, thereby responding better to changing needs. This is true for the large Dutch contributions to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), the UN CBPFs, the DRA, the Red Cross Disaster Response Fund as well as the core funding to individual UN agencies, the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) and IFRC. IOB observes that since 2015, decision-making on funding has become more robust and transparent because of the implementation of the technical criteria developed by MFA. Application of these criteria safeguards the needs-based character of the budget for new and ongoing crisis situations.

4. The partners supported by the Netherlands have not met the humanitarian assistance policy demands to localise, improve links with longer-term development and to innovate.

Localisation and the nexus require tailored solutions and a strong commitment to complement and strengthen the capacities of local actors. IOB found the NGOs (such as those united in the DRA) and the Red Cross (particularly the national societies and IFRC) to be better allies in these efforts than the UN. UN agencies are not performing well in terms of localisation. Though they engage local partners by allocating them a certain proportion of the budget, the relationship is often top – down. Not enough has been achieved in terms of treating local partners as equals and moving towards strategic longer-term partnerships instead of sub-agreements. Factors constraining their ability to localise are the requirements of different donors on reporting and due diligence, risk management and the perceptions of which partner is best placed to deliver timely and principled assistance. We found no evidence that the unearmarked and multi-year character of donors like the Netherlands had in any way been passed on to local actors.

At the same time, in very intense conflict crises (like those studied in Yemen, South Sudan and Syria) IOB observes a clear trade-off between the tailored solutions needed for localisation and the nexus, and the ability to deliver a timely and principled humanitarian response at scale. For the latter, the capabilities of UN agencies (in terms of scale and leverage) and of the ICRC (in terms of protection and principled aid) are indispensable. In other words, those organisations, who have demonstrated the best ability to deliver a timely and principled humanitarian response at scale, have made less achievements in providing tailored solutions needed for localisation and the nexus.

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7 Multi-annual and flexible funding is characterised by a high degree of predictability through multi-year arrangements, and it is unearmarked. The donor will link this funding to specific humanitarian partners but not to specific projects, programmes, themes or humanitarian crises. The practice of linking allocations to specific CBPFs is known as semi-earmarked funding.

Regarding innovation, it proved difficult to assess the impact of the many ad hoc initiatives that together have not led to transformative change. The policy objectives relating to this priority and the other two priorities (localisation and the nexus) have not been thought through adequately and there is insufficient capacity for monitoring, evaluation and learning. IOB believes that the Netherlands and other donors and partners should together address these shortcomings.

5. **The partners supported by the Netherlands (UN, Red Cross, DRA) are struggling to share the risks associated with delivering humanitarian aid, and this is resulting in limited opportunities to support local actors in accordance with their inherent strengths (local knowledge, operational access to communities). IOB found that Dutch partnerships practices do not provide enough incentives for addressing this shortcoming. There has been too little support amongst humanitarian donors to achieve positive change.**

The MFA has largely delegated its ambitions on localisation to its partners but without closely influencing, assisting and monitoring them through informed policy dialogue and accompanying measures. IOB found that one outcome of this is that the increase in Dutch multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding (considered to be a key enabler for localisation) has not been passed on by international partners to local actors. Regarding localisation, there has been overreliance on achieving the quantitative target (more funding of local NGOs) and too little emphasis on holding humanitarian partners to account on the equity of their partnerships with local actors.

Donors do not work collectively to provide economic incentives for change in how humanitarian aid is provided. Despite global commitments to support localisation, they do not hold humanitarian partners to account for the equity and quality of their partnerships with local actors. IOB sees the most significant obstacles to be lack of trust in local actors, international actors' desire for self-preservation and the power relations between different actors. Ambitions to localise have also been hampered by negative perceptions of local actors' capacity. Many donors have, understandably, little appetite for risk, particularly for fiduciary, legal and reputational risks, and this has led to stricter requirements for compliance and due diligence, which may burden local actors disproportionately. These actors mostly receive little support to cover their overheads and thus cannot always avail of a good quality risk system. Moreover, they do not receive sufficient funds to strengthen their long-term organisational capacity.

The MFA decision in 2021 to include "forward-leaning language" on localisation, risk management and capacity strengthening in the new funding arrangements with two main partners (the Red Cross family and DRA) is commendable. It has not yet been followed up with similar steps to hold the more poorly performing UN partners to account on the equity and quality of their partnerships with local actors. IOB sees this as a challenge that requires donors to coordinate their approach. DG ECHO would be a suitable partner to work on this.

6. **Localisation also requires changes within the MFA itself relating to risk management and developing a more integrated and shared strategy on capacity strengthening.**

IOB found the MFA is struggling with the concept of risk sharing because of a widespread low appetite for risk in parliament and society. Although this is understandable, the IOB evaluation brings out that genuine risk sharing would require a more widely supported narrative on the degree of risk that the Netherlands is willing to accept to ensure the delivery of timely, relevant and thereby effective life-saving humanitarian assistance. This narrative would include a paragraph realistically appraising the opportunity for accountability to focus less on limiting the risk that money or materials will not always be used for their intended purposes, and instead to place more emphasis on the results achieved in the eyes of the affected population.

IOB found that capacity strengthening in humanitarian aid often focused on the capacity to fulfil donor requirements rather than on the ability to carry out urgently needed projects and programmes. This undermines the ability of local partners to make full use of their strengths: proximity to the affected people, their understanding of these people and hence their ability to adequately address their needs.

7. IOB's assessment of the effectiveness of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy[8] is mixed.

The Netherlands was found to be effective in influencing humanitarian partners and stakeholders whenever there was a profound narrative and enough capacity to work strategically towards deliberate change. The determining success factor is considered to be the teamwork between The Hague, Dutch embassies and missions.

Positive examples of humanitarian diplomacy are the Dutch efforts concerning MHPSS, conflict and hunger, and the Grand Bargain. IOB found the role played by the Netherlands was proactive, constructive and at times leading: influencing a shared agenda for change, convening meetings, setting agendas and advancing global policy development. Similar conclusions were reached on Dutch support for multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding and a well-coordinated UN-led humanitarian system. The recognition of the role played by the Netherlands was found to be stronger at headquarters and multilateral level but less prominent at field level. Furthermore, IOB's fieldwork confirmed that the Netherlands has at times proved to be a willing and able partner to deliver certain messages at the request of humanitarian organisations in coordination with other donors. These diplomatic efforts were mostly intended to protect humanitarian space and promote humanitarian access.

The Netherlands was found to be less effective in influencing humanitarian partners and stakeholders regarding many of the other thematic priorities pursued since 2015. At times it proved difficult to assess the effectiveness of these efforts, as results have not been systematically recorded. IOB found that humanitarian diplomacy actions had to respond to a variety of issues without being guided by a clear framework. A relatively high workload has hampered strategic reflection and prioritisation of activities, especially when identifying issues that can be left to other donors and partners. In practice, prioritisation reflected the high-profile humanitarian crises that had attracted political attention. IOB evaluators observed a demanding context: when humanitarian needs arise, it is politically and morally difficult to do nothing. IOB suggests limiting the number of priorities in humanitarian diplomacy and establishing the level of Dutch engagement on the basis of capacity, credibility and network.

8. IOB's assessment is mixed about the extent to which the MFA has been effective in influencing partners in relation to localisation, innovation and the nexus through humanitarian diplomacy.

On the positive side, localisation, innovation and the nexus are very much part of the global agenda for change in which the Netherlands was found to play an active, enabling, convening and constructive role.

On the negative side, IOB found the Dutch narrative on localisation, the nexus and innovation in humanitarian action to be lacking in profoundness. This has limited the MFA's ability to effectively change the behaviour of its humanitarian partners on the ground. The MFA was found to have largely delegated its ambitions on localisation and the nexus to its partners, without closely monitoring, influencing and facilitating them through informed policy dialogue and accompanying measures. Regarding the nexus, IOB also found that even though the Netherlands is seen by partners to be a constructive player, the MFA has no integrated strategy to consistently promote links between the humanitarian and development and peacebuilding policies, prioritisation and budgets.

IOB recommends making incremental changes to the current ways of working. The most strategic recommendations are summarised below.

Recommendation 1: On unearmarked funding

Based on the largely positive findings of the evaluation, IOB recommends that the Netherlands continues providing mostly multi-year flexible unearmarked funding to the same categories of recipients. The Netherlands should also continue promoting this approach to others, whilst at the same time claiming a seat at the table commensurate with its funding. This will ensure gaining influence (promoting the Dutch agenda) as well as help acquire much needed information for monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). Just as in 2015, IOB recommends ensuring that the trust invested in its partners is accompanied

[8] IOB defines humanitarian diplomacy as achieving better humanitarian outcomes for people in need by influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments, peoples and humanitarian organisations through dialogue and negotiation.

by MFA applying a stronger and more focused strategy on MEL. This will require capacity and a more consistent investment in humanitarian expertise across embassies and the humanitarian department in The Hague. More specifically IOB recommends appointing additional dedicated staff to strengthen strategic collaboration, networking and information exchange with the EU (DG ECHO and DG DEV), as well as adding to the capacity of regional humanitarian coordinators in other regions where high-profile humanitarian crises hit and Dutch humanitarian and political interests are at stake.

Recommendation 2: On localisation, innovation and the nexus

Unearmarked funding requires continuously taking care to monitor, evaluate and learn so as to improve the support given to the people who need it. Regarding localisation, IOB suggests promoting capacity strengthening, strengthening the local role of local partners in decision-making and sharing risk in a different way. Humanitarian funding should be used to ensure that local actors gain relevant capacity and receive priority in selection, coupled with capacity building and guidance where needed. As a donor, the Netherlands also needs to consider its own role in power dynamics and to address potential shortcomings in risk management. MFA should assess the opportunity of having accountability focus less on limiting the risk that money or materials are not used exactly as per donor requirement; at the same time, it should put greater emphasis on the results achieved in the eyes of the affected population. The Netherlands must therefore hold the various UN partners more accountable for localisation.
To create impact, this can only be done in coordination with other donors. The first line of action could be to advance the localisation agenda with the help of big donors like the EU (DG ECHO).

Regarding innovation, it is important that MFA considers how and where innovation can be given a strategic place in its humanitarian support. The Netherlands should consider scaling back its engagement in and support of its partners' innovation activities and modalities and instead doing more to promote system change and/or to facilitate other priorities such as localisation or the nexus. The Netherlands implicitly trusts the recipients of its unearmarked funding regarding the way they spend the funds and the innovation they introduce as part of their corporate strategies and policies. In parallel, in its negotiations and discussions with fund recipients the Netherlands should promote appreciation of innovation and the desire to innovate.

Regarding the nexus, the Netherlands as a donor faces operational and organisational challenges.
To ensure good linkage between the different perspectives of humanitarian assistance and development aid, IOB recommends that the humanitarian department initiate change by being more explicit and proactive in defining "exit routes" and inviting other thematic departments to follow up in a limited number of long-term humanitarian crises that are a burden on the discretionary budget. Flexibility in budgets should be explored and implemented within the broader ministry to facilitate blended financing when transitioning from a purely humanitarian approach to a development approach.

Recommendation 3: On humanitarian diplomacy

Using diplomacy to promote humanitarian objectives can help achieve more results by prioritising, building a narrative, strengthening guidance to embassies and exchange of experience and information, and strategically addressing human resources. At the same time, there is a need to address the current capacity constraints that this evaluation laid bare. This means investing more consistently in humanitarian expertise across embassies and the humanitarian department in The Hague.
IOB specifically recommends ramping up strategic collaboration, networking and information exchange with the EU (DG ECHO and DG DEVCO) on Dutch and Grand Bargain focus areas and consistently using the more elaborate MEL capacity of other donors (see recommendation 1).

Recommendation 4: On becoming the humanitarian donor that people need

Humanitarian funding is expected to be increasingly insufficient to address the ever-growing humanitarian needs induced by climate change, continued conflict and instability. IOB recommends starting to work on future scenarios in order to position the Netherlands in debates on the urgent and forward-looking question of whether current ways of giving humanitarian aid will remain effective and appropriate in a vastly changing world.

1 Rationale

This report provides the results of IOB's evaluation of Dutch Humanitarian Assistance: Funding and Diplomacy 2015 – 2020. The evaluation's main question was: to what extent does Dutch humanitarian policy contribute to achieving humanitarian goals, and how does it do so?

The sections below briefly describe the objective and subject of this evaluation. More details can be found in the Terms of Reference.[9]

9 The Terms of Reference of this evaluation can be found on the IOB website.

1.1 Objective of research

Humanitarian assistance[10] aims to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity following conflict, shocks and natural disasters. It differs from other forms of foreign assistance and development aid in that it is intended to be governed by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.[11] Humanitarian assistance is also supposed to be short-term in nature, providing for activities during and in the immediate aftermath of emergencies. Between 2015 and 2021, the Netherlands spent close to EUR 3 billion on humanitarian assistance, more than 15% of its official development assistance expenditure.

In the past decade, humanitarian appeals have been underfunded by a steady 40%,[12] and the shortfall continues to widen. The challenges do not relate solely to the funding available, however. It is also important to know what the needs are, how they can be addressed and whether they were addressed adequately in the period under evaluation. Humanitarian action is no longer only about food, water, shelter and protection. Themes like localisation, innovation and the nexus[13] have emerged as new priorities in humanitarian assistance, representing the sector's sense that these are better ways of working. Humanitarian needs are expected to continue to grow, while humanitarian crises are becoming ever more complex. At best, funding levels remain equal in view of competing priorities, and therefore it is essential to target the financial and human resources more accurately for humanitarian action.

This policy evaluation explores if and how the Netherlands has successfully supported and facilitated humanitarian partners to improve their humanitarian assistance with needs-based interventions guided by humanitarian principles. It examines two means used to achieve better outcomes for people in need: funding and diplomacy. IOB (the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs) also sought out the latest insights on humanitarian localisation and innovation. IOB has studied the strengths and weaknesses of the Netherlands' humanitarian partners and the partnerships that were developed with them. The evaluation is intended to yield lessons to be learned from past interventions and to contribute to improving Dutch humanitarian policy and its targeting of resources.

The research aims to shed light on three significant aspects of "good humanitarian donorship": striking the balance between (1) the trust invested in experienced humanitarian partners, (2) the risk associated with their work and the need to (3)) learn to share that risk, resources and influence more fairly with local partners as to improve the support given to the people who need it.

This report was written by an evaluation team at the Ministry's Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) consisting of Johanneke de Hoogh and Herma Majoor. We wish to thank the members of the external reference group for their commitment and constructive advice: Fadi Hallisso (Basmeh & Zeitooneh), Thea Hilhorst (Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam), Hans van den Hoogen (previously MFA and Oxfam Novib), Hugo Slim (University of Oxford, previously ICRC), and Marriet Schuurman and Waldo Serno of the Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid.

10 In this evaluation, a distinction is made between humanitarian assistance as humanitarian aid through funding or in-kind assistance, and humanitarian diplomacy in terms of diplomatic efforts to facilitate humanitarian assistance and to influence international humanitarian policy.

11 The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines the humanitarian principles as follows: "Humanity: Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings; Neutrality: Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature; Impartiality: Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions; Independence: Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented." *Source: OCHA on Message* (July 2022).

12 OCHA 2021. Global Humanitarian Overview.

13 In this evaluation, localisation refers to the shift of resources and decision-making to local and national responders in humanitarian action; innovation is defined as innovative activities that provide improved solutions to humanitarian challenges, quality, efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian responses and outcomes for people in crises; the nexus is defined as an approach that favours linking humanitarian activities to development activities, indicating the need for longer-term development to address the root causes and structural drivers of crises. In 2015, the triple nexus approach was introduced, which aims additionally at implementing actions that are conflict-sensitive and work towards averting conflict and achieving peace.

A special word of thanks goes to Jeff Duncalf, independent consultant at MDF, who conducted the three country case studies in South Sudan, Yemen and Syria. The research team would also like to thank Veronique Barbelet at HPG, Gemma Davies, Josie Flint and Eleanor Davey at HAG, who performed an excellent literature study on humanitarian localisation. Furthermore we thank Maximilian Bruder and Thomas Baar at United Nations University MERIT for their thorough literature study on innovation. The internal IOB advisory group who provided regular feedback consisted of Meie Kiel, Rob van Poelje, Martin van Vliet and Rens Willems. Valuable support was also given by Charlotte van Eijk and Bas Limonard at IOB. Final responsibility for this report rests solely with IOB.

IOB's last Policy Review of Humanitarian Assistance was published in 2015. The present evaluation will account to parliament and Dutch society for the financial expenditure on humanitarian assistance from 2015 to 2021. It is one of the building blocks for the Policy Review of article 4 of the budget for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation – Peace, Security and Sustainable Development – scheduled for 2023.

1.2 Netherlands policy on humanitarian assistance

In response to the increased complexity of emergencies and to rising humanitarian needs across the world, the Netherlands has maintained a humanitarian policy that is founded on the humanitarian imperative and follows a needs-based approach, while pushing for reforms on international forums.[14] The primacy of the humanitarian imperative is that action should be taken to prevent or alleviate humanitarian suffering arising out of disaster or conflict, and that nothing should override this principle.[15] Dutch humanitarian policy is based on the still widely accepted – although by no means universally implemented – principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. The Netherlands recognises that these principles are central to establishing and maintaining access to people affected by crises and delivering humanitarian assistance to them. As such, they have a practical operational relevance and must not blur the lines between military operations, political objectives and humanitarian efforts.

Within this overall policy, the 2011 Dutch humanitarian policy document "Relief to People in Need"[16] set out four priority goals: (1) more self-reliance and resilience; (2) more effectiveness through less duplication and more coordination; (3) humanitarian access and neutrality, and (4) greater accountability.

The 2015 IOB Review of Humanitarian Policy[17] emphasised the need to adjust this policy in the face of the increasing complexity of many crises and the rapidly changing international context. IOB recommended a "more realistic policy" with a "long-term focus on specific themes to which the Netherlands could bring added value". The ministry reacted by making additional and more flexible funding available for humanitarian aid and by defining several long-term priorities: assistance to refugees, innovation, preparedness and security of humanitarian aid workers. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit resulted in the "Grand Bargain", an agreement among the 15 biggest donors of humanitarian aid and the 15 biggest implementing organisations to reform their ways of working. The final aim was to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action.[18] It provided a stepping-stone for the further development and refinement of Dutch policy on humanitarian assistance.

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14 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2019). *Mensen eerst: Nederlandse koers humanitaire diplomatie en noodhulp*. Beleidsnota, maart 2019.

15 *The Humanitarian Charter and minimum Standards in Humanitarian response*, HSP Handbooks | Home (spherestandards.org), SPHERE Association, 2018

16 Kamerstuk 32605 Nr 64, *Hulp aan Mensen in Nood*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 23 December 2011.

17 IOB. 2015. Beleidsdoorlichting van de Nederlandse humanitaire hulp, 2009-2014. Den Haag: IOB.

18 The Grand Bargain (Official website) | IASC (interagencystandingcommittee.org)

In 2019, the policy document "People first" was published.[19] The document highlighted the focus for humanitarian funding and diplomacy on:

- Representing the interests of people in need.
- Protection and empowerment of women and girls.
- Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in crisis situations.
- Strengthening of the position and capacity of local aid workers.
- Innovation to make humanitarian assistance more efficient and effective.
- Reforming the international humanitarian aid system.

IOB has investigated various levels of implementation of this humanitarian policy, including decision-making about funding, diplomatic efforts, the performance of the Netherlands as a humanitarian donor and political actor, and the added value of various funding channels and humanitarian organisations in the field.

1.3 Funding types and details

Over the years, the Netherlands has become a strong advocate for unearmarked multi-annual funding mechanisms. The ambition is to make aid more predictable, to allow recipient organisations to better prepare for and have quicker access to funding in imminent crises, to immediately start with aid delivery in the event of an acute crisis, to deploy funding where it is most needed or where existing means are inadequate and to respond to the humanitarian consequences of violent conflict. Three types of funding can be distinguished:

1. Multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked contributions, which consist of core funding to United Nations (UN) humanitarian organisations – including the Central Emergency Response Fund, (CERF) – and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In the period under review, this flexible funding through multi-annual unearmarked contributions accounted for the largest part of Dutch humanitarian funding: it accounted for 41% of the total humanitarian aid budget in 2015 and 55% in 2020.[20]

2. "Softly earmarked funding", in the form of annual decisions taken early in the year to make money available for ongoing chronic humanitarian crises and specific decisions in response to new developments and acute crises during the year. This category contains all contributions to Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) and to the Netherlands Red Cross (NLRC: a block grant) as well as all Dutch contributions to Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) coordinated by OCHA. The Netherlands has a say in allocating these funds to specific humanitarian crises, but not to specific projects. Softly earmarked contributions accounted for a slowly diminishing part of Dutch humanitarian funding: it accounted for 57% of the total humanitarian aid budget in 2015 and 37% in 2020.

3. Earmarked funding consists of targeted contributions for specific projects promoting priority themes like MHPSS, conflict and hunger, innovation. This comprises only a small proportion of Dutch humanitarian budget: since 2015, an average of 3%.

19 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2019). *Mensen eerst: Nederlandse koers humanitaire diplomatie en noodhulp.* Beleidsnota, maart 2019 and preceding yearly letters to parliament since 2015.

20 On a worldwide scale, from 2017 to 2019 the proportion of unearmarked humanitarian funding varied between 14% and 17% (Development initiatives. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022, Chapter 4).

Table 1 *Unearmarked, softly earmarked and earmarked funding in millions (EUR) for specific crises 2015 – 2022. Source: Yearly letters to parliament*[a]

	(1) un-earmarked		(2) softly earmarked		(3) earmarked		
	core funding		acute + chronic crises		thematic priorities		Total
2015	41%	219.0	57%	301.9	2%	10.2	531.1
2016	52%	225.7	45%	195.4	3%	12.9	434.0
2017	64%	258.0	35%	142.0	1%	5	405.0
2018	57%	220.0	40%	155.8	3%	11.7	387.5
2019	57%	222.0	39%	149.8	4%	15.7	387.5
2020[b]	55%	205.0	37%	135.8	8%	30	370.8
2021[c]	55%	205.0	37%	139.0	8%	31.0	375.0
2022[d]	49%	229.3	48%	221.0	3%	15.2	465.5
Total	54%	1,784.0	42%	1,440.7	4%	131.70	3,356.4

[a] *In some years, in-kind assistance and non-ODA are accounted for within thematic priorities, and in other years they are accounted for within acute crises.*

[b] *KST 34952-108 (2020) Investeren in perspectief – Goed voor de wereld. Brief van de Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 03 maart 2020.*

[c] *Additional humanitarian contributions during 2021 in response to COVID-19 and increased humanitarian needs not included.*

[d] *KST 2022D07787 Humanitaire Hulp en Diplomatie 2022 d.d. 25 februari 2022; KST 2022Z04538/2022D09213 Humanitaire Inspanningen voor Oekraïne en buurlanden 2022 d.d. 18 maart 2022; KST34952-157 Kamerbrief over financiële reserves humanitaire hulp.*

This evaluation assessed various aspects of funding, including the strengths and weaknesses of Dutch-funded partners and the extent to which assumptions on their added value have held true. In relation to this, the evaluation studied if current funding mechanisms adequately contributed to the localisation of humanitarian assistance and to participation of the affected communities, and to innovation and the coordination with development goals (the nexus). The evaluation also attempted to assess if the current distribution of funds over different humanitarian channels and actors was a wise choice, given the specific qualities of each of these channels and actors. In accordance with the ToR, the value for money question was not part of the evaluation, however, and the efficiency or effectiveness of different channels and organisations was not compared.

1.4 Humanitarian diplomacy

This policy evaluation has explored humanitarian diplomacy in terms of concrete results and best practices. For the purpose of this evaluation, IOB defines humanitarian diplomacy within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as achieving better humanitarian outcomes for people in need by influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments, peoples and humanitarian organisations through dialogue and negotiation. The research focuses on the actions of Dutch diplomats and ministers, as opposed to humanitarian diplomacy conducted by humanitarian organisations.

“Humanitarian diplomacy” was not an entirely new concept, but it did not become prominent in Dutch foreign policy until after the third Rutte government took office in October 2017. The sub-study on Dutch humanitarian diplomacy conducted in the framework of this study is described in section 2.3.

2 Evaluation questions, methodology and case studies

2.1 Evaluation questions

The evaluation set out to assess to what extent and how Dutch humanitarian policy has contributed to achieving Dutch humanitarian goals, with special attention for the priority themes innovation, localisation and the nexus. The overall evaluation question was:

> To what extent does Dutch humanitarian policy contribute to achieving humanitarian goals, and how does it do so?

The overall question has been divided into three sub-questions:

RQ 1 How effective are Dutch-funded actors in the humanitarian system (UN Agencies, Red Cross family and NGOs) in achieving Dutch humanitarian goals?

1.1 What are relative strengths and weaknesses of various funded humanitarian actors, how can these be explained, and in what way have these delivered added value in the delivery of humanitarian assistance?
1.2 Have Dutch-funded actors in the humanitarian system delivered timely, needs-based and principled humanitarian action? What have been factors of success, or failure?
1.3 What has been the contribution of Dutch-funded actors to the objectives of innovation, localisation and the coordination with broader development goals? What best practices are identifiable and what has been their added value for the realisation of humanitarian goals?

RQ 2 What kind of funding relationship does the MFA have with its various partners, and how does this relationship enable or hamper their effectiveness in the delivery of humanitarian aid?

2.1 How are funding decisions made within the MFA?
2.2 What different types of relations between the MFA and recipient organisations emerge from these decisions, and how do these relations enable or hamper the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance?
2.3 In what way have the priority themes of innovation and localisation been promoted within these relationships and how have Dutch diplomatic efforts contributed to innovation and localisation within the humanitarian system?
2.4 How have policy changes in response to the IOB Policy Review of 2015 been implemented, and to what extent have these changes contributed to achieving Dutch humanitarian goals?

RQ 3 To what extent do Dutch humanitarian diplomatic efforts influence the effectiveness of humanitarian actors and how do they contribute to concrete results on Dutch humanitarian priority themes?

3.1 How is humanitarian diplomacy practised within the MFA? Can concrete results and/or best practices be identified?
3.2 How have these efforts facilitated and strengthened humanitarian action of Dutch-funded humanitarian organisations? What concrete results are identifiable?

2.2 Data collection: literature research and three country case studies

This evaluation was based on eight sub-studies conducted either by an external party under the guidance of IOB, or by IOB with the support of an external consultant (Table 2).

Table 2 *Sub-studies informing the evaluation*

#	Sub-study content	Conducted by
1	In-depth analysis of humanitarian policy, Theory of Change, assumptions and decision-making	IOB
2	Desk study on effectiveness	IOB
3	Humanitarian diplomacy	IOB
4-6	Case studies in Syria, South Sudan and Yemen	MDF
7	Literature study on localisation	HPG/HAG
8	Literature study on innovation	UNU-MERIT

In each sub-study, information was gathered for input for this document and to inform the other sub-studies. This contributed to triangulation. Some reports were issued successively, but where sub-studies were conducted simultaneously, information was mutually exchanged. The reports for the individual sub-studies[21] are available on the IOB website.

Sub-studies 7 and 8 were mainly based on desk review, whereas the other sub-studies combined desk review with key informant interviews. In the three country case studies, South Sudan, Yemen and Syria, the evaluation additionally made use of field observations, a survey and beneficiary interviews.

The team collected primary and secondary data until the end of June 2022. Although the period evaluated was officially 2015 – 2020, certain interesting and/or relevant findings relating to the period after 2020 are also mentioned in this report.

The evaluation used a pre-designed semi-structured questionnaire for key stakeholders and beneficiaries. Beneficiaries were interviewed using focus group discussions. In the case study countries, a structured online survey was launched for key humanitarian stakeholders (actors and donors). Respondents from fund recipients were selected for interview on the basis of their relative importance with respect to assumed added value, monetary value of contribution and specific attention to the Dutch policy priorities innovation, localisation and links with development goals (the nexus); care was taken to ensure that different types of implementing organisations were included. Other key stakeholders were selected based on their expected knowledge of and engagement in the subject. Snowballing was used to recruit additional stakeholders for interviews. Beneficiary respondents were also selected purposefully from among those benefitting from the CBPFs or DRA programmes. Table 3 gives the breakdown of the 492 respondents whom IOB interviewed for the evaluation.[22]

Table 3 *Details on the 492 respondents interviewed for the evaluation*

Source of interviewees	Phase 1	Country case studies			Humanitarian Diplomacy study	Decision-making study	Localisation study	Innovation study	End Phase	Total
		South Sudan	Yemen	Syria						
Interviews with key stakeholders	26	29	26	30	62	18	0	2	2	**195**
Focus groups with beneficiaries	0	54	51	3	0	0	0	0	0	**108**
Feedback sessions with key stakeholders	0	16	16	24	0	26	41	14	8	**145**
Online survey with external stakeholders	44[23]									**44**
Total										**492**

21 The sub-study on Humanitarian Diplomacy will not be published separately since the contents of the final version have been integrated in this evaluation.

