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EMERGENCY GAP SERIES 01

Emergency gap: Humanitarian action critically wounded¹

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¹ This paper is the first of a series of analyses undertaken as part of the Emergency Gap project. Our work aims to assess the growing evidence of lack of humanitarian response capacity in acute conflicts and to increase the humanitarian sector's awareness of and engagement in conflict work. See <https://emergencygap.msf.es>

² The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of MSF.

Introduction

The humanitarian system is stretched to a breaking point, engaged in an unprecedented number of crises around the world and faced with an ever more complex emergency landscape. The first-ever World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) will take place in May 2016 in Istanbul, from which there might emerge a new narrative about the humanitarian mission. In spite of the numerous pre-summit consultations and copious literature produced in the build-up to the summit, its focus appears to carry very little critical reflection on the system's current challenges and shortcomings vis-à-vis emergency response.

The long-awaited report by the United Nations (UN) Secretary General (SG) –*One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*– and the associated 'Agenda for Humanity' set the framework for engagement at the WHS. A key theme to emerge from this framework is the need for a more predominant role for local actors in humanitarian response, and the need for closer alignment of the humanitarian and development (and climate vulnerability, stabilisation, and peace and security) agendas in order to effectively address protracted crises. This new approach is intended to integrate humanitarian action into the wider efforts to tackle the root causes of conflict and other emergencies, but by prioritising the ending of needs it reframes humanitarian assistance in terms that contradict its essence, its core mandate and its relevance in conflict settings.

The integration of humanitarian action into the wider efforts to tackle the root causes of crises and end needs contradicts its essence, its core mandate and its relevance in conflicts and highly politicised contexts

Prevention, risk reduction, resilience, local response, and sustainable action are useful approaches that can limit exposure to risk, reduce vulnerability and build durable solutions for people in recurrent crises. They should be pursued wherever they are relevant and appropriate to the particular emergency context, but cannot be the default humanitarian response to all crises. Examples of significant failures in emergency response to the most acute humanitarian crises of our time are mounting: the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Libya, as well as health crises such as the cholera outbreak following the Haiti earthquake in 2010 and the Ebola epidemic in 2014–15 illustrate the insufficient emergency response capacity in the humanitarian system. In all these contexts, the prescriptions set out by the WHS will have little relevance while what is dramatically missing is a clear focus on improved emergency response.

If taken too far, the current quest for system-wide coherence risks turning humanitarian action into a simple instrument, and a rather clumsy one at that, at the service of a higher end: the SDGs

But rather than reviewing and addressing these systemic failures, the WHS is calling for an even wider scope of action and even smaller investment in the core humanitarian competences. At such a historical moment, when the world as a whole takes stock for the very first time of our commitment to humanitarianism, we believe that it is imperative to examine why we, as a system, are failing at what we still see as a core mandate of humanitarian action: the provision of emergency assistance to victims of conflict.

Good humanitarian action is not always in line with longer-term development outcomes. While all actors, including specialist emergency organisations like MSF, must be mindful of the impact their operations have on local structures, services and the long-term prospects, the primary focus of humanitarian action is to respond to urgent needs in the emergency phase of a crisis, within a broader global response to a much more extensive scope of challenges. If taken too far, the current quest for system-wide coherence risks turning humanitarian action into a simple instrument, and a rather clumsy one at that, at the service of a higher end: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This conceptual shift is the culmination of a process that has been unfolding for the past two decades and is being reinforced by the increasingly protracted and recurrent nature of crises³ around the globe. Emergency response is often caricaturised as short-sighted and old-fashioned patch to other complex problems and its specificities sometimes portrayed as inefficient, ineffective and outdated. We feel that this process has come at a great cost and that people in need are being left behind by a humanitarian system that was forged at the battlefields and that is now relinquishing its ability to operate swiftly and effectively in conflict settings for a subsidiary role to development and stabilisation policies.

³ The number of countries that have received a higher-than-average share of their Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the shape of humanitarian aid for eight or more consecutive years has risen dramatically over the past two decades and now account for two-thirds of all humanitarian aid received. For more information on the methodology, see Development Initiatives' Global Humanitarian Assistance programme. The latest figures can be found in the Global Humanitarian Assistance 2015 (p. 93).

