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HOW IS THE SYSTEM PERFORMING?

The principal challenge to evaluating the performance of something as large and amorphous as the humanitarian system is the lack of defined, system-wide objectives against which to gauge success or failure. How to assess system performance if it's not clear precisely what it is attempting to accomplish?

A FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT OF SYSTEM PERFORMANCE



The function of supporting chronic crisis – by far the bulk of the humanitarian caseload – continues to see largely the same (often too few) donors doing the heavy lifting to keep basic humanitarian aid flowing year after year.

In the absence of specific aims on which all actors and observers would agree – beyond the broad goals of saving lives and reducing suffering – we can nevertheless define four broad humanitarian functions:

- rapid response to massive sudden-onset disasters that overwhelm a country's coping capacities
- provision of crucial basic services to populations living under chronic emergency conditions due to conflict and failures in development and/or governance
- supporting resilience and strengthening local capacity for independent response
- advocating on behalf of crisis-affected people.

The first two consume the bulk of humanitarian resources and efforts. Of these, massive sudden-onset disasters like the Haiti earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines inevitably attract the most media and public attention. Natural disaster response is also where many of the most interesting developments in the humanitarian sector can be found, such as technical innovations and crowdsourcing initiatives, the involvement of the private sector and direct giving by individuals at a previously unseen scale. But as we saw in section 2, by far the bulk of the humanitarian caseload falls under the second function, chronic crisis support. In these contexts, largely the same (often too few) donors and implementers do the heavy lifting to keep basic humanitarian aid flowing year after year.

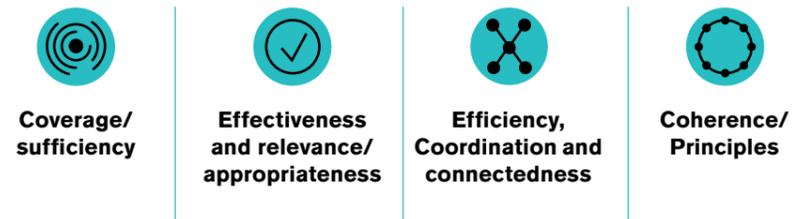
The third function, supporting resilience, is less central; labelling it a humanitarian function can be controversial, particularly when the system is already stretched thin attempting to carry out traditional crisis response. Some insist this is not an appropriate role for humanitarian actors, as it blurs the line between development and relief, and between governmental responsibility and the distinct, apolitical sphere of humanitarian action that needs to be kept separate for humanitarians to do their job effectively (MSF, 2011). Humanitarians are nonetheless increasingly assuming the function of supporting resilience, particularly in countries where they have experienced the futility of launching repeated relief responses to the same emergencies and watching as the population becomes successively more vulnerable with each.

The fourth function, advocacy, is the attempt to influence external actors, chiefly the political forces that represent both the causes and potential solutions for many of the crises that humanitarians deal with. Advocacy can take the form of public campaigns or behind-the-scenes negotiations, and may be accompanied and strengthened by the provision of first-hand information on conditions on the ground. Advocacy efforts can be directed toward broad goals, such as promotion of international humanitarian law, or to small and specific operational concessions. The advocacy role is explicit in the job description of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, and implicit in the roles of field-level humanitarian leaders, but is generally practiced in an ad hoc manner. Humanitarian actors hold

different conceptions of the purpose and place of the advocacy function, which can lead to tension between them, for example about whether and how openly to push for specific political or military action.

This section assesses the performance of the humanitarian system in carrying out the four functions described above. Assessment was based on the standard OECD-DAC evaluative criteria (OECD-DAC, 1991), as adapted for humanitarian action (Beck, 2006). Findings have been further organised into four categories, combining some of the original criteria for clarity and to avoid repetition:

The section integrates findings from field visits, interviews, review of



evaluations and other documents, and surveys of aid practitioners and recipients, and highlights examples from humanitarian responses during 2012–2014. The interviews were all conducted on a not-for-attribution basis, and in the interest of narrative flow we did not include in-text citations for most references to interview findings. Exceptions are when interviewees expressed perspectives specific to their agency or actor type and when certain views agreed or conflicted with other strands of evidence, in which case we have qualified them accordingly. Findings drawn from the literature and survey responses are cited as such.

The next two subsections focus on the first two functions – rapid response to sudden-onset disasters and support in chronic crises – in some detail. This is followed by a briefer look at the secondary, and occasionally contentious, functions of resilience-building and humanitarian advocacy.