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THE NEED

NEW TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN THE HUMANITARIAN CASELOAD

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2.1 Emergencies: Larger and mostly conflict-driven

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According to the UN’s humanitarian Financial Tracking Service (FTS), the number of international responses has gone down appreciably, particularly interventions for natural disasters (see Figure 2). On average, the number of emergencies to which the system responded in 2012–2014 decreased by a third, and the number of natural disaster responses by more than two thirds, compared to the prior period. This is not to say that far fewer natural disasters are occurring – the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) reported 350 natural disasters in 2013 (Guha-Sapir et al, 2014) – but rather that fewer emergencies were declared for which the host government requested international assistance and/or for which the international system issued a formal appeal.

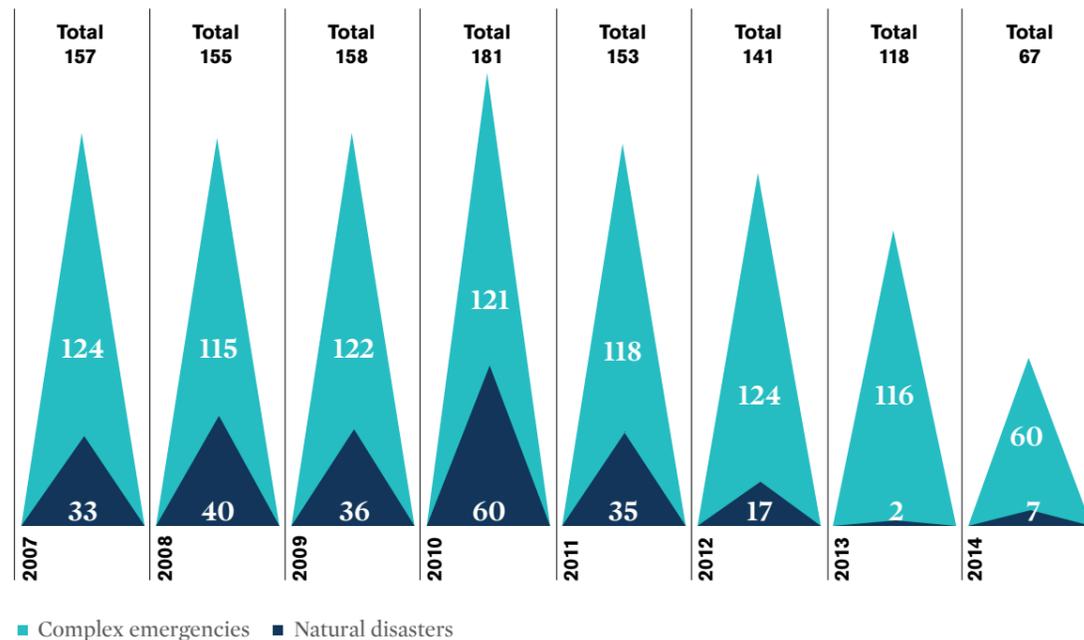
At the same time, significantly greater numbers of people were targeted for assistance (a 44% average increase from 2009–2010, and a 78% increase from 2007–2008), and the price tags for the responses have risen accordingly. The most significant development during the period was the escalating Syrian civil war, which engendered a massive human exodus

and confronted the system with the double task of caring for upwards of three million refugees while seeking ways to reach more than double that number of people displaced or otherwise in need inside Syria.

Not only is the system faced with larger numbers of people needing assistance, but the complexity of the task has arguably increased as well, with the preponderance of violent civil conflicts in the caseload. Chronically vulnerable and unstable areas such as CAR, Mali and South Sudan, whose populations were already receiving humanitarian assistance, experienced new outbreaks of violence leading to further displacement and magnified needs. Unlike sudden-onset natural disasters, which tend to have limited periods of acute crisis and recovery, chronic complex emergencies – characterised by long-standing conflicts, weak governance and severe poverty – create conditions where people need outside help to meet their most basic needs year after year, with no foreseeable ‘normal’ to get back to.

Needs tend to accumulate as new complex emergencies are added to the caseload more quickly than older ones drop off. The absence of political and development solutions to the underlying causes has led to the current situation in which the majority of humanitarian resources are directed to chronic complex emergencies. Of the 58 countries that received humanitarian assistance in 2014, 49 (84%) had received it every year for the last five years and 40 countries (69 per cent) were on their tenth straight year of receiving humanitarian aid.