22 Some respondents from the feedback sessions with key stakeholders were interviewed more than once.

23 Of whom 9 were UN respondents, 6 worked for INGOs, 18 for the DRA and 11 for local partners.

2.3 Methodology

There are many definitions of effectiveness in humanitarian aid.[24] We focused on the effectiveness of Dutch humanitarian policy in contributing to intermediate goals within the Dutch humanitarian policy, and therefore we assessed how effective that policy has been in contributing to the following intermediate objectives of:

- timely, needs-based and principled humanitarian action
- innovation in humanitarian action
- localisation of humanitarian action
- coordination with broader development goals (the nexus)
- addressing priority themes such as conflict and hunger, MHPSS and the Grand Bargain agenda on humanitarian reform

We did not map out how Dutch policy has delivered results at field level on the established end objectives of Dutch humanitarian policy since 2015: saving lives, restoring dignity and enhancing resilience of people affected by humanitarian crises. This was a deliberate choice, as the largely unearmarked character of Dutch humanitarian funding made it complicated to establish a strong linkage between HQ level funding and diplomacy and its results for the people affected by a humanitarian crisis. The evaluation instead explored whether the three fundamental pathways adopted to achieve the intended impact of saving lives, restoring dignity and enhancing resilience (see Figure 1 on page 26-27) exist, work and hold true at the level of the abovementioned intermediate goals. IOB did so by validating the underlying assumptions. IOB also focused its analysis on the distinct qualities of humanitarian partners, funding mechanisms and the Netherlands as donor and diplomatic actor in contributing to these intermediate goals within Dutch humanitarian policy. Finally, we reviewed the overall logic of Dutch humanitarian policy and ascertained the plausibility of the presumed causal relationships between the interventions to reach the intermediate goals and the intended impact or end goal of saving lives, restoring dignity and enhancing the resilience of people affected by humanitarian crises.

On the basis of the existing Theory of Change (2018)[25] and consultations with the humanitarian division of the MFA and Dutch humanitarian partners, we reconstructed the policy theory in order to present a picture of the expected relationship between the policy tools (money and diplomacy) and the desired impact of saving lives, restoring dignity and enhancing the resilience of people affected by crises. Figure 1, the result of this reconstruction,[26] provides a schematic overview of Dutch humanitarian policy between 2015 and 2020. It illustrates three parallel pathways: a funding mechanisms pathway, a humanitarian partners pathway and a coalitions of likeminded and less usual partners pathway, each of which is distinct yet when taken together contribute to the same medium- and long-term outcomes and desired impact. The policy seeks to improve the response to crises, to strengthen the preparedness to crises and to build a more effective humanitarian ecosystem to achieve the desired impact of saving lives, restoring dignity and enhancing resilience. The policy also reflects a strong insistence on the crosscutting themes of humanitarian needs and humanitarian principles and a focus on a number of thematic priorities.

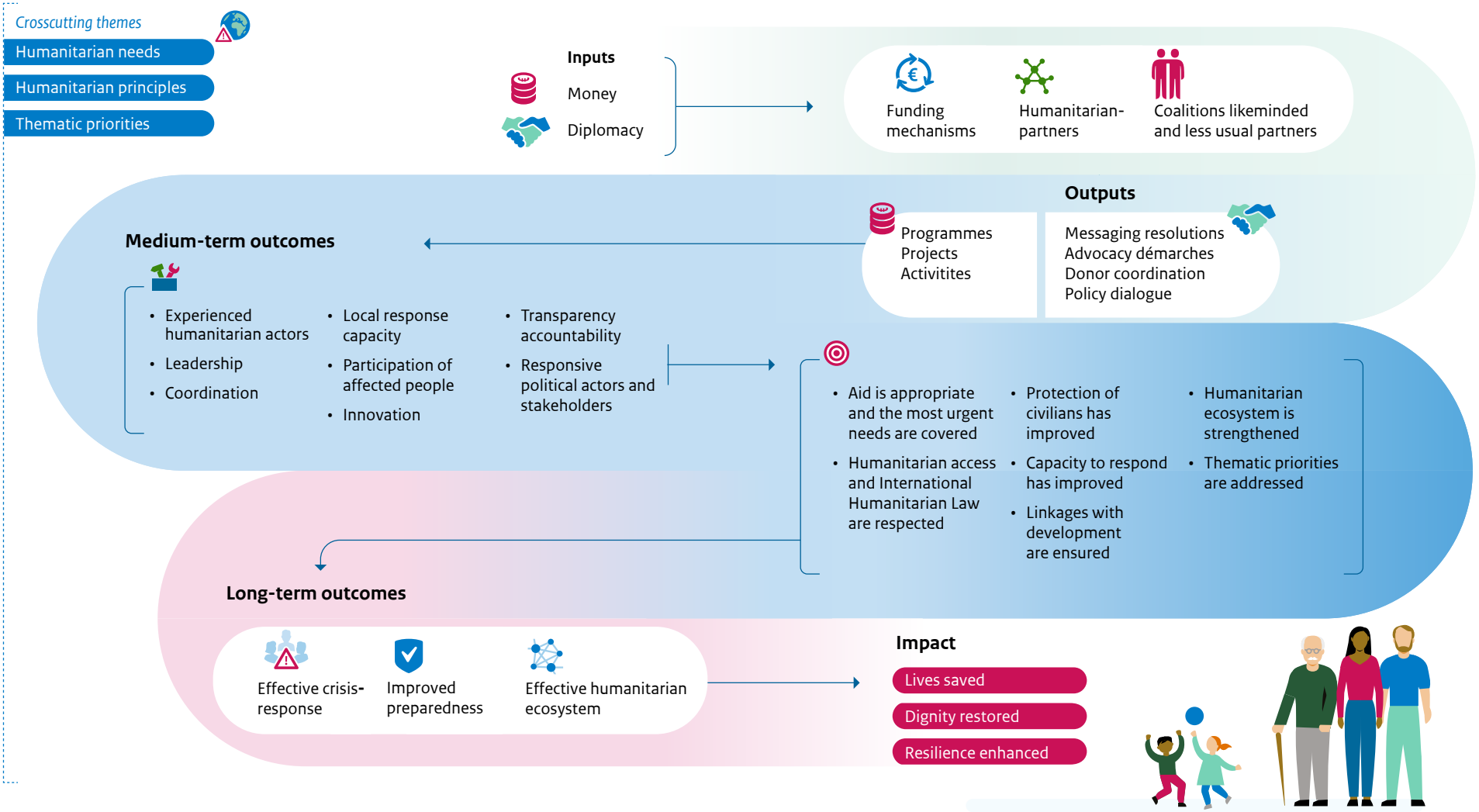
[24] Scott, R. (2014). *Imagining More Effective Humanitarian Aid: a Donor Perspective*. OECD 2014.

[25] Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, 2018, Theory of Change Humanitaire Hulp, Narratief, Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid, oktober 2018.

[26] This reconstruction of the policy was discussed and agreed in consultation with the humanitarian policy department of the MFA in two sessions and discussed in two meetings with DRA NGOs in 2021.

Figure 1

Reconstruction of Humanitarian Policy



IOB found that the number of thematic priorities for Dutch humanitarian aid policy has grown to no less than 18 since 2015.[27] IOB did not assess the effectiveness of Dutch policy in relation to all these thematic priorities. Given the context of increasing humanitarian needs and complex humanitarian crises, IOB limited its analysis of Dutch effectiveness to the objectives of a timely, needs-based and principled humanitarian assistance, the objectives of innovating and localising humanitarian assistance and the coordination with broader development goals (also referred to as the nexus). In addition, IOB looked more closely at the effectiveness of MHPSS, Food and Hunger and the Grand Bargain agenda on humanitarian reform when evaluating the humanitarian pathway of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy.

The three pathways were further elaborated in detail (see Figures in the Annex and the IOB study on Dutch decision-making[28]) to ascertain the assumptions underpinning the expected outcomes. Many assumptions underpin the humanitarian funding pathway and the humanitarian partners' pathways, but we considered only those relevant for the focus of this evaluation: the objectives of a timely, needs-based, principled assistance and innovation, localisation, and coordination with broader development goals (the nexus). A similar approach was used to narrow down the assumptions underpinning the humanitarian diplomacy pathway, considering an additional focus on the objectives of MHPSS, Food and Hunger and the Grand Bargain agenda on humanitarian reform.

The 11 assumptions that remained (see Table 4) were then tested in the three case study countries, further explored in a broader desk review on effectiveness[29] and reviewed in the humanitarian diplomacy study. The results were then triangulated. Findings were collated and responses aggregated and categorised according to the various research questions. IOB researchers have interpreted these findings and combined their interpretations into conclusions intended to demonstrate what worked and what did not. Recommendations linked to the conclusions were developed, bearing in mind the aim to keep them concrete, measurable and, as far as possible, actionable.

The three countries for the case studies were selected using a structured sampling approach based, among other things, on severity and diversity of crisis, levels of funding, diversity of humanitarian partners engaged, presence of Dutch NGOs and CBPF and/or CERF[30], relevance in terms of localisation and innovation, and feasibility of access for researchers.[31] On the basis of these criteria, Syria, Yemen and South Sudan were selected.

During the research, IOB organised various sense-making workshops with stakeholders from different backgrounds to gather their feedback and validate preliminary findings. Online internal peer review meetings were held and also online meetings with an external reference group. The feedback from these meetings has been incorporated in this report.

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27 Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: Strengths and weaknesses, IOB report, 22 September 2021 found the following thematic priorities in relevant policy documents shared with parliament: reform of the humanitarian system; innovation; improved preparedness; safety of aid workers; Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA); women and girls; in-kind assistance; localisation; accountability; education; sexual and reproductive health rights; support vulnerable people in crisis areas; Grand Bargain; triple nexus; MHPSS; conflict and hunger; risk sharing.

28 Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: Strengths and weaknesses, IOB report, 22 September 2021.

29 Herma Majoor, Effectiveness of Partners and Funding Relations, *Desk review for the Evaluation of the Humanitarian Assistance Policy of the Netherlands. Funding and diplomacy 2015-2020*, April 2022.

30 CBPF and CERF are the Country Based Pooled Funds and Central Emergency Response Fund, both administered by the UN.

31 The Terms of Reference can be found on the IOB website.

Table 4 *List of assumptions tested*

1. Providing unearmarked, predictable funding to a core group of experienced humanitarian organisations enhances specialisation and the necessary scale.
2. Large-scale crises require the deployment of big multilateral agencies.
3. Predictable unearmarked flexible funding leads to efficient, effective and timely delivery of aid.
4. Humanitarian partners have added value because of their specific knowledge and expertise, deliver relevant assistance and act with integrity in accordance with humanitarian principles.
5. UN-led coordination prevents gaps and overlap and determines which actor is best suited to deliver aid on the basis of quality, capacity, presence, access and speed.
6. Pooled funds contribute to coordination and effectiveness of aid.
7. Partners especially improve their capacity to respond if they are receiving unearmarked predictable funding.
8. Multi-annual flexible funding gives the Netherlands a good reputation and influence.
9. Accessible knowledge and capacity are available in the Humanitarian Aid Division in The Hague and embassies to assess whether Dutch partners do indeed have the expertise, professionalism and capacity and take decisions according to needs, principles and thematic priorities.
10. The Netherlands has influence because of its profile in international law and its good reputation as a large, predictable and trustworthy humanitarian donor. Being a large donor gives the Netherlands leverage. Cooperation is essential to increase leverage.
11. Aid delivery based on humanitarian principles is the best way to guarantee appropriate, needs-based, effective aid reaching conflict situations. Politicisation of aid can be prevented and mitigated by supporting experienced humanitarian actors.

2.4 Limitations

The evaluation encountered some limitations, which were mitigated where possible.

First, the scope of the study was vast. The study could cover the situation in depth in three country case studies, and due to the sampling frame, these would be mainly countries in conflict or with a recent conflict history. The three chosen countries (Syria, Yemen, South Sudan) have high intensity conflict situations. This evaluation therefore represents only part of the reality, as it did not look at humanitarian crises and disasters taking place in low intensity conflicts, or post-conflict areas. This choice also coloured the findings on the strengths and weaknesses of partners. For example, the sheer scope of humanitarian needs in Yemen has required a quick upscaling of the response, valuing the strengths of the UN as a preferred partner. One may rightly ask if the UN is as effective in low-intensity conflicts and post-conflict areas, where national governments as well as local authorities and civil society may be in a better position to respond. IOB has not explored these scenarios. The evaluators have tried to fill this gap by taking a broader view in their desk review and literature studies. The team tried to obtain third-party monitoring data from other bilateral donors in order to get a quantitative insight into beneficiary feedback, but despite multiple requests to those donors, for reasons of data protection the data could not be shared.

The second limitation is that the contribution to the nexus[32] was difficult to assess. The so-called "triple nexus" between humanitarian assistance, broader development goals and agendas for peace and stability was agreed upon as a focus for the wider humanitarian system at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.[33] It was however not taken up as a specific objective of Dutch humanitarian policy until 2020, when the minister referred to it in a letter to Parliament.[34] Without such operationalisation of the nexus in Dutch humanitarian policy in the period under evaluation, it proved difficult for IOB to draw

[32] This was to answer the question: How effective are Dutch-funded actors in achieving Dutch humanitarian goals (on the coordination with broader development goals), to what extent do Dutch diplomatic efforts contribute to concrete results on Dutch humanitarian priority themes? (The double nexus being one of the identified priority themes).

[33] Key questions and considerations for donors at the triple nexus lessons from UK and Sweden | IASC (interagencystandingcommittee.org), 16 December 2019.

[34] TK34 952, nr. 108, *Investeren in Perspectief – Goed voor de Wereld, Goed voor Nederland*, 3 March 2020.

conclusions on whether and how the Netherlands had contributed to the nexus in the field. Nonetheless, we did encounter the many dilemmas that this triple nexus brings. Humanitarian assistance based on the principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality does not necessarily match with parallel agendas of development, peace and stability that are guided by conflict sensitivity and principles of do no harm. IOB will explore the possibility of taking a closer look at the dilemmas and opportunities in the framework of the Policy Review of article 4 of the budget for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation – Peace, Security and Sustainable Development – that is scheduled for 2023. Both this humanitarian policy evaluation and a parallel evaluation of the Dutch contributions to Stability, Security and Rule of Law in Fragile Contexts will feed into that policy review.

A third limitation is related to the unearmarked and flexible character of Dutch funding. Recipients appreciated unearmarked funding, but at the same time were unable to provide details on the exact spending of the Dutch funds, and what this spending achieved. This type of funding cannot be linked to any particular project, moreover the reality is that the Dutch funding "has its fingers in many pies". This made it impossible for the team to find evidence on the specific contribution of Dutch funding to addressing humanitarian needs and to achieved results. It was possible, however, to identify (positive) strategic and operational results related to the flexible character of this funding.

As for the selection of respondents, although because of the vast scope of the study the group of respondents was large, it was still smaller than IOB would have liked, especially in terms of beneficiary respondents. As a result, there was less rigorous representation of beneficiary voices. Moreover, the time spent in-country for the case studies and the number of people available for interviews did not allow random sampling, so the sampling was purposive.

3 Effectiveness of humanitarian partners

3.1 Introduction

The Dutch government supports experienced humanitarian partners and innovative funding mechanisms to save lives, restore dignity and enhance resilience. Most funding is flexible, unearmarked or semi-earmarked and given at headquarters level. In 2021, the Netherlands was the tenth humanitarian donor in the world in terms of size of support and was among the five donors who funded 69% of the UN CBPFs.[35] Based on the achievements reported in, among others, the 2021 Global Humanitarian Overview, IOB finds it plausible that Dutch money has contributed to the many lives saved, dignity restored, and resilience enhanced.

35 Development initiatives | Global Humanitarian Assistance. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022.

The emergency response focuses firstly on saving lives. In 2021, under Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), 107 million people were reached with life-saving food assistance.[36] Additionally, humanitarian organisations, including those funded by the Netherlands, are increasingly abandoning the division between emergency support and building resilience and are including resilience in their corporate approach. One of the appeals that received most funding in 2021, for instance, was the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan.[37]

Dignity is a little more difficult to report on at a large scale, since there is no commonly agreed definition, but it is often linked to protection, rights and basic needs.[38] Most humanitarian actors are reported to have provided protection services including legal aid, sexual and gender-based violence related services and psychological support to vulnerable groups including women and girls, young people, refugees and asylum seekers.[39] The Dutch thematic emphasis on MHPSS and Prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH) falls well within this area. For IDPs and refugees, inter-agency partners focused on ensuring protection through multi-sectoral response activities supporting the objectives under the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, the Global Compact on Refugees and Global Compact on Migration.

3.2 Effectiveness of partners

The Effectiveness of Dutch-funded actors in the humanitarian system

Overall, IOB has found UN Agencies, the Red Cross family and DRA to be reasonably effective in delivering timely, needs-based and principled humanitarian action in challenging environments of conflict. On the basis of reports it consulted,[40], IOB considers it to be plausible that Dutch money has contributed to the many lives saved, resilience enhanced, and dignity restored as reported in independent evaluations and UN reports since 2015. There is also enough evidence that assumptions on the strengths and weaknesses of these partners hold in practice.

However, when it comes to new policy demands in humanitarian assistance on localisation, innovation and the nexus, these same humanitarian partners have not lived up to Dutch expectations. Localisation and the nexus require tailor-made solutions and a strong commitment (and risk appetite) to complement and strengthen local capacities. IOB has found the NGOs (such as those united in the DRA) and the Red Cross (IFRC and national societies) to be better allies on localisation and the nexus than the UN. At the same time, in high intensity conflict crises (like the ones studied in Yemen, South Sudan and Syria) it was found that there is a clear trade-off between tailor-made solutions and the ability to deliver a timely and principled humanitarian response at scale. For the latter, the unique roles of UN agencies (in scale and leverage) and the ICRC (in protection and principled aid) are indispensable. On innovation it proved difficult to assess the impact of the many ad hoc initiatives that together have not led to transformative change.

The section below lays out the main findings to support the abovementioned conclusions.

3.2.1 Strengths and weaknesses of specific Dutch humanitarian partners

In general, IOB observed that feedback and complaint mechanisms for beneficiaries rarely work well. The aim is to strengthen accountability and learning, but most systems suffer from multiple challenges: lack of beneficiary awareness, no or poorly working hotlines, absence of transparent channels, lack of analysis of feedback and inadequate follow-up responses. As a result, feedback is limited, and adaptive measures scant.

36 https://gho.unocha.org/intro/global-achievements.
37 Development initiatives | Global Humanitarian Assistance. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022.
38 Mosel, I and Holloway, K. 2019. *Dignity and humanitarian action in displacement.* HPG report, March 2019.
39 https://gho.unocha.org/intro/global-achievements.
40 Effectiveness of Partners and Funding Relations, *Desk review for the Evaluation of the Humanitarian Assistance Policy of the Netherlands. Funding and diplomacy 2015-2020*, Herma Majoor, April 2022; Study on the effectiveness of humanitarian partners and funding relations of the Netherlands Case studies synthesis report, Jeff Duncalf, June 2022, MDF.

3.2.1.1 UN agencies

The MFA provides unearmarked funding to various UN agencies. This evaluation looked at OCHA, WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR, which are the most relevant humanitarian partners in terms of humanitarian mandates and funding levels.

IOB has found that where needs are vast, where governments allow access, but where capacity and leadership are lacking at community and country level, the UN is often in the best position to lead and coordinate international humanitarian action. The country case studies have validated that this is particularly true in large-scale crises, where the UN has an added value in providing aid due to economies of scale and access to good-quality logistics and other systems. In the case study countries, UN-led coordination has helped prevent gaps and overlap and to determine which actor is best suited to deliver needs-based aid based on quality, capacity, presence, access and speed.

At times, however, for instance in Syria, the UN also struggles to provide sufficient assistance to populations in non-government held areas. The reason is that UN agencies' inherent strength lies in its leverage and mandate to engage with officially recognised authorities on issues of humanitarian concern. In conflict-induced crisis countries, the UN strength of working with the government comes at the cost of not always being able to engage with other parties in a conflict. Vulnerable people in non-government held areas may thus receive less assistance or sometimes none at all.

IOB observes as well that large-scale assistance through UN agencies is relatively expensive. Donor money travels a longer trajectory from UN, via INGOs and local partners to reach the affected populations. This has also led to cascading of overheads and low coverage of the indirect costs of local partners[41]. IOB also observed that in the case study countries the UN-led coordination is not necessarily conducive to empowering local actors in humanitarian action.

OCHA

OCHA is the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Its mandate is to ensure that assistance and protection reaches the people who need it most. OCHA has an important role in bringing together humanitarian actors to ensure the international response to emergencies is coherent.[42] This coordination is done in clusters which represent groups of humanitarian organisations, both UN and non-UN, in each of the main sectors of humanitarian action.

IOB has found that OCHA coordinates international humanitarian assistance well and has a good overview of needs and gaps. IOB observes that the cluster system is sometimes slow and bureaucratic, but that it also helps to avoid gaps, duplication and overlap.[43] OCHA uses Dutch funding for its institutional capacities and institutional costs to manage the CERF and CBPFs. IOB concludes this has also benefitted other MFA partners and humanitarian actors. Even though negotiating access is a unique strength of the ICRC, OCHA also has a responsibility in this field and is often instrumental in improving humanitarian access, not only inside countries but also in negotiations in New York and Geneva.

In Yemen, specific programmatic strengths identified in the case study were, for example, the OCHA-produced monitoring reports within the Yemen Humanitarian Fund. (YHF). These reports, which result from numerous field trips, provide sectoral recommendations that benefit the extended humanitarian community. IOB found OCHA Yemen to be well experienced in delivering the role of central coordinating body. OCHA also leads the selection process for CERF and YHF, in coordination with and based on analysis by cluster leads.

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41 *International Humanitarian Financing: Review and comparative assessment of instruments A study for the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative* commissioned by the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance Abby Stoddard, Ph.D., Final report 22 July 2008; *From Grand Bargain to beneficiary: An analysis of funding flows through the humanitarian system.* Tasneem Mowjee, Lydia Poole and Barnaby Willitts-King May 2017.

42 www.UNOCHA.org.

43 IASC 2022. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis. 14 July 2022; case study observations.

It was confirmed in IOB's field studies that by coordinating, leading and implementing needs assessments, OCHA contributes to the effectiveness of aid. In South Sudan for instance, OCHA had managed nationwide joint assessments that feed into the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) process, led on localised assessments, and coordinated and facilitated the working relations amongst the aid community well. OCHA's weaknesses were mostly found in terms of their resistance to localisation, which OCHA perceives as hampering the effective and efficient selection of implementers. At times OCHA has had problems filling leadership vacancies in high intensity crises, which has affected its ability to lead and coordinate.

UNICEF

UNICEF has the mandate to address child rights and protection, and access to education, water, sanitation and health (WASH). The agency is also a partner to deliver on MHPSS in crisis-affected contexts, which is a priority among the MFA's ambitions.

UNICEF is a bold advocate for women and children's rights,[44] and avails of operational agility and surge capacity in complex humanitarian emergencies.[45] IOB found that in the three country case studies, UNICEF has leverage on these themes and a clear added value in the implementation of humanitarian programmes through its close collaboration with national and local authorities. Humanitarian partners see UNICEF's integrated programming[46] as an added value. In Yemen, UNICEF works alongside the national health services, providing vaccinations and nutrition programming, while also providing WASH[47], protection and education support. In South Sudan, it was confirmed through fieldwork that UNICEF brings the necessary experience and expertise to the response on child protection programming, malnutrition treatment and education.

On the other hand, intended results are not always achieved and limitations to coverage are frequent.[48] MOPAN observed that UNICEF did not always work on the basis of results-based management and that evaluations and research were often ad hoc[49] and that its data management and analysis are not always sufficient for identifying those most in need.[50] In Yemen, UNICEF is only irregularly able to conduct monitoring in all locations, and is concerned over possible inadequacies in their data from remote rural areas.

WFP

The World Food Programme (WFP) has the mission to save lives and to change lives by delivering food assistance in emergencies and working with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience.[51]

Based on the three country case studies as well as focused desk review, IOB has found that WFP's strength lies in its logistic capacity and effective and efficient implementation at large scale in volatile and complex operational contexts,[52] which often also benefits other actors.[53] Without UNHAS[54] flights, which WFP operates in many countries, for example, nationwide humanitarian support would not be possible.

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44 UNICEF (2019). *Evaluation of the Coverage and Quality of the UNICEF Humanitarian Response in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies.* January 2019.

45 MOPAN (2017). *UNICEF Institutional Assessment report.* Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, MOPAN 2015-16 Assessments.

46 Integrated programming combines activities in relation to health, nutrition, WASH, child protection and early childhood development.

47 WASH stands for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene.

48 MOPAN (2017). *UNICEF Institutional Assessment report.* Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, MOPAN 2015-16 Assessments.

49 MOPAN (2017). *United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Institutional Assessment report.* Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, MOPAN 2015-16 Assessments, 2017.

50 UNICEF (2019). Evaluation of the Coverage and Quality of the UNICEF Humanitarian Response in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies. January 2019.

51 www.wfp.org.

52 See also: WFP Executive Board (2020). *Management response to the recommendations of the summary report on the strategic evaluation of WFP's capacity to respond to emergencies (2011 – 2018).* Executive Board. First regular session, Rome, 16-17 April 2020.

53 See also: Steets, J., Meier, C., Harmer, A., Stoddard, A. & Spannagel, J. (2018). *Evaluation of WFP Policies on Humanitarian Principles and Access in Humanitarian Contexts. Evaluation Report*, WFP Office of Evaluation, May 2018, OEV/2016/014.

54 UNHAS stands for United Nations Humanitarian Air Service.

Furthermore, WFP's extensive monitoring system often provides monthly updates of markets, food security situations and related needs. IOB observes that, compared to others, WFP can scale up quickly, making a big impact in large-scale food crises. In South Sudan, for instance, WFP has been responsible for 90% of general food distributions, assisting 5.3 million people in 2020. In Yemen, WFP's rapid response mechanism enables a response within 72 hours. WFP can operate under difficult circumstances and knows how to reach people via partners in most affected regions. Remarkable is WFP's investment in private partnerships to improve procurement efficiency and boost its delivery.[55] WFP's approach to identify and mitigate risks has also been assessed to be working well.[56]

On the other hand, IOB found that WFP can quickly become the largest player in a humanitarian crisis, making direct delivery of food assistance and cash transfer the most dominant response but taking time to adapt programming towards livelihood and more sustainable solutions that people ask for. This is aggravated by the preference of many donors to earmark humanitarian money for the first life-saving response. Also, WFP's ability to achieve equitable and inclusive coverage of vulnerable people in humanitarian contexts is sometimes mixed, especially if funds are insufficient. According to interviewees, one of the reasons is that WFP needs-based plans are often considered to be "inaccurate" and "unrealistic", which makes acquiring full funding unlikely. This forces WFP to select a target group within the group that they identified as vulnerable.

WFP cooperates as much as possible with local government and communities. Working in close cooperation with host governments is often a necessity, to enable their targeted coverage to be reached. The downside is that this, coupled with WFP's strong dependence on mostly highly earmarked donor funding, represents a risk to operational independence.[57] For example, if part of the WFP operation is to transport and distribute in-kind food assistance from a few large donors, field workers depend on negotiations with authorities to facilitate the logistics behind this. This is more of a challenge for WFP than for other humanitarian actors, as WFP often has the largest operation, shipping lots of goods and other relief items.

UNHCR

UNHCR is the UN organisation responsible for protecting the rights of refugees and IDPs, and for coordinating the international humanitarian response to refugee crises.

IOB's fieldwork revealed that UNHCR manages the refugee and returnee processes well. UNHCR targets specific groups, and their livelihoods activities and protection advocacy[58] are deployed to help beneficiaries engage in a livelihood as a more durable solution.[59] UNHCR's strength is perceived as being its responsive and adaptive programming approach[60],[61] and working closely with existing local structures.[62] UNHCR's refugee mandate, supported by its lead role in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC's) Protection Task Team, has helped to mainstream and build partnerships as part of the IASC Protection Policy. An evaluation of UNHCR's protection cluster leadership identified its

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55 WFP Executive Board (2017). *Management Response to the Recommendations of the Summary Evaluation Report – Corporate Partnership Strategy.* Executive Board, Annual Session, Rome, 12-16 June 2017.

56 MOPAN (2019). WFP. *Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network*, MOPAN 2017-18 Assessments, April 2019.

57 Steets, J., Meier, C., Harmer, A., Stoddard, A. & Spannagel, J. (2018). *Evaluation of WFP Policies on Humanitarian Principles and Access in Humanitarian Contexts.* Evaluation Report, WFP Office of Evaluation, May 2018, OEV/2016/014.

58 Frankenberger, T. & Vallet, M. (2018). *Evaluation of UNHCR's Livelihoods Strategies and Approaches.* Global Report, December 2018, ES/2018/11. Evaluation Service UNHCR, Genève, Switzerland.

59 Featherstone, A. (2018). *Evaluation of UNHCR's Leadership of the Global Protection Cluster and Field Protection Clusters: 2014-2016*. October 2017, ES/2017/04. Evaluation Service UNHCR, Genève, Switzerland.

60 MOPAN (2019). *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*. MOPAN 2017-19 Assessments. Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, February 2019 (amongst others); Hanley, T., Ogwang, K., & Procter, C. (2018). Evaluation of UNHCR prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) *in the refugee population in Lebanon (2016-2018)*. Evaluation Report, November 2018, ES/2018/05. Evaluation Service United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Genève, Switzerland.

61 Dávila Aquije, D., Jones, S., Otulana, S., Pellens, T. & Seyfert, K. (2017). *Evaluation of UNHCR's implementation of three protection strategies: The Global Education Strategy, the Updated SGBV Strategy and the Child Protection Framework*. July 2017, Full report, ES/2017/2. Evaluation Service United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Genève, Switzerland.

