



INTRODUCTION

This report, the third in the **State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS)** series, examines the system's performance from 2012 to 2014. Its research framework and methodology remain consistent with the previous iterations but have been elaborated and refined in some areas. The goal of the SOHS study is to gather and synthesise evidence to form an overall picture of the system, and indicate how well it is serving the needs of people affected by conflict and crisis. By doing so the report aims to inform the global policy discussion and help to improve international cooperation in humanitarian assistance.

1.1 Definitions and analytical framework

System? What system?

At the outset of each review, we have found it necessary to explain the use of the word ‘system’ to describe the rather messy assemblage of actors and activities in the humanitarian sector. Some commenters have objected to the term on the grounds that it implies an internal logic and functional order that simply do not exist in the humanitarian sphere. Others believe that the very attempt to demarcate a system is exclusionary, defining an in-group in relation to an out-group to no useful purpose – or worse, that it invokes and perpetuates the sense of a hierarchical relationship between the international aid agencies, which control most of the resources, and local organisations and people, who perform most of the aid provision.

All socio-economic models of this kind are subjective and differ according to the modellers’ vantage point and purpose. This is especially true when applied to such a basic human activity as helping others in need. Such constructs are really just useful fictions, created to help us understand, describe and potentially influence the process being observed. Accordingly, the SOHS study’s definition of the humanitarian system is intended simply to delineate the field of study in a way that makes it meaningful and useful as a subject of analysis and as something that could be improved through collective action.

We also reject the notion that addressing ‘the system’ means necessarily focusing on Western, UN-centred entities and leaving out local, regional and rising global actors. These non-Western actors are integral to the system, and we have included them in our analysis. It is true, however, that because of the large numbers of host country non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and a lack of recorded data on their activities, the analytical task is made more difficult.

This study uses the term ‘system’ in an organic rather than mechanistic sense, as a complex whole formed of interacting and interrelated elements. The humanitarian system is thus defined as **the network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian assistance is provided when local and national resources are insufficient to meet the needs of the affected population.** The most salient characteristic may be the interdependence of its component actors, for in a humanitarian emergency no single entity can serve the needs of an entire affected population; rather, the task requires the concomitant actions of other donors, implementers and host institutions. Furthermore, although leaderless and fragmented, the system exhibits evidence of shared principles, norms and values and a convergence of interests that, despite protests to the contrary, suggests something systemic at work.

Key actors

The humanitarian system, thus defined, is composed of the organisational entities for which humanitarian action is the core business and *raison d’être*, and others that may play important roles in aid but have other principal functions and goals. The first group can be considered the core actors. They have aid provision as their primary mandate, are operationally or financially related to each other, and many of them share common overarching goals and normative principles in humanitarian action. They include the following:

- local, national and international NGOs
- UN humanitarian agencies
- the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
- recipient government agencies with responsibility for crisis response
- humanitarian arms of regional intergovernmental organisations
- donor-government agencies and offices that provide humanitarian funding and coordination

