

Learning Paper

IASC SYSTEM-WIDE SCALE-UP MECHANISM

**From protocol to reality:
lessons for scaling up collective
humanitarian responses**

2 February 2024

Management, funding and implementation of the evaluation

The evaluation was commissioned and funded by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group (IAHE SG), an associated body of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Two independent consultants were contracted to conduct the lessons learned review.

Acknowledgements

The consultant team would like to thank the staff of the OCHA evaluation team in New York, the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering and Management Groups and the members of the Emergency Directors Group. We would also like to thank the United Nations Resident Coordinator / Humanitarian Coordinators, the Humanitarian Country Teams and all others who participated in this review in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti and Somalia for the time and support they provided, and for the information and documentation they shared that has formed a key part of the analysis. We also thank Anna Brown for copy-editing the report and Dasha Kurinna for their graphic design.

Consultants

Glyn Tyler, Humanitarian Outcomes
Raphael Gorgeu, HERE Geneva

Evaluation management

IAHE Steering Group Chair

Ali Buzurukov

OCHA Evaluation Manager

Nicole Henze, Lilia Ormonbekova

Evaluation Management Group

Aya Shneerson (WFP)

Carlotta Tincati (UNICEF)

Elma Balic (IOM)

Jacqueline Galinetti (ICVA/Plan International)

Jenin Assaf (FAO)

Laura Olsen (UNICEF)

Malene Nielsen (UNHCR)

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Executive Summary

Background

In 2012, following the earthquake in Haiti and floods in Pakistan, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) set up a System-Wide Emergency Activation, or level-three (L3) system, to enable accelerated and scaled-up assistance and protection for major sudden-onset disasters or the major rapid deterioration of an ongoing emergency. This was activated for the first time in January 2013 in response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The system was then activated six more times, mostly for large-scale protracted crises. The activations were intended for a short period, but some cases lasted several years, for example, Syria or South Sudan.

In November 2018, the L3 system was revised and replaced with Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols. These aimed to retain the positives of the L3 mechanisms but to avoid some of the recognized problems of that mechanism: multiple, repeated and long extensions; the use of L3 protocols as a signal of crises' relative importance or severity; the perception of an L3 declaration as a direct fundraising tool. In keeping with the shift from L3 to System-Wide Scale-Up, revised Protocols 1 and 2 focus on the provision of the short-term enhancement of operational capacity. This includes the enhancement of leadership and coordination, a revision of needs assessments, joint prioritization and strategic planning, and the setting of operational benchmarks. The activation criteria of the protocols contain elements that allow for activation where access, security and overt politicization of crises are key features.

The IASC Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up protocols are internal measures designed to critically enhance the humanitarian response and to encourage IASC member organizations and partners to rapidly mobilize the necessary operational capacities and resources to respond. They are activated in response to a sudden-onset emergency or significantly deteriorating crises, or those in which the humanitarian response is stalled. They are also used where the capability to lead, coordinate and deliver assistance and protection does not match the crises' scale, complexity and urgency.

The decision to activate the scale-up protocols is based on five criteria related to the crisis response in question: scale, urgency, complexity, capacity and risk of failure to deliver effectively and at scale to affected populations. The protocols have been in place for five years and have been activated 11 times. This period has seen challenges with deactivation and an increasing number of simultaneous activations similar to those previously experienced.

In light of these observations, the IAHE Steering Group commissioned this review, on the request of the Emergency Directors Group (EDG), to enable learning for the humanitarian system and to provide lessons for future activations. The review aims to provide the basis for discussion around improvements in the use and implementation of the protocols, in light of activations in four focus countries: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti and Somalia.

The data collection for this lessons-learned exercise included 63 interviews with EDG members, donors, and current and former representatives of IASC members in the focus countries, complemented by a light literature review. This exercise is not an evaluation and has limitations. It cannot assess the effectiveness of the scale-up activations nor fully analyse the relationship between System-Wide Scale-Ups and IASC members' corporate emergency protocols or funding allocated. However, the consistency of the data collected through interviews was remarkable and the findings were robust.

Key findings

The review found that, beyond their primary intended role of mobilizing operational capacities and resources, the application of the IASC Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols in practice seems to fulfil at least three additional, not formally intended but widely perceived, functions: to (re)instate the humanitarian nature of the response; to strengthen its collective nature; and to signal the relative severity of a crisis.

The review found a consensus that System-Wide Scale-Up contributes to a notable boost of in-country operational capacities and resources for humanitarian response and thus fulfils its primary function. This increase often manifests first as the deployment of surge capacities, followed by establishing additional medium- to long-term positions, contributing overall to more coordinated collective responses. These positions can be dedicated and experienced national or sub-national cluster leads, access negotiation or advocacy experts, additional OCHA personnel to support expanded coordination requirements, and senior humanitarian leadership roles like deputy humanitarian coordinators.