62 Baker, J., Elawad & I., et al (2018). *Independent Evaluation of the UNHCR South Sudanese Refugee Response in White Nile State*, Sudan (2013 – 2018). August 2018, Final Evaluation Report, ES/2018/02. Evaluation Service UNHCR, Genève, Switzerland.

weakness as mixed performance in coordinating the protection cluster due to the leadership deficiencies of the protection coordinators in the field.[63] In South Sudan, protection issues in and around the camps remained a concern,[64] including for women facing sexual and gender-based violence.[65]

In South Sudan, UNHCR has led on the rollout of PSEA across the country. For example, UNHCR leads in-country on the adoption of PSEA best practices, having conducted trainings at the nine state-level clusters.

3.2.1.2 The RCRC Movement

The Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement is made up of three independent parts: the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the ICRC and the national societies. The IFRC's mission is to act before, during and after disasters and health emergencies. Through its large network of 192 national societies, thousands of local branches and millions of volunteers, the IFRC has a presence even in remote communities.[66] The IFRC coordinates and develops strategic guidance for this network, thus facilitating the capacity development of national societies. The ICRC leads in situations of armed conflict. It almost always brings its own staff to operations, relying on national society staff if needed, and where the situation allows. The ICRC will come and go, depending on the level of conflict and peace. National societies are there to stay, close to the communities in which they work.

The MFA provides largely unearmarked funding to the different components of the RCRC Movement. The greatest support is given to ICRC in terms of core funding and appeal top-ups. Furthermore, the MFA supports the NLRC that channels earmarked and partly earmarked funds to IFRC-coordinated country appeals and some core funding to the IFRC.

IOB has found enough evidence to confirm that the ICRC plays a unique and indispensable role in protecting and assisting the most vulnerable in situations of armed conflict. IOB has also found that the wider RCRC Movement represents a unique and vast network that through its national societies allows for a continued presence and capacity in and near crisis-affected communities. The closeness of these national societies to national authorities at state level was found to positively affect their operational capacity, yet at times also to seriously complicate their neutral and independent aid delivery. IOB has found the IFRC to be a serious partner in promoting links with development goals (climate adaptation), capacity strengthening, more equal partnerships and locally led disaster response.

ICRC

ICRC is known first and foremost for its field operations in aid for victims of armed conflict and internal violence all over the world. ICRC's inherent strength lies in its strict principled approach, which guarantees relatively good access to all parties of a conflict. ICRC is often referred to as the first one in and the last one out. Its unique role as guardian of international humanitarian law (IHL), the law applicable in situations of armed conflict, is formally recognised by the state parties to the Geneva Conventions, who represent almost all the world's states. ICRC also functions as a catalyst for discussing issues between governments and other actors, and promotes IHL implementation with states[67]

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63 Featherstone, A. (2018). *Evaluation of UNHCR's Leadership of the Global Protection Cluster and Field Protection Clusters: 2014-2016*. October 2017, ES/2017/04. Evaluation Service United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Genève, Switzerland.

64 Forced recruitment into armed factions, child marriage, and child labour were reported as common in Unity State, and one would imagine are common elsewhere. The numbers of people in the camps around Bentiu have increased due to recent displacements, and housing in the camps was said by IDPs to be overcrowded.

65 Beneficiaries in Bentiu (South Sudan) reported issues for women when collecting firewood in that they are open to assault, and UNHCR reported that women are exposed to SGBV in the home and elsewhere.

66 Effectiveness of Partners and Funding Relations, *Desk review for the Evaluation of the Humanitarian Assistance Policy of the Netherlands. Funding and diplomacy 2015-2020*, Herma Majoor, April 2022

67 Yves Sandoz (1998). ICRC as guardian of international humanitarian law, 31 December 1998; confirmed by fieldwork in the three case country studies and interviews with humanitarian and diplomatic stakeholders.

IOB found ICRC to be strong in adhering to neutrality principles. In South Sudan and Yemen, ICRC was granted access to all parties to the conflict, including in areas inaccessible for UN and INGOs, as they were seen as a prime example of an organisation that adheres to the principles of neutrality and impartiality. In Syria, due to its profile ICRC was perceived to be more agile than UN agencies in promoting early recovery and a more cost-effective approach towards long term humanitarian needs.[68]

ICRC as well as IFRC play a role at the interface of Dutch priorities, such as ensuring a focus on MHPSS and localisation, by supporting stronger local response to facilitate early access to services.[69] They can mobilise local staff and volunteers from the communities and can engage experienced experts in the design and approach of interventions.[70]

Because of its strong adherence to neutrality, independence and impartiality, ICRC shares limited operational information only within the UN cluster system. ICRC conducts its own needs assessments which, although communicated, remain uncoordinated with the UN.[71] Furthermore, ICRC commissions or publishes relatively few independent evaluations, and thus, even though it has a good reputation, it is also perceived to have a weak evidence base. Feedback from the case study countries indicated that ICRC formal reporting was quite minimalist, although ICRC is usually happy to talk in detail informally in person.

IFRC

The IFRC supports the national RCRC societies in more than 192 countries with strategic guidance, capacity strengthening and coordination tasks. In South Sudan, for instance, the South Sudanese Red Cross was supported with capacity building, concentrating support on their disaster preparedness and response and tracing activities. In Yemen, capacity building focused on disaster response. Feedback from stakeholders suggests that the capacity support given by nine international RCRC societies made efforts that were complementary rather than top – down in nature, with the South Sudanese Red Cross being increasingly in the driver's seat and taking ownership. Though results vary per context, IFRC is increasingly playing a strong role in sudden onset disaster response and related capacity strengthening and strengthening the link to climate change adaptation.

RCRC national societies

The strength of the RCRC national societies is their presence in the so-called "last mile of delivery", especially in specific belligerent front-line locations like in Afghanistan, Somalia or Syria.[72] In South Sudan for instance, the Red Cross has good levels of access, based on a nationwide network of 21 branches and 21,000 volunteers. In the Netherlands, the NLRC also provides the MFA with a platform to engage with domestic disaster response agendas and actors.[73] The NLRC is perceived to provide a unique long-term entry point for the Netherlands to support a vast network of national societies in crisis or crisis-prone areas and MFA leaves priority setting to the NLRC's professionals and experts. The NLRC has bilateral partnerships with 12 other Red Cross national societies, which fosters capacity strengthening.[74] Interviews brought out that NLRC is a good partner to liaise with, given its strong network and humanitarian expertise.

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68 ICRC News release on the occasion of the five-day visit of the president of the ICRC Peter Maurer to Syria (29 March 2021) "*This is not about having a political divide on reconstruction, this is about finding practical solutions in water, sanitation, health, basic electricity, basic income for people*"; The Century Foundation, Sam Heller (16 December 2021). *Early Recovery Aid Can Provide Vital Relief to Syrians – If Donors Follow Through*; Internal report (6 April 2022): *11 jaar humanitaire crisis in Syrie met recordhoge humanitaire noden; Verslag van Humanitaire Senior Officials Meeting.*

69 Internal report (2019.) ICRC/ IFRC: *Veel en brede steun voor beoogde Rode Kruis/Halve Maan-resolutie over geestelijke gezondheid.* 16 juli 2019.

70 Rijks-Intern (2019). Humanitaire hulp - Rode Kruis/Halve Maan - *33e Internationale Conferentie* (2 December 2019).

71 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2019). *Review and Capacity Assessment of Danish Red Cross*.

72 Gomez, M. (2020). *Health in the Last Mile.* Norwegian Red Cross.

73 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. *Nederlandse Rode Kruis over rapport 'Tweede publieksterugkoppeling nationale actie Nederland helpt Sint-Maarten'.*

74 These bilateral partnerships concern the National Societies of the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Lebanon, Mali, Uganda, The Palestinian Territories, Sudan, Zambia and South Sudan.

In some protracted crisis situations, the RCRC national societies' approach to risk identification, monitoring, management and mitigation has been identified as weak. This is especially the case where regional and country-level leadership is less strong, such as in some Middle Eastern and African regional and country offices.[75] In South Sudan, the South Sudan Red Cross has at times been seen as linked with the government, which may lead to access issues if opposition factions become wary of working with them.

The national societies are usually firmly embedded in a state's governmental establishment.[76] Though this is usually positive in terms of access and operational impact, it has the potential to affect the perceived neutrality and independence of other members of the RCRC family[77] active in a country. This was brought up especially in the Syria case study, where the SARC has a good relationship with the government, which could have led to delays in providing assistance to needy people in areas not controlled by the government and to bias in aid delivery.

3.2.1.3 Dutch Relief Alliance

The DRA is a coalition of 14 Dutch aid organisations[78] in partnership with the MFA of the Netherlands. The country case studies and document research confirm that using one lead INGO as a conduit for the Dutch funding has generated a less fragmented approach for the Dutch government than having to go through each INGO directly.

IOB considers the DRA to be a positive example of innovation, as the Dutch government would not have been able to fund the total of 14 individual member organisations individually to the same extent. Similarly, DRA members experienced added value of being part of the DRA in its access to Dutch government funding.[79] IOB also found that as collaboration within the DRA improved over time, it enhanced the quality of the humanitarian response of its individual member organisations. These positive results were mostly found in the strengthened coordination with the UN on principled needs-based action and the alignment of DRA operations with the HRPs[80]. Positive results were also found to result from DRA's shared strong insistence on localisation and resulting capacity strengthening of local partners. IOB assesses DRA's role in localisation as promising. Even though not all member organisations deliver equally on these ambitions, and many institutional obstacles remain, quite some DRA members were perceived as being at the forefront of promoting the participation of local partners. Examples show that they have created strong bonds with local NGOs providing direct linking into communities. IOB considered working towards more equal partnerships as well as sharing risks, capacities and overhead to be the main institutional challenges for DRA members to address.

IOB's findings on the assumption that the DRA will improve aid effectiveness and prevent fragmentation are mixed. DRA's strength as a consortium is that it can mobilise agencies that are agile and responsive[81] and that create strong bonds with local NGOs that provide direct linking into communities[82] with a relatively short delivery chain, low overheads and a risk appetite that is relatively high.[83] This includes setting up and implementing Joint Responses (JRs) in many countries, which enables an integrated response. For example, in South Sudan, DRA working alongside local partners supports a multi-sectoral response with activities in the food security, nutrition, cash, protection and WASH (Water, Sanitation

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75 Giesen, P., Musori, M., Richards, G. (2019). *Evaluation of the IFRC Syria Emergency Appeal.* Humanitarian Strategy Consult Amsterdam, 22 April 2019.

76 Slim, H. 2021. *Solferino 21. Warfare, Civilians and Humanitarians in the Twenty-First Century.*

77 IFRC, ICRC, national societies.

78 The DRA partners are CARE Nederland; Cordaid; Dorcas; Oxfam Novib; Plan International; Help a Child; Save the Children; SOS Children's Villages The Netherlands; Stichting Vluchteling; Tearfund NL; Terre des Hommes; War Child; World Vision; and ZOA.

79 Schofield, R., et al. (2022). *DRA External Evaluation, Final Report.* 24 June 2022. IOB's country case studies in Syria, Yemen and South Sudan.

80 HRP stands for Humanitarian Response Plan coordinated by the UN.

81 Schofield, R., et al. (2022). *DRA External Evaluation, Final Report.* 24 June 2022. IOB's country case studies in Syria, Yemen and South Sudan.

82 ECAS (2018). *Summary Report DRA Final evaluation, 2015 – 2017*; various Joint Response (JR) evaluations.

83 International Council of Voluntary Agencies. *Balancing Risk Appetite and Risk Tolerance in Humanitarian Operations.*

and Hygiene) sectors,[84] a programme that has been operational since at least 2017.[85] The engaged DRA members each contribute their own specific expertise,[86] adding value to the programme. Similarly, in Yemen, DRA supported the Yemen JR during the period in 2018 – 2021, delivering a multi-sector response with six international partners[87] and four local partners,[88] implementing activities in six different sectors in five governorates. Having consistent Dutch DRA funding for the last five years was seen as having created stability and a continuity of programmes that enables staff capacity building and facilitates work with the local authorities.

At the same time, an external evaluation found that DRA could do much more to work in an integrated way and deliver genuinely joint programmes that should have greater impact.[89] Moreover, there is no evidence that the DRA's Framework Partnership Agreement with the EU guarantees that each partner has the capacity to respond rapidly and effectively to acute crises. And the modality of distributing tasks and funds among DRA partners was not found to be conducive to ensuring that the most urgent needs are met by the DRA partner that is best equipped to do so. Currently 80% of the funds for JRs in protracted crises are divided equally amongst responding DRA partners and the last 20% is divided based on several factors, including "who is best placed to respond".[90] The rationale of DRA is that rather than negotiating about money, member organisations should focus on quality of programming. IOB observes that there is a risk that this system promotes supply-driven thinking rather than needs-based programming.

3.2.2 Timeliness, needs-based and principled approach by partners

3.2.2.1 Timeliness of action

IOB observed that all Dutch-funded partners have made significant efforts to respond as rapidly as possible but are hampered by external factors. Their efforts have been slowed down by security constraints, limited humanitarian access and lack of enough and sufficiently flexible funding[91]. In the case studies it appeared that most of these challenges to access, including weak state and physical infrastructures and slow government approvals, are largely beyond the control of the agencies involved.

WFP, for example, is a bulk transporter operating in highly insecure contexts and sometimes extremely poor infrastructure and is thus likely to face distribution delays. WFP also faces administrative blockages that cause delays in delivering food assistance, for instance in obtaining Yemeni government clearances for distributions of food already prepositioned in the country.[92]

The DRA faced challenges in four of their acute crisis JRs,[93] leading to delays at the outset in recruitment, procurement, securing beneficiary lists, liaison with local authorities and insecurity. In Yemen in 2020, the JR was affected by delays in the approval of project sub-agreements by local authorities, COVID restrictions and security challenges.[94]

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84 Centre for Emergency and Development Support, Community Empowerment Foundation, Humanitarian Development Consortium, Live Well, Mary Help Association, Smile Again Africa Development Organization, Universal Intervention and Development Organization, Widows and Orphans Charitable Organization, Women Development Group.

85 Annual Impact Reports for DRA for 2016 and 2015 were not consulted.

86 Save the Children, the consortium leader, is strong on child protection (co-leading the child protection cluster with UNICEF), and education. Help a Child provides psychological support to children and works on SGBV and domestic violence cases, DORCAS has expertise in food security and livelihoods and WASH, while Tear Fund is an experienced provider of emergency relief and hosts the South Sudan NGO Forum.

87 CARE, Save the Children, Stichting Vluchteling/IRC, OXFAM Novib, CORDAID and ZOA.

88 Solidarity Association for Development / Attadhamon Foundation for Development, Al-Nibras Foundation, Coalition of Humanitarian Relief and the Yamaan Foundation.

89 Schofield, R., et al. (2022). *DRA External Evaluation, Final Report*. 24 June 2022.

90 Ibid.

91 Lack of humanitarian access is not always limited to the high intensity conflict situations as studied in the case study countries. During the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic there were also access constraints. Moreover, certain countries in Asia do not appreciate international humanitarian assistance organisations taking on leading roles in response to sudden onset disasters.

92 WFP (2018). *Immediate, Integrated and Sustained Response to Avert Famine in Yemen, Standard Project Report 2018*. World Food Programme, Yemen.

93 Venezuela and Columbia 2019, Lebanon 2020, Gaza 2021.

94 Schofield, R., et al. (2022). *DRA External Evaluation, Final Report.* 24 June 2022.

Due diligence and administrative procedures

Other challenges that are more within the control of humanitarian agencies come down to delays in delivery resulting from slow or inflexible administrative procedures, lengthy budget approvals,[95] delays in onward contracting, contractor payments and fund disbursement.[96] These challenges were mostly found for the UN: for example, in the 2015 response to the influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey, when it was observed that UNICEF needed to work towards more timely release of ToR, calls for tender, contracts and payments [97] and that UNHCR[98] had been slow in mobilising surge capacity, causing delays in implementation.[99]

Slowed down by coordination

A trade-off emerges between timeliness and quality coordination to prevent gaps and overlaps in the response. For example, in South Sudan and Syria, interviewees mentioned that thorough application procedures for CBPFs would ensure coordination with cluster leads but also delay the implementation of much needed aid delivery. DRA's consensus-oriented decision-making model was also seen as leading to time constraints because of its emphasis on conducting local needs assessments jointly with partners and on programme design, when the priority need was delivery – as in the case of Syria, where violence resulted in rapid and large-scale displacement.[100]

Flexible unearmarked funding is key to timeliness

IOB has found that international and local partners consider flexible funding to be paramount to ensure timely assistance. Flexible funding can be defined as unearmarked multi-year funding that gives partners the flexibility to prioritise and respond. It has the downside of low donor visibility and inability to establish a direct link between funding and results in the field.

DRA members stated that the DRA mechanisms work well, and that funds are easily adaptable and released on a timely basis. Initially, DRA faced lengthy MFA proposal approvals, late fund transfers and delays in provision of supplies.[101] In Yemen, DRA agencies reported delayed MFA approvals, transactions and communication,[102] but later, MFA funding allocation decisions became more streamlined.[103] Similarly, the unearmarked core funding to UN agencies, IFRC and ICRC is said to be quickly available, released through each agency's own in-house mechanism to fill gaps in the supply line. This is reported as extremely important to help avoid delays in implementation. More than once, interviewees referred to such funding as "gold". CERF funding is also said to be released relatively quickly. The CBPFs take more time, as sectoral cluster leads determine the gaps and shortfalls that such funding can address. The IFRC Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF) system, which Dutch funding supports, is known to release funds within 48/72 hours of request. Interviews also suggest that the IFRC has good preparedness capacity to act quickly through national societies.

95 Pottelbergh, G. & Singh, C. (2017). *Evaluation of the Dutch Relief Alliance 2015-2017: Final Report.* ECAS Consulting, 17 November 2017.

96 Stoddard, A., Poole, L., Taylor, G., Willits-King, B. (2017). *Efficiency and Inefficiency in Humanitarian Financing. Humanitarian Outcomes.*

97 Darcy, J., Durston, S., Ballarin, F., Duncalf, J., Basbug, B., & Buker, H. (2015). *An independent evaluation of UNICEF's response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey, 2012-2015.* New York: UNICEF.

98 Sule Caglar, A., Conoir, Y., Murray, J., Thomas, V. & Ulkuer, N. (2016). *Evaluation of UNHCR's Emergency Response to the influx of Syrian Refugees into Turkey.* January 2014 – June 2015, Main report. UNHCR Evaluation Service, ES/2016/03, Geneva.

99 Confidential - UNHCR document and correspondence; MOPAN (2019). *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).* MOPAN 2017-18 Assessments. Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, February 2019.

100 Humanitarian Strategy Consult (2019). *Report of Evaluation of Syria Joint Response 4.* Humanitarian Strategy Consult, 29 May 2019, Amsterdam & and NWSJ After Action Review (2020).

101 Pottelbergh, G. & Singh, C. (2017). *Evaluation of the DRA 2015-2017: Final Report.* ECAS Consulting.

102 Poole, L. & Willitts-King, B. (2016). *Mid-term evaluation of the DRA.* Evaluation report, July 2016, HPG.

103 Bagash, T. (2018). *Yemen Joint Response 3 under the DRA 2017, Final Evaluation.* Grassroots, Yemen.

3.2.2.2 Needs-based and principled humanitarian assistance

Challenges

The ability of humanitarian partners to respond to the most urgent needs depends among other things on the timeliness, quality and frequency of needs assessments. The literature, fieldwork and interviews revealed significant challenges.

Firstly, there is a challenging dilemma or trade-off between the need to deliver at scale and the tailored solutions necessary for ensuring long-term solutions (the nexus). National, and local NGOs may not have the ability to implement at the scale that is required. On the other hand, they are reported to have good local access and community engagement and to contribute local knowledge, acceptance and cultural awareness. Depending on the context, these same local actors ensure more easily that the humanitarian response does no harm and lays the groundwork for longer-term solutions in terms of resilience, livelihood, development and peacebuilding. The challenge is to strengthen local leadership and engage local actors, affected population and development stakeholders in early stages of needs assessments.

Secondly, often the identified needs far outweigh overall funding, making it even more essential to ensure that the most vulnerable groups are reached with the limited resources. To achieve this, needs assessments must go sufficiently in-depth, which is extremely hard to organise.

Thirdly, good quality needs assessments necessarily require a principled approach to humanitarian assistance. This appeared to be a challenge in the three case country studies, as humanitarian principles were constantly under pressure due to ongoing insecurity and war. Parties in the conflict sometimes prevented access to certain areas or to information about needs, knowing they could use this to exert influence over the assistance.

Humanitarian agencies deliver needs assessments at scale

Despite the abovementioned challenges, IOB found that the larger, more experienced UN, RCRC national societies and INGO agencies have sufficient capacity to organise and undertake large quality field assessments of needs. For example, OCHA organises the nationwide Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plan, while WFP undertakes large-scale food security and livelihood assessments, and FAO plays a major role in the IPC (integrated phase classification) process.[104]

UNHCR's needs assessments focus on the protection needs of various vulnerable groups. Needs assessments are administratively linked to registration and benefit from investments in digitalisation.[105] A weakness of UNHCR was seen as the agency being unable to consistently promote Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) in the protection cluster.[106]

UNICEF assesses child and maternal health and acute malnutrition levels. It also works on strengthening AAP and has developed and uses a handbook that prioritises making needs assessments participatory.[107] Its needs assessments were sometimes found to be weak, leading to insufficient clarity about the highest priority needs and inconsistent attention to equity.[108]

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104 This classifies humanitarian geographical areas according to three separate scales (IPC Acute Food Insecurity, IPC Chronic Food Insecurity and IPC Acute Malnutrition).

105 MOPAN (2019). *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).* MOPAN 2017-19 Assessments. Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, February 2019.

106 Featherstone, A. (2018). *Evaluation of UNHCR's Leadership of the Global Protection Cluster and Field Protection Clusters: 2014-2016.* October 2017, ES/2017/04. Evaluation Service United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Genève, Switzerland.

107 UNICEF (2020). *Accountability to Affected Populations: A handbook for UNICEF and partners.* UNICEF, Office of Emergency Programmes, Geneva.

108 UNICEF (2019). *Evaluation of the Coverage and Quality of the UNICEF Humanitarian Response in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies.*

Several national societies, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) or the Turkish Red Crescent lead country-level coordination systems, including agency registration approval,[109] and as local organisations act as gatekeepers to the larger system. As mentioned earlier, they have sufficient capacity to undertake large, quality field assessments of needs, which is positive. Yet their closeness to the state's governing establishment can lead to bias in aid delivery.

OCHA and UN-led coordination

Fieldwork in Syria, South Sudan and Yemen revealed that OCHA's role in coordinating needs assessments within the clusters is widely recognised and valued by all stakeholders as being indispensable and of good quality. The cluster system works reasonably well to coordinate the humanitarian response and prevent gaps and overlap in a volatile environment. The relatively new cluster-coordinated needs assessment was also reported to be a useful tool both in South Sudan and Syria. The three country case studies and also the external DRA evaluation[110] confirm that humanitarian partners have contributed to and used the coordinated needs assessments to inform and develop their response. The humanitarian partners under review appeared to actively contribute to UN-led humanitarian coordination.

In Syria, the three different perspectives[111] severely complicate the UN-led coordination in a Whole of Syria approach. In government-held Syria, the needs assessments by the UN agencies are mostly done in close collaboration with the SARC. Given SARC's capacity and access to government-held territories, this has increased the reach and impact of humanitarian operations. But given the closeness of the SARC to the government of Syria, it raises valid questions about the independence and impartiality of the outcomes of needs assessments. Biased beneficiary selection remains an important risk in Syria, and biased programming or a lack of access for independent needs verification is equally challenging for local NGOs, UN agencies,[112] INGOs and, to a lesser extent, the IFRC.[113] International humanitarian partners have a crucial and complicated role to provide counterweight to undue influence exerted by the government authorities.

WFP plays an important role in assessing needs

WFP operations are assessed as mostly being well designed to respond to needs.[114] In West and Central Africa, WFP's geographical targeting was found to be mostly adequate, but in some contexts activity-level targeting was less adequate and led to the exclusion of vulnerable populations, such as nomadic people and/or people living with HIV and AIDS, or those experiencing seasonal food insecurity.[115] The MFA-supported mVAM[116] enables WFP to systematically assess the needs of the most vulnerable people in remote and hard to reach areas.[117] In Yemen, the lack of humanitarian access and the reliance on remote data gathering have affected the quality of the IPC.[118] In South Sudan, the IPC became a divisive rather than a uniting factor between UN agencies and the government; IPC ranked the country as between emergency (IPC 4) and famine (IPC 5) – a ranking that is politically sensitive for the government but is very relevant for the volume of international aid to be raised by humanitarian actors.

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[109] Giesen, P., Musori, M., Richards, G. (2019). *Evaluation of the IFRC Syria Emergency Appeal.* Humanitarian Strategy Consult Amsterdam, 22 April 2019.

[110] Schofield, R., et al. (2022). *DRA External Evaluation*, Final Report. 24 June 2022.

[111] Syria is divided into areas that are under President Bashar al-Assad, areas under Kurdish authorities and rebel-held areas.

[112] Hopkins, N., & Beals, E. (2016). *How Assad regime controls UN aid intended for Syria's children.* The Guardian, 29 August 2016.

[113] Humanitarian Strategy Consult (2017, 2018, 2019) - SJR 2, 3 evaluations and NWSJR Cross Border After Action Review. Humanitarian Strategy Consult (2019). IFRC Syria Appeal Evaluation.

[114] MOPAN (2019). *World Food Programme (WFP).* Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network, MOPAN 2017-18 Assessments, April 2019.

[115] Diaz, B. & Betts, J. (2017) *Regional Synthesis 2013-2017: West and Central Africa Region.* Operation Evaluations Series, November 2017, WFP Office of evaluation, OEV/2017/009.

[116] WFP's mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (mVAM) system collects food security data through short mobile phone surveys, using SMS, live telephone interviews and an Interactive Voice Response system.

[117] Robinson, A., Obrecht, A. (2016). *Using mobile voice technology to improve the collection of food security data: WFP's mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping.* HIF/ALNAP Case Study. London: ODI/ALNAP.

[118] Integrated Food Security Phase Classification is a tool that allows governments, UN Agencies, NGOs, civil society, and other to collaborate and determine the severity and magnitude of acute and chronic food insecurity and acute malnutrition in a country, according to internationally recognised scientific standards.

3.2.3 Delivering results on Dutch priority themes

Innovation, localisation and the nexus have emerged as Dutch priority themes since 2015, in response to the sector's sense that these are better ways of working. They have been prioritised under the Grand Bargain and adopted by many donors. These priority themes are referred to in the policy reconstruction (Figure 1) as crosscutting themes to be addressed throughout the overall humanitarian policy effort of the Netherlands.

The section below also assesses how funding arrangements of the Netherlands have helped partners to move these priority themes forward. Apart from funding, the MFA also puts effort into influencing the decisions and behaviour of humanitarian organisations through dialogue and negotiation. IOB considers this "policy dialogue" with humanitarian partners to be part of humanitarian diplomacy. The performance of the Netherlands as a diplomatic actor on these same priority themes will be discussed in sections 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5. of this evaluation.

3.2.3.1 Performance of partners on localisation

How can localisation be understood [119]

Even though there is no single definition, the localisation of humanitarian action generally refers to shifting resources and decision-making to local and national responders in humanitarian action.[120] It is this definition that IOB adopted for the purpose of this policy evaluation.

Since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, addressing inequalities in the system has increasingly been considered to be the "right" thing to do, given that humanitarian actors agree that the affected societies are central. Localisation is one way to help achieve this. It is a political choice based on ethics and principles and not solely on evidence.[121] Perceptions of the impact of localisation in the literature have mostly been positive: improved access; improved resilience; enhanced sustainability; links with development; timeliness; improved accountability to affected people; lower costs; and greater cost effectiveness.

In the literature it is argued that change towards stronger localisation will happen only when it is a necessity or is forced upon international actors. Lack of choice for international actors, as seen for instance in Myanmar, Somalia and parts of Sudan and Syria where international organisations have limited access, can lead to a shift in the power dynamics between international and local actors. IOB found that a partial power shift towards local actors has also happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, although the focus was found to have remained on improving effective delivery and less on self-determination and governance issues.[122] Nonetheless, global policy commitments have not translated sufficiently into tangible results at the operational level. IOB sees the major obstacles to be lack of trust in local actors, internationals' self-preservation, and power dynamics between different actors.[123] Perceived concerns about the capacity of local actors have also hampered the ambitions to localise. Thus, transformational change of the humanitarian response system is far from taking place.

Based on the evidence, IOB is convinced of the need for donors to strengthen their narrative[124] and work together towards localisation. Many donors' risk appetite is low, particularly for fiduciary, legal and reputational risks. This has led to more stringent requirements for compliance and due diligence, which disproportionately burdens local actors. International and national organisations are both susceptible

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[119] This section is based on an IOB commissioned literature study: Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021), Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localization, and the sources used in the present study.

[120] See for example *Going Local, achieving a more appropriate and fit-for-purpose humanitarian eco-system in the Pacific*, October 2017 redcross.org.au.

[121] Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021) Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localization.

[122] Mania, P. (2021). *Humanitarian learning under the Covid-19 pandemic; a pathway to localization?* Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 02 August 2021.

[123] Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. & Davey, E. (2021) Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localization.