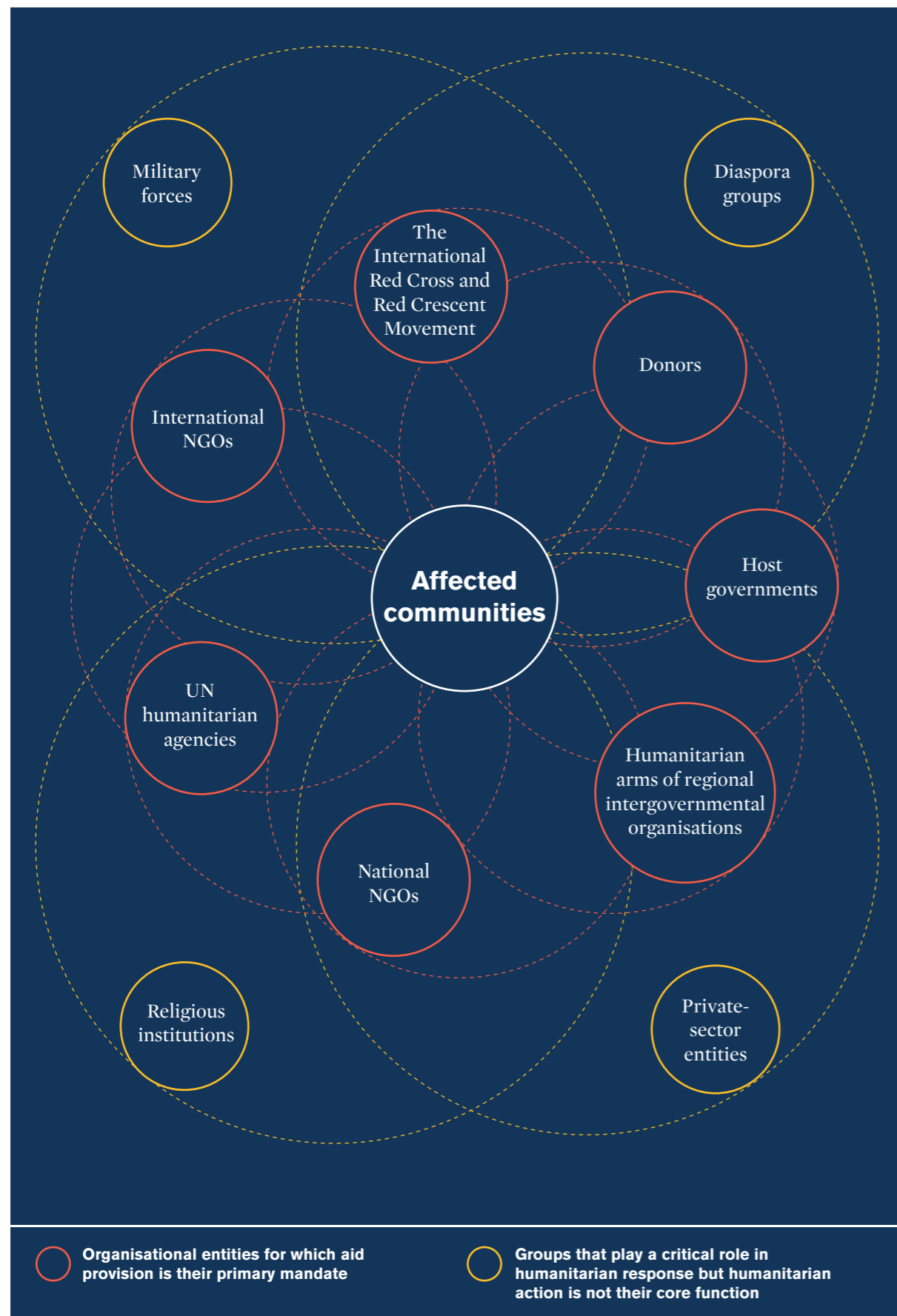
Military forces, religious institutions, private-sector entities and diaspora groups often play critical roles in humanitarian response as well. In some emergencies they may work parallel to, or in coordination with, the other members of the humanitarian system, but humanitarian action is not their core function. Their participation is usually determined by the geographic location of the crisis, and they generally have different approaches and ultimate goals. Their activities nevertheless affect the core humanitarian actors and provide important context for their work.

Most aid providers in most emergencies are local to the place experiencing the emergency. But a village or a nation that has the capacity to cope with a crisis and meet people’s needs through its own public and private resources has, by definition, no need of the international humanitarian system. In other words, the humanitarian aid system exists to fill gaps. It can supplement national capacity to respond to a disaster, step in for an absent public sector, or intervene to protect and aid civilians caught between warring parties.

The sizes and types of such gaps vary, and humanitarian responses must be tailored accordingly. A middle-income country with a stable government will have very different needs than a failed state whose population lacks the most basic services and means of survival. ALNAP has proposed thinking in terms of four basic models of humanitarian response, depending on the crisis: comprehensive (where needs are great and host-government capacity is lacking), constrained (in situations of conflict and challenge to humanitarian principles), complementary (in low-to-middle-income countries with growing capacity) and consultative (in middle-to-high-income countries with specific technical gaps to fill) (Ramalingam & Mitchell, 2014).