Failing at the core: the emergency gap

The emergency gap is the absence of sufficient humanitarian actors on the ground, delivering urgent assistance during the acute phase of a crisis

As a humanitarian sector, we now have more means and know-how at our disposal than ever before, yet humanitarian organisations and donors are struggling to keep up with the ever-growing demands placed on the sector, especially when it comes to conflicts. Lack of access, of adequate resources – including funding – and of the necessary security assurances are often cited as the reasons behind the shrinking humanitarian presence at the heart of acute emergencies. The dominant narrative is focusing on the so-called "funding gap": that abyss between the resources in the hands of the humanitarian community and the cost of meeting the needs of people. While available funding is clearly not enough, it is only part of the system's shortcomings vis-à-vis rapid response in insecure environments.

Current discussions around improving humanitarian financing are bypassing important existing flaws such as the lack of agility of existing mechanisms. At the same time, there is growing evidence that the humanitarian system is struggling to remain on the ground and deliver assistance when a major conflict erupts or when there is an escalation in a protracted crisis. The resulting gap is what we call the "emergency gap" and it refers to the absence of sufficient humanitarian actors on the ground, delivering urgent assistance during the acute phase of an emergency. The emergency gap is leaving people destitute of aid at the most critical of times, and the humanitarian system is unable to perform its core duty to the victims of conflict. In our view, there are three internal factors of the current system that have created a vicious circle leading to the emergency gap: a structural one, a mindset one and a conceptual one.

Structural Deficiencies

Humanitarian financing plays a key role in generating incentives for action within the system

The system has accepted as normal to operate with three to four months funding delay at the start of a crisis limiting the type of assistance it is able to provide

The current humanitarian system is the result of the combination of government donors' priorities, which over the last 25 years have firmly favoured a UN-led architecture, and the organisational choices of humanitarian agencies, which have shaped themselves according to the evolving humanitarian landscape and the changing nature of donors' policies. In the past decade, the various humanitarian reform processes, championed by humanitarian donors and the UN, have reinforced this trend and have converged in an international system where the bulk of resources is held by a handful of UN agencies and the majority of frontline work is done by NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Power relations within the resulting monolithic block are uneven, with donors controlling the resources; the UN defining the limits of the response as well as providing logistical and security management support; and implementing agencies looking for ways to reconcile operational demands with structural constraints.

Humanitarian financing structures play a key role in generating incentives for action within the system. From the very creation of institutionalised humanitarian action, timeliness and flexibility have been paramount for allowing swift interventions. Now they are becoming a growing challenge in humanitarian assistance and yet one that is not being addressed or even acknowledged in current debates. Instead, the system has accepted as normal that it will operate with three to four months funding delay at the start of a crisis, thus severely restricting the type of assistance it is able to provide at this most critical of times.⁴ We are dismayed by the resignation with which the humanitarian sector embraces its own inability to react adequately in the face of a major event, especially when it takes place in insecure environments.

UN agencies, which have access to unearmarked funds, are no doers, and very few of the operational organisations have the financial reserves or the standby capacity to launch a major emergency intervention without external financial support. As we see it today, the humanitarian system lacks sufficient structural capacity and adequate means to respond to acute crises, whether they are new emergencies or peaks in on-going ones.

⁴ An examination of funding to major humanitarian response plans shows that money is slow to arrive at the start of an appeal. Country-based pooled funds are also slow in securing funding and making allocations. Bilateral donors' funding instruments vary in terms of speed and are often dependent upon the type of recipient organisation. The humanitarian financing architecture will be further examined in an upcoming paper from the Emergency Gap series.

In highly politicised environments, independence from political actors is of central importance for gaining access and acceptance. Relinquishing the principle of independence leaves us 'naked' in conflict areas

Approaches towards improving efficiency in humanitarian response have invariably passed through a quest for even more system-wide alignment and coherence, and consequently have reinforced the loss of operational diversity in the sector. As decision-making, operational structures, financing, and risk management policies have become more centralised at the core of the UN-led system, its rules have become extrapolated to, when not directly imposed on, the rest of implementing agencies. This invariably represents a challenge for independent humanitarian action, especially when the UN political, peace and security, and humanitarian bodies coexist on the ground in conflict settings. For MSF and other humanitarian organisations, independence is a key humanitarian principle that has very practical implications in the ability to respond to humanitarian needs. In highly politicised environments, independence from political actors is of central importance for gaining access and acceptance. This independence rests on access to unrestricted funding; autonomous capacity in logistics, transport and operations; and independent security management. Yet the continuous consolidation of the humanitarian system into one monolithic block, coupled with the humanitarian-development integration promoted by the UNSG and the WHS, risks turning independent action into a narrative figure that is increasingly hard to put into practice.

