Synthesis and Meta-Analysis of Findings from Crisis-specific Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations Covering the Period 2015-2025

📅 March 2026

The IAHE Synthesis exercise pulls together the findings from seven inter-agency humanitarian evaluations (IAHEs) covering nine different contexts spanning 2015 – 2025: Mozambique Cyclone Idai (2019), Ethiopia drought (2015-2018), Yemen (2015-2021), Afghanistan (2021-2023), Northern Ethiopia conflict (2021-2023), Somalia drought (2022-2024), and Türkiye/Syria Earthquake (2023-2025).

It also presents a meta-analysis of issues that arise from reading across the evaluations and suggests recommendations that stem from the findings.

IAHE

Findings

❖ **The system is largely effective in averting catastrophe, but limited beyond that.** Overall, the IAHEs show that the humanitarian system has been largely successful in its core purpose. It has played a crucial role in averting the worst potential outcomes of crisis situations, even while it has often struggled to address the wider humanitarian agenda that falls short of catastrophic level.

❖ **Reponses are not well configured to context.** The *functions* performed by the international humanitarian system range from those that are broadly supportive of in-country systems and capacities (auxiliary) to those that largely by-pass them (substitutory). The IAHEs suggest that failure to properly configure the collective response in relation to existing structures and capacities leads to lack of synergy and reduced impact. The supply side – that which the humanitarian system is configured to offer and its preferred modes of response – tends to be the dominant factor in response decisions. Yet, finding the right mode of engagement with the governing authorities (legitimate or de facto) and local capacities is essential to determining the effectiveness of the international humanitarian response to crises.

The IAHEs reflect **four main forms of acute human vulnerability:**

➔ **Acute food insecurity**
➔ **Rapid/sudden loss of livelihoods, income and assets**
➔ **Acute threats to life and health**
➔ **Acute protection threats**

These arise from the following causes or triggers of humanitarian crisis (often in combination)

➔ **Armed conflict / political instability**
➔ **Natural hazards and climatic shocks**
➔ **Public health emergencies / epidemics**
➔ **Economic shocks**

Exacerbating all the above, chronic poverty and limited economic development.

The interconnectedness of these different forms of vulnerability, and of the related sectors of intervention, is still too little recognized in current humanitarian practice.

❖ **The system is reactive, not adequately proactive.** Early warnings are not triggering adequate early action. The humanitarian system as it currently operates responds to the visible escalation of crisis symptoms and to an *immediate and compelling humanitarian imperative.* This responsive role is clearly essential, but the IAHEs make a strong case for a more proactive stance from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and its members. Specifically, the IAHEs show that the system is limited in its ability to reduce human suffering in two particular ways. First, on the upstream side, it often does little to address or adequately prepare for emergent crises. Second, on the downstream side, the reactive posture does little to enable affected people and systems to recover and to withstand future or continuing shocks.

❖ **Related to this, acute prevention is central to humanitarian action.** This involves changing risk patterns at the population level – and so reducing the probability of catastrophe – as well as meeting immediate needs at the household level, particularly in contexts of recurrent or protracted crises. Yet the IAHEs also show that in the context of limited funding and capacities, the short-term acute (immediate) needs agenda always wins out over the forward-looking (risk) agenda. The agenda of reducing of population-level risk factors for mortality, morbidity and security is too often underfunded.

❖ **Most of the programme responses were judged relevant to the needs of those affected.** Yet, the humanitarian system needs to improve its sensitivity to the evolving needs of the most vulnerable groups (including newly displaced), to evolving patterns of need and also to gender-specific issues not currently revealed by the available data.

❖ **Effectiveness in the IAHEs is assessed in terms of population-level effects,** largely based on trends in food security and malnutrition data, but at household level the assessment is often based on 'assumed benefit'. Outcome monitoring is less consistent in practice than *output* reporting, a supply-side metric that provides too weak a basis for determining collective effectiveness either at household or population levels. The question of quality of response is variously interpreted in the evaluations.

❖ **Little progress has been made to advance resilience and HDP nexus agendas.** Although most of the humanitarian responses reviewed included resilience building of communities and systems in their strategic aims, the evaluations found little progress was made on this agenda. The primary reason given for this is underfunding, creating a tension of prioritization between short- and medium-term goals. Attempts to apply a more coherent 'nexus' model also foundered on a lack of joined-up planning between humanitarian and developmental agendas, and a lack of multi-year funding options. The humanitarian system needs to be realistic in its own aims and clearer in its relationship to social security and developmental mechanisms.

❖ **Protection is consistently weak.** The IAHEs found that both in applying the 'centrality of protection' principle and in providing specific protection services, the humanitarian system struggled to gain traction and affect outcomes. Work in these areas has generally been *responsive and remedial* rather than preventive. Advocacy on protection has often been disjointed and inconsistent, and sometimes absent altogether. More clarity is needed on the relationship between humanitarian and human rights agendas.

❖ **Access is often a primary constraint.** Some IAHES reported that responses had no collective access strategy or that access negotiations were conducted without any consistent framework, resulting in disparities among agencies. In addition to denial of access by governing authorities, another impediment to access has been the humanitarian system's own, often highly restrictive security policies, particularly as applied to UN agencies. Taken together with intrinsic risks and the operating constraints imposed by donors (aid conditionality), the result has often been a severely limited operating space.