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Figure 1 / The humanitarian system**Analytical framework**

The study evaluated the humanitarian system on its performance and progress during 2012–2014, using the OECD-DAC (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee) evaluative criteria as modified for humanitarian action (OECD-DAC, 1991; Beck, 2006): coverage/sufficiency, relevance/appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, connectedness, coherence and impact.

This year's report differs from earlier editions by adding a second organising layer to the research framework: the core functions of the humanitarian system. This provides a clearer analytical logic as to what is being evaluated and, we hope, improves readability.

The humanitarian system can be seen as having two principal functions and two auxiliary functions.

The 'principal' functions are:

- Providing rapid relief in response to major sudden-onset disasters that overwhelm the capacity of the state and local actors to respond
- Meeting the basic humanitarian needs of populations undergoing chronic crisis conditions caused by conflict, repeated natural disasters, failures of development or governance, or some combination thereof.

The auxiliary functions are:

- Building capacity for local disaster preparedness, recovery and general resilience
- Advocating for humanitarian action and access on behalf of crisis-affected people.

The four functions described above do not make up an exhaustive list of humanitarian activities and are not equally important in every case. Rather, elements of each are usually at work to some degree in any given humanitarian context.

Table 1 summarises the research framework that was used as a basis for the interview questions, practitioner and recipient surveys and evaluation synthesis categories used in this study (see SOHS Annexes – www.alnap.org/resource/sohs2015-annexes). Four emergencies (also shown in Table 1) were chosen for a more in-depth look, one to represent each of the four humanitarian functions explored in the study. Highlights of those four country studies are presented in boxes throughout the report.

1.2 Methodology

The research team for SOHS 2015 was composed of Humanitarian Outcomes Partners and Research Associates. ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action), the commissioner and institutional home of the SOHS project, provided management and direction of the study.

As in previous years, the research had six main components:

1. compilation and analysis of descriptive statistics
2. review and synthesis of formal evaluations and other secondary literature
3. key informant interviews
4. field visits
5. surveys of humanitarian actors and host government representatives
6. surveys of humanitarian aid recipients.

Descriptive statistics

The SOHS study measured the size and scope of the humanitarian system by quantifying its organisational, human and financial resources and comparing them to quantified measures of need. This was done through organisational mapping, caseload analysis and financial analysis.

- **Organisational mapping:** The Global Database of Humanitarian Organisations (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2015) was the principal research tool for quantifying the system's implementing actors. The database contains information on more than 4,000 operational organisations that provide aid in humanitarian emergencies, including national and international NGOs, UN agencies and Red Cross/Red Crescent entities. It includes their sectors and countries of operation, annual humanitarian expenditures, staffing numbers and other basic organisational data. Information was compiled from public sources, including agencies' annual reports and financial statements; where hard numbers were not available, estimates were derived with an algorithm that uses averages from similarly sized and operating organisations. (see SOHS Annexes – www.alnap.org/resource/sohs2015-annexes).
- **Caseload analysis:** The team gathered information on emergency-affected countries from sources such as the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT), the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (FTS, 2015), and World Bank data sets. The caseload data set was compiled to glean the numbers, types, locations and relative severity (number of people in need) of the humanitarian crises occurring or ongoing during the time period, and to compare it to the response.
- **Financial analysis:** This measured global humanitarian financial resources and market share, based on agency budget and expenditure information (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2015), and trends in aid volume, donorship and funding channels, based on information about direct aid flows to specific emergencies (FTS, 2015).

Evaluation synthesis and literature review

Findings from 147 formal evaluations conducted in 2012–2014, covering 38 countries, were synthesized using a protocol developed in past SOHS studies. Each report was reviewed, categorised and coded based on a set of standard research questions (Table 1), and then logged to a unified spreadsheet matrix. This allowed comparative and partial quantitative analysis of the findings. Evaluations were also graded for quality according to evaluation standards and guidance from the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), OECD-DAC and others, and weighted accordingly in the analysis.

The review of literature other than formal evaluations covered 276 published reports, articles, agency grey literature and opinion pieces. The aim of the review was to synthesise a broad range of qualified opinion on the current state and future of humanitarian assistance.

The SOHS Annexes (www.alnap.org/resource/sohs2015-annexes) provide a full list of evaluations and other documents reviewed and an annotated list of the evaluation matrix categories, including the weighting criteria.