With centralised coordination, funding and decision-making systems comes a narrowing of humanitarian organisations' ability to independently choose where, when and how to respond to needs. From our experience working in acute conflict, we know that independence in each of these spheres, and especially in terms of funding, brings greater flexibility in programming choices and security management. Relinquishing the principle of independence leaves us 'naked' in conflict areas. Walking the talk of the principles is not just a theoretical endeavour; it is a very practical necessity. How an agency conducts advocacy and negotiates access matters significantly and is intimately related to its ability to assess risk and therefore to establish institutional risk tolerance. In most conflict areas today, the UN formally and practically represents a large majority of the traditional aid system in negotiations with armed groups. This distance between the implementing actors and the armed actors makes it very hard for the former to assess potential risks as well as to generate trust through dialogue and action.

The UN-centric system needs to recognise and address the tension between the UNDSS risk-aversion and the "stay and deliver" spirit of humanitarian action

Moreover, we believe that in certain contexts, the security management role played by the UN can actually hamper the expansion of operations in insecure settings. For instance, in some armed conflicts such as in Yemen, the risk-averse stance of the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) has proven detrimental to the system's ability to deliver assistance to all people in need of aid and protection.⁵ By promoting a logic that prioritises the protection of staff and assets over emergency response, humanitarian assistance was effectively put on standby for several months. The UN-centric system needs to recognise and address the tension between the UNDSS risk-aversion and the "stay and deliver" spirit of humanitarian action.⁶

⁵ See IASC, *Operational Peer Review: Response to the Yemen Crisis*, January 2016

⁶ For more information see: A. Cunningham, *To Stay and Deliver? The Yemen Humanitarian Crisis 2015*, MSF OCBA, April 2016. <https://emergencygap.msf.es>

Mindset Shift

Operating in conflict zones is difficult, dangerous, messy and expensive. Yet the humanitarian sector has become conservative, risk-averse and cost-obsessed

Operating in conflict zones is difficult, dangerous, messy and expensive. Yet the humanitarian sector has become conservative, risk-averse and cost-obsessed. Faced with ever more complex humanitarian financing and delivery chains, donor governments are increasingly imposing a return on investment logic even to humanitarian donorship. By putting value for money at the heart of decision-making, sometimes in order to protect humanitarian financing from drastic budget cuts, donors have created perverse incentives when it comes to operating in insecure environments where loss of assets is highly likely, close monitoring and reporting is often unfeasible and follow-through of initial planning is rare. Security and logistical challenges tend to make working under fire or in remote locations extremely costly and operationally complex, which is again at odds with the push for cost-efficiency and longer-term gains.

Predictably, humanitarian organisations that remain heavily reliant on funding and operational support from the traditional system – and are thus more strictly subjected to its norms and procedures – are finding it difficult to fund, resource and maintain frontline work. Emergency response is then swapped for longer-term programming or for remote management roles with work being subcontracted to local actors. Capacity building and investment in local organisations are positive developments in international assistance aimed at countries that suffer from recurrent natural disasters, climate vulnerability or epidemics, but at the same time enjoy stable governance and strong civil society. Yet this same approach is particularly unsuited to conflict zones, fragile states and other highly politicised environments.

Even in such contexts, compromises may sometimes be necessary when circumstances are extreme and the lack of access and security severely restrict humanitarian operations. In such places, MSF have also resorted to playing a remote-management role in order to continue to assist the victims of conflict wherever they are found. However, we do not pursue these remote models as a policy choice but rather as a necessary trade-off that allows us to fulfil our commitment to populations caught in violence.

Growing localisation of aid cannot be the answer to the system's structural flaws

Growing localisation of aid cannot be the answer to the system's structural flaws. While we see great value in working in partnerships with local organisations and with independent local medical networks that operate in remote and insecure areas, we believe that the ability to work alongside local actors in assisting affected populations remains critical for impartial and neutral humanitarian response in conflicts. International humanitarian action must remain capable of bringing new

resources to critical situations when local capacities have been overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis. This may mean that a country's material resources are insufficient to respond to the situation, but it may also mean that local actors do not have the political independence, muscle or will to address the crisis. In conflict settings, principled humanitarian action may not even be feasible for all local actors, both because it could put them in danger and because it would be unrealistic to expect them to remain impartial and neutral when under attack.

By switching the focus from delivering aid in emergencies to mentoring and funding local organisations, international humanitarian actors have lost core competencies, such as security management and robust organisational systems in logistics, operations and human resources. As a consequence we are witnessing a certain operational paralysis of the traditional humanitarian system when faced with the logistical and operational challenges that are common to working in conflicts. Working in acute crises is hard at the best of times, and this is why it requires the right mindset to face the challenges. Large doses of resourcefulness, flexibility in the face of rapidly evolving situations, determination vis-à-vis challenges and an appetite for overcoming obstacles are all key to succeeding.⁷ The new conservative mindset is hampering emergency response capacity as much as the structural flaws that have enabled it, but by being a more subtle expression of the humanitarian system's failure, it is infinitely harder to redress.