[124] IOB defines narrative as a policy rationale in terms of established policy objectives and pathways towards clearly defined change.

to risks,[125] but local actors have mostly received little support to cover their overheads and thus cannot always avail of a good quality risk system. Moreover, not all risks can be mitigated with optimal policies and controls, and some risk must be accepted. Also, donors insufficiently fund long-term organisational capacity strengthening for local actors. Local actors' capacity is perceived to be limited, but international actors define capacity in a way that perpetuates power imbalances.[126]

Many researchers have found that donors do not yet work collectively to provide economic incentives for change,[127] and do not hold humanitarian partners to account on the equity and quality of their partnerships with local actors. It remains for international actors to decide who has capacity,[128] what capacity counts,[129] who gets what funding, what types of partnerships prevail and who can access coordination structures and strategic decision-making forums.[130] One of the reasons may be that international actors are reluctant to move to more equitable partnerships for reasons of self-preservation.

Dutch funding for localisation

Unearmarked funding to comply with the Grand Bargain

Due to capacity constraints and prevailing risk management strategies, the MFA is limited in its ability to directly fund local organisations and depends on the extent to which international organisations transfer funds and power. To fulfil the Grand Bargain localisation commitments,[131] the Dutch approach has been to prioritise predictable, flexible unearmarked funding to a limited number of experienced humanitarian partners with whom there was a long-term relationship.[132] This seemed a reasonable approach, as this type of funding has been identified as the key enabler to facilitate more localised and participatory responses,[133] assuming that core partners will increase direct humanitarian funding to local and national responders to achieve the agreed target of at least 25%. The main means to achieve this target were seen by IOB's respondents to be the NLRC, DRA and OCHA for the CBPFs. Core partners like the IFRC, OCHA for CBPFs, UNHCR and UNICEF reported that in 2021 they met or exceeded the target of providing 25%

125 Wall, I. and Hedlund, K. (2016) *Localisation and locally-led crisis response: a literature review.* Copenhagen: L2GP; Poole, L. (2018) *Turning rhetoric into resources: transforming the financing of civil society in the Global South.* NEAR Network (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/publications/turning-rhetoricresources-transforming-financing-civil-society-global-south; Stoddard, A., Czwarno, M. and Hamsik, L. (2019) *NGOs and risk: manging uncertainty in local – international partnerships.* (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/publications/ngos-risk2-partnerships).

126 Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021). Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localization.

127 Ali, M., Loduro, L., Lowilla, V. et al. (2018) Funding to local humanitarian actors: South Sudan case study. HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/funding-to-localhumanitarian-actors-south-sudan-case-study/); Barbelet, V. (2019) *Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action.* HPG report. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/11471-rethinking-capacity-andcomplementarity-more-local-humanitarian-action); 2019; Featherstone, A. and Mowjee, T. (2020) *Desk review on enhancing the potential of pooled funds for localisation*, (https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18276/pdf/final_gbw2_pooled_ funding_ for_localisation.pdf); Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W., Willitts-King, B. and Spencer, A. (2020) *Grand Bargain annual independent report 2020.* HPG commissioned report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/ publications/ grand-bargain-annual-independent-report-2020/).

128 Van Brabant, K. and Patel S. (2018) *Localisation in practice: seven dimensions of localisation emerging indicators and practical recommendations.* DEPP and the Global Mentoring Initiative (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Localisation-In-Practice-Full-Report-v4.pdf); Barbelet, V. (2019) *Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action.* HPG report. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/11471-rethinking-capacity-andcomplementarity-more-local-humanitarian-action); Fast, L. and Bennett, C. (2020) *From the ground up: it's about time for local humanitarian action.* HPG report. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/16991-ground-it-s-about-time-localhumanitarian-action).

129 Barbelet, V. (2019) *Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action.* HPG report. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/11471-rethinking-capacity-andcomplementarity-more-local-humanitarian-action); Melis, S. and Apthorpe, R. (2020) 'The politics of the multi-local in disaster governance' *Politics and Governance* 4(S2): 366.

130 Wall, I and Hedlund, K. 2016. *Localisation and Locally led Crisis Response: A Literature Review.* Swiss development Cooperation.

131 Commitment 2.4 to achieve by 2020 a global, aggregated target of at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders and Grand Bargain commitment 2.6 to make greater use of funding tools which increase and improve assistance delivered by local and national responders, such as UN-led CBPFs (IFRC Disaster Relief Emergency Fund and NGO-led and other pooled funds).

132 Dutch unearmarked flexible funding increased from around 41% of the total humanitarian aid budget in 2015 to 55% in 2021. Throughout these years, the percentage of softly earmarked funding available for specific crises remained an average of 41%. This category contains contributions to DRA and to the NLRC as well as all Dutch contributions to CBPFs coordinated by UNOCHA.

133 Metcalfe-Hough, V. et al. (2020) *Grand Bargain annual independent report.* June 2020.

humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible.[134] The DRA aim of 35% to local actors in acute crises was achieved by 2020.[135] These achievements, however, reflect funding reaching local actors through an international partner who receives donor funds directly. As for direct funding from donors to local and national responders, according to the Financial Tracking System data, in 2021 this was USD 495 million, which was only 2% of global humanitarian funds.[136]

Since 2021, challenges around power dynamics have become more of a priority, because the MFA has used the findings of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) literature study on humanitarian localisation to guide the renewal of funding arrangements with two main partners (the NLRC/IFRC and DRA). The MFA included "forward-leaning language" on the ambition to improve the equity and quality of partnerships of these partners with local actors. These arrangements included a requirement for efficient risk management and transparency about how risks are shared among partners. Moreover, capacity-strengthening of local actors and RCRC societies' members was mentioned as a specific priority for the use of funds. Local partners were to be given a role in capacity needs assessments, in direct communication with donors to reflect on the partnership conditions, and in joint planning of and decision-making about interventions. The relevance of passing on favourable conditions of multi-year funding and providing an adequate indirect cost recovery for local partners were also included. This was laid down in the relevant grant framework and as such guides the partnership of the MFA with the NLRC and DRA in the coming years.[137]

Results of partners on localisation

In the three case study countries, key interviews brought out that the core humanitarian partners perceived to have adopted the thematic priority of localisation in their field level programming had done so because of the policy guidelines of their respective organisations. The main reason for policy development on this issue was the Grand Bargain. Section 5.5 will explore how the humanitarian diplomacy of the Netherlands was found to play an active and constructive role in moving this agenda for change forward.

UN agencies

Using information on the three case study countries,[138] IOB found that local partners in Syria, Yemen and South Sudan value the DRA framework as being more successful in integrating national NGOs as full partners than the respective CBPFs. OCHA is seen as a good coordinator, and through its management of CBPFs, direct funding to national NGOs has increased up to or above 25%, but its capacity strengthening is often limited to fulfilling funding requirements, and funding remains short term.

There is some discrepancy between how OCHA and the rest of the humanitarian community see OCHA's role and its management of CBPFs as a tool for localisation. In Yemen, selection of the best actor to provide support under the YHF is based on who is perceived to have the best capacity in a specific geographical area. According to OCHA, here the obligation to meet the 25% YHF target of funding for local partners introduces a criterion that is not based on capacity and may lead to a less than optimal decision. In South Sudan, the humanitarian community sees the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) as the main tool for localisation, but the SSHF management does not see it as their responsibility and see capacity building of the fund recipients as only one element of what they are there to do.

The CERF funds only benefit UN organisations directly, and transfer of funds to local organisations is limited and entirely at the discretion of these UN agencies. Funds have been effective in nearly attaining the 25% target of the Grand Bargain, but DRA and CBPF recipients find that not enough has been achieved tin terms of treating local partners as equals and moving towards strategic partnerships instead of sub-agreements.

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134 Metcalfe-Hough, V., et al. (2021) *The Grand Bargain in 2021: an independent review.* HPG-ODI.
135 Schofield, R., et al. (2022). *DRA External Evaluation*, Final Report. 24 June 2022.
136 Metcalfe-Hough, et al. (2021). *The Grand Bargain in 2021: an independent review.* HPG-ODI.
137 Subsidiebeleidskader Humanitaire hulp 2022 – 2026, Besluit vaststelling beleidsregels en subsidieplafond Subsidieregeling Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken 2006 (Humanitaire hulp 2022 – 2026).
138 Study on the effectiveness of humanitarian partners and funding relations of the Netherlands: Case studies synthesis report, Jeff Duncalf, June 2022, MDF: the study combined and triangulated findings based on interviews, a survey, focus groups of beneficiaries, feedback sessions with policymakers and a document review.

In general, from the three country case studies and desk review it was concluded that the UN agencies proved to be poor allies for achieving localisation objectives. UN agencies often offer six-month contracts to implementing or cooperating partners, where for instance in North Yemen the time to set up an activity easily takes more than three months. There has been little or no progress on achieving equal partnerships.

WFP and UNICEF, like OCHA, apply a narrow interpretation of capacity building for local partners, focusing foremost on teaching the procedures they use to apply for funding. Factors constraining their ability to localise are the requirements of different donors on reporting and due diligence, risk management and the perceptions of which partner is best placed to deliver timely and principled assistance. We found no evidence that the unearmarked and multi-year character of donors like the Netherlands had in any way been passed on to local actors.

RCRC Movement

The RCRC family adheres well to the prioritisation of the localisation agenda. National societies are increasingly in the driver's seat of programming, needs assessments and decision-making. Many RCRC societies have a significant role in ongoing nationwide operations through their branch networks and volunteers, even though the interviews brought out that this depends on the capacity of each society, which varies considerably. Factors seen as enabling in this process are a continuous focus on capacity building, clear ambitions and positive learning in disaster response and preparedness. The capacity building of national societies by the IFRC and national societies was seen as a good example of institutional capacity building that will have a durable localised impact. Examples were found in Sudan and Yemen, where the local Red Cross agencies will remain in country long after the international and UN agencies have left and are building up their capacity to respond to and mitigate localised conflict and disasters in future.

DRA

The case studies and desk research suggest that the DRA has made strong progress on localisation. DRA members have reached out to increasing numbers of local partners in each case study country. Local DRA partners are perceived by respondents as using their own specialist expertise to facilitate grassroots interventions that have greater levels of acceptance in the communities. In Yemen, findings suggest that the added value from the local partner in the DRA consortium is access to hard-to-reach areas, stronger coordination with local authorities and a better understanding of community needs and the local culture. Capacity strengthening is seen as a core activity within DRA.[139] This was confirmed by DRA's local partners, who repeatedly mentioned capacity strengthening – for example, on monitoring, evaluation and learning, PSEA, complaints mechanisms, human resources and finance. Stakeholders interviewed in South Sudan and Yemen found that the dual mandate of DRA members (humanitarian and development) also requires DRA to engage local partners at an early stage.

However, the 2022 external evaluation found that despite DRA's strong and strategic efforts, localisation (beyond the prescribed proportion of funding) is not yet sufficient, even by comparison with DRA's own goals, and sometimes it is lacking as a structural approach among DRA's members. The evaluation confirms that in several JRs, capacity strengthening has evolved from a top – down approach to more of a nuanced partner-led approach. Nonetheless, the hard metric of expenditure in 2021 was around 3%, well below the 5 – 8% target set by DRA for capacity strengthening. Furthermore, amplifying the voice and capacity of local actors was found to be ad hoc, with excellent initiatives in Somalia and South Sudan, but no evidence of a concerted effort across JRs.[140]

[139] DRA strategy 2018-2021, priority 4.
[140] DRA External Evaluation 2021.

3.2.3.2 Performance of partners on innovation

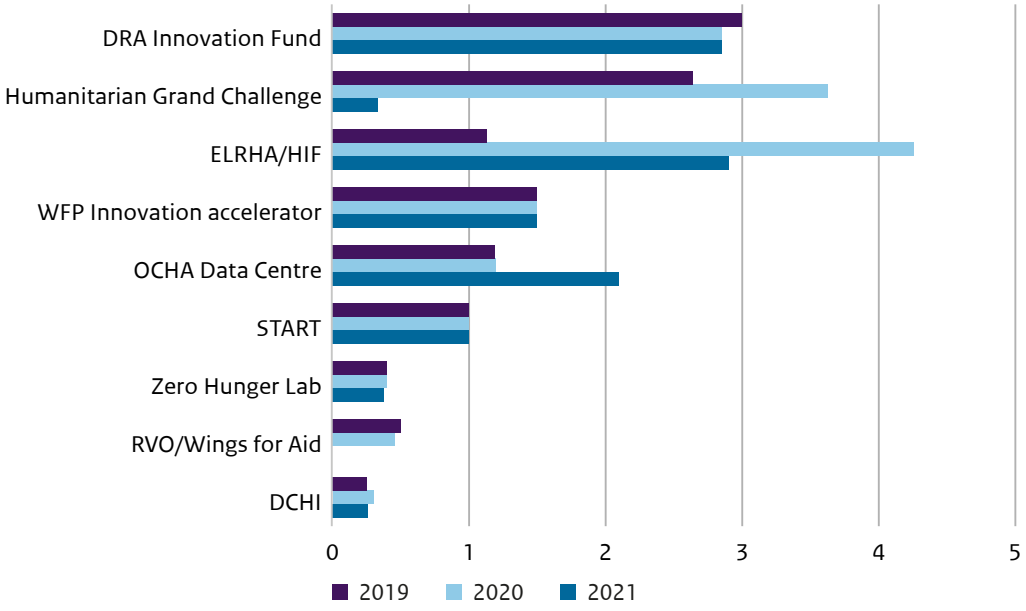
How to understand innovation

Innovation was a key priority of the Grand Bargain until 2020, with the aim to help improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian support. There is no generally accepted definition of the term "humanitarian innovation", but usually (and in the context of this evaluation) it is defined as innovative activities that provide improved solutions to humanitarian challenges of quality, efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian responses and outcomes for people in crises.[141]

Efforts at innovation and their results have remained relatively limited and have not visibly transformed the sector or added much value when tackling the prevailing strategic and operational challenges. Reasons include overoptimistic ambitions and the lack of a shared notion of what successful innovation looks like in the humanitarian sector.[142] Moreover, trial and error are seen as unethical, and the context is volatile. Intense time pressure tends to favour established approaches,[143] and donors' requirements for evidence to support innovative approaches are often more stringent.[144] In general, a mere 1% of humanitarian funding is spent on innovation.[145] The investment into the earlier stages of innovation is many times higher than into the more complex scaling up of innovations.

Very few innovations are scaled up, even if they had measurable results.[146] Most innovation initiatives met stronger systemic, mindset and capacity constraints than expected and have not delivered the anticipated transformational change. In the Grand Bargain 2.0, which began being implemented in 2021, the number of key priority themes was cut back to two, namely multi-annual, flexible, unearmarked funding and localisation/participation, and innovation was discarded.[147] Despite these challenges, the Netherlands has taken concrete steps to support humanitarian innovation via diplomacy as well as via earmarked and unearmarked funding, as described below.

Chart 1 *MFA-earmarked funding for innovation in EUR million*



[141] United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (2021). *Literature Study Innovation in Humanitarian Assistance.* May 2022.
[142] United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (2021). *Literature Study Innovation in Humanitarian Assistance.* May 2022.
[143] Darcy, J. (2013). *The Use of Evidence in Humanitarian Decision Making.* ACAPS Operational Learning Paper.
[144] Maxwell, D., J. Parker, and H. Stobaugh. (2012). *What Drives Program Choice in Food Security Crises? Examining the "Response Analysis" Question.* World Development, Special Edition on Impacts of Innovative Food Assistance Instruments, forthcoming.
[145] ELRHA (2018). *Too tough to scale? Challenges to scaling innovation in the humanitarian sector.*
[146] Metcalfe-Hough, V, et al. (2020) *Grand Bargain annual independent report.* June 2020.
[147] Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, et al. June 2022. *The Grand Bargain in 2021. An independent review.* HPG-ODI

Dutch funding for innovation

Dutch support for successful innovation funds

The MFA has funded and promoted humanitarian innovation for almost a decade, an early example being the development and successful implementation[148] of WFP's "mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping".[149] Before 2015, innovation was mostly seen as beneficial to disaster risk reduction.[150] Thereafter, innovation figured prominently as a general goal in policy documents,[151] as a means to improve timeliness, efficiency and high-quality aid delivery. The MFA sees solutions as being a longer-term commitment to strengthen response capacities in (1) safe use of digital information (2) new funding solutions to improve timeliness and (3) initiatives to advance learning and knowledge, accountability and transparency, and the safety of aid workers. Since 2019, as well as the requirement for innovations to be demand-driven and local actors to participate, a focus area has been the scaling up of innovations.[152] Nonetheless, evidence is lacking on the ability of taking innovation to scale and on clear standards of what scaling up innovations entails.[153]

During the period evaluated, the MFA supported several innovation funds, allowing grantees to select and support innovative ideas, while accepting that not all of these would be taken to scale. For 2019, the Netherlands allocated EUR 13 million to innovation (out of a total budget for humanitarian assistance of EUR 387 million)[154] (details in Chart 1).[155] The number of innovations under this portfolio is being cut back: it was ten in 2019 but in 2023 there will be seven. Though individually the funds mostly work well,[156] there is little interlinkage. An example was found in South Sudan, where DRA member NGO Plan and UNICEF, both board members of the Dutch Coalition for Humanitarian Innovation (DCHI)[157] failed to link up innovative approaches on education.[158]

No correlation between unearmarked funding and innovation

Through unearmarked funding, the MFA also assumes that funds are spent on innovation, but although key informants found unearmarked funding important to enable innovation efforts, coupled with donor dialogue, no hard evidence was found of correlation between funding and innovation. The nature of such funding makes it difficult if not impossible to identify a direct link between funding and innovation. A Swiss evaluation of ICRC found that even though many believe that unearmarked funding is the best approach to encourage innovation, in practice, the most innovative projects had been specifically funded.[159] IOB believes the examples below are noteworthy even though the extent to which they are linked to specific Dutch funding cannot always be measured or confirmed.

148 Development Information Services International, 2015. Review of mVAM programme: novel application of mobile technologies for food security monitoring. August 2015.

149 mVAM is currently mainstreamed in WFP's operation to remotely monitor food security and has led to better, cheaper and more reliable data to inform humanitarian support, leading to better targeting at lower cost. WFP, 2018. *Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping: Food security analysis at the World Food Programme*. November 2018.

150 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, vergaderjaar 2014-2015. Beleid ten aanzien van ontwikkelingssamenwerking. *Brief van de Minister voor Buitenlandse handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking.*

151 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, vergaderjaar 2015-2016. Beleid ten aanzien van ontwikkelingssamenwerking. *Brief van de Minister voor Buitenlandse handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking.*

152 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, vergaderjaar 2019-2020. Investeren in Perspectief – Goed voor de Wereld, Goed voor Nederland.

153 United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (2021). *Literature Study Innovation in Humanitarian Assistance.* Commissioned by IOB, May 2022.

154 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2019). 3. R: Humanitaire hulp (overzicht cijfers, MHPSS, Grand Bargain).

155 De Jonge, H (2021). *Stand van zakenbrief Covid-19*. Kamerbrief, 13 januari 2021. Confidential - WFP BEMO; WFP Executive Board (2019). *Annual performance report for 2018*. Executive Board, Annual Session, Rome, 10-14 June 2019; Draft plan 30 September 2021, intern.

156 Effectiveness of Partners and Funding Relations, *Desk review for the Evaluation of the Humanitarian Assistance Policy of the Netherlands. Funding and diplomacy 2015-2020*, Herma Majoor, April 2022.

157 DCHI is a coalition of companies, knowledge institutions and NGOs aimed at humanitarian innovation.

158 Rijks-Intern (2016). Centraal-Afrikaanse Republiek - Noodhulp - Report of field visit. Department fior Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid. 16 December 2016

159 Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (2017). *Independent Evaluation of the Swiss Contribution to the ICRC Headquarters.* June 2017.

Dutch partners use new technologies developed by others

UN agencies

UN agencies are using new technologies to innovate their approach. WFP, for example, has invested heavily in innovation, including in scaling up under the Scale-up Enablement portfolio of their Innovation Accelerator, where a gradually increasing number of successful innovations are taken to scale,[160] such as e-vouchers, blockchain technology and biometric registration, and, most recently, gathering satellite images for information verification and vulnerability assessments in inaccessible areas.[161] The UN-wide Global Pulse initiative uses mobile phone network data for estimating household expenditure on food and identifying households needing assistance.[162] One of the issues that WFP is working on[163] is privacy and data protection. This is important to ensure organisations cause no harm by using personal and other forms of sensitive data; it includes data requests from some donors that may risk harming already vulnerable populations even further. In 2019, the UN-OCHA Centre for Humanitarian Data organised a conference on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action to discuss these topics.[164]

UNHCR and WFP co-lead the UN Business Innovations Group,[165] which strives to improve cost efficiency through expanding collaborative activities, joint actions and cost savings within UN agencies.[166] UNHCR registration systems for cash support are gradually being digitised, strengthening the basis for more efficient oversight and effective analysis.[167] Increasing use is being made of biometrics and data-driven technology to improve efficiency of refugee assistance.[168] Further innovations are self-help kiosks, call centres and legal aid booths and outreach apps,[169] and partnerships with local organisations for integrating refugees into local society.[170] UNHCR's Innovation Service collaborates with a range of stakeholders, from UN partners, private sector and academia to NGOs. UNHCR is part of the Global Humanitarian Lab that works to scale up collective innovation in humanitarian interventions by funding and steering. UNHCR also collaborates with the Global Alliance on Humanitarian Innovation, which seeks to address innovation needs that cannot be effectively tackled by individual actors and organisations.[171]

In terms of finance, UNHCR tries to close their funding shortfall by innovative ways of fundraising, such as through the "connecting worlds app",[172] which aims at facilitating safe contact between refugees and those who support them. UNICEF has an Innovation Fund that provides seed funding for innovations in humanitarian and development contexts.[173]

By giving earmarked funds to the OCHA Centre for Humanitarian Data in The Hague, the Netherlands enabled the Centre to collect and analyse data on a worldwide scale, with the aim to increase impact and efficiency of future humanitarian support. Regarding pooled funds, OCHA sees innovation potential in strengthening the funding of local actors, in priorities that are not yet sufficiently addressed (including targeting women and girls and people living with disabilities), and in assessing whether CERF can be used in a multi-year manner.[174]

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160 WFP 2020. *Innovation Accelerator. The year in review.*

161 Rijks-Intern (2017). VN - WFP - Humanitaire hulp - *WFP biedt interessant inkijkje in de wereld van innovatie, data en technologie voor humanitaire doeleinden.* 11 januari 2017.

162 United Nations (2015). *Global Pulse Information sheet*; https://www.unglobalpulse.org/.

163 Rijks-Intern (2017). VN - WFP - Humanitaire hulp - *WFP biedt interessant inkijkje in de wereld van innovatie, data en technologie voor humanitaire doeleinden.* 11 januari 2017.

164 Rijks-Intern (2019). Humanitaire hulp - *Strengthening responsible use of sensitive data in humanitarian situations - the beginning of an important conversation at Wilton Park.* 26 mei 2019.

165 UNHCR (2019) *Webinar summary note: what is the UN Business Innovations Group in the Grand Bargain to reduce management cost?*, 28 November, IASC.

166 Metcalfe-Hough, et al. (2020) *Grand Bargain annual independent report.* June 2020.

167 Ravesloot, B., et al. (2019). *Midterm Evaluation of UNHCR's Cash-based Interventions Capacity Building Approach.* Evaluation Report, April 2019, ES/2019/02. Evaluation Service UNHCR, Genève, Switzerland.

168 UNHCR (2018). *Grand Bargain Self Report* (January-December 2017).

169 Rijks-Intern (2019). VN - UNHCR - *Humanitaire hulp - Internationale bescherming centraal op agenda Standing Committee - ook aandacht voor SEA en SH*. 8 juli 2019.

170 Confidential report (2019). VN - UNHCR - *Humanitaire hulp – Scene setter Global Refugee Forum* 17-18 december 2019. 11 december 2019.

171 Mcclure, D. (2018). *Creating more impactful innovation capabilities in the aid sector.* The Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation, 2018, London.

172 Rijks-Intern (2020). VN - UNHCR - *Oproep UNHCR aan EU: Solidariteit met vluchtelingen buiten Europa mag niet ten koste gaan van die aan de grenzen* - Verslag UNHCR 77e Standing Committee. 19 maart 2020.

173 Rijks-Intern (2018). VN - UNICEF - Ontwikkelingssamenwerking - UNICEF Uitvoerende Raad 12-14 september - *Fore zet in op innovatieagenda en private sectorsamenwerking.* 24 september 2018.

174 Rijks-Intern (2019). VN - OCHA - Humanitaire hulp - *Verslag OCHA Donor Support Group 21 juni.* 15 juli 2019.

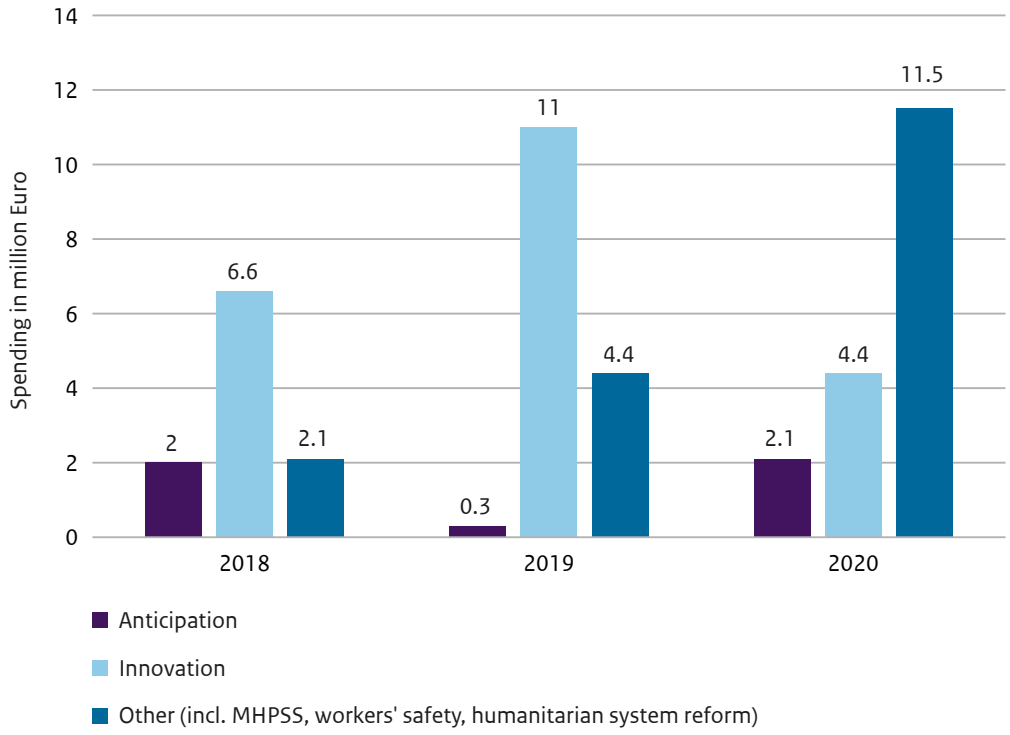
ICRC

ICRC is active in innovative financing.[175] The Dutch government has supported Humanitarian Impact Bonds to facilitate ICRC's long-term programming for rehabilitation centres. ICRC, together with other Dutch partners, is also a partner in the Global Humanitarian Lab platform for innovation.[176]

DRA

The existence of the DRA consortium, the development of which has required money and diplomacy at all levels, and the way the partnership has been built by both the MFA and the member NGOs over the years, can be seen as innovative. The partnership has led to efficiency gains and yielded positive results in term of internal collaboration within the consortium, which manifested in better collaboration in various countries and shared capacity building and advocacy activities.[177]

Chart 2 *DRA spending on thematic contributions*



DRA members are perceived to be able to act as agents of innovation with a relatively short delivery chain, low overheads and relatively large risk appetite.[178] The strategic priority of DRA was "more innovation – be at the forefront of new approaches to delivering high quality humanitarian action", but there is no consensus among partners about the yardstick they measure themselves against. Some partners have also opined that JRs are not suitable operational test beds for yet unproven innovations.[179] DRA partners also reported feeling that innovation was being pushed onto them[180] – a sentiment endorsed by the innovation literature study, which found that innovations over the last ten years had been largely top – down, focusing on donors' wishes, rather than bottom – up from local communities.[181] Nevertheless, a fair amount of innovation took place in the JRs, among others under the Dutch Innovation Fund. Chart 2 shows the DRA spending on innovation compared to thematic funding for anticipation and MHPSS in three years.

[175] Rijks-Intern (2018). De Rode Kruis/Rode Halve Maan beweging: ICRC, IFRC en de Nationale Verenigingen kunnen niet met, maar ook niet zonder elkaar. 13 juli 2018.
[176] Partners include Handicap International, ICRC, OCHA, Terre des Hommes, UNHCR and WFP.
[177] Schofield, R., et al. (2022). *DRA External Evaluation*, Final Report. 24 June 2022.
[178] International Council of Voluntary Agencies (n.d.). *Balancing Risk Appetite and Risk Tolerance in Humanitarian Operations.*
[179] Schofield, R., et al. (2022). *DRA External Evaluation, Final Report*. 24 June 2022.
[180] Ibid.
[181] UNU - MERIT (2021). *Literature Study Innovation in Humanitarian Assistance.* May 2022.

Table 5 *Innovation examples*

In the case study countries, concrete innovation examples were observed, even though results could not be assessed.

In South Sudan, WFP has utilised a fleet of amphibian vehicles, important within the food response to access remote areas, thereby reducing reliance on air operations. UNHCR has distributed menstrual cups and pee/poo bags for beneficiary usage immediately after displacement. IFRC has started using some forecast-based funding within their operations. DRA partner Tearfund initiated a remote sensing study project to understand and address the frequent breakdown of hand pumps in Northern Bahr-el-Gazal.