Key informant interviews

The SOHS 2015 team interviewed 340 individuals – 209 in person, as part of the field-based research, and 139 remotely from the study headquarters. Key informants were selected to be broadly representative of the major actors and sectors of the international and national systems, reflecting their proportional share of resources (human and financial) and operational presence in humanitarian response. Nine countries were chosen to ensure broad representation of the four humanitarian functions (with the understanding that multiple functions may be at play at any given time):


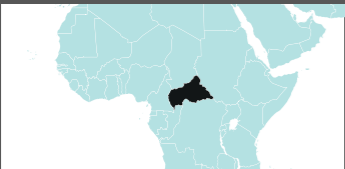
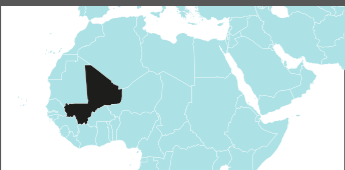

- Haiti (response to sudden-onset disaster, and a follow-up to SOHS 2012)
- Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia and South Sudan (support in chronic crisis)
- Indonesia and Mauritania (fostering preparedness and resilience)
- Myanmar and Yemen (advocacy).

Most of the headquarters-level interviews were undertaken by phone, but some took place in person where opportunity allowed. Interviewees represented the following entities:

- local NGOs and diaspora groups – 8 interviewees
- international NGOs (INGOs) – 28 interviewees, around 65% based at global or regional headquarters and the rest in field locations
- consortia of INGOs – 5 interviewees
- UN secretariat and agencies – 32 interviewees, 70% based at global or regional headquarters
- global clusters and sub-clusters – 14 interviewees
- members of the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement – 7 interviewees
- donor governments – 21 interviewees, about half based in the field
- regional organisations – 5 interviewees



340
KEY
INFORMANT
INTERVIEWS
FED INTO
THE SOHS
2015
ANALYSIS

		Evaluation criteria: Research questions							
Core humanitarian functions		Coverage/sufficiency Is the volume and distribution of resources sufficient to meet needs? To what degree are needs covered?	Effectiveness How well were humanitarian objectives met? Was the response timely?		Relevance/appropriateness Do interventions address the priority needs of recipients? To what extent do they drive programme design?	Efficiency Do outputs reflect the most rational and economic use of inputs?	Connectedness Do humanitarian activities take account of other key actors and efforts?	Coherence Does the intervention adhere to core humanitarian principles and align with broader peace and development goals?	
KEY FUNCTIONS	 FUNCTION 1 Rapid response to sudden onset disasters Philippines, Typhoon Haiyan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volume of public and private financial flows following disaster onset. Perceptions of sufficiency of humanitarian actors, host governments and recipients. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time from disaster onset to start of activities. Specific objectives met or not met, according to evaluations. Perceived relative effectiveness of different sectors and actors, according to survey responses. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of government and/or community involvement in and leadership of needs assessment and prioritisation. Consultation with local community and beneficiaries on needs assessments, appeals and other feedback mechanisms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment of most efficacious materials and logistical platforms for the type of disaster. Rational allocation of time and resources as perceived by participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efficient division of labour between donors and funding channels. Gains in economies of scale vs. loss in cascading overheads of sub-partnership arrangements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involvement of local and national authorities (if appropriate), development actors and civil society throughout the programme cycle (needs assessment and prioritisation, planning, implementation monitoring and evaluation). Existence of exit or transition plans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of promotion of and respect for international humanitarian law by humanitarian actors (public statements and policy input, via media monitoring). Adherence to core humanitarian principles (mapping outcomes of relevant meetings at the global and regional levels and perceptions indicated by survey data). Evidence of reconciliation with development and peace building priorities when possible, independence of humanitarian priorities when necessary (evaluations).
	 FUNCTION 2 Support in chronic crises Central African Republic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual global and sectoral funding flows, compared to needs. Global and sectoral programming presence, compared to needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accomplishments based on objectives (as identified in strategic response plans, programme proposals and the like), according to evaluations. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational emphasis on priority needs. Use of systematic, broad-based and participatory needs assessments. Beneficiary consultation and feedback mechanisms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rational allocation of time and resources as perceived by participants. 			
	 FUNCTION 3 Fostering resilience and preparedness Mali	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding flows dedicated to preparedness and resilience, compared to needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level of preparedness (advance funding and rapid deployment). Demonstrated improved response and/or quicker recovery in subsequent emergencies. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities and resources strategically targeted to areas most vulnerable to shocks and disasters. Consultation and participation of populations in determining needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriateness of preparedness and resilience inputs. 			
	 FUNCTION 4 Advocacy Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional resources devoted to global and national-level advocacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy changes by political actors attributed to advocacy efforts. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning and activities against collectively identified priorities for advocacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measurable results of activities and time spent on advocacy efforts. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independence of humanitarian objectives from other agendas. 	