Both humanitarian donors and operational organisations need to accept – and for their policies and practices to reflect – that cost-effectiveness is not a guiding humanitarian principle

Humanitarian action cannot attempt to address people's needs without direct engagement with affected populations, or without the capacity to work in close proximity with all actors on the ground. Both humanitarian donors and operational organisations need to accept – and for their policies and practices to reflect – that cost-effectiveness is not a guiding humanitarian principle, and that humanitarian access and delivery have to be ensured under any circumstance and not only where risk is low and when it is relatively straightforward to do so.

⁷ The issues of security management and risk-taking, operational innovations, and investment in logistics and emergency response capacities will be addressed in separate papers in the Emergency Gap series.

Conceptual Flaws

Humanitarian action needs to remain firmly rooted in responding to the urgent needs of people caught in crises today

By mixing acute and protracted crises, and natural disasters with conflicts, and putting them all into the same concept, the humanitarian community is no longer able to have meaningful discussions on humanitarian action

Over the last decade, humanitarian assistance has become overstretched into the intersection with development aid into encompassing risk reduction and resilience-building activities, on one end of the aid spectrum, and early recovery and indefinite provision of basic services on the other. This is because the people most affected by humanitarian emergencies are the poorest and also those living in countries that are environmentally vulnerable, politically fragile or both.⁸ At the same time, humanitarian assistance is required for longer timeframes, which reflects the fact that humanitarian crises are usually protracted or recurrent and that in countries lacking security or governance structures humanitarian assistance is one of the very few international resources available. The humanitarian community is then pulled into an ever-widening agenda where chronic poverty, climate vulnerability, political insecurity and recurrent shocks intersect.

Such a broader overview of the economic, political and social dimensions of a crisis is useful for a better understanding of global challenges. The build-up to the WHS has consolidated some good thinking around how to address protracted emergencies and chronic fragility: multi-annual planning and funding, strategic overview of all concurrent needs in a context, coordinated decision-making on collective outcomes, etc. This represents an extremely important and positive change and could have a decisive effect on reducing risk and vulnerabilities while at the same time building sustainable solutions for people trapped in protracted and recurrent crises. The humanitarian system has a number of skilled multi-mandate organisations that are well positioned to engage in such work. However, humanitarian action needs to remain firmly rooted in responding to the urgent needs of people caught in crises. Shifting the focus from responding to human suffering today to reducing the likelihood of suffering tomorrow is problematic. Both objectives need to be pursued, but the former cannot be replaced by or subordinated to the latter.

As the humanitarian system zooms too much out of the crisis moment, it loses the ability to detect and address the most pressing needs. Consequently, terminologies and approaches tend to blend into one narrative and to blur the specificities of each type of response. While longer-term focus will always be needed, it is increasingly coming at the expense understanding of adequate emergency response capacity in the face of acute crises and the ability to scale up in a timely manner when a protracted emergency experiences a peak of hostilities. The dominant narrative, captured by the UNSG's report for the WHS, appears to be ignoring the

⁸ According to *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2015*, 93% of people living in extreme poverty live in countries that are environmentally vulnerable (30%), politically fragile (32%) or both (31%).

One size does not fit all: the humanitarian sector must retain its diversity of actors, mandates and operating models

The stretching of the notion of humanitarian action is also coupled with an ideological push for the dilution of its inherent importance, by subordinating humanitarian objectives to development and political goals

reality of persistent acute crises around the world, especially in conflict-stricken contexts, and the continued inability of the humanitarian sector to deliver adequate and timely emergency response. And yet, humanitarian response in conflicts is being deprioritised while much of the conversation is geared, albeit not explicitly, towards natural or recurrent catastrophes, and many of the proposed models and strategies stem from experience and ambitions in those settings.

By mixing acute and protracted crises, and natural disasters and health emergencies with conflicts, and putting them all into the same concept, the humanitarian community is no longer able to have meaningful discussions on humanitarian action. When we apply lessons learned from natural disasters across the board and replicate operational approaches from protracted and low-intensity crises to acute emergencies, we are left with a dysfunctional system that is and will continue to fail people living under bombs today. This "one size fits all" logic ignores the diversity of humanitarian scenarios, the different natures and demands of crises, and the variety of approaches and skills they require. Given that the notion of humanitarian action has expanded, it is paramount in our view that the system acknowledges and retains its diversity of actors, mandates and operating models, and that it resists any attempt to impose a single logic to humanitarian action. Better collective outcomes are unlikely to come from uniform approaches to complex problems with diverse manifestations.