In Syria, UNICEF and UNHCR supported local implementers to use solar energy and undertook remote monitoring of water stations to overcome access issues. They helped produce biogas from organic waste and installed medical waste incinerators. Cordaid, through the DRA, procured a vetting system for cash-based interventions, to ensure that individuals or entities were not affiliated with, or supporters of terrorists. Oxfam piloted solar energy, but the high investment and space requirements reduced its attractiveness to donors.

In Yemen, there was little to no feedback on any partner having implemented significant innovations. DRA had allocated only USD 50,000 for innovation in Yemen, which made application for funds unattractive and the potential for scaling up unlikely for the partners.

3.2.3.3 Performance of partners on the nexus

How to understand the Nexus

Nexus pursued but the step to triple nexus not yet definite

The humanitarian – development – peace (triple) nexus is the term used to capture the interlinkages between the humanitarian, development and peace sectors. It refers to the need to work together to meet peoples' needs more effectively, mitigate risks and vulnerabilities, and move towards durable solutions and sustainable peace.[182]

Efforts to conceptualise and achieve the double nexus linking humanitarian assistance to sustainable development continued for over two decades, starting with the "linking relief, rehabilitation and development" approach. In 2013, IOB concluded that this was a multi-faceted approach with multiple challenges,[183] many of which have survived until today, as can be seen from the wealth of good intentions and debates but limited concrete progress. In 2015, peace building was added, thereby creating the triple nexus concept.[184] At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, it was decided to strengthen cooperation between humanitarian organisations, development actors, civil society organisations and governments. This so-called "New Way of Working" was meant to give impetus to the ambition to create more coherence in the programming of humanitarian action, sustainable development and peacebuilding. It was agreed that simultaneously providing life-saving aid and addressing the root causes of a crisis offered better chances of preventing humanitarian needs arising in the future.[185]

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[182] GCRF (2020). The Triple Nexus (H-D-P) and Implications for Durable Solutions to Internal Displacement Research Briefing Paper UNSG High Level Panel on Internal Displacement. August 2020.

[183] IOB, Study no. 380. May 2013. Linking Relief and Development: More than old solutions for old problems?

[184] The humanitarian – development approach is called double nexus, indicating the need for longer-term development to address root causes and structural drivers of crises. In 2015, the triple nexus approach was introduced, which aims at actions being conflict-sensitive and working toward prevention of conflict and achievement of peace.

[185] TK34 952, nr. 108, *Investeren in Perspectief – Goed voor de Wereld, Goed voor Nederland*, 3 March 2020, Letter to Parliament, p. 9.

The Netherlands aims to strengthen leadership to achieve a better connection and linkage between humanitarian action and long-term development work. The relevant policy document specifically mentions that the Netherlands pursues this aim "where possible and not at the expense of humanitarian principles". [186] Several UN agencies and Member States, including the Netherlands, have committed to enabling shared analysis of needs and risks and shared planning between humanitarian and development sectors, to better align humanitarian and development planning tools and interventions.[187]

The MFA is working to implement OECD-DAC recommendations by encouraging humanitarian partners to adopt a nexus approach and focusing on coordination, programming and financing. The MFA often embeds the nexus approach in partner assessments and the justification of funding allocations. The relevant policy brief[188] includes a selection of humanitarian principles, development (Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)) and foreign trade policy priorities (business opportunities, market access after Brexit and the redesign of trade and investment networks) but lacks a direct linkage to peace-related objectives. The Netherlands is not alone in this. In many interviews it appeared that humanitarian actors often focus their efforts on the humanitarian – development nexus and pay far less or no attention to the peace building aspect.

Dutch funding for the nexus

Walls between humanitarian and development hamper nexus

When distributing its funding, the Netherlands has mostly kept its budgets for peace building, development and humanitarian action in separate silos. On the other hand, the flexibility that comes with unearmarked and multi-annual funding has enabled humanitarian partners to take the first steps towards early recovery, resilience and longer-term investments. To some extent, they have had sufficient authority to be able to set up engagement with local authorities and development actors, even in situations where such engagement is sensitive for donors. However, the findings indicate that this usually does not allow humanitarian partners to fully coordinate with broader development goals in different contexts. For an organisation like the NLRC, it would be much easier to have a single funding agreement for humanitarian assistance and follow-up development-related support (for instance, climate change adaptation) as these often benefit the same target groups. The way the Dutch funding is set up at present, however, does not allow this.

Partners with good nexus intentions at corporate level

At corporate level, most MFA partners have a dual development and humanitarian mandate, and they often link their operations to both humanitarian principles and the SDGs under their existing policy architecture.[189] Examples of conceptualisation of triple nexus thinking within the UN system are the New Way of Working and the associated Commitment to Action, which meet immediate humanitarian needs while at the same time reducing risk and vulnerability.[190]

UN agencies

OCHA is committed to promoting needs analysis across "the pillars of international intervention" and "addressing root causes of vulnerabilities and the reinforcing of local capacities".[191] Since 2017, OCHA and UNDP have co-chaired the Joint Steering Committee for advancing Humanitarian and Development Collaboration.[192] OCHA also co-convenes Grand Bargain Workstreams 5, 7 and 8, which include mainstreamed triple nexus commitments.[193] In addition, OCHA reports progress on joint needs assessments conducted together with the World Bank and UNDP.[194]

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186 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2019). *Mensen eerst: Nederlandse Koers humanitaire diplomatie en noodhulp.* Beleidsnota, March 2019.
187 UNOCHA (n.d.). *Agenda for Humanity.* Self-Report 2019.
188 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2018). *Investeren in perspectief, Goed voor de wereld, goed voor Nederland.* Beleidsnota, May 2018.
189 WFP Executive Board (2019). *Annual performance report for 2018.* Executive Board, Annual Session, Rome, 10-14 June 2019.
190 World Humanitarian Summit (2016). *Commitments to Action.*
191 UNOCHA. Strategic Plan 2018-2021.
192 Agenda for Humanity reports (2017, 2018, 2019).
193 UN (n.d.). *The Joint Steering Committee.* https://www.un.org/jsc/content/joint-steering-committee
194 UNOCHA (n.d.). *Agenda for Humanity.* Self-Report 2019.

UNICEF works in partnership with UNDP, UNFPA and UN Women[195] to make the nexus approach instrumental in breaking down traditional mandate-based silos in humanitarian and development contexts.[196] Its Innovation Fund funds interventions in both these contexts, though linkage between the two is not specifically pursued.[197]

WFP's triple nexus agenda has prompted a review of operational priorities, which has resulted in incorporating SDGs 2 (zero hunger) and 17 (partnerships for the goals) and tackling hunger and malnutrition through partnerships in WFP's strategic plan and consistently pursuing this in WFP's Country Strategic Plans.[198]

UNHCR has specific target groups, and it deploys livelihoods activities and protection advocacy to achieve durable solutions for them. The agency links its nexus approach with the Global Compact for Refugees[199] and engages with the SDGs by aligning with national priorities and contributing to national development and protection policies.[200] There is also significant evidence of UNHCR's consistent advocacy for sustainable solutions for persons of concern, including status holders and asylum seekers, both in the Netherlands[201] and in post-conflict contexts.[202]

RCRC Movement

IFRC supports national societies to engage with the SDGs in a number of ways, including within its health and care framework.[203] The IFRC also contributes to quality education (SDG 4) through 51 RCRC national societies in collaboration with Ministries of Education, to combating climate change (SDG 13) through the Global Climate Change Centre in the Netherlands, and to peaceful societies, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) through the role of national societies as auxiliaries to governments in disaster risk reduction, disaster response and health and social care support.

ICRC has defined humanitarian activities as "restricted by IHL" and having "a humanitarian purpose".[204] IFRC identified the tensions between humanitarian principles work and the nexus agenda by indicating that several international humanitarian organisations are perceived by national governments as foreign entities that are guided by international political and security agendas and often act as a substitute or, in some cases, a catalyst, for security interventions by Western-led intergovernmental organisations.[205] ICRC has also pointed out deep-rooted tensions between normative notions such as impartiality and the political agendas of development and peace,[206] which, when mixed, have grave implications for the safety of humanitarian workers,[207] putting at risk the delivery and hence effectiveness of life-saving aid.

195 UNICEF (2018). *Strategic Plan 2018-2021*. UNICEF, January 2018.
196 Rijks-Intern (2018). VN - UNICEF - Ontwikkelingssamenwerking - UNICEF Uitvoerende Raad 12-14 september - *Fore zet in op innovatieagenda en private sectorsamenwerking*. 24 september 2018.
197 Ibid.
198 WFP Executive Board (2021). *WFP Strategic Plan (2022-2026) (unedited version)*. First Informal Consultation, 23 July 2021, World Food Programme, Rome, Italy.
199 UN (2018). *Global Compact on Refugees*. United Nations, New York.
200 UNHCR (2018). *Global Appeal 2018-2019*. UNHCR, Geneva, Switzerland.
201 UNHCR (2020). *Global Report 2019*. UNHCR, Geneva, Switzerland.
202 MOPAN (2019). *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. 2017-18 Performance Assessment. MOPAN assessments, February 2019.
203 IFRC (2020). *IFRC Health and Care Framework 2030: The IFRC's contribution to healthier, more resilient communities and individuals*. IFRC, 27 November 2020.
204 ICRC (2019). *Annual Report 2018, Volume 1*. International Committee of the Red Cross, May 2019, Geneva, Switzerland; ICRC (2018). *Annual Report 2017, Volume 1*. International Committee of the Red Cross, June 2018, Geneva, Switzerland; ICRC (2020) *Annual report 2019, Volume 1*. International Committee of the Red Cross, June 2020, Geneva, Switzerland.
205 IFRC (2018). *IFRC Annual Report 2017*.
206 DuBois, M. (2020). *The Triple Nexus: Threat or Opportunity for Humanitarian Principles*. Berlin: Centre for Humanitarian Action.
207 ALNAP (2018). *The State of the Humanitarian System*. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI.

DRA

DRA as a consortium does not have a shared approach to the nexus, as DRA members have differing views. The agencies that make up the consortium mostly have a development-based organisational culture of partnership, and they focus on equity and sustainability. Overall, although the agencies do not have a formal mandate, they seem at ease with the development and peace discourse and often cite their contributions to the SDGs. The triple nexus is included in the new DRA strategy, but IOB did not find further evidence documenting how DRA intends to implement an explicit nexus strategy.

Dutch partners struggle to implement nexus at field level

In the examples above, achievements by various partners are reported, but it is very difficult or even impossible to link them to Dutch funding because it is largely unearmarked. Though a similar problem occurs for innovation, at least part of innovation is linked to specific funds supported by the Netherlands. Various stakeholders reported that it is very likely that Dutch flexible funding combined with promotion of the nexus has led to partners also prioritising the nexus. In the absence of counterfactual impact evaluation and of the obligation for partners to report on this topic, the IOB evaluators found it difficult to find evidence that Dutch funding causes partners to pursue the nexus.

Specific examples suggest that the humanitarian partners and the Dutch government both find that presence in the field makes it easier to coordinate with broader development goals. In countries where Dutch embassies have development expertise, and delegated budgets are available for development cooperation, operational small-scale tailor-made solutions have been found. Examples in Yemen and South Sudan have in common a fair amount of discretion, flexibility and local leadership by the UN Resident Coordinator, ambassadors and embassy staff. It was possible to bring in development expertise to address recurrent humanitarian needs in a sustainable way, and long-term development partners were encouraged to continue their Dutch-funded programmes but to focus as much as possible on a more immediate response to meet the humanitarian needs.

From the case study countries, it appeared that incorporating the nexus into partner strategies and action plans did not necessarily lead to actual compliance with the nexus at country level. In Syria, nexus initiatives linking humanitarian and development activities and organisations are few and far between, even though the HRP has now been set to cover two years. The international community is holding back funding for recovery or development to exert pressure for a political resolution to the conflict. Only a few developmental activities are ongoing, such as ICRC's "too big to fail" initiative and UNICEF's emergency recovery/peacebuilding interventions.[208] Despite the red lines, however, OCHA reported that 36% of the 2021 funding went to resilience-building activities,[209] the third pillar of the HRP. In Syria's context, resilience is seen as lifesaving, as lives depend on a certain level of reconstruction. This is in line with the finding for humanitarian support in general, that in 2021 the early recovery cluster, which aims to support sustainable recovery and strengthen resilience, received the least funding and had the lowest level of requirements met.[210]

In South Sudan, success was scant, predominantly due to the lack of government engagement. Dutch government partners have incorporated some resilience building and capacity building aspects in partner programming, for example WFP's Road building and food for assets activities,[211] and UNICEF's contribution to capacity building in healthcare services. The lack of government engagement in the support or rehabilitation of nationwide public services hampers the inclusion of longer-term stability or the sustainability of such services because of uncertainty about future management. Local DRA partners implement some livelihood initiatives, but these are all relatively small-scale. There is no nexus strategy, and though coordination on emergency activities is strong, there is little joint planning by the humanitarian and development actors. Support remains focused on meeting emergency needs, even though the country has a history of 40 years of humanitarian support.

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208 Examples are the rehabilitation and local capacity development for durable water and sanitation services and the Al-Bab water station rehabilitation, which utilises local resources and operational support.

209 In 2020, the SCHF increased its funding to the Early Recovery Cluster, focusing on creating livelihood opportunities for vulnerable IDPs, returnees and host populations. This includes cash for work, small grants, asset rehabilitation, as well as business growth and vocational training.

210 Development initiatives | Global Humanitarian Assistance. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022.

211 According to WFP, 640 km of road was mended in 2020.

In Yemen, the case study came up with slightly more positive conclusions. Several respondents from various backgrounds reported that the humanitarian intervention in Yemen is at a pivotal moment. Although emergency response activities are still required, there is a greater need to initiate resilience building and livelihood interventions. Many beneficiaries mentioned the need to have a source of income beyond what the humanitarian agencies provide.[212] The humanitarian and development actors in the country have acknowledged this, and it has started to influence coordination and planning.

The HRP[213] included resilience building as a strategic objective, but the recent inter-agency evaluation was still critical of the lack of balance between competing long- and short-term priorities.[214] Resilience building and capacity building activities are included in partner programming, for example in activities of UNICEF and Save the Children, irrespective of the funding channel. UNICEF's activities in the health sector are aimed at long-term impact, as they rehabilitate and build the capacity of staff at national health service facilities. Nonetheless, beyond these positive examples, the links between humanitarian and developmental actors are still limited. The Dutch government also plays a role in promoting the nexus through board membership of the regional humanitarian officer on the Yemen Humanitarian Pooled Fund, which promotes resilience-building activities.

In general, WFP is making great efforts to coordinate with other UN partners to work towards longer-term solutions. Nonetheless, interviewees report that the sheer magnitude of its operations makes WFP a dominant player in some country contexts, which may nudge humanitarian priority setting towards food assistance rather than longer-term solutions. In Yemen, the humanitarian community has been relying on the IPC, which is driven by WFP and FAO and was the only system generating needs-related data but at the same time is far from perfect in terms of coverage and transparency.[215] This has led to insistence on a long-term focus on food needs for the long term, with less attention for resilience and livelihoods.[216]

Support to localisation to achieve the nexus

Support by the Netherlands and other donors has the potential to contribute indirectly to the nexus, for instance by funding localisation. Local humanitarian actors are less likely to distinguish between emergency, resilience and recovery programmes, and they often deliver humanitarian as well as development and at times peacebuilding programmes.[217] This creates opportunities for pursuing the triple nexus. The literature study commissioned by IOB brought out that donors were recommended to strengthen this link between humanitarian and development support, for instance through multi-year humanitarian funding, like the Netherlands does for various partners.[218]

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212 FGD Participants in Lahj, Toban District - IDP Camp said, for instance, *"The amount received is spent on buying food, paying debts, and health care and medicines. However, the received amount is insufficient, as it is the only income source we have"*.

213 OCHA, 2021. *Humanitarian Response Plan Yemen*. March 2021. https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-2021-march-2021-enar.

214 IASC.2022. *Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis.* 14 July 2022. https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis.

215 IPC classification reports 2013 onwards.

216 IASC.2022. *Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis.* 14 July 2022. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis - Yemen | ReliefWeb.

217 Barbelet, V., et al. (2020) Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localization: a literature study. HPG literature review. London: ODI.

218 Ibid.

4 Effectiveness of Dutch humanitarian funding

4.1 Innovative funding mechanisms

The Dutch government supports innovative funding mechanisms like the UN CERF, UN CBPFs, DRA and unearmarked or semi-earmarked funding given to the headquarters of the NLRC, ICRC and IFRC to save lives, restore dignity and enhance resilience. In 2021, the Netherlands was the tenth humanitarian donor in the world in terms of size of support, and it was among the five donors who funded 69% of CBPFs.[219] Dutch multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding increased from an average of 41% of the total humanitarian aid budget of the Netherlands in 2015 to 55% in 2021.[220]

IOB found the MFA to have developed funding relations that largely enable the effective delivery of timely and principled humanitarian aid. The separate study on decision-making and the fieldwork in Syria, South Sudan and Yemen both confirm that the Netherlands donates much predictable multi-year unearmarked funding that allows for more efficient and effective aid delivery and hence responds better

[219] Development initiatives | Global Humanitarian Assistance. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022.
[220] Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: strengths and weaknesses, IOB report, 22 Sep 2021.

to changing needs[221]. The practice of providing predictable core funding has helped to shield the largest part of the humanitarian budget from ad hoc interests. In response to the 2015 IOB evaluation the MFA also developed a more solid basis for decision-making and priority setting, using technical criteria to safeguard the needs-based character of the discretionary budget[222] for new and ongoing crisis situations. Quality (unearmarked and multi-year) funding is also identified as the key enabler for facilitating more localised and participatory responses.[223] The section below recapitulates the most important findings on the relationships between decision-making and funding.

4.2 Allocating funds

Decision-making on humanitarian assistance is managed centrally by the Humanitarian Aid Division, which operates from the MFA within the broader Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid.[224] Embassies and permanent missions may be consulted but do not play a decisive role in shaping decisions. IOB conducted a separate study to explore in depth how decisions about humanitarian allocations are made, informed and justified, and to which breakdown of allocations this leads in terms of core funding, semi-earmarked funding and thematic funding of key humanitarian partners. Based on this separate study on decision-making,[225] Table 5 summarises the strengths and weaknesses identified.

Table 6 *Strengths and weaknesses of Dutch humanitarian decision-making*

Strengths

- A humanitarian policy that stands firmly for the humanitarian imperative and responds to political realities with a certain degree of common sense.
- A Humanitarian Aid Division whose expertise is respected within the MFA.
- A strong focus on funding for areas with the highest humanitarian needs. Central decision-making is based on information that facilitates such context-specific needs-based funding.
- Experienced partners who in principle are in a position to effectively prioritise and address the most urgent humanitarian needs, based on timely available context assessments. This enables the Netherlands to focus on a strategic policy dialogue with these partners.
- A strong ambition to facilitate high-quality financing to humanitarian partners in the form of funding that is predictable and can be used to fund core activities. Evidence confirms that this type of funding allows for more efficient and effective aid delivery that responds better and timelier to changing needs.
- The practice of providing predictable core funding has also helped to shield the largest part of the humanitarian budget from ad hoc interests.
- Earmarking only takes place for a limited part of the budget (around 4%) on specific themes and partners. This earmarking has a specific aim: to promote clearly defined change.

Weaknesses

1. The risk of promoting a status quo of privileged humanitarian partners, which may lead to a lack of critical reflection and a certain automatism in monitoring, subsequently creating too strong confidence in these partners.
2. Too many priority themes: the number increased from eight to 18 between 2015 and 2021, which hampers paying sufficient attention to each of them. This has not been matched by a proportionate increase in thematic humanitarian expertise at the policy department and in embassies.

221 The Study on the effectiveness of humanitarian partners and funding relations of the Netherlands Case studies synthesis report, Jeff Duncalf, June 2022, MDF reports the following on page 16: "As can be seen in the online survey, support was especially vocal for the "gold" funding that is the non-earmarked core annual HQ level donations that provide flexible funding for sudden onset disasters and gap filling for ongoing interventions. Such support was reported by partners as reliable, timely, and easy to access through each organisation's individual systems.

222 The discretionary budget was on average approximately 42% of the annual humanitarian budget. It is allocated to specific crises that emerge or worsen during the year.

223 Metcalfe-Hough, et al. (2020) *Grand Bargain annual independent report*. June 2020.

224 The department is known within the MFA by the following abbreviation: DSH-HH.

225 Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: strengths and weaknesses, IOB report, 22 Sep 2021.

3. The quality of the policy dialogue with key humanitarian partner depends on the expertise and experience of a limited number of senior policymakers and humanitarian experts.
4. Managing large sums of money takes up a lot of time and human resources, limiting time for strategic thinking, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) and for acquiring new knowledge and data for informing the policy dialogue with key partners.

IOB observed that donors with humanitarian policy agendas similar to that of the Netherlands (for example, Germany, Denmark and Sweden) work in similar ways to the Netherlands. They too were found to trust the experience of and prior working relations with key humanitarian partners. The average breakdown of funds between UN, Red Cross and NGOs had a similar basis as in the Netherlands. It was based on a strong preference for the multilateral channel to create impact and coordinate humanitarian aid, and on special ties with the Red Cross family because of its unique mandate. NGOs were often included in this budget because of their specific expertise. Findings also suggest that for all donors, the exact breakdown of funds between UN, Red Cross and NGOs has involved a certain level of arbitrariness in decision-making. Factors responsible for this are recurrent decisions in response to larger humanitarian crises over the years, the ambition to be perceived as a predictable donor, and limited donor capacity to manage large sums of money across many partners. Since 2015, the share of core funding in the total budget has grown from 41% to 55%. IOB notes that this requires strong emphasis be given to MEL and an informed policy dialogue with key humanitarian partners. Currently, this dialogue depends on the expertise and experience of a limited number of senior policymakers and humanitarian experts. Donors with a much larger in-house humanitarian expertise and capacity are able to put more emphasis on MEL to feed the policy dialogue with partners.

IOB also observed a high degree of effectiveness in safeguarding a needs-based and principled approach when allocating funds. In response to earlier IOB recommendations,[226] the MFA clarified the basis for decision-making and priority-setting, using a set of technical criteria to measure and compare the severity of different crises.[227] Regarding the yearly discretionary budget, findings suggest that the set of technical criteria has played a role in rationalising the allocation process within the humanitarian team, as it has enabled policymakers to look beyond the remits of a particular crisis and their own dossier. In subsequent years, its use varied, as a few indicators were added or deleted to achieve a balance between technical and political considerations or for common-sense reasons. Adhering too strictly to certain indicators, for example, would lead to relatively large sums of money being spent in populated countries in protracted crises. Policymakers would argue that these crises are better served with a triple nexus approach and development aid budgets than with yearly humanitarian allocations. IOB learned that the set of technical criteria was especially helpful when justifying allocations to CBPFs at the beginning of each year. In a slightly different form, the same criteria were used to weigh a possible humanitarian response to acute crises during the year. As such, the set informed funding decisions on the discretionary budget, which was on average approximately 42% of the budget. The set was not used to inform decisions on core funding.

IOB found no evidence that internal coherence of decisions on humanitarian assistance with broader development goals was secured through regular coordination and contacts between respective humanitarian and development departments. It was found that this coordination was hampered by the fact that crisis-prone areas do not always match up with the Dutch government's ODA priorities.

[226] IOB evaluation of Dutch Humanitarian Assistance 2015.

[227] These criteria are: 1. the level of vulnerability of the population, 2. the number of people that need humanitarian aid, 3. The UN appeal in a specific year, 4. The ICRC appeal in a specific year, and 5. the funding shortfall per crisis. These criteria are further explained in Annex 1 of Dutch-decision-making on humanitarian assistance: strengths and weaknesses, IOB report, 22 Sep 2021.

4.3 Limits in capacity

The MFA's Humanitarian Aid Division is limited in capacity in terms of manpower and of humanitarian expertise. In response to the IOB evaluation in 2015, investments have been made to upgrade this capacity. Two regional humanitarian coordinators have been added to the team as permanent positions in Nairobi and Amman. At the same time, temporary posts were created to support the Dutch ambitions on MHPSS and the Grand Bargain. At its maximum, the department consisted of 24 fulltime positions. However, five temporary posts were cut in 2022, which means that 19 fulltime staff are currently working on humanitarian funding and humanitarian diplomacy within the MFA. The budget remained at a significant level of EUR 371 million in 2020 and is expected to increase to EUR 554 million in 2023.

The commitment to MHPSS was renewed in the new coalition agreement of the government in 2021. Current ambitions on effectiveness of funding, MHPSS, localisation, the nexus and innovation require a well-informed policy dialogue with partners as well as strong coordination amongst donors in Geneva, New York and Brussels. However, IOB observes that the capacity in The Hague and Brussels is not yet sufficient to ensure the effectiveness of Dutch humanitarian policy. For example, developing and maintaining strong ties with DG ECHO and DG DEV on humanitarian priorities require more personnel than the current single dedicated staff member in The Hague. Both ECHO and DG DEV are considered to be game changing players on humanitarian and nexus assistance.

5 Effectiveness of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy

The previous chapter focused on effectiveness of Dutch funding and funding mechanisms with partners to reach humanitarian outcomes for people in need.

This chapter explores the effectiveness of a second means to achieve better outcomes for people in need: diplomacy. IOB found that humanitarian diplomacy actions had to respond to many issues without being guided by a clear framework. The high workload hampered strategic reflection and prioritisation of activities, especially the identification of issues that can be left to other donors and partners. In practice, prioritisation followed the high-profile humanitarian crises that had gained political attention.

5.1 What does humanitarian diplomacy entail

As noted in chapter 1, IOB defines humanitarian diplomacy by the Dutch MFA as achieving better humanitarian outcomes for people in need by influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments, peoples and humanitarian organisations through dialogue and negotiation.[228] This definition is based on a reconstruction of Dutch humanitarian policy (see Figure 1) and the many other existing definitions of diplomacy and humanitarian diplomacy.[229]

Humanitarian diplomacy is also understood as taking place in different realms, trying to change something on the ground at the operational level, developing new laws or resolutions at the legal level, or trying to influence a bigger agenda that addresses the wider challenges of humanitarian action at the policy level.[230] Furthermore, the IOB humanitarian diplomacy study distinguishes three forms of humanitarian diplomacy that interact 1) at the level of headquarters (HQ), when the Dutch MFA is connecting with a humanitarian organisation's HQ and participates in multi-donor meetings, initiatives and networks; 2) at the multilateral level, when Dutch permanent missions are operating in UN forums (the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Council) the EU and Groups of Friends, 3) as well as at the country level, when Dutch embassies and regional humanitarian coordinators are operating in crisis contexts (usually acting together with like-minded partners).

As current research on humanitarian diplomacy observes, significant tension is embedded in humanitarian diplomacy: "Diplomacy is characterized by compromise and pragmatic dealings, whereas the public image of humanitarian action is the opposite: it is about working for ideals and universal principles regardless of the interests of specific political actors."[231] Along the same lines, IOB found that compromise and pragmatic dealings are inherent to any form of humanitarian diplomacy, even more so if it is conducted by government actors. As a result, humanitarian diplomacy has a large internal component to it: effective engagement on humanitarian issues with external stakeholders inevitably requires the MFA to coordinate within the government on possible interactions with broader interests of foreign policy and development cooperation. The opposite is also true. Foreign policy making and development cooperation are expected to be weighed against the humanitarian consequences for the most vulnerable people affected by crises.

5.2 How humanitarian diplomacy is practised within the MFA

The MFA has always practised a certain form of humanitarian diplomacy, but in October 2017, minister Kaag, a former UN diplomat, moved humanitarian diplomacy up the policy agenda, because the number of humanitarian crises had grown, and funds were not keeping pace with increasing humanitarian needs. The minister's ambition was to use Dutch political leverage more strategically, to achieve better humanitarian outcomes for people affected by crises. The minister was also determined to include humanitarian considerations more systematically into Dutch foreign policy decisions. The Humanitarian Aid Division was to give a voice to the people in need and the minister wanted to play an active role in certain humanitarian crises.

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[228] The definition of diplomacy by Encyclopædia Britannica Diplomacy Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary combined with insights from the policy reconstruction, which was done in collaboration with policymakers of the MFA.

[229] CMI Brief | 2018, *Humanitarian Diplomacy: A New Research Agenda*, Antonio De Lauri (2018), Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI Brief no. 2018:4).

[230] Humanitarian Diplomacy podcast: Hugo Slim discusses the art of humanitarian diplomacy and the history and experience of the ICRC, 12 May 2021.

[231] Humanitarian Diplomacy: A New Research Agenda, Antonio De Lauri (2018), Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI Brief no. 2018:4).

5.2.1 Level of ambition

According to MFA policy documents, Dutch humanitarian diplomacy aims at enabling the following humanitarian outcomes: (1) to ensure that aid is appropriate and that the most urgent needs are covered; (2) to promote that humanitarian access and IHL are respected; (3) to improve the protection of civilians; (4) to strengthen the humanitarian system to deliver aid; and (5) to address certain thematic priorities.

The Humanitarian Aid Division at the MFA has a central role in priority setting, coordination and providing strategic guidance to humanitarian diplomatic action. Most striking is the relatively high number of priorities[232] set by the ministry throughout the period under analysis (2018 – 2021) (Table 6). To its credit, MFA attempted to reduce the number of priorities, but the capriciousness of world events made it difficult to ring-fence the number of activities in advance. IOB evaluators observed that the context is demanding; when humanitarian needs arise, doing nothing is politically and morally difficult to sustain. According to some staff members, the minister, supported by ambitious members of parliament, seemed "to always want more instead of focusing on less". Consequently, IOB found that humanitarian diplomacy actions had to respond to many issues but without being guided by a clear framework.