KEY FUNCTIONS

AUXILIARY FUNCTIONS

- academia, the media and the private sector – 17 interviewees
- the military – 1 interviewee
- the World Bank – 1 interviewee
- Women made up 39% of the interviewees. Annex 1 provides the full list of interviewees.



201 FIELD-BASED INTERVIEWS



4 country case studies

Philippines
Central African Republic
Mali
Syria

fed into the analysis for
the SOHS 2015.

Field-based research

Field-based research was conducted in four countries that experienced a significant humanitarian emergency during the study period. The countries were selected to represent both geographic diversity and one of the four key humanitarian functions (again with the understanding that multiple functions may be at play at any given time):

- Philippines (rapid response to sudden-onset disaster)
- Central African Republic (support in chronic crisis)
- Mali, as part of the Sahel (fostering preparedness and resilience)
- Syria (advocacy)

The humanitarian responses in these countries were reviewed according to the research framework, and provided an opportunity to delve deeper into issues explored in the global-level research. The focus of each mission was on in-person interviews, particularly national-level stakeholders such as host government authorities and local aid workers, in addition to those deployed from within the region and from international organisations. One focus of the field research was the extent to which beneficiary perspectives had been captured through different mechanisms, including evaluations. In the Philippines, the researchers held focus group discussions with aid recipients; this was not possible in the other study countries due to security concerns.

In these four countries, the researchers conducted 201 interviews in addition to the Philippines focus groups. In the **Philippines**, the team conducted in-person interviews in Manila, Tacloban and Santa Fe, and four focus groups with a total of 47 participants. The visit was supported by *Action Contre La Faim* Spain, whose staff provided translation for interviews with beneficiaries and some local government officials. For the **Mali** study, hosted by *Solidarités International*, all interviews took place in Bamako. The planned visit to the **Central African Republic** (CAR) coincided with several days of violent clashes within Bangui, causing humanitarian organisations to suspend operations or restrict their movement, which forced the trip to be cancelled, and all interviews were conducted by phone; this resulted in fewer national-level stakeholders being consulted. For Mali and CAR, the interview guide was professionally translated into French, and over half of the interviews were conducted in French. For the **Syria** study, the team travelled to Amman in Jordan, Gazientep and Antakya in Turkey, and Beirut in Lebanon. The International Rescue Committee hosted the visit.

Survey of humanitarian actors

Two online surveys were created for humanitarian actors, one targeting aid practitioners (both international and national staff) and the other host-government representatives. Each survey was available in English, Arabic, French and Spanish and was disseminated for eight months through dozens of humanitarian networks and fora, with a particular focus on staff in operational settings. The practitioner survey received 1,271 responses from 100 different countries, and the host government survey received 39 responses from 24 different countries. For the practitioner survey, INGOs constituted 47% of the sample, UN agencies 30%, national NGOs 8%, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) 6 per cent, national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies 1% and donors 3%. Over 80% of respondents were based in countries receiving humanitarian assistance, and these countries corresponded closely with those receiving the most humanitarian assistance during the study time frame. The SOHS Annexes (www.alnap.org/resource/sohs2015-annexes) provide the templates and full results of these online surveys.