❖ **The application of humanitarian principles has proven contentious.** Disagreement over what a 'principled approach' entails is a recurrent theme of the IAHEs. Sometimes this concerns the terms of engagement with governing authorities and the inability to come to agreement on collective 'red lines'; in other cases, it concerns apparent conflicts between the principles themselves and their proper interpretation. Lack of access often means that, de facto, aid is not provided collectively on an impartial basis.

❖ **AAP emerges as one of the weakest aspects of IASC responses.** While significant advances have been made recently in AAP practice, feedback and complaints mechanisms, whether through individual agencies or collective processes, appear from the IAHEs to have a poor record overall of being responsive to feedback received – or in some cases, of being accessible at all. Community engagement in a wider sense appears a relatively neglected aspect of collective practice.

❖ **The IAHEs report multiple remaining barriers to localization.** The evaluation evidence suggests that national and local CSOs remain in many ways outside – even excluded from – the UN coordinated response other than in transactional ways, as contracted providers of services. This role is itself complicated by questions of due diligence and administrative capacity. Increased direct access to country-based humanitarian funds is making some difference to this with regard to short-term funding, but otherwise direct funding to local actors remains largely unavailable. Particularly in protracted crises, the humanitarian system needs to be clearer which of the functions it currently performs can and should be performed by in-country actors (governmental and other) and map out with those actors and with donors appropriate and realistic ways of achieving that over time.

❖ **Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) are not sufficiently strategic.** The IAHEs report a lack of clearly articulated strategic intent in HCTs; these bodies were found to be more reactive than forward-looking and largely information-sharing rather than decision-making bodies, a fact attributed in part to their sheer size. Some instances of seriously 'dysfunctional' HCTs are noted. Collective advocacy initiatives tend to lack a joined-up approach, partly due to conflicting organisational interests and mandates which make it difficult to achieve consensus.

❖ **HCTs lack accountability.** Collective accountability for performance and decisions taken is generally found to be weak by the IAHEs. There remains confusion between ideas of 'collective', 'mutual' and 'individual' accountability, and how these relate to existing lines of agency accountability. The nature of the humanitarian system – the fact that it comprises multiple autonomous agencies each with its own mandate, priority concerns and modes of operating – explains many of the challenges faced in both harmonizing responses and holding the system to account.

★ Recommendations

1. Shift system towards a more proactive and anticipatory stance

Proposals include shifting the balance of assessment from needs towards risk; stronger IASC support for conflict-related scenario planning; and forging stronger links with relevant upstream acute risk reduction (development) programmes.

2. Enable more effective and efficient scale-up of collective response

Proposals include more clearly defined thresholds and triggers for early action and scaled-up response; more consistent use of crisis modifiers as part of better harmonization of development and humanitarian agendas in high-risk environments; and agreement on and audit of collective efficiency criteria.

3. Reshape the systems auxiliary role in a sudden-onset 'natural' hazard crisis

Proposals include making the definition of the auxiliary role of the international system central to the preparedness agenda; likewise for building the response capacity of local actors; and a more radical proposal for limiting the involvement of international agencies in such contexts.

4. Adapt system responses to the demands of recurrent and protracted crises

Proposals include working with donors and development finance actors (World Bank and others) on mechanisms to enable medium-term finance for basic services in complex political crises; and a more radical proposal for a protracted crisis-specific appeal system.

5. Strengthen and focus the collective protection agenda

Proposals include the clarification and focusing of the collective (Centrality of Protection [CoP]) agenda by HCTs, especially around violence against women and girls, displacement, and child and civilian protection; shared protection and advocacy strategies; ensuring assistance programmes are consistent with the protection needs of displaced populations; and including aid worker security within the 'protection of civilians' agenda.

6. Secure a better fit of international supply to national and local demand

Proposals include capacity assessment, the articulation of mutual roles and the comparative advantage of international and national or local actors at the outset of a crisis; as well as work to overcome the main barriers to partnership between international and local agencies (streamlining due diligence, etc.).

7. Promote strategic focus and accountability in the HCT

Proposals include setting core priorities for collective action with monitored targets; defining a related advocacy strategy; focusing on active collaboration (not just coordination) towards these common goals, through multisectoral and area-based programming; and potentially a radical slimming down of the HCT with an accompanying Humanitarian Forum to hold it to account.

📝 Synthesis Recommendations and the Humanitarian Reset

The evaluations cover responses that pre-date the Humanitarian Reset. However, the synthesis sheds light on structural and long-standing challenges facing the sector that remain relevant today.

Almost all of recommendations align with the actions planned as part of reset roadmap. In some cases, they go beyond what is proposed in the Reset and, in the case of the first recommendation, caution the sector not to lose sight of its anticipatory role, in its focus on the most acute needs.

Who we are: the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group (IAHE SG) conducts independent evaluations to promote system-wide learning and accountability in major crises.

As an independent body working closely with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), we support the leadership and senior management of humanitarian organizations with evidence-based lessons to improve collective humanitarian action.

The synthesis was prepared by James Darcy, independent consultant.