Since 2018, diplomatic action has been undertaken with a focus on a) specific humanitarian crises; b) specific humanitarian themes; and c) improving the humanitarian system.[233] For all these focus areas, diplomatic action took place at the level of headquarters (by MFA staff), at country level (by embassies and regional coordinators), and by staff of permanent missions to the UN in New York, Geneva and Rome, and at the permanent mission to the EU in Brussels.

Table 6 *Priorities as mentioned in policy documents and letters to parliament and interviews since 2018*

1	Protection of civilians, humanitarian access and space, and respect for international humanitarian law
2	Protection and empowerment of women and girls
3	Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in crisis situations*
4	Strengthening the position and capacity of local aid workers*
5	Innovation aimed at making emergency aid more effective and efficient*
6	Reform of the international humanitarian aid system (follow-up to the Grand Bargain)*
7	Conflict and hunger – follow-up to resolution 2417*
8	Nexus: achieve better linkage between humanitarian action and long-term development work*
9	Prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH)
10	Syria*
11	Yemen*
12	South Sudan*
13	Rohingya refugee crisis (Myanmar)
14	The Horn of Africa
15	Ethiopia
16	Afghanistan
17	Ukraine
* Selected as case studies for this Policy Evaluation	

[232] *Kaderinstructie Humanitaire Hulp* (MinBuza 20221.1143437) mentions four crises (Yemen, Syria, South Sudan and the Rohingya refugee crisis) and four specific themes (MHPSS, the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2417 on Conflict and Hunger, the realisation of a humanitarian system that is fit for purpose (Grand Bargain and the minister's role as Eminent Person of the Grand Bargain) as well as IHL (including the protection of civilians and aid workers) and UNSC resolution 2286 on the protection of medical missions as focus areas in specific contexts; Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: strengths and weaknesses, IOB report, 22 September 2021. IOB's analysis of the annual letters to parliament on humanitarian assistance since 2015, as well as the 2018 policy note *Mensen Eerst, Nederlandse koers humanitaire diplomatie en noodhulp* reveal the number of thematic priorities of Dutch humanitarian aid policy has grown from nine in 2015 to 18 in 2021: Rijks-intern HH-Beleid Vernieuwd-Kamerbrief Mensen Eerst! Schetst ambitie voor prominenter politiek en diplomatiek profiel, 31 oktober 2019.

[233] *Kaderinstructie Humanitaire Hulp* (MinBuza 20221.1143437), as well as the 2018 policy note *Mensen Eerst, Nederlandse koers humanitaire diplomatie en noodhulp.*

5.2.2 Strategic guidance

The IOB Humanitarian Diplomacy study concludes that a high workload resulting from many focus areas has hampered strategic reflection and prioritisation of activities and has not sufficiently allowed the identification of issues that can be left to other donors and partners. IOB observes that an early recommendation[234] to regularly reflect with the broader team on results achieved, methods used and possible changes in strategy has not been integrated into the workflow of the MFA and country teams. Policy officers reported that because they are overloaded with day-to-day tasks, they often struggle when building a narrative to guide their work for a specific priority, which has hampered strategic reflection and has limited information exchange among teams. Furthermore, during the years evaluated, senior staff and management were often too busy to engage more meaningfully in the daily choices emanating from the many priorities. The small team dedicated to MHPSS was an exception, allowing time for frequent strategic reflection, identifying realistic deliverables and engaging a broader group of diplomats at the MFA and at embassies.

IOB observes that in practice, prioritisation followed the high-profile humanitarian crises that were attracting political attention. IOB evaluators also found that in general, multilateral efforts to achieve humanitarian outcomes for people in need received more attention and strategic guidance from The Hague than the diplomatic efforts of bilateral ambassadors on the ground. The MFA invested efforts in multilateral donor coordination and the policy dialogue with humanitarian partners at HQ level. As a result, the permanent missions in New York and Geneva feel closely connected to policy development and decisions on policy positions in The Hague. At the same time, some bilateral ambassadors indicated that they would have welcomed more frequent consultations with management or senior staff at the Humanitarian Aid Division of the MFA about strategy and focus or to get feedback on their humanitarian diplomacy efforts at the country level in a highly volatile crisis environment. The same ambassadors felt that a more frequent exchange would have brought lessons and experiences from the field to feed policy development and future bilateral and multilateral actions.

5.2.3 Available capacity and expertise

The guidance that the Humanitarian Aid Division was able to offer largely depended on the capacity and expertise of its policy advisers in The Hague. The Humanitarian Aid Division has managed to recruit and retain some staff with humanitarian experience, some staff with experience in the political departments of the ministry and some with specific academic or legal knowledge. As such, the staff as a whole have a good mix of knowledge and experience.

IOB observes, however, that few staff members have a combination of humanitarian and political experience. The staff dedicated to specific crisis situations tend to be junior, having no to little prior experience in the field or in political departments of the ministry. In addition, the high turnover of junior staff results in frequent loss of expertise, which is problematic for exerting influence, both within the ministry and internationally. On a more positive note, the two regional humanitarian coordinators in Nairobi and Amman were found to have raised the humanitarian profile of the Netherlands in the respective crises of their region and have also actively fed policy development and diplomatic actions with information and analysis from the field. However, they also struggled with prioritising and dedicating limited capacity to the most important topics.

5.2.4 Dilemmas

According to the overarching framework instruction (2019), humanitarian diplomacy is intended not to be a “niche” diplomacy but to be an integral part of Dutch diplomatic action. This asks for transparent decision-making based on careful consideration of the various interests in foreign policy. Humanitarian diplomatic action requires good cooperation between various parts of the ministry. Support for the humanitarian arguments is not a given.

Now and then tensions arise between different interests, for example between humanitarian and peace and security interests (Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Venezuela), humanitarian and trade interests (Yemen, Saudi Arabia), and humanitarian and anti-terrorism interests (the law on criminalisation of intended stay in terrorist areas). At times it proved very difficult to influence broader foreign policy positions from a purely humanitarian perspective. Humanitarian arguments would simply not reach the ministers.

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234 *Leren van Humanitaire diplomatie*. Intern advies van IOB aan DSH, IOB, 29 mei 2020.

Stakeholders were found to be either not aware of the humanitarian perspective or to give more weight to political, economic or security interests. For example, humanitarian arguments were initially ignored when new legislation was being developed to criminalise sojourn in a terrorist area (with a view to prosecuting foreign terrorist fighters who willingly joined or supported ISIS or their families). This was perceived to be a result of siloed ways of working rather than a deliberate choice. It was remedied at a later stage, when Dutch civil society brought up the negative consequences for humanitarian aid workers in Syria.[235]

Interviews brought out that colleagues within the wider ministry were in essence sympathetic to the humanitarian perspective but needed clearer guidance or more hands-on knowledge to value the humanitarian arguments brought in by the MFA's Humanitarian Aid Division. It was observed that expertise on IHL and obligations for the Netherlands as a state party to the Geneva Convention is not widely available within the organisation. In 2019, the Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid raised the importance of more inclusive coordination at the level of Director Generals. Guidance was then given to political departments within the MFA in order to include humanitarian arguments more transparently at the early stages of decision-making and policy development. This one-off guidance was not incorporated structurally into new ways of working and was therefore found to have slipped into oblivion; when asked, current team members appeared to be unaware of it.

As the Syria case illustrates, Dutch humanitarian diplomacy is being shaped within the MFA, which is by nature a political organisation. This is a blessing, as humanitarian diplomacy can give political leverage, but the Humanitarian Aid Division is also forced to coordinate on the importance of humanitarian considerations vis-à-vis different interests at stake and to persuade stakeholders accordingly or even insist that they agree. In the case of Syria, the Humanitarian Aid Division had a hard time defending and safeguarding the humanitarian perspective, as political considerations became increasingly foregrounded. IOB's case studies on Syria indicate that stronger guidance is necessary, given the changing realities in the field. IOB notes that it can be expected that it takes time to achieve the aspiration of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy to better integrate humanitarian considerations into foreign policy making. IOB also concludes that investment in the knowledge base of diplomats throughout the organisation has not been sufficiently strong and specific.

5.3 Syria, a case in point

In Syria, it proved hard to reconcile the humanitarian interest to reach vulnerable people in need with the political interest to prevent any of the support benefitting the Syrian regime. The Humanitarian Aid Division took the position that upholding the humanitarian imperative and being transparent about realities in the field was more important than ever. IOB considers this to be consistent with the humanitarian policy as developed and shared with parliament. Foreign policy colleagues in the Syria team and the North Africa and Middle East department, however, argued that saving lives in the short term may well contribute to prolonging a harmful situation and more human suffering in the long term.

The complex political context and publications on the non-lethal assistance (NLA) dossier[236] also led to questions about whether funds for humanitarian assistance in Syria had reached the envisaged recipients. Since 2019, there has regularly been internal debate on how to proceed. Risk-adverse behaviour and political sensitivity due to the NLA-related discussions were felt to further complicate discussions on humanitarian aid and any support beyond humanitarian aid in Syria. The Humanitarian Aid Division has had to keep a fine balance between defending the humanitarian imperative where political red lines have no place and following the Dutch political stance on the Assad regime.

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[235] Debate in Dutch House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer*) on 5 September 2019: https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/h-tk-20182019-105-12.html; Artsen zonder Grenzen: Noodhulp bedreigd door antiterrorismewet (artsenzondergrenzen.nl); Legislative proceedings on 12 November 2019 in the Dutch Senate (Eerste Kamer); DGPZ staff meeting report of 18 November 2019.

[236] Between 2015 and 2018, the Dutch government supported an NLA programme that aimed to support moderate opposition to President Assad. In September 2018, a national Dutch newspaper (*Trouw*) published an article on NLA programme support. The article and subsequent publications led to intense political debate in the Netherlands about complex issues such as the legal basis for NLA, the possible criminal law consequences for returning foreign fighters, possible human rights abuses committed by moderate opposition groups supported by the Netherlands, and compatibility with the non-intervention principle under international law.

The IOB evaluation has brought out that the MFA has been consistent and constructive in ensuring the humanitarian imperative as well as the quality and transparency of aid guided the dialogue with stakeholders and the wider policy positions of the Netherlands. Nonetheless, as a slightly more pragmatic approach gains ground within and outside the EU, matters are being complicated by a lack of guidance on whether to move with like-minded partners and, if so, how.

As the Syria crisis drags on, this more pragmatic approach entails giving growing support to more sustainable solutions to address water and education needs, which inevitably means stronger links with Syrian or de facto authorities. At the level of The Hague this would require some repositioning, giving more weight to the humanitarian interest to reach people in need efficiently and, to prevent any support reaching the (de facto) authorities, giving less weight to the political interests. This repositioning would first and foremost require a more deliberate acceptance of the political risks of giving indirect support to (de facto) authorities. A lack of flexibility on this runs the risk of short-term inefficient costly humanitarian responses being perpetuated and does not reflect the realities in the field.

A more pragmatic approach also takes account of the reality that life-saving humanitarian work in Syria needs some sort of collaboration and dialogue with de facto authorities and that humanitarian partners struggle to uphold principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. These principles remain leading for humanitarian assistance to reach people in need, but, as academic research and many publications[237] have shown, the reality is that humanitarian organisations must negotiate with authorities about access. Compromises and taking risks are part of this reality. The IOB study on effectiveness[238] mentions the Syrian government's attempts to influence or interfere in compiling beneficiary lists and the choice of programme implementation sites. Access to some geographical locations has been difficult for reasons of security.

These issues are not unique to Syria; humanitarian access and neutral aid delivery are hard-fought principles anywhere in the world.[239] IOB's fieldwork and desk review resulted in the conclusion that not all risks can be mitigated, and therefore, a level of risk must be accepted if lives are to be saved in complex political contexts. It is argued that a zero-tolerance approach from donors to certain risks, and punitive measures when risks materialise, can lead to international and local actors downplaying the extent of the risk, precluding the opportunity for transparency and a solution-oriented or risk-sharing approach.[240]

5.4 Best practices

During the period reviewed, the MFA's Humanitarian Aid Division organised several focused sessions[241] to reflect with Dutch missions and embassies on humanitarian diplomacy and how to improve strategies and MEL. However, IOB's interviews and document research brought out that little attention had been given to recording results or to reflecting and learning from past diplomatic interventions and advocacy efforts.

IOB concludes that building a narrative that clearly states the objectives of and limitations of Dutch involvement is a key enabler for impact. Other enabling factors are the humanitarian knowledge, expertise and dedicated capacity in The Hague, Dutch embassies and missions in Geneva and New York. In this respect, many interviewees mentioned the promotion of MHPSS as a positive example that has achieved impact due to the availability of a dedicated (though small) team that has been able to build up a sound knowledge base, identify plans of action with concrete deliverables and to undertake periodic strategic reflection. According to interviewees, the team functioned as a hub that engaged a broader group of policy officers and diplomats at the MFA and bilateral and multilateral posts, e.g. by means

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237 See e.g. *Shaping the Humanitarian World*, Peter Walker and Daniel Maxwell, Global Institutions 2009; *Humanitarian negotiations revealed, The MSF experience*, Claire Magone, Michael Neuman and Fabrice Weissman (eds), MSF 2011; *Humanitarian ethics, A guide to the morality of aid in war and disaster*, Hugo Slim 2015; *Solferino 21, Warfare, Civilians and Humanitarians in the Twenty-First Century*, Hugo Slim 2022.

238 Study on the effectiveness of humanitarian partners and funding relations of the Netherlands: Case studies synthesis report, Jeff Duncalf, June 2022, MDF.

239 Interview with UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths, the New Humanitarian Podcast 26 January 2022.

240 Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021) Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localization.

241 At least four: sessions on 17 and 19 June 2020, a meeting on 9 November 2021 and a workshop on 30 September 2021.

of an informal liaison group. Being able to frequently reflect on results achieved and lessons learned ensured that plans were kept realistic. Furthermore, internal and external stakeholders also mentioned that humanitarian actors in Yemen and South Sudan see the Netherlands as a credible, reliable and non-threatening actor that is able to deliver certain messages to authorities and de facto authorities thanks to its long history of development cooperation and the near absence of competing political agendas. Along the same lines it was mentioned that external stakeholders see the Netherlands as a credible partner in New York, Geneva and Rome as consistent Dutch support for a principled and rules-based international order is inspiring trust among bigger UN agencies. The Netherlands is also seen as a major humanitarian donor that insists on flexible funding and supports the UN playing a leading role.

The practices and lessons that were brought up by stakeholders in interviews with IOB and in the various sessions organised by the Humanitarian Aid Division on humanitarian diplomacy thus largely reflect the enabling factors observed in research and communities of practice on effective humanitarian diplomacy.[242] Based on multiple sources,[243] IOB sees the following capacities and factors as enablers for effective humanitarian diplomacy: know your policy; prioritise the issues in which capacity, network and credibility lie; build a narrative; be clear about the objectives (what is it you are trying to change?); tailor the sequencing of actions (when is a good moment to push and when is it better to lie low?); engage with those who hold power to make the change happen; track whether you are making headway; learn and adapt the strategy to contextual changes when necessary.

The following paragraphs illustrate how Dutch diplomacy becomes more successful in terms of impact and results achieved when one or more of the key enablers (a narrative with clear objectives, humanitarian knowledge, political expertise and dedicated capacity) are effectively deployed. IOB sees Dutch efforts in Syria, on conflict and hunger, MHPSS and the Grand Bargain as positive examples that may provide lessons on good practice. Nevertheless, IOB has observed some factors that hamper the effectiveness of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy: a lack of clarity on policy objectives; inadequate prioritisation; incomplete narratives; the absence of a shared sense of purpose combined with high ambitions; a demanding political context; and capacity constraints. Addressing any of these issues may improve and strengthen the impact of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy.

5.5 Results of humanitarian diplomacy

As expected, it was difficult to establish a direct relationship between the results of diplomatic action and how humanitarian aid was delivered. An interviewee from one of the leading humanitarian organisations identified four types of impact to measure that organisation's progress towards achieving established objectives of humanitarian diplomacy: (1) connective impact (are we talking to the right people?); (2) impact leading towards a conducive environment (are we managing to change the discourse to create an environment in which certain discussions happen?); (3) normative impact (have we managed to change the law, or developed new norms in writing or by doing?); and (4) operational impact (can we see a concrete change of behaviour on the ground?). Even though these distinctions were developed for a humanitarian organisation, they help IOB to provide insight into the concrete results of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy. IOB has explored this via five concrete examples: Syria, Conflict and Hunger, MHPSS, results achieved for Dutch-funded humanitarian organisations and results achieved on the new policy demands of localisation, innovation and the nexus.

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[242] *The Humanitarian Diplomacy podcast, Episode 4: The case of the ICRC*: Hugo Slim discusses the art of humanitarian diplomacy and the history and experience of the ICRC, 12 May 2021; Willem, E. & Kamstra, J. (2020). "How Does Organisational Capacity Contribute to Advocacy Effectiveness? Taking Stock of Existing Evidence." Development in Practice 30, no. 5 (July 3, 2020): 599 – 608.

[243] Based on *The Humanitarian Diplomacy podcast, Episode 4: The case of the ICRC*: Hugo Slim discusses the art of humanitarian diplomacy and the history and experience of the ICRC, 12 May 2021; Willem, E. & Kamstra, J. (2020). "How Does Organisational Capacity Contribute to Advocacy Effectiveness? Taking Stock of Existing Evidence." Development in Practice 30, no. 5 (July 3, 2020): 599 – 608 and four sessions with the Humanitarian Aid Division, Dutch missions and embassies on 17 and 19 June 2020, on 9 November 2021 and on 30 September 2021 as well as interviews with larger humanitarian organisations.

5.5.1 Results achieved in Syria

Dutch diplomatic efforts to forward humanitarian objectives in Syria have mainly revolved around: (1) the periodic renewal of the cross-border resolution; (2) humanitarian access and principled aid; and (3) accountability. At the field level, it was hard to determine concrete results of how Dutch diplomacy facilitated and strengthened humanitarian action of Dutch-funded humanitarian organisations.

The IOB field study in Syria found no evidence of results that could be directly attributed to Dutch diplomatic interventions. We did find evidence of consistent efforts being made by the Netherlands in Amman, Beirut, Ankara, The Hague, Geneva and New York to forward the three humanitarian objectives. For example, key informants mentioned the active and constructive role of the Netherlands in donor coordination meetings in Amman. This finding was supported by reports and diplomatic cables. The efforts also concerned posting mutually agreed messages in the relevant international forums on humanitarian access, principled aid and IHL as well as advocating for the periodic renewal of the cross-border resolution to facilitate humanitarian assistance through cross-border operations into Syria.

When studying the case of Syria, IOB observed limited impact towards a conducive environment based on consistent and coordinated messaging by the international community, to persuade those in power to grant humanitarian access. Minor operational impact was observed as certain humanitarian convoys were let through, but there was no evidence for a direct link with Dutch input. Based on the Syria country case study, IOB concludes that a strongly politicised context makes it more difficult for partners to share information about the encountered impediments.

A few examples were brought up in interviews and/or logged in as results by policymakers themselves in the 2019 Action Plan:

Table 7 *Examples of efforts and results of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy in Syria*

Theme	Effort	Results	Impact
Whole of Syria approach	The NL participated actively in donor coordinated advocacy in Geneva and the region to promote principled humanitarian assistance throughout Syria (2019).	The NL and international community openly support the UN in difficult conversations with Syrian regime on humanitarian access.	IOB observed impact towards a conducive environment. In interviews, UN, Red Cross, INGOs and foreign diplomats mentioned the importance of consistent and coordinated messaging to persuade those in power to grant humanitarian access. Literature and media research[244] confirm positive and negative examples.
Humanitarian access	The NL supports and implements donor-coordinated pressure within the International Syria Support Group by repeatedly bringing up the importance of letting humanitarian convoys through.	In 2019, two humanitarian convoys reached Rukban; weekly monitoring missions of the UN to Al Hol and Rukban were made possible.	A direct link between the effort and subsequent letting through of certain humanitarian convoys is difficult to prove with evidence. IOB observes operational impact based on the perceptions obtained in interviews with UN, Red Cross, INGOs and foreign diplomats, that suggest a change of behaviour from authorities on the ground.
Quality of aid	Donor-coordinated pressure on the UN via various mechanisms to be transparent about humanitarian access across Syria.	At intervals, more transparency from the UN on humanitarian access. A map was created to show the level of access at a particular moment in time and was distributed selectively.	The interviews brought out that attempts to achieve a conducive environment had limited impact. Based on the effectiveness study (Syria country case study) IOB concludes that the more politicised the context the more challenging it is for partners to share information about the impediments they encounter.

[244] Natasha Hal, Rescuing aid in Syria, 14 February 2022, CSIS.

5.5.2 Results achieved on Conflict and Hunger

When studying the priority theme of conflict and hunger, IOB observed a considerable normative impact (i.e. the Netherlands contributed to developing new norms) as well as impact towards achieving a conducive environment (i.e. the Netherlands contributed to changing the discourse and to creating an environment in which certain discussions happen). By playing an active role in the negotiation of UNSC resolution 2417 on conflict and hunger in 2018, the Netherlands has contributed to increased international awareness of and attention for the link between conflict and hunger.

Conflicts are one of the main causes of hunger. But lack of access to food can also be a cause of war.[245] UN resolution 2417 on conflict and hunger was the first to explicitly recognise that conflict and hunger are linked, which is a fact that many countries continue to deny to this day. The resolution enables UN agencies to brief the UN Security Council on acute conflict-related situations of famine and is an important norm-setting document which diplomats can refer warring parties to. Its importance is widely recognised, as shown by WFP being awarded the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize. The prize was seen as recognition that providing food goes beyond the emergency response and can contribute to peace, social cohesion and stability.[246]

Resolution 2417 was also the first to underline that "the use of starvation as a method of warfare may constitute a war crime." This nuance is important, because starvation of civilians is a specific legal term and is already banned under both the Geneva Convention (in all conflicts) and a war crime (only in international conflicts) under the Rome Statute. The incidental starvation of civilians in non-international armed conflict is therefore currently not a war crime. While the formulation "may constitute" leaves room for debate about when it may (or may not) be a war crime, this formulation helped pave the way for a separate initiative (inspired but in no way mandated by UNSC resolution 2417) by Switzerland with strong Dutch lobbying and backing, that introduced the amendment of the Rome Statute.

Despite the limited staff capacity devoted to the theme, interviews with internal and external stakeholders confirm that the Netherlands – as part of a broader coalition – has played an active and constructive role in promoting follow-up to the UNSC resolution on conflict and hunger. After the adoption of the resolution, the Netherlands contributed, promoted and facilitated discussion on the resolution's implementation among relevant parties (donors, UN organisations and INGOs). In addition, it has supported Security Council members in keeping the issue on the agenda. Although early warning has improved (meaning that the UN Security Council is regularly briefed), no further action has yet been taken and is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future under the current constellation. Nonetheless, raising attention for the issue has changed the international dialogue and exposes violators of the principles of the resolution, as is illustrated by the recent events in Ukraine. The subsequent pressure on parties to the conflict to enable food exports from Ukraine to the rest of the world can be interpreted as a positive operational spin-off of the changing discourse and norms. A wider "trickle down" to country level operations is, however, yet to be tested.

The Netherlands has started to focus on the narrower path of legal accountability, realising that the first prosecution could take many more years. It is investing in legal expertise, gathering information on violations and has developed a toolbox for international legal accountability.[247]

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[245] Violent conflict has a devastating impact on food systems, as it "negatively affects almost every aspect of a food system, from production, harvesting, processing, and transport to input supply, financing, marketing, and consumption" (FAO, IFAD et al. 2021, 54). "Lasting food insecurity is a principal legacy of war (Messer and Cohen 2007). At the same time, heightened food insecurity can contribute to violent conflict. Without resolving food insecurity, it will be difficult to build sustainable peace, and without peace the likelihood of ending global hunger is minimal." (Caroline Delgado and Dan Smith 2021. "The Two-Way Links between Conflict and Hunger". *Hunger and Food Systems in Conflict Settings.* Global Hunger Index, October 2021. https://www.globalhungerindex.org/issues-in-focus/2021.html).

[246] The Humanitarian Diplomacy podcast, *Episode 5: In Case of Emergency*, interview with Brian Lander, deputy Director of the Emergency Division at WFP HQ and Rebecca Richards (Chief of Peace and Conflict office, WFP's Programme and Policy Division).

[247] Report of the Dutch Mission in New York, *VN-Veiligheidsraad-Humanitaire Hulp-Conflict en Honger: de link en relevantie zijn evident, maar niet voor iedereen*, 22 April 2021; Report of the Dutch mission in New York, *VN-Humanitaire Hulp-Integratie MHPSS in crisis respons een stap dichterbij*, 28 december 2021.

5.5.3 Results achieved on MHPSS

When studying the results achieved on MHPSS, IOB observed normative impact as well as impact towards a conducive environment. The Netherlands has built a strong international profile on MHPSS and is recognised internationally as a frontrunner in the field of MHPSS due to its knowledge, experience, and the attention devoted to MHPSS by government and NGOs.[248] The humanitarian profile and network of minister Kaag has greatly helped in raising awareness both within the ministry and among international partners. The recognition of the role played by the Netherlands was found to be greater at headquarters and multilateral level and less prominent at field level. Although humanitarian actors on the ground do recognise the importance of MHPSS, they are less aware of the role played by the Netherlands in its promotion. The question is whether they need to be. The examples that follow below illustrate the results achieved.

The Netherlands, together with like-minded countries and UN organisations, successfully lobbied for MHPSS to be referred to in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan to COVID-19 Pandemic. MHPSS had been absent in the first draft but was included in the second version.[249] In 2021, the permanent mission in New York succeeded in promoting a reference to the importance of MHPSS in the annual humanitarian "omnibus resolution", meaning that, in principle, MHPSS has become an integral part of humanitarian response.[250] This implies that the IASC must give follow-up to the paragraph on MHPSS. To ensure this effort would be successful, the permanent mission collaborated closely with the MHPSS team in The Hague and drew up a roadmap that included holding meetings. For example, in December 2020, during the humanitarian week in New York, the Netherlands organised a meeting chaired by the Dutch Permanent Representative, with participation of the UN Secretary-General. At the meeting, eight humanitarian organisations endorsed a document on integrating MHPSS in humanitarian action. In addition, the permanent mission, successfully promoted a paragraph on MHPSS in the ECOWAS HAS resolution of June 2021, requesting the UN and other humanitarian organisations to integrate MHPSS in their programmes, make capacity available and report on the topic.[251]

Despite the success of promoting MHPSS and its incorporation in key policy-guiding documents, the assumption that it would "trickle down" to country level operations has yet to be tested. Notwithstanding widespread acknowledgement of the importance of MHPSS and the setting up of MHPSS Technical Working Groups in many countries, this has not yet been translated into more financial support to MHPSS; from a financial perspective and in relation to actual needs, it is still a small element in actual crisis response, but the Dutch government is set on continuing to promote MHPSS.[252]

5.5.4 Results achieved for Dutch-funded humanitarian organisations

When assessing Dutch diplomacy on the Grand Bargain and influencing a shared agenda of change, IOB observed normative impact and impact towards a conducive environment. The same applies to IOB's exploration of Dutch support for multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding and for a well-coordinated UN-led humanitarian system. Another finding from IOB's fieldwork in Yemen and South Sudan is that the Netherlands has been a willing and able partner to deliver certain messages at the request of humanitarian organisations in coordination with other donors. These diplomatic efforts were mostly aimed to protect humanitarian space and promote humanitarian access. IOB observed limited to no operational impact and found no hard evidence that Dutch diplomatic efforts have facilitated and strengthened overall functioning of the main humanitarian partners in the three case study countries.

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248 Interviews with key stakeholders in New York, Geneva; Report of the Dutch mission in New York, *VN-Humanitaire Hulp - Integratie MHPSS in crisis respons een stap dichterbij*, 28 december 2021.

249 Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19, UN Coordinated Appeal, April-December 2020: interviews; https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHRP-COVID19_July%20update_abridged%20final.pdf.

250 Report of the Dutch mission in New York, *VN-Humanitaire Hulp - Integratie MHPSS in crisis respons een stap dichterbij*, 28 December 2021.

251 Permanent mission Geneva, GEV-PA 69/2021, 30 June 2021.

252 Coalition agreement of January 2021 and the new Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking policy note of June 2022.

It is difficult to attribute results to the Netherlands, as the Netherlands almost always operates in larger coalitions of like-minded countries. Nevertheless, IOB observed normative impact and impact towards a conducive environment, as Dutch influence is perceived by stakeholders as potentially subtle and indirect, yet positively affecting a shared agenda of change. This agenda of change revolved around operationalising the Grand Bargain by actively participating in and leading international working groups, as well as bringing certain initiatives on humanitarian data further. The Netherlands was also mentioned as a valued member of the international humanitarian donor community, leading by example on multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding as well as supporting well-coordinated UN-led humanitarian assistance. This was found in the three case study countries as well as at the level of The Hague, Geneva, Rome and New York.

Findings in two of the three case study countries suggest that the Netherlands has been a willing and able partner to deliver certain messages at the request of humanitarian organisations and in coordination with other donors. These diplomatic efforts were mostly aimed to protect humanitarian space and promote humanitarian access. Given the complex context, results are perceived to be ad hoc, short-lived and not traceable solely to the Dutch efforts. Yet they greatly speak to the imagination: humanitarian convoys are let through, women and girls receive the appropriate hygienic assistance thanks to diplomatic interventions by the ambassador.