Figure 2a / International humanitarian emergency responses, 2007–2014

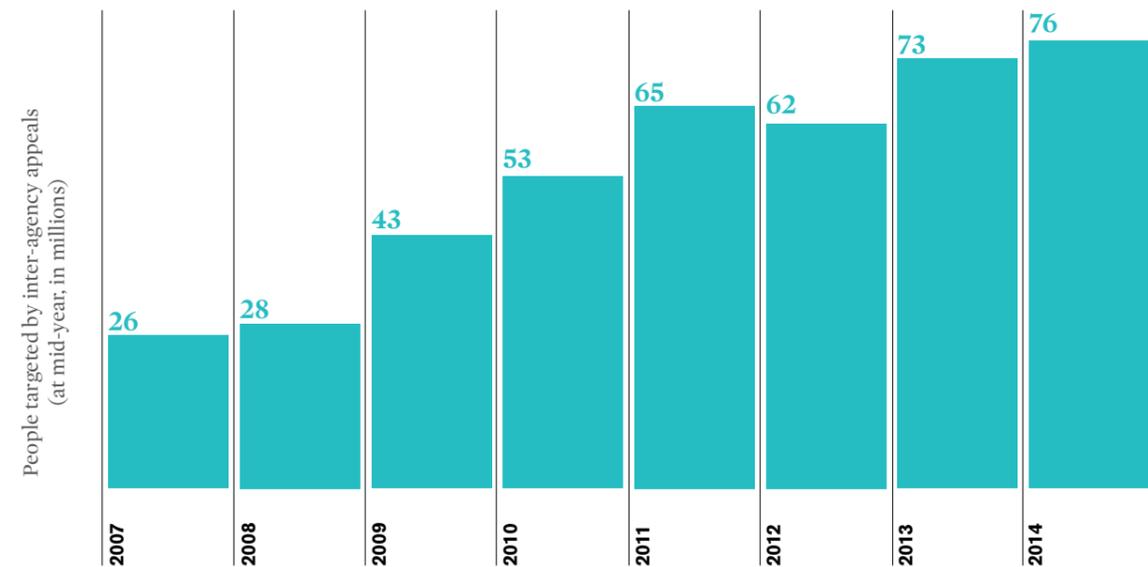


Source: FTS (11 January 2015).

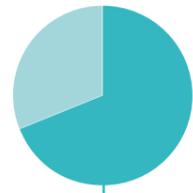
into the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey

Figure 2b / Targeted recipients of aid

Source: OCHA, 2013(f) World Humanitarian Data and Trends.



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The result is a core caseload of emergencies that are resistant to resolution and that bring the additional problems of insecurity, impediments to access, and weak or non-existent host government capacity to receive and coordinate the aid efforts. Add to this the occurrence of a climatological disaster of historic proportions (Typhoon Haiyan) and an uncontrolled region-wide outbreak of deadly infectious disease (Ebola), and recent experience makes it reasonable to expect that the world will continue to experience bigger crises than the current humanitarian system is designed and equipped to handle.

The occurrence of humanitarian emergencies can't be reliably predicted, and will always be 'spiky'. The challenge for the system is attaining a level of capacity that would allow it to cope with new surges in need while maintaining the necessary level of aid in long-running crises.

2.2 The problem of measuring and defining needs

The numbers of emergencies and targeted recipients of aid give only a partial picture of the actual humanitarian need, and getting to a more accurate accounting of needs is one of the thornier problems in humanitarian action. The system has not developed a standard formula for calculating people in need, typically a subset of 'people affected' by an emergency (some of whom can cope without outside assistance). In the past, most humanitarian appeals were based not on the number of people in need but rather on the total number of targeted beneficiaries of different projects planned by agencies. More recently, humanitarian actors coordinating in a given emergency have used consensus numbers that are derived from a variety of data sources. Very different estimating methods are used in different contexts, however, depending on the strength of the source data and the way in which the consensus is reached. This makes global analysis difficult.

Good data is typically in short supply in humanitarian emergencies, particularly in volatile and hard-to-access settings or where baseline surveys have not been carried out. Further challenges include distinguishing between humanitarian needs caused by conflict and those caused by underlying poverty, and counting displaced people who may move frequently. To meet the programming needs of individual humanitarian agencies, the majority of needs assessments continue to be undertaken in ways that are ad hoc and uncoordinated across sectors (ACAPS, 2013a). Complicating matters further, the numbers may carry political weight, with pressure from various actors and agendas to come up with the 'right' estimates.

Some global reports have consolidated need numbers in opaque and inconsistent ways, adding to the confusion. The lack of solid data on people in need remains a major obstacle to understanding the success or failure of a humanitarian response. Without being able to measure the proportion of people who needed aid who actually received it, coverage rates cannot be estimated. Errors or confusion in this regard can harm the credibility of appeals; donor governments have been known to complain about



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'appeal inflation', suspecting that agencies, knowing they were unlikely to get 100 per cent of what they were requesting, were overstating the requirements, hoping to maximise their returns.

In 2011, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Response (IASC) developed the Humanitarian Profile to provide a standard methodology for counting people affected by an emergency (IASC, 2011). In addition, the Humanitarian Dashboard and the Humanitarian Needs Overview, recently introduced as part of the new country-level coordinated strategic planning process, now provide estimates of total people in need per sector (as opposed to just the people that the agencies expect to reach). This is an important improvement, generating a more transparent planning approach in that it shows the larger scope of needs. However, these recipient groups overlap, since most people experiencing a crisis have needs in more than one sectoral area (for example, food, clean water and shelter), so simply adding the sector totals would overstate the total number of people in need in a country. A recent interagency initiative to address this problem (the Humanitarian Profile Support Package Consultation, December 10, 2014, Geneva) as well as ongoing research by the Assessment Capacities Project and others, are leaning towards using the total from the sector with the most people in need as the best available proxy. ●