Nonetheless, the scale-up activations faced several challenges. The increase in operational capacity varied significantly across scale-up responses in terms of financial and human resources, which impacted the sustainability of the surge. For instance, funding shortages significantly reduced the time coordinators could be deployed in Haiti. Another issue was the lag in building deep field-level capacity, which is essential for effective on-ground coordination and engagement. This lag was due to the difficulty in finding staff for remote locations and access challenges. Also, the scale-up protocols did not bring changes to Humanitarian Coordinator positions despite the need for greater flexibility in leadership roles. System-Wide Scale-Up does not automatically lead to improved response quality, nor does it necessarily resolve contextual challenges like access, aid instrumentalization or security constraints. The protocols lack specific guidance on managing security risks, and interviewees suggested that a more proactive approach to security could enhance field-level operational capacity, especially in conflict contexts. In addition, scale-up efforts are often at odds with other system-level directives, such as staffing limitations. This reflects the inherent inflexibility of UN systems, including the Secretariat and the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS). Scale-up activations cannot overcome systemic issues like the need to increase operational footprint in hard-to-reach areas, to enhance collective accountability or to reduce bureaucracy.

Activation is often used to reset the status quo by instating or reinstating the response's humanitarian nature. Deploying surge personnel and emergency specialists helps refocus the response on collective humanitarian priorities. This is particularly the case where the humanitarian action had shifted towards a development or nexus approach and was in close relationship with governments, making it more difficult to adopt a principled approach. Activating the system is essential to move towards a principled humanitarian response.

The review finds a strong consensus that scale-up strengthens a more coordinated response at the country level. This is due to the roll-out of scale-up tools and enhancement envisioned by the protocols such as strengthened cluster coordination, statement of key priorities, joint rapid and multisector assessments, Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocations, and the development of Flash Appeals and subsequent Operational Peer Reviews. Together, these measures reinforce the collective sense of the humanitarian response.

While the primary aim of these functions is to mobilize capacities and resources rapidly, it is the signalling function that, over time, tends to diverge from and overshadow the primary objective of the System-Wide Scale-Up mechanism. The Scale-Up Protocols were introduced to mitigate this issue, which was prevalent under the L3 protocols. Nonetheless, the review indicates that activations are still viewed as

signals of the severity and importance of a crisis, mainly to draw attention and guide response efforts. They serve as a public declaration of urgency regarding a crisis by influencing the decisions and actions of various actors in the humanitarian system, including donors and host governments. The incentive is particularly high in the current global context of prolonged crises with chronic funding shortages, where signalling is seen as key to garnering attention and resources. This function is closely related to the problem of deactivating the scaled-up responses. This is particularly difficult in prolonged crises or situations with no clear resolution, or situations in which a scale-up within the time frame of the activation is hindered. A significant concern is that deactivation might inadvertently signal that a crisis is no longer critical, with the fear that it could lead to decreased attention and funding, and a lack of motivation for responders. This issue often leads to hesitation among stakeholders when considering deactivation, as exemplified by the crisis in Ukraine, where there was reluctance to indicate any reduction in priority. Compounding this challenge is the lack of detailed guidance in the protocols for handling these complex deactivation decisions, making the process intricate and challenging.

Scale-up activations are not intended to prioritize a crisis for donor funding, and there is a clear consensus that they should not be used to overcome chronic funding shortfalls. However, they are often perceived as a signal to donors about the priority of a crisis, with an expectation of increased funding. Donor interviews suggest that funding decisions are more influenced by their own assessments of crisis severity and political interests rather than scale-up activations. The activations may help to mobilize internal funds within the humanitarian system; they do not guarantee additional external funding.

The Scale-Up Protocols are effective, but in their current configuration they activate all of the described functions concurrently, with no option for selective application in specific contexts. Scale-up is generally seen as more relevant to UN bodies, with entities like OCHA and UN cluster lead agencies having clear expectations and playing central roles. Non-UN actors, including INGOs that are a significant part of the IASC, are involved. They are perceived as less beholden to the activation process, and their response to these activations is less documented. Overall, the review suggests a disparity in how different humanitarian actors engage with and are influenced by activations.

Apart from the “signalling” aspect, the functions of System-Wide Scale-Ups are generally time-bound, with their initial three functions having a similarly limited lifespan. The effectiveness of any scale-up is typically limited to three to six months, after which the collective momentum behind these initiatives typically diminishes. Extending the activation beyond this period usually does not guarantee an ongoing increase in operational capacity. However, the ongoing signalling function—particularly the perception that scale-up highlights the severity of the crisis—remains until deactivation. This signalling aspect is essential when considering whether to extend or deactivate the scale-up, as it continues until the activation is formally ended.