The number of priority themes in The Hague increased, but Dutch diplomatic efforts at the multilateral and global level were found to be connected with the most relevant agendas (Grand Bargain; conflict and hunger) and to have positively contributed to a shared international agenda on priority challenges (multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding, localisation, risk sharing). Ambitions to achieve real changes in the humanitarian system through innovation, localisation and an operationalisation of the nexus have not been fulfilled. Actively supporting localisation would require a genuine power shift, more equal partnerships, risk sharing, less insistence on financial accountability, more insistence on accountability to the affected population and multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding.[253] IOB concludes that the required shift in thinking within the ministry and the necessary wider and more solid coalition of partners and donors is still lacking, as is the underlying solid narrative, which needs broad support in parliament and society.

5.5.5 Results achieved on localisation, innovation and the nexus

Despite the effort MFA invested in humanitarian diplomacy, IOB's assessment is mixed about the extent to which the MFA has been effective in influencing partners in relation to the new policy demands on localisation, innovation and the nexus.

On the positive side, when assessing Dutch diplomacy on the Grand Bargain and influencing a shared agenda of change, IOB observed a connective impact and impact towards a conducive environment. Localisation, innovation and the nexus are very much part of this global agenda for change in which the Netherlands was found to play an active, enabling, convening and constructive role.

On the negative side, IOB found the Dutch narrative on localisation, the nexus and innovation in humanitarian action to be lacking in profoundness. This has limited the MFA's ability to effectively change the behaviour of its humanitarian partners on the ground. The MFA was found to have largely delegated its ambitions on localisation and the nexus to its partners, without closely monitoring, influencing and facilitating them through informed policy dialogue and accompanying measures.

To support the analysis above, the following section will lay out in more detail the main findings on Dutch diplomatic efforts in pursuit of localisation, innovation and the nexus.

[253] Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021) Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localization.

5.5.5.1 *Dutch diplomacy on localisation*

On localisation, there has been an over-reliance on reaching the quantitative target (increasing funding to local NGOs) and too little emphasis on the equity of partnerships with local actors. IOB has found that the increase in Dutch multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding (considered to be a key enabler for localisation), has not been passed on by international partners to local actors. Both localisation and the nexus require changes within the MFA itself, for example on risk management and developing a more integrated strategy on capacity strengthening. IOB found the MFA struggling with the concept of risk sharing because of a generally felt low risk appetite in parliament and society. Genuine risk sharing would require a more widely supported narrative on how much residual risk the Netherlands is willing to accept to ensure life-saving humanitarian assistance. The Netherlands has a role in negative power dynamics, as accountability focuses more on limiting the risk that money or materials are not used for intended purposes than on the results achieved in the eyes of the affected population. The top – down accountability has been delegated to Dutch intermediary partners who therefore have less room to manoeuvre to engage with local partners on the basis of equity in partnerships.

Commitment to the Grand Bargain

Before 2015, very limited attention was given to Dutch support to localisation as part of humanitarian policy.[254] In 2016, localisation goals started to appear more prominently in Dutch policy papers.[255] The MFA now acknowledges that funding is not the only aspect of localisation, but that capacity building[256] is an essential factor in localisation and one that it is are willing to support. Under the Grand Bargain, the government has committed to four specific points:[257]

- Specific Commitment 4: the government is committed to build humanitarian capacity of local and national responders to enable them to provide quality humanitarian aid according to agreed humanitarian principles and standards, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard.
- Specific Commitment 5: Recent changes in Dutch regulations mean unearmarked support can be provided to foreign NGOs (some Dutch NGOs already receive core funding).
- Specific Commitment 6: The Netherlands is a strong supporter of CBPFs as a way of channelling more funds to local responders, and it will continue to increase its contributions as a proportion of total assistance. In recent years, the Netherlands has also consistently been one of the top five donors to CERF.
- Specific Commitment 7: the Netherlands will reduce the reporting burden on local and national responders by accepting progress reporting through the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI, compatible with Dutch guidelines) and by harmonisation of donor reporting requirements.

Focus on global discussions

Despite the lack of a wider narrative to back up its policy on localisation, the Netherlands was found to have undertaken many diplomatic efforts and initiatives to deliver on at least three of these four commitments. Documents and interviews with key stakeholders inside and outside the Netherlands confirm that since 2016 the Netherlands has been an active player in global donor- coordinated discussions to support a more local and localised humanitarian response. Many examples demonstrate that the results are mostly found in successful agenda setting, convening stakeholders, keeping momentum, leading by example (on multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding) and contributing to policy development.

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254 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, vergaderjaar 2014-2015. 32 605 Nr. 156. Beleid ten aanzien van ontwikkelingssamenwerking. *Brief van de Minister voor Buitenlandse handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking*.

255 Ibid.

256 IOB would prefer to use the term *capacity strengthening*, which is considered to express more equal power dynamics between international and local partners. But the official language used in humanitarian policy at the time referred to "capacity building "and that is why this term is used here.

257 Kingdom of the Netherlands, *World Humanitarian Summit, Core Commitments 2016*.

Flexible funding

Unearmarked and multi-year funding is identified as the key enabler to facilitate more localised and participatory responses.[258] Over the years, the Netherlands has become a strong advocate for multi-annual unearmarked funding to experienced humanitarian partners. This type of funding increased from an average of 41% of the total humanitarian aid budget in 2015 to 55% in 2021.[259] At the same time, Minister Kaag, as Eminent Person of the Grand Bargain from June 2019 until June 2021, has put emphasis on localisation. It came up as a key theme in the Grand Bargain Annual Meeting in June 2020. On many occasions, the minister has highlighted the lack of an upward trend in flexible and predictable unearmarked funding, as well as the limited progress in passing flexibility of financing along to local partners within the system. Worldwide, the total volume of unearmarked funding decreased in 2019 and, after a small COVID-19 driven increase in 2020, decreased again in 2021. As a proportion, worldwide unearmarked funding has been declining almost continuously since 2016.[260]

In 2021, funding provided directly to local and national actors was also significantly lower. It followed the same COVID-19 related increase in 2020 as mentioned above (most of this funding went to national governments and the health sector), but direct funding to local partners fell by almost two thirds, to a mere 1.2% of total funding.[261] There are no hard data on the proportion and amount of flexible funding that was passed on in full to local partners through international organisations and, for instance, CBPFs, but in the light of the trends mentioned above, this is also likely to have decreased. Data suggests that there was only a slight increase in volume terms of multi-year funding to some multilateral organisations in 2021 compared with 2020, and in the volume (and to a lesser extent the percentage) of flexible funding, including contributions to the CERF and OCHA-managed CBPFs.[262]

As explained earlier, direct Dutch funding to local actors was not considered an option, due to capacity constraints and prevailing risk management strategies within MFA. IOB observes that the Netherlands' reliance on international organisations to transfer funds and power to local organisations to achieve Dutch policy objectives on localisation means that embassies have a role to play in holding these international organisations to account on partnership practices and localisation targets. IOB has found that the two regional humanitarian coordinators have indeed played an active role in this, despite no structural guidance from The Hague about how far they should go. As for the input on localisation at field level, embassy staff report that they lack guidance on support and monitoring.

In Grand Bargain meetings, the Netherlands has also underlined that working in fragile contexts implies taking risks, including the risk that funding will go to the wrong hands. But local responders should not be the sole bearers of risk. Though the Netherlands shares in the risk by mostly providing unearmarked funding, much risk remains with local responders. From the interviews with stakeholders, it seems that the MFA struggles with the concept of risk sharing because of the general feeling that risk appetite is low in parliament and society. Genuine risk sharing would require co-ownership by all actors, including the MFA,[263] plus a more widely supported narrative on the level of residual risk that the MFA is willing to accept to ensure life-saving humanitarian assistance reaches people in need. In 2019, the MFA and ICRC jointly produced a paper to understand how risk sharing is related to the Grand Bargain and localisation.[264] In April 2020, an MFA and ICRC co-led conference took place with 45 stakeholders from states, humanitarian organisations (local and international) and the private sector. Since 2020, the Netherlands has officially acknowledged that risk sharing is important to strengthen the role of local governmental and non-governmental actors, and in 2022 it was included in Dutch humanitarian policy.[265] Nevertheless, the Netherlands does not yet really practise risk sharing, and concomitantly with the unearmarked funding delegates the risk to intermediaries, who often transfer this disproportionately to their local partners.

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258 Metcalfe-Hough, et al. (2020) *Grand Bargain annual independent report*. June 2020.

259 Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: strengths and weaknesses, IOB report, 22 Sep 2021.

260 Development initiatives | Global Humanitarian Assistance. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022.

261 Ibid.

262 Metcalfe-Hough, et al. (2021) The Grand Bargain in 2021: an independent review. HPG commissioned report. London: ODI (www.odi.org/en/publications/the-grand-bargain-in-2021-an-independent-review).

263 Barbelet, V., et al. (2021) Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localization: a literature study.

264 Metcalfe-Hough, V. (2020). *The future of the Grand Bargain. A new ambition?* Briefing note. June 2020.

265 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (25 februari 2022). Brief aan de Voorzitter van de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. Investeren in Perspectief – Goed voor de Wereld, Goed voor Nederland.

Regarding commitment 4 under the Grand Bargain Workstream 2, the Netherlands has worked to improve the humanitarian reporting standard in IATI and support other organisations to switch to IATI reporting. The Netherlands has also drawn attention to this issue in its capacity as co-leader of the Grand Bargain Workstream "Greater Transparency".[266]

5.5.5.2 Dutch diplomacy on innovation

On innovation, the lack of a shared notion on what successful innovation looks like in the humanitarian sector has been a challenge for the MFA, its partners and this evaluation. The MFA rightly focused on larger funds, platforms and initiatives and advocated for a consistent implementation of the Grand Bargain on innovation. IOB observes that despite considerable efforts, the results of innovation have remained relatively limited and have not visibly transformed the humanitarian sector. Innovations were mostly donor-driven and rarely focused on demands from crisis-affected populations. Very few innovations have been scaled up, even where there were measurable results. On a more positive note, Dutch-funded partners have used existing new technologies (e-vouchers, blockchain, biometrics) to improve cash assistance, registration of refugees and data analysis. Other noteworthy examples are satellite images to verify vulnerabilities in inaccessible areas and increased emphasis on forecast-based funding[267]. IOB also considers the DRA to be an innovative partnership and funding arrangement between the MFA and Dutch-based NGOs.

Early start to supporting innovation

Even before the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, the Netherlands together with the UK had organised a large meeting to promote the importance of humanitarian innovation and lobby for it to be high on the WHS agenda.[268] Since 2016, the Netherlands has positioned itself as an enabler of innovation but rarely focusing on specific projects. Moreover, the MFA sees its role in innovation not only as funder, but also as convener. It achieves this by linking various actors and activities to maximise Dutch input, and in advocacy, participating at various levels such as UN boards, the World Economic Forum High-Level Group on Humanitarian Investing and OECD-DAC meetings.[269] Since the Humanitarian Aid Division has covered many priorities with limited capacity, the focus for innovation is on larger funds, platforms and initiatives. For 2018, the MFA aimed at putting innovation high on the humanitarian agenda, insisting on consistent implementation of the Grand Bargain, using humanitarian data and making such data available, intensifying cooperation with the private sector and developing new financing instruments.[270] In 2019, diplomatic efforts were mostly aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian funding, with innovation as one of the avenues to achieve this.[271] Stakeholders from various backgrounds are of the opinion that the Netherlands made a positive and informed effort to support a global agenda to address the challenges at stake. The efforts made by minister Kaag as Eminent Person of the Grand Bargain are perceived to have been very helpful to maintain momentum.

266 The Netherlands (2017). *Grand Bargain. Input from the Netherlands*, January-December 2016. 7 Feb 2017.

267 According to the German Red Cross: "Forecast-based financing releases humanitarian funding based on forecast information for pre-agreed activities which reduce risks, enhance preparedness and response, and make disaster risk reduction within the humanitarian assistance overall more effective. The overall objective is to anticipate, prevent if possible and reduce potential humanitarian needs as a result of extreme weather disasters and to strengthen the preparedness capacities of humanitarian actors. A key element of forecast-based funding is that the allocation of resources is agreed in advance".

268 Rijks-Intern (2015). VN - Humanitaire hulp - Heldere boodschap van NL en VK: humanitaire top moet doorbraak worden voor innovatie. 22 juli 2015.

269 Rijks-Intern (2019). OESO - DAC - 15 mei – concept verslag – prioriteiten voorzitter – Total Official Support for Sustainable Development - en humanitaire hulp: "It's all about the nexus". 20 mei 2019.

270 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, vergaderjaar 2017-2018. Beleid ten aanzien van ontwikkelingssamenwerking. Brief van de Minister voor Buitenlandse handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking.

271 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, vergaderjaar 2019-2020. Investeren in Perspectief – Goed voor de Wereld, Goed voor Nederland.

Limited success in specific intervention focus areas

Innovation has the potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance by moving away from traditional in-kind support and instead using new technologies and ways of organising support.[272] The focus areas for financing innovation in humanitarian support according to Dutch policy are solutions that can be scaled up, anticipatory assistance and financing, improving local and international coordination and more beneficiary engagement to identify and address needs.[273]

Coordination has been acknowledged as core to achieving effective innovation, which includes achieving consensus about the most important humanitarian challenges. The Netherlands supports developing and maintaining a network of donors to ensure coherence of input to innovation. The Netherlands has also identified the need for better monitoring of innovation and believes the solution is to make better documentation and sharing of lessons learned a condition for funding, and to make agreements on monitoring and evaluation with partners to generate evidence and best practices. The MFA has funded an organisation to support such monitoring.[274]

The topic of innovation is often discussed at executive board meetings and other meetings with UN agencies, and even though a causal relation cannot be evidenced in this evaluation, the agencies do make a considerable effort to innovate. On taking office in January 2018, the new Executive Director highlighted the pursuit of innovation as an important point of attention for UNICEF.[275] Regarding WFP, besides bringing innovation up in the Executive Board meetings, the Netherlands has had bilateral meetings with the director of Innovation and Change Management and the director of the Innovation Accelerator. Innovation is one of the three pillars in the WFP's "Private-sector partnerships and fundraising strategy (2020 – 2025)".[276] Minister Kaag has communicated directly with WFP on the importance of innovation to facilitate humanitarian partners' work while increasing efficiency.[277]

For UNHCR, in relation to the Global Refugee Compact, Minister Kaag had drawn attention to the opportunities technology offers for promoting entrepreneurship in relation to refugees and for including private sector partners and encouraging them to innovate.[278] The Compact is expected to contribute to innovations, for example in education, livelihoods and "solutions",[279] though at the same time it is acknowledged that there are no instant solutions for providing assistance to the continuously increasing number of refugees.[280]

Interviews with policymakers brought out that they struggled with defining humanitarian innovation and how to limit the seemingly infinite possibilities for funding. Embassy staff feel that they have insufficient guidance on innovation. Some policymakers felt they were poorly equipped to make choices on financial support for innovations. Decision makers within the MFA were concerned about finding a sharper focus and subsequently transferred advocacy on innovative financing to a different MFA department (Directorate for Sustainable Economic Development – DDE), where a task force already existed.

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272 UNU-MERIT (2021). *Literature Study Innovation in Humanitarian Assistance.* May 2022.

273 Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2019). *Mensen eerst: Nederlandse koers humanitaire diplomatie en noodhulp*. Beleidsnota, March 2019.

274 Development Initiatives Poverty Research Ltd (2018). Concept note for 6 months addendum to existing grant 29448 from Netherlands. June 2018.

275 Rijks-Intern (2018). VN - UNICEF - Ontwikkelingssamenwerking - UNICEF Uitvoerende Raad 11-14 juni - *Contouren van ED Fore's prioriteiten worden langzaam zichtbaar.* 17 juli 2018.

276 Rijks-Intern (2019). VN - WFP - Verslag WFP Executive Board (18-21 November 2019): *Het einde van een bewogen jaar voor WFP.* 25 november 2019.

277 Ministry of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (2020). Letter from Minister Kaag to WFP Executive Director David Beasley. 19 May 2020.

278 Rijks-Intern (2019). VN - UNHCR - Humanitaire hulp - *HC Grandi op bezoek in NL.* 7 juni 2019.

279 Rijks-Intern (2019). VN - UNHCR - Humanitaire hulp - *34 landen zijn het meest betrokken bij opvang van en ondersteuning voor vluchtelingen: hoe betrekken we de rest? Global Refugee Forum in december moet verandering teweegbrengen.* 28 maart 2019.

280 Diplomatic cable BZV (2019). VN - UNHCR - Humanitaire hulp - Scene setter Global Refugee Forum 17-18 december 2019. 11 december 2019.

5.5.5.3 Dutch diplomacy on the nexus

On the nexus, IOB found that even though the Netherlands is seen by partners as a constructive player, the MFA is still working in silos and has no integrated strategy to consistently promote links between the humanitarian and development policies, prioritisation and budgets. In countries where Dutch embassies have development expertise and delegated budgets for development cooperation are available, operational small-scale tailor-made solutions have been found. Examples in Yemen and South Sudan have in common a fair amount of discretion, flexibility and local leadership by the UN Resident Coordinator and ambassadors and embassy staff. The few examples suggest that for the humanitarian partners and the Dutch government alike, closeness to the field makes it easier to facilitate coordination with broader development goals.

The Netherlands is seen by partners as a constructive player that in many crisis contexts has a long background in development funding and is not hampered by a limiting foreign policy agenda. This profile was perceived as matching well with building consensus and shared agendas around certain priority teams mostly at a global level, and in humanitarian crises where the embassy has the capacity in place to follow up and give feedback.

When participating in platforms such as the boards of UN agencies, the Netherlands has also succeeded in drawing attention to Grand Bargain priorities. For instance, for many years the Netherlands was on the Executive Board of WFP and used these meetings to encourage WFP to prominently include the nexus in its multi-annual strategic plans.[281]

IOB observes that in Yemen and South Sudan, the Netherlands is seen as a credible, reliable and non-threatening actor that is able to deliver messages to authorities and de facto authorities, thanks to its long history of development cooperation and the absence of competing political agendas. Nonetheless, such consensus building rarely happens around the nexus.

Involving the country team in drafting a country action plan on humanitarian diplomacy, as happened in Yemen, was perceived as a way to create buy-in from other parts of the ministry. Flexibility was granted for diverging from the strict humanitarian point of view and including some developmental themes. The Netherlands has not developed integrated strategy on the double or triple nexus, however, and nor does it use it. Regarding innovation and localisation and its links to the nexus, embassy staff report that they lack guidance.

[281] Rijks-Intern (2021). VN - WFP - *Verslag jaarlijkse Executive Board 2021 - terugblik op 2020, een jaar van verdere groei en aandacht voor de werkcultuur*. 2 juli 2021.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Introductory observations

This ex post evaluation draws conclusions and formulates recommendations based on what is known from the past. IOB has not reflected as much on the very valid and more forward-looking question of whether, in a vastly changing world, current ways of giving humanitarian aid will be effective and appropriate in the future. The increased complexity, frequency, scale and unpredictability of crises and disasters will inevitably change the way the world responds. Humanitarian funds will be far more unable than is currently the case to keep up with the needs induced by climate change, continued conflict and instability. At the same time, IOB's review of a small but growing evidence base suggests that current inequalities in the aid system make aid less efficient, less effective and not sustainable. More importantly, these inequalities are increasingly becoming questionable from a moral point of view. IOB believes it is this reality that will ultimately turn the tide and demand better solutions for crisis-affected people based on equity, inclusion and a more locally led and integrated response.

With this in mind, the conclusions and recommendations that follow below may be read as conservative, because they conclude and recommend that incremental changes should be made to the current ways of working. IOB stands ready to help policymakers reflect, move forward and adapt to these changing realities.

6.2 Conclusions

Conclusion 1: Dutch-funded partners have contributed to achieving the intermediate objectives of Dutch humanitarian funding, providing efficient, effective and timely delivery of aid, based on their specific knowledge and expertise.

This conclusion is supported by evidence from desk review and stakeholder interviews and the finding that most of the relevant assumptions in Dutch humanitarian policy (see below) held true, which contributes to the credibility of the existing Theory of Change.

Assumption: Providing unearmarked, predictable funding to a core group of experienced humanitarian organisations enhances specialisation and necessary scale.
IOB's findings confirm that each Dutch partner operates according to its mandate and brings its own sectoral expertise, which was illustrated in the three reviewed humanitarian contexts and was confirmed by the desk review and interviews related to other countries.

UN agencies, CBPF recipients, DRA members and local partners as well as national RCRC societies were also providing their own sectoral expertise as well as local knowledge, access to insecure locations and better working relations with local authorities.

Assumption: Large-scale crises require the deployment of big multilateral agencies.
The assumption that big multilateral agencies can make a big impact in large-scale food crises was validated in the field studies as well as in targeted desk review and numerous evaluations. The UN has the leverage and capacity to attract substantial funding and to scale up quickly through the concerted effort of players such as WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF and OCHA.

WFP in particular can scale up quickly and is also a crucial enabler for other humanitarian actors in large-scale aid operations. The assumption that DRA leads to efficiency gains for the Dutch MFA by funding through one humanitarian lead agency also holds, as interviews confirmed that scaling up humanitarian funding to Dutch NGOs would not have been feasible without the DRA.

Assumption: Predictable unearmarked flexible funding leads to efficient, effective and timely delivery of aid.
IOB has found that flexible unearmarked funding is paramount to international and local partners, to ensure timely assistance. Despite being unable to establish a direct link between Dutch humanitarian funding and results, due to lack of earmarking, sufficient evidence was found in the three case study crisis contexts to sustain the conclusion that the joint operations of the experienced humanitarian partners have significantly contributed to saving lives, building resilience and restoring dignity. In the case studies, it was confirmed that Dutch-funded actors have delivered timely, needs-based and principled humanitarian action to the best of their abilities.

Most of the response was sufficiently timely, even if timeliness was also found to depend on context, capacity, humanitarian access and availability, as well as on the quality of funding from other donors. The case studies did not yield evidence that one trusted humanitarian partner was timelier than others. The assumption that flexible funding enables timeliness was confirmed in fieldwork, interviews and targeted desk study. Core funding to ICRC was a key factor in speeding up the first response to new or a sudden increase in humanitarian needs until targeted funding became available from other donors.

DRA's timeliness was found to have improved over the timeline under evaluation, as MFA funding allocations have become more streamlined in terms of timeliness and flexibility. The assumption that the DRA mechanisms enable DRA to respond rapidly and efficiently to acute crises was only partly validated, as findings also suggest that DRA support is not very rapid because of the consensus-oriented approach.

Assumption: Humanitarian partners have added value because of their specific knowledge and expertise, deliver relevant assistance and act with integrity in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Despite significant challenges, Dutch-funded humanitarian actors have the systems and capacity in place to ensure a neutral assessment of humanitarian needs and to target assistance accordingly. Evidence suggests that the quality of needs assessments has been monitored and evaluated at regular intervals via the cluster system as well as via evaluations and peer reviews. Even though the monitoring and evaluation took time, shortcomings in needs assessments were identified and wherever possible were used to adapt humanitarian programming.

Although humanitarian principles have been under constant pressure in the three case study countries, these same principles have nonetheless greatly guided the work of Dutch-funded humanitarian actors.

Assumption: UN-led coordination prevents gaps and overlap and determines which actor is best suited to deliver aid on the basis of quality, capacity, presence, access and speed.

In the difficult contexts under evaluation, trust in the UN-led international humanitarian system was found to be justified. UN-led coordination helps prevent gaps and overlap and to determine which actor is best suited to deliver aid, based on needs, quality, capacity, presence, access and speed. The cluster system was found to work relatively well, increasing real-time coordination and cooperation in a constantly changing environment. UN-led coordination was found to be especially valuable in high-impact crises that require a large-scale response, where it is essential to ensure results in terms of addressing the most urgent needs and preventing gaps and overlap.

The case studies revealed that humanitarian partners in Syria, South Sudan and Yemen were mutually complementary and were making strong and mostly successful efforts to coordinate their actions within the UN-led cluster. Nonetheless, there is convincing evidence to suggest that in these same contexts the UN-led system leaves little space for national and local organisations to influence and lead the humanitarian response. A lack of trust in local actors, internationals' self-preservation and the power dynamics between different actors prevent a more locally led humanitarian action. The requirements of different donors on reporting and due diligence, risk management are also constraining their ability to localise. UN considerations on partnership choice are based on who is perceived to have the best capacity in a specific geographical area, and there are insufficient incentives for long term capacity strengthening of local partners.

Assumption: Pooled funds contribute to coordination and effectiveness of aid.

Pooled funds like the CERF and CBPFs have enabled OCHA to target assistance according to the most urgent needs. They have also contributed to OCHA's leadership in coordinating the humanitarian response, preventing gaps and overlap. CERF funding proved to be a slightly better enabler of timely action than CBPFs. The IFRC and DREF funding mechanisms have also enabled a timely response through the existing network of national societies.

Conclusion 2: Dutch-supported humanitarian partners bring their own particular strengths and weaknesses.

The findings confirm that where needs are vast, governments allow and countries and communities lack capacity and leadership, the UN is in the best position to lead and coordinate international humanitarian action. UN agencies' inherent strength lies in leverage and mandate to engage with officially recognised authorities on issues of humanitarian concern. However, in conflict-induced crisis countries, the UN strength of working with the government comes at the cost of not always being able to engage with other parties in a conflict. Also, scale and timely delivery were often seen to compromise the UN's more strategic ambitions relating to localisation, local capacity strengthening, equal partnerships, complementarity and the nexus. On the other hand, in various contexts, OCHA was found to play a significant role in negotiating humanitarian access for the system at large.

ICRC is seen as unique in safeguarding the implementation of IHL. In conflict situations, ICRC was found to have a solid response and preparedness capacity. Depending on the context, the RCRC societies have strong capacity to respond and prepare for sudden onset disasters. In recent years, IFRC and the RCRC societies (including NLRC) particularly stand out in evaluations, policy documents and strategies for their insistence on localisation, complementarity and capacity strengthening. Depending on the context, positive results have been identified in shifting power dynamics and stronger local capacities.

The DRA has developed into an effective funding mechanism that provides a much-needed consistency and flexibility of funding to a relatively large number of experienced INGOs. As collaboration within the DRA improved over time, it has positively affected the quality of the humanitarian response of its individual member organisations through strengthened coordination with the UN on principled needs-based action, and alignment of DRA operations with the HRPs. Based on three case studies, IOB assesses DRA's role in localisation as promising, even though its member organisations do not all deliver equally on this ambition and many institutional obstacles remain.

Conclusion 3: Provision of flexible, unearmarked funding by the Netherlands provided various benefits.

Like conclusion 1, this conclusion is based on the finding that most of the relevant assumptions held true.

Assumption: Partners especially improve their capacity to respond, if they are receiving unearmarked predictable funding.

The Dutch emphasis on flexible unearmarked funding, combined with the strategy to focus on donor coordination and an informed policy dialogue with Dutch-funded partners, was found to be well justified in Dutch humanitarian policy and seen as a wise strategy. It also makes sense in view of the limited capacity in the Humanitarian Aid Division and embassies to allocate big funds. The flexible unearmarked character of Dutch funding greatly enhances the effectiveness of Dutch-funded partners to deliver. At times, it has also enabled humanitarian partners to take the first steps towards early recovery, resilience and longer-term investments

Assumption: Multi-annual flexible funding gives the Netherlands a good reputation and influence.

Due to its flexible and unearmarked character, Dutch humanitarian funding is referred to as "golden" money by the recipients. It allows the organisations to respond quickly to the most urgent needs and gap filling for ongoing interventions. Moreover, it gives the Netherlands a good reputation, a valuable network, insights and influence in The Hague, Geneva, Rome and New York. At HQ level of the larger humanitarian organisations, the Netherlands is perceived as an active humanitarian donor that can be quite effective in promoting change, achieving consensus and delivering on shared agendas. MHPSS was mentioned as one of the most visible results by many stakeholders. Nonetheless, within the case study countries, Dutch funding could not always be identified, which reduced visibility (conclusion 4).

Assumption: Accessible knowledge and capacity are available at the MFA and embassies to assess whether Dutch partners do indeed have the expertise, professionalism and capacity and take decisions according to needs, principles and thematic priorities.

The "golden" money as described above has the downside of poor donor visibility in the countries where humanitarian crises strike and develop further. In the case study countries, the Netherlands was not always seen as an important donor or influential actor. This complicates access to information and stakeholders. The provision of core and flexible funding has made MEL complicated, as for most of the Dutch humanitarian budget it is difficult to trace in which countries Dutch money has been spent. Without investing in the network of Dutch embassies on the ground and in embassy capacity, the Netherlands therefore runs the risk of being poorly informed and less able to feed the policy dialogue with its humanitarian partners. A good information position was found to be essential to mitigate the risk of promoting a status quo of privileged humanitarian partners, to justify the trust invested in the Dutch partners and to be able to adequately substantiate future funding decisions. The two regional humanitarian coordinators in Amman and Nairobi have been indispensable in this respect. But despite the large sums of humanitarian money provided and the political relevance of many of the humanitarian crises at hand, it was found that the overall humanitarian capacity and expertise in the Humanitarian Aid Division, the Dutch mission in Brussels and bilateral embassies was too thinly spread to adequately address the many humanitarian and political issues at stake.

Conclusion 4: Low donor visibility accompanying unearmarked funding does sometimes negatively affect Dutch leverage at country level. It results in less information flowing to the Netherlands and hampers MEL, thereby making it difficult for the Netherlands to remain a knowledgeable and well-informed diplomatic actor.