The stretching of the notion of humanitarian action is also coupled with an ideological push for the dilution of its inherent importance, as signalled by explicit calls in the WHS's flagship report to integrate humanitarian objectives to development and political goals. This deep shift in ideology away from principled action and towards coherence has been formalised by the WHS as the new paradigm for humanitarian action in the modern era. A shift that, from our perspective, equates to abandoning the victims of today in the hope that conflict will end tomorrow. Yet, we still firmly believe that principled action is not an option but a prerequisite of humanitarian assistance in conflicts. Whether "integrated" into a UN mission with state-building objectives or "partnered" with a government with a development agenda, humanitarian action loses its voice and ability to stand up for the victims in a time of crisis. In many fragile contexts, a state capacity-building logic replaces the focus on saving lives and alleviating human suffering when needs arise.

The new humanitarian paradigm, emerging from the WHS, will ultimately mean that when internal conflict or a major emergency occurs, and the response needs to be delivered independently from governmental policies and structures, humanitarian actors do not have the technical means or the moral stance to stand their ground and to distance themselves from state actors. Thus, while the dominant narrative pushes for a conceptual shift towards more integrated agendas, collective action is becoming less and less a viable option, and the different needs of people in acute, protracted, conflict-related or natural-disaster-induced crises will not be all met by a single approach.

Conclusions

Humanitarian action is failing at its core and the resulting emergency gap is leaving people destitute of assistance and protection

The two fundamental and closely inter-related pillars of emergency response in conflict settings – independence and emergency response capacity – are severely damaged

Humanitarian action is at a critical juncture. However, far from being challenged by a funding gap or by a lack of long-term and strategic vision, it is failing at its core and the resulting emergency gap is leaving people caught in conflicts destitute of assistance and protection. This fundamental failure of the humanitarian community vis-à-vis working in acute conflicts is blatant and yet not properly addressed by the current debates. The ability of the system to provide effective humanitarian assistance in conflicts is markedly inadequate as proven by our collective failure in Yemen, Syria, Libya and other recent crises. The two fundamental and closely inter-related pillars of emergency response in conflict settings – independence and emergency response capacity – are severely damaged.

By relinquishing its financial, political and logistical independence, many of the traditional actors have either given up and bunkered down, or are finding themselves 'naked' and ill-equipped on the ground in conflicts, without the capacity to deliver or the protection of the principles to negotiate a safe working space.

Emergency response necessitates structural strength and agility, two elements that rely heavily on financial independence and have become a rarity in the humanitarian sector. The loss of financial independence and the emerging emphasis on accountability and cost efficiency translates into structural deficits that severely hamper implementing agencies' ability to deliver in complex settings. Operating in conflict zones requires leeway of action/flexibility, a robust logistical and security management capacity (independent from political actors), as well as competence in negotiated access (practical application of principles).

The humanitarian rhetoric has radically shifted over the last decade, trading core values and even devaluing the role of emergency response. Negotiated access has been replaced by UNDSS risk management (aversion), and independence by accountability and coherence. This push for greater coherence within the UN-led humanitarian system is choking humanitarian action by making existing structures heavier, while procedures are becoming more cumbersome and operational models riddled with bottlenecks. This is particularly worrying in the field of emergency response in volatile settings with dire consequences for victims of conflict.

Humanitarian action is facing a double blow: the sector's lack of ambition for improved emergency response and the relinquishing of principled action by subordinating it to political, development and security concerns

The UNSG's report for the WHS that will mark the way forward for a new and improved humanitarian action in the years to come, is disappointingly promoting this loss of focus by overtly calling for humanitarian action to be put at the service of political and developmental goals. The upcoming WHS will most likely consolidate this worrisome departure from principled humanitarian action. Furthermore, emergency response appears to be seen as little more than a glitch in an otherwise lineal trajectory towards development, and collective ambitions limited to "preserving and retaining capacity".⁹

As humanitarian practitioners, we need to reaffirm that emergency response is a core business of humanitarian action, and should never accept a vision of humanitarian action as an imperfect version of development and stabilisation policies.

Humanitarian action is facing a double blow: the sector's lack of ambition for improved emergency response and the relinquishing of principled action by subordinating it to political, development and security concerns. Until the international community can effectively prevent conflicts and bring about a present free from violence, we have the obligation to invest in a humanitarian system that is able to save the lives of people living in conflicts today.

⁹ As stated in the proposed Core Commitments for the WHS: <https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/file/526725/view/575820>