Benchmarks are designed to play an essential role in scale-up activations, as a means of setting targets, assessing progress and guiding the transition from the scale-up back to the ongoing response. Their effectiveness varies by country. In some, like Afghanistan and Somalia, benchmarks were valuable for planning and progress tracking. In others, like Ethiopia, they were often misaligned with the actual response and were underused. These benchmarks were generally not maintained beyond the first few months. The review also points out weaknesses in using benchmarks, such as being overly ambitious and insufficiently focused, and sometimes being viewed more as bureaucratic necessities than practical tools. Protocols also require transition planning, to build a bridge between benchmarks and the regular humanitarian programme cycle, yet the review found no instances of transition plans being used. While there would appear to be an opportunity for alignment between benchmarking, transition planning and the Operational Peer Review (OPR), transition planning is absent and OPRs independent.

There is a noticeable correlation between the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols and individual UN agencies' emergency protocols, with UN agencies retaining autonomy in their response based on their own analyses. INGOs show less reference to the IASC protocols. The varying degrees of alignment and timing of responses to IASC activations among agencies, as seen in instances like Haiti, further illustrate the complexity and lack of a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship between system-wide activations and individual agency actions.

A way forward

Navigating the differences between intention, practice and perceptions

The perceptions of what System-Wide Scale-Ups should deliver are deeply embedded in the collective views of EDG and IASC members and donors, and are not fully aligned with the intention of the current protocols. As long as the scale-up mechanism remains a one-size-fits-all tool, it seems unlikely that small adjustments to the protocols would bring corresponding changes in practice. This learning paper argues that an acknowledgement of what System-Wide Scale-Ups are in practice, and revising expectations and objectives accordingly, would be a logical and pragmatic approach. When discussing any potential activation, it seems essential to ask some key questions. Precisely what is an activation meant to achieve in the given context? Is it necessary or desirable to invoke all four interdependent functions of an activation? What else must be done to address identified issues that the activation, in its current form, will be unable to address?

Managing the signalling function

To address the challenges of signalling in humanitarian scale-up activations, the IASC could explore the following options: automatic deactivation after a set period to avoid indefinite extensions; using alternative methods such as press releases and high-profile visits to maintain attention on crises; and implementing stricter criteria for extending activations. Additionally, creating a "watch list"—for example for countries that are transitioning post-deactivation—can be an alternative way to signal the importance of crises. These strategies aim to balance the need for focused humanitarian responses with the practical and political realities on the ground, ensuring that the signalling function does not overshadow the actual needs of the crisis.

Sustaining capacity and managing transition

Benchmarks are important in scale-up activations and the IASC should enhance their consistency, quality and integration with transition planning. The IASC should tailor benchmarks to fit the typical six-month activation period, focusing more on scale-up aspects, and discussing them at the EDG as part of its collective responsibility while ensuring the Humanitarian Country Team maintains its autonomy. Transition planning is a crucial missing element and is essential to connect the benchmarks with ongoing humanitarian responses.

The implications of multiple, simultaneous scale-up activations

The unprecedented number of five simultaneous scale-up activations in 2023 creates a risk that each activation may become less effective because qualified, deployable human resources are finite, and the overall funding envelope does not expand proportionally with each scale-up. For some key informants, this represents an increasing risk of failure if the activations are not able to deliver sufficient additional capacity or if the increased capacity is more difficult to sustain beyond the initial surge. This could expose the humanitarian response to further criticism. The question of whether the number of scale-ups should or should not be limited in view of operational limits is a difficult question to answer, not least given the number of individual humanitarian crises that qualify. Ultimately, and while recognizing that capacity limits are real, it seems appropriate that discussions about potential activation should continue

to be based on needs with decisions taken as objectively and consistently as possible, rather than being influenced by the number of “standing” activations.

Strengthening collective accountability

The scale-up activations, characterized by strengthened clusters and an influx of international staff on surge missions, do not inherently increase collective accountability. To improve their effectiveness, it is crucial to focus on enhancing accountability to affected populations, supporting the inclusion and empowerment of NGOs, and involving local actors. Additionally, assigning clear responsibilities in benchmark development and implementing an inter-agency data-sharing agreement can address collective planning and transparency obstacles. Accountability checks within the system and towards the communities involved must remain in place.

Closing gaps in internal protocols

IASC members need to act with speed and agility when a System-Wide Scale-Up is declared. This action must encompass rapid deployment, recruitment, procurement and efficient security risk management. Corporate emergency protocols regulate these critical procedures and provide the necessary flexibility. However, UN bodies that lack such protocols often struggle to meet the demands of scale-up responses. To address this, it is recommended to develop corporate emergency protocols, particularly for faster procurement and recruitment processes, in UN bodies where these are absent. Additionally, UNDSS security risk management procedures should be reviewed and improved to ensure that these fully support the needs of scaled-up operations.