This conclusion is based on the finding that Dutch leverage to promote change was mostly found at the global level, where the HQs of humanitarian agencies greatly value the quality of the unearmarked funding by the Netherlands. At country level, the Netherlands struggles to get a seat at the table, as it does not automatically figure on the top ten list of (usually earmarking) donors. The problem is less acute in countries where the Netherlands supports the CBPF and the influence of Dutch diplomats and ambassadors with a strong humanitarian background counterbalances the aforementioned negative consequences.

Conclusion 5: Regarding individual partners contributing to the Dutch priority themes localisation and nexus, it was possible to only partly validate the added value of Dutch-funded partners, and there was hardly any evidence that they had innovated.

IOB found the Dutch narrative on localisation, the nexus and innovation in humanitarian action to be lacking in profoundness. This has limited the ability of the MFA to effect change with influence and money. The MFA has largely delegated its ambitions on localisation and the nexus to its partners, without closely monitoring, influencing and facilitating them through an informed policy dialogue and accompanying measures. In countries where Dutch embassies have development expertise and delegated budgets for development cooperation are available, operational small-scale tailor-made solutions have been found. These specific examples suggest that for both the humanitarian partners and the Dutch government, closeness to the field makes it easier to facilitate coordination with broader development goals.

Regarding localisation, all Dutch-funded humanitarian partners were found to have improved local actors' access to funding, and most of them have reached or even surpassed the Grand Bargain target of allocating 25% of their funding to local actors. Results were mixed, however, when further steps on localisation were assessed in terms of addressing unequal partnerships and capacity strengthening.

Partners like the IFRC, the NLRC and RCRC societies have pursued a relatively strong localisation strategy that promotes and delivers on local leadership and local capacity strengthening, whenever country contexts allow. The enabling factors are clear ambitions and national leadership, as well as positive learning in disaster preparedness and disaster response. Similarly, the DRA has made promising efforts on localisation, even though its members have sometimes lacked a structural approach to capacity building and shared decision-making.

On the other hand, individual UN agencies were often found to be poor allies in the localisation agenda. Even though UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP and OCHA have a strong track record in cooperating and coordinating with national and local authorities, they have made little progress on improving equality in partnerships with national and local NGOs and CSOs. They also usually follow a narrow interpretation of capacity strengthening, focusing foremost on learning the systems they use to apply for funding.

The evaluation has not been able to validate the assumed added value of individual partners in delivering results on the nexus. It was observed that partners honour the nexus in their corporate strategies, but that at field level, achievements are less impressive. NGOs, benefitting from their dual mandate in development and humanitarian assistance, produced slightly better results. There are many dilemmas hampering effective operationalisation of the nexus. Humanitarian assistance based on the principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality does not necessarily match with parallel agendas of development, peace and stability that are guided by conflict sensitivity and principles of do no harm.

The intensity of the humanitarian crises under review may have affected our research, as the longer-term developmental nexus support that should be linked to the humanitarian activities was not yet being given in any of the case study countries. In Yemen and South Sudan, affected communities were asking for more livelihood and income generation activities that would reduce their dependence on humanitarian aid and would go some way to restoring the dignity of the affected communities.

Although these possible benefits had been confirmed by a recent evaluation and some planning documents, they had not materialised in practice. In all three countries, no evident exit strategy was available, partly due to the large numbers of people still displaced and living in camp situations and to the absence of signs of a resolution in any of the conflict scenarios.

Assumptions on the added value of Dutch-funded humanitarian partners to deliver on innovation were difficult to confirm, since there was no shared narrative on the level or content of ambitions. Individual humanitarian partners were mostly found to pursue ad hoc innovations that introduced new technologies based on top – down multilateral and donor-driven agendas. The IOB literature review on humanitarian innovation also concluded that innovations are still being introduced in an ad hoc way without making sufficient efforts to systematically integrate effective innovation.

Conclusion 6: Dutch humanitarian diplomacy has positively affected a shared agenda of change and priority challenges within the humanitarian system.

This conclusion is based on the below findings. The agenda of change revolved around promoting multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding, coordination of donor requirements and bringing new initiatives to the table (risk management) or furthered the use of humanitarian data. Its influence on the effectiveness of humanitarian actors is unknown. Concrete results linked to specific Dutch diplomatic efforts are mostly visible for specific priority themes at the multilateral strategic policy level.

Assumption: The Netherlands has influence because of its profile in international law and its good reputation as a large, predictable and trustworthy humanitarian donor. Being a large donor gives the Netherlands leverage. Cooperation is essential to increase leverage.

The Netherlands was commended by many stakeholders for its willingness, knowledge and ability to "push forward on specific humanitarian challenges". IOB mostly found the Netherlands had had a connective and normative impact and an impact towards achieving a conducive environment for Dutch humanitarian diplomacy, having positively contributed to developing new norms as well as to changing the general discourse on certain thematic priorities. Dutch diplomatic efforts at the multilateral level were found to have connected with the most relevant agendas (Grand Bargain, conflict and hunger) and to have positively contributed to a shared international agenda on priority challenges (such as good multi-annual, flexible and unearmarked funding, localisation, risk sharing). The results of these efforts need to be put into the perspective of much broader efforts and a wider support within the humanitarian system for most of these themes. On MHPSS the Netherlands stands out as an experienced and knowledgeable actor that can instigate change at the policy level.

It was much more difficult to find operational impact in terms of seeing a concrete change of behaviour on the ground. In two of the three case study countries (South Sudan and Yemen), the Netherlands was found to be a willing and able partner to protect humanitarian space and promote humanitarian access through diplomatic and political efforts. Given the complex context, results are perceived to be ad hoc, short-lived and not traceable to the Dutch efforts only. The results that were found greatly speak to the imagination: humanitarian convoys were let through, and women and girls received the appropriate hygienic assistance thanks to specific diplomatic interventions by an able Dutch ambassador. In the third case study country (Syria) political constraints (no presence in Damascus) have limited Dutch leverage on humanitarian outcomes.

Conclusion 7: Since 2018, the MFA has struggled to develop a more deliberate and structured approach to humanitarian diplomacy. The agenda for humanitarian diplomacy was ambitious and broad for a medium-sized donor with corresponding (and limited) staff capacity.

This conclusion is based on the finding that since 2015, 18 priority themes have been mentioned in policy documents and letters to parliament, which makes it difficult to give each of them the attention they deserve. It proved challenging to build a strong narrative, provide strategic guidance to embassies and learn from past interventions across the many themes and humanitarian crises to be covered. For the benefit of certain actions of humanitarian diplomacy, since 2018 this number has been reduced to nine thematic priorities and a flexible number of around seven main humanitarian crises to cover, but this still means that available staff are spread thinly across the many priorities.

Assumptions: Aid delivery based on humanitarian principles is the best way to guarantee appropriate, needs-based, effective aid conflict situations. Politicisation of aid can be prevented and mitigated by supporting experienced humanitarian actors.

This assumption was found to specifically hold true in situations of armed conflict, where adhering to the principles of neutrality, independence, impartiality and humanity is absolutely necessary for humanitarian actors to be able to safely cross lines and gain access to populations in need. The Humanitarian Aid Division of the MFA has done well to have made principled and needs-based aid its core ambition. However, holding on to these principles is a challenge within and outside the MFA. There is a huge risk that aid will be politicised, as illustrated by the many examples of dilemmas in the three case study countries. Experienced humanitarian actors (be they local, UN, Red Cross or INGOs) need the support of state parties to the Geneva Conventions like the Netherlands to speak out and intervene on their behalf. External stakeholders mentioned many examples of overt and silent diplomacy, where the Netherlands has been supportive to effect change. This humanitarian diplomacy by the MFA has a large internal component to it. It requires the MFA to coordinate within the government on possible interactions with broader interests of foreign policy and development cooperation. The opposite is also true. Foreign policy making and development cooperation are expected to be weighed against the humanitarian consequences for the most vulnerable people affected by crises. IOB found the Humanitarian Aid Division within the MFA to have made consistent efforts to use humanitarian arguments to help achieve broader foreign policy positions.

6.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: On unearmarked funding

Based on the evaluation's findings relating to the effectiveness of funding, IOB recommends that the Netherlands continues providing mostly multi-year flexible unearmarked funding to the same categories of recipients and promotes this approach with others, while at the same time claiming a seat at the table commensurate with the funding it has given. Diplomats and ambassadors with a strong humanitarian background have succeeded in achieving this aim. As in 2015, IOB believes that the trust invested in humanitarian partners must be accompanied by an informed policy dialogue based on a strategy focused on MEL. This will require the MFA to use its capacity to assess and digest the adequate MEL done by the humanitarian partners themselves and by better equipped humanitarian donors (see V and VII below) and to invest more consistently in humanitarian expertise across embassies and the Humanitarian Aid Division in The Hague. Unpacking the foregoing, IOB recommends:

(I) that the Netherlands continues with mostly multi-year unearmarked funds. The downside of unearmarked funding, that it makes it difficult to attribute results to Dutch support, should be accepted as an inherent disadvantage. This disadvantage is outweighed by the clear advantage of enabling aid delivery to be more efficient and effective and to respond better to changing needs.

(II) to continue to promote unearmarked and multi-year funding with other donors, since such funding is clearly linked with effective humanitarian assistance.

(III) to increase Dutch visibility and influence by claiming a seat at the table with organisations that receive unearmarked funding.

(IV) to continue funding the same group of humanitarian organisations, but, in coordination with other donors, ensure that these partners keep or strengthen their focus on Dutch and Grand Bargain related priorities.

(V) to increase strategic collaboration, networking and information exchange with the EU (DG ECHO and DG DEV) on Dutch and Grand Bargain focus areas and consistently make use of the more elaborate MEL capacity of other donors.

(VI) to invest, strengthen and focus MEL on a limited number of focus areas. This will help the Netherlands to become a better-informed influencer and achieve results on these priorities.

(VII) to strengthen the network of regional humanitarian coordinators with additional dedicated staff for liaising with DG ECHO.

(VIII) to consider investing in additional humanitarian capacity in other regions where high-profile humanitarian crises hit and Dutch humanitarian and political interests are at stake.

Recommendation 2: On localisation, innovation and the nexus

Localisation, innovation and the nexus have been identified and agreed as important priorities under the Grand Bargain. Many actors reportedly make efforts to contribute but results remain limited. IOB therefore recommends reconsidering the importance of focus areas and ways to achieve their operationalisation.

Localisation:

(I) Funding targets for increased direct funding of local actors are complied with in many countries, but this has appeared insufficient to induce a real power shift. The Netherlands should therefore, in consultation with humanitarian partners – including local partners – include and promote other ways of localisation, such as capacity strengthening, a stronger local role for local partners in decision-making and a different way of risk sharing. Local partners should be allowed to indicate where the gaps are and how best to close them.

(II) As a donor, the Netherlands also needs to consider its own role in negative power dynamics and address potential shortcomings in risk management. The Netherlands should investigate the feasibility of focusing accountability less on limiting the risk that money or materials are not used for intended purposes and more on the results achieved in the eyes of the affected population.

(III) In many circumstances, often when CBPFs are allocated, local partners are not selected for funding under the adage "the best partner wins", however, this makes localisation a catch-22: local partners do not have experience and capacity to implement humanitarian interventions, and hence they do not get selected and never gain such experience and capacity. It is the responsibility of international humanitarian actors, including the Netherlands, to make sure that local actors acquire relevant capacity and are given priority in selection, coupled with such capacity strenghtening and guidance where needed.

(IV) The UN is not performing well in terms of localisation. Although it engages local partners in terms of proportion of budget, the relationship is often top – down and not strategic. The Netherlands must therefore redouble its efforts to hold the various UN partners accountable for localisation. To create impact, this can only be done in coordination with other donors. The first line of action could be to bring the localisation agenda further with big donors like the EU (DG ECHO).

Innovation:

It is important that the Netherlands contemplates how and where to give innovation a strategic place in its humanitarian support and for what reason innovation should be supported.

(I) The Netherlands needs to assess the extent to which specific funds need to be dedicated and spent on innovation, and what part of innovation can be left to other donors or even to large UN agencies.

(II) Based on the above assessment, the Netherlands may wish to consider narrowing its engagement in and support of innovation of activities and modalities by partners, in favour of promoting system change and/or facilitating other priorities, such as localisation or the nexus.

(III) As part of unearmarked funding, the Netherlands must trust its partners to innovate as part of their corporate strategies and policies. On a parallel trail, appreciation of innovation and the desire to innovate should be promoted in negotiations and discussions with fund recipients.

Nexus:

The Netherlands as a donor faces operational and organisational challenges to work optimally towards the nexus. The humanitarian department and other DGIS departments work under a siloed approach. These silos must be broken down if the Netherlands is to successfully promote the nexus and achieve results. Destroying the silos implies taking strategic steps within the broader ministry towards increased flexibility and cohesion. To reconcile the differing perspectives of humanitarian assistance and development aid, IOB recommends the following.

(I) The MFA's Multi-Annual Country Strategies (MACs) need to be deployed to initiate better collaboration, communication and programming between the different perspectives, budgets and departments: the Humanitarian Aid Division should actively participate in the country teams that develop and monitor these MACs.

(II) The Humanitarian Aid Division can initiate change by being more explicit and proactive in defining pathways to a gradual exit from humanitarian assistance by inviting other thematic departments to follow up in only a limited number of long-term humanitarian crises that place a burden on the discretionary budget.

(III) One or two "nexus pilots" should be developed to gain experience and learn how to achieve such gradual exit in practice. These pilots would require embassies to play a major role, as closeness to the field makes it easier to facilitate alignment with broader development goals. It would require knowledge of operational realities and necessarily lead to tailored solutions. To achieve these, it will be necessary to increase involvement, ownership and buy-in of development stakeholders within and outside the ministry.

(IV) Flexibility in budgets should be explored and implemented within the broader ministry to facilitate blended financing when transitioning from a purely humanitarian approach to a development approach.

(V) It is recommended that the Netherlands (together with other donors) rethinks and operationalises its approach to the nexus in politically difficult contexts to find openings that serve people more sustainably and also more cost-effectively. Political issues hamper working on the nexus, as is currently the case in Syria, where only humanitarian (lifesaving) and early recovery support is allowed. Though the reason for this is understood, vulnerable people who cannot change the situation bear the brunt.

Recommendation 3: On humanitarian diplomacy

Using diplomacy to promote humanitarian objectives can help achieve more results by prioritising, building a narrative, strengthening guidance to embassies and exchange of information and lessons learned, and strategically addressing human resources as follows:

(I) IOB suggests limiting (or further limiting) the number of priorities on humanitarian diplomacy and establishing the Dutch level of engagement on the basis of capacity, credibility and network. Simultaneously, with regard to the priorities that are no longer pursued: strengthen communication and coordination with actors who are better placed to achieve positive and effective change.

(II) Build a stronger narrative on the selected priorities: priorities should be selected on the basis of more frequent strategic reflection, that identifies realistic deliverables and the concrete steps needed to effect change. Humanitarian diplomacy must go beyond "raising awareness" and acknowledge that achieving actual results is the most important ambition.

(III) Strengthen mutual exchange with embassies and missions: it is suggested to institutionalise a regular exchange of thoughts and experience on humanitarian diplomacy between the Humanitarian Aid Division of the MFA, missions and bilateral ambassadors, coupled with regular reflection on lessons learned. Bilateral embassies should be given a stronger role in operationalising the nexus and localisation.

(IV) Acknowledge that even with more focus, a stronger narrative and strengthened exchange with embassies and missions, there is a need to address the current capacity constraints:
- It is recommended to have staff in place throughout the MFA who combine a strong background in humanitarian and political work, since this facilitates prioritisation and effective exertion of influence.
- It is essential to build and invest in a strong network of ambassadors, diplomats, policy makers and decision-makers in crisis-prone countries with humanitarian expertise.
- The two positions of regional humanitarian coordinator in Amman and Nairobi should be treasured and maintained. Consider augmenting them by adding to the capacity in other regions where high-profile humanitarian crises hit and Dutch humanitarian and political interests are at stake.
- IOB recommends strengthening the network of regional humanitarian coordinators with additional dedicated staff in Brussels to raise the impact of Dutch humanitarian diplomacy through increased strategic collaboration, networking and information exchange with the EU (DG ECHO and DG DEV) on Dutch and Grand Bargain focus areas.
- New colleagues should receive targeted training and should participate in staff exchanges.
- It is advisable to explore options for increasing collaboration with the human rights department and the human rights ambassador on advocacy for IHL.

(V) Strengthen evidence-based humanitarian diplomacy, providing strategic guidance on monitoring, evaluation and learning and asking missions and embassies to feed policy development and the policy dialogue with humanitarian partners on the chosen priorities. This will help focus and strengthen humanitarian diplomacy.

(VI) Start to work on future scenarios to position the Netherlands in debates on the very valid and more forward-looking question of whether current ways of giving humanitarian aid are effective and appropriate in a vastly changing world. As the world advances towards more complex, more frequent and bigger humanitarian crises induced by climate change and continued conflict and instability, the Netherlands will need to be ready and to have developed options for future policy.

7 Annex

Annex A

Funding Mechanisms pathway

Crosscutting themes

- Humanitarian needs
- Humanitarian principles
- Thematic priorities

Inputs

Money

Assumptions

- Confidence in UN, Red Cross, NGOs
- Providing unearmarked, predictable funding to a core number of professional humanitarian organisations enhances specialisation and enables them to scale up activities
- Predictable unearmarked funding may be used for forgotten crises
- Predictable unearmarked flexible funding leads to efficient, effective and timely delivery of aid
- Pooled funds contribute to coordination and effectiveness of aid
- Multi-annual flexible funding ensures NL's good reputation and influence
- DSH-HH and embassies can access the knowledge and have the capacity for assessing whether UN, Red Cross and NGOs do indeed have the expertise, professionalism and capacity and base their decisions on needs, principles and thematic priorities
- Multi-annual flexible funding promotes needs-based priority setting and shelters humanitarian decision-making from politically motivated priority setting

Outputs

Funding mechanisms

CERF
CBPF
DRA

NLRC block grant
core funding

Medium-term outcomes

- Professional humanitarian actors
- Local response capacity
- Leadership
- Innovation
- Coordination
- Transparency accountability

Assumptions

- Partners address most urgent needs
- Partners ensure linkages with development
- Partners promote transparency and accountability
- Partners improve their capacity to respond, especially if they receive unearmarked predictable funding
- Partners enhance local response capacity
- Partners support UN leadership and actively contribute to humanitarian coordination
- Partners innovate and address thematic priorities

Long-term outcomes

- Aid is appropriate and the most urgent needs are covered
- Humanitarian ecosystem is strengthened
- Capacity to respond has improved
- Thematic priorities are addressed
- Linkages with development are ensured
- Protection of civilians has improved

Annex B

Humanitarian Partners pathway

Crosscutting themes

- Humanitarian needs
- Humanitarian principles
- Thematic priorities

Inputs

Money

Outputs

Humanitarian partners

UN
Red Cross
INGOs
DRA

Assumptions

- Dialogue with partners, donor coordination and monitoring enable NL to assess effectiveness of UN, Red Cross and NGOs
- NL can influence partners towards desired outcomes
- Where appropriate, NL is willing and able to complement funding with diplomatic efforts to influence political actors

Assumptions

- UN, Red Cross, NGOs will deliver and guarantee a solid basis for making decisions according to needs, principles and thematic prioritie
- These humanitarian partners have added value because of their specific knowledge and expertise; they deliver relevant assistance and act with integrity, working according to humanitarian principles
- DSH-HH and embassies can access the knowledge and have the capacity for assessing whether UN, Red Cross, NGOs do indeed have the expertise, professionalism and capacity, and take decisions according to needs, principles and thematic priorities

Medium-term outcomes

- Professional humanitarian actors
- Local response capacity
- Transparency accountability
- Leadership
- Participation of affected people
- Responsive political actors
- Coordination
- Innovation

Long-term outcomes

- Aid is appropriate and the most urgent needs are covered
- Capacity to respond has improved
- Thematic priorities are addressed
- Humanitarian access and IHL are respected
- Linkages with development are ensured
- Protection of civilians has improved
- Humanitarian eco-system is strengthened

Assumptions

- Principled aid leads to coverage of the most urgent needs
- UN, Red Cross, NGOs can make independent and impartial assessments of humanitarian needs
- UN, Red Cross, NGOs work according to humanitarian principles and will target assistance accordingly
- UN, Red Cross, NGOs may address Dutch thematic priorities
- UN is the best to lead and coordinate international humanitarian action

  Coordination leads to flexible, rapid and effective response
- Cooperation with local partners is key to good access and security of aid workers
- Allowing local organisations to be in charge will result in better needs assessments and lower costs of aid delivery
- Investing in local preparedness will lead to effective, efficient and timely response and increases the dignity of the affected people
- NGOs bring added value to innovation
- Big Data enables rapid real-time mapping of the most urgent needs
- Increased accountability to the affected population leads to better coverage of needs, more efficiency and lower costs
- Strong political engagement is a prerequisite for successful humanitarian aid
- Large-scale crises require deployment of big multilateral agencies

  NGOs have large implementing capacity and can often work in places where the UN has no access
- The DRA will improve effectiveness of aid and prevent fragmentation
- ICRC's neutrality provides for the best humanitarian access in conflict areas
- UN-led coordination prevents gaps and overlap and determines which actor is best suited to deliver aid on the basis of quality, capacity, presence, access and speed
- Investing in local preparedness will reduce humanitarian risks and needs and the costs of humanitarian aid
- Capacity building of aid organisations in affected countries is crucial for sustainable aid
- Giving humanitarian aid where it is needed and, where possible, focusing on development aid, means others will have to step up to link the two
- Innovation will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of aid
- Increased accountability increases cooperation, understanding, learning and control and promotes change
- NL has influence because of its good reputation as a generous, predictable and trustworthy humanitarian donor

Annex C

Humanitarian Diplomacy pathway

Crosscutting themes

- Humanitarian needs
- Humanitarian principles
- Thematic priorities

Input

Diplomacy

Assumptions

- Partners and information can be trusted
- MFA internal agreement on the Dutch position that takes account of all humanitarian and wider political interest
- Good cooperation within MFA and between The Hague, missions and embassies
- NL has a credible claim and is a credible partner in the given context
- NL has insight into power relations and direct or indirect access to power holders and stakeholders
- Accessible knowledge, network and capacity at DSH-HH and embassies
- Adequate knowledge of IHL and humanitarian principles is present in MFA, The Hague, missions and embassies
- Needs-based humanitarian response requires diplomatic efforts to ensure access to those in need, to uphold the humanitarian principles, and to ensure that humanitarian agencies are acting in line with donor policies

Coalitions likeminded less usual partners

Assumptions

- NL has influence because of its profile in international law and good reputation as a humanitarian donor
- Being a large and flexible donor gives NL leverage
- Cooperation is essential to increase leverage
- NL has enough flexibility to adjust to changing contexts and has access to sound, up-to-date information

Outputs

Messaging resolutions démarches advocacy dialogue

Assumptions

- Political actors and stakeholders can facilitate humanitarian access
- Political actors and stakeholders can be influenced to improve access and let aid organisations work according to humanitarian principles
- Working with professional humanitarian partners will help to improve humanitarian access
- Knowledge of International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian principles is lacking
- Flexible support to ICRC

  International Humanitarian law and respect for the humanitarian space
- Aid delivery based on humanitarian principles is the best way to guarantee appropriate needs-based, effective aid

Donor coordination policy dialogue

Assumptions

- NL has influence because of its good reputation as a generous, predictable and trustworthy humanitarian donor
- Politicising aid can be prevented and mitigated by supporting professional humanitarian actors that work according to humanitarian principles
- Humanitarian actors and partners can be influenced to act in line with donor policies

Medium-term outcomes

- Responsive political actors and stakeholders
- Professional humanitarian actors

Long-term outcomes

- Aid is appropriate the most urgent needs are covered
- Humanitarian access and IHL are respected
- Protection of civilians has improved
- Humanitarian eco-system is strengthened
- Thematic priorities are addressed

Diplomats are active from input to output to medium-term and long-term outcomes to impact

UNITED NATIONS

GENERAL	UNOCHA	UNICEF	WFP	UNHCR
Assumptions	**Assumptions**	**Assumptions**	**Assumptions**	**Assumptions**
Confidence in the UN (UN is able to deliver and is a reliable partner)	Where governments allow, OCHA coordinates international humanitarian assistance and has a good overview of needs and gaps	Child protection and children's rights are in good hands with UNICEF	A choice for WFP is a choice for efficiency, effectiveness and scale	UNHCR has international leverage because of its unique refugee mandate within the UN
Where governments allow, UN is in the best position to lead and coordinate international humanitarian action	OCHA enhances leadership of Humanitarian Country Teams and Humanitarian Coordinators	UNICEF has leverage on these themes	WFP can have a greater impact in large food crises and can scale up quickly	Where governments allow, UNHCR coordinates the response to refugee situations adequately and with relevant actors
The multilateral system may have flaws, but there is no better alternative	OCHA plays a key role in enhancing the neutrality and quality of humanitarian aid	UNICEF has clear added value in the implementation of humanitarian programmes through its close collaboration with national and local authorities	WFP has strong logistical skills and expertise, and as logistical coordinator is a crucial enabler for the bigger aid operation	UNHCR puts working with existing local structures at the heart of its programmes
The UN stands for legitimacy, leverage and impact in large-scale crises	OCHA stimulates cooperation between humanitarian partners and organisations	UNICEF works in development, humanitarian and reconstruction contexts and responds quickly and effectively when conditions change	WFP can operate under difficult circumstances and knows how to reach people via partners in the most affected regions	Refugees are central to its participatory and inclusive planning process
UN-led coordination prevents gaps and overlap and determines which actor is best suited to deliver needs-based aid, based on the criteria of quality, capacity, presence, access and speed	OCHA enhances targeted and effective aid through rapid collection, analysis and sharing of data	UNICEF plays an important and active role in supporting the NEXUS	WFP pays attention to the most vulnerable groups (women, children..)	UNHCR aims to find durable solutions by enhancing refugees' self-reliance and resilience
UN is more effective than NGOs in providing aid in major crises, due to economies of scale	OCHA stimulates innovation of the humanitarian system	UNICEF has a strong strategy, strong management and large operational capacity (>142 countries) and is therefore effective in delivering aid	In large-scale operations like South Sudan, WFP tries to buy as locally and regionally as possible	UNHCR has access to many places
UN may leave little space for local leadership and decentral authorities	Pooled funds like the CERF and CBPFs enable OCHA to target assistance according to the most urgent needs		WFP cooperates as much as possible with local governments and communities	
	OCHA has a positive impact on efficiency and effectiveness of aid		WFP stimulates humanitarian innovation and preparedness in conflict-induced crises	
	OCHA stimulates localisation through its CBPF		WFP has relevant expertise in data collection and use	
			WFP has a strong reputation in public/private partnerships	
			WFP coordinates with UN partners (e.g. FAO) to work towards longer-term solutions	

RED CROSS		
ICRC	**NLRC**	**IFRC**
Assumptions	**Assumptions**	**Assumptions**
ICRC has an exclusive humanitarian mission, is a professional, realistic, knowledgeable partner	NLRC is a dependable, unique partner and ensures a fast, adequate, effective and efficient response in natural and conflict-related disasters	The Federation of the Red Cross is a knowledge broker with an important coordinating role in supporting national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies
Adhering strictly to its neutrality, ICRC has the broadest humanitarian access	NLRC strengthens local response capacity and local humanitarian leadership through ongoing preparedness programmes, cooperation and partnerships	The Federation is a potential or actual powerful network of national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies that are locally rooted and at the forefront of localisation
In conflict-related crises ICRC can reach the most vulnerable people in places where often the UN and NGOs cannot work	NLRC can rely on local volunteers and the worldwide network of national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies	
Support to ICRC means support to safeguarding the humanitarian space and greater compliance with International Humanitarian Law	NLRC has “boots on the ground” and knows the humanitarian context	
ICRC can rely on local volunteers and the worldwide network of national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies	Red Cross volenteers are often the first to respond	
ICRC will capitalise on existing local capacity so as to improve linkages with reconstruction	NLRC has a strong ambition to innovate	
ICRC prioritises the most urgent humanitarian needs		

NGOs DUTCH RELIEF ALLIANCE (DRA)

NGOs	DRA
Assumptions	**Assumptions**
NGOs may have better access to conflict areas than the UN because of long-term cooperation with local partners and organisations	DRA is effective and efficient as a funding instrument. The block grant enables DRA to respond rapidly and efficiently to acute crises
(Dutch) NGOs have visibility and strong links with the general public, within Dutch society and with politicians. NGOs can secure public support for humanitarian action	The DRA network ensures that the most urgent needs are met by the DRA partner that is best equipped to do so
NGOs bring added value to innovation	DRA has a worldwide network of qualified humanitarian staff
NGOs bring added value to localisation	Many DRA partners are already present in the world's largest humanitarian crises and can scale up rapidly when there is a need
	Their Framework Partnership Agreement with the EU guarantees that DRA partners have the capacity to rapidly and effectively respond to acute crises
	DRA puts people at the heart of good quality humanitarian response
	Funding DRA as humanitarian lead agency representing 14 NGOs results in efficiency gains for the Dutch MFA
	DRA offers the Dutch government better visibility than unearmarked contributions and it enhances the government's humanitarian profile
	DRA leads to efficiency gains for NGOs through joint programming, improved learning, increased visibility and exchange of resources and methodologies
	DRA promotes innovation
	DRA promotes implementation led by local actors

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