Survey of aid recipients

SOHS 2012 incorporated remote surveys of aid recipients for the first time, on an experimental basis. SOHS 2015 continued and expanded this component with the purpose of giving a stronger voice within the evidence base to the ‘end users’ of the humanitarian system – the people in emergency-affected countries who received humanitarian aid. Using cell phone networks, surveys were disseminated through GeoPoll to recipient populations using text messaging or interactive voice response (IVR) technology. The surveys were conducted in the eastern DRC and Pakistan (countries that were also targeted in the 2012 study, for comparative purposes) as well as the Philippines. The surveys had a target minimum sample size of 267 for a 95% confidence level with a confidence interval of 6. Target sample sizes were met in all but the Pakistan survey. The surveys captured the perspectives of 1,189 aid recipients (470 in DRC, 481 in the Philippines and 238 in Pakistan) on the quantity, quality and timeliness of the aid they received, the extent to which they were consulted on programming, and what they saw as the main obstacles to improved aid delivery. The survey questions and results can be found in the SOHS Annexes (www.alnap.org/resource/sohs2015-annexes).

Surveys were also attempted in CAR and Mali, but conflict-related service disruptions and coverage deficits contributed to a very low response in these countries. In total over 80,000 phone calls were made, with a significant non-response rate due to unreachable phone lines or non-pickup. Of those reached, a small portion of those who opted in actually qualified for the survey based on the requirement that they had received aid during the past three years.

Surveys of



1,271
aid practitioners



100
countries

39
host governments
representatives
from

24
countries



1,189
aid recipients from
DRC, the Philippines
and Pakistan

add informed the
SOHS 2015

The fact that aid recipients were surveyed in only three countries, and at sample sizes at the minimum level of confidence for statistical significance, means we must be modest in using them to draw conclusions about performance for the entire humanitarian system. However, we consider them to be a component of evidence of equal weight and importance to the surveys and interviews of aid practitioners, and highly illustrative for the simple reason that the end users of aid are seldom systematically polled for evaluations of this kind. The recipient survey findings are referenced throughout the discussion and presented in detail in section 4.6.

Analysis

In order to analyse and synthesise the wide range of research findings, the team members produced separate papers on each of the above components, which were exchanged and reviewed by the whole team, culminating in a pre-drafting conference during which the team weighed the key findings from the components and reached consensus on indicative conclusions. Findings based on the OECD-DAC evaluative criteria in each component were organised and analysed by the core humanitarian function they pertained to.

The criterion of ‘impact’ – that is, long-term changes in living conditions or well-being attributable to an intervention, was not explicitly included in this breakdown. (This was also true of earlier iterations of the study – ALNAP, 2012.) The shorter-term, output- and outcome-oriented nature of humanitarian action creates an attribution problem for measurements of impact that most humanitarian evaluations do not attempt to tackle, and those that do have trouble demonstrating with any rigour. Although this study did find more instances of humanitarian evaluations attempting to include impact compared to prior years, some seemed to conflate impact with sustainability and others with beneficiary satisfaction. Only two evaluations reviewed for the synthesis were specifically billed as ‘impact evaluations’ (one was of the Sudan education cluster and the other of a Kenya rapid assessment preparedness initiative). Because impact remains problematic for humanitarians to define and measure in relation to their work, synthesising a small number of project-level impact results in order to say something about the overall system would not be realistic or useful. However, the SOHS study attempted to draw conclusions about the humanitarian system as a whole, assessing its function and value within the broader global arena.

1.3 Limitations

In addition to the inability to conduct recipient surveys in CAR and Mali and the cancellation of the CAR field trip due to a sudden escalation of hostilities, a few other limitations affected the study. For one, although the number of host-government representatives responding to the survey was significantly greater than in the previous survey, at only 39 respondents from 24 host countries, it remains far smaller than we would have liked.

Additionally, a small number of targeted key informants were not available for interviews. Where possible, these were replaced with individuals with similar profiles in an effort to maintain the diversity called for in the research strategy.

Finally, there is the matter of positive bias in evaluations. Over 50% of evaluations rate the performance of the evaluation subject as good. Most evaluations are commissioned by agencies or donors with a vested interest in the results, so it is very possible that the incentive structure tends toward more positive findings, even when external consultants are hired to carry out the evaluation. A summary reading of results led us to conclude that ‘good’ was also often used to indicate ‘adequate’ performance. Impact was measured infrequently in the body of evaluations and received a disproportionate number of ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ ratings in comparison with other criteria. ●