

Learning Paper

IASC SYSTEM-WIDE SCALE-UP MECHANISM

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

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Management, funding and implementation of the evaluation

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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.

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
PART 1: PURPOSE AND APPROACH	10
1. Background: from L3 protocols to System-Wide Scale-Ups.....	11
2. Purpose and approach of the review.....	13
3. Scope and methods.....	14
4. Limitations.....	15
5. Structure of the learning paper.....	15
PART 2: FINDINGS.....	17
Section A: The IASC System-Wide Scale-Up Mechanism in practice.....	18
6. Four functions and four characteristics.....	18
7. The phases of System-Wide Scale-Ups.....	21
8. The alignment between System-Wide Scale-Up and IASC members' corporate emergency declarations.....	27
9. What System-Wide Scale-Ups are not.....	30
Section B: Opportunities, challenges and dilemmas: areas for reflection.....	32
10. The differences between intention, practice and perceptions.....	32
11. Managing the signalling function.....	33
12. Sustaining scale-up and managing transition.....	34
13. The implications of many simultaneous scale-up activations.....	34
14. Improving collective accountability.....	36
15. Something practical.....	36
PART 3: ANNEXES.....	37
Annex 1: TOR	
Annex 2: List of Interviewees	
Annex 3: Timeline of IASC Activations since 2018	
Annex 4: Descriptive Comparison of corporate Emergency protocols	
Annex 5: Interview Protocol	
Table 1. Overview of System-Wide Scale-Up activations.....	12
Figure 1. First four months of System-Wide Scale-Up and corporate activations for focus countries.....	28
Figure 2. Overview of all IASC activations over time.....	35
Figure 3. Overview of newly activated and ongoing activations/year.....	35

List of Abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
CBPF	Country-based pooled funds
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EDG	Emergency Directors Group (IASC)
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IAHE	Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
L3	Level three (part of corporate classifications of humanitarian emergencies)
OPR	Operational Peer Review
RC	Resident Coordinator

Glossary

The paper refers to the use of IASC Standard Operating Procedures – Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up, Protocols 1 and 2. These are referred to in the paper as the protocols, or individually as Protocol 1 or Protocol 2. System-Wide Scale-Ups resulting from the use of these protocols are referred to as such, or simply as activation or scale-up in the general sense.

PART 1:

PURPOSE AND APPROACH



1. Background

In 2012, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) introduced the Transformative Agenda,¹ a key component of which was the development of the level-three (L3) protocols.² The aim of these L3 protocols was to improve the collective response and enhance the rapid deployment of additional operational capacities in crises that required an international humanitarian response. Designed as “an exceptional measure [...] for exceptional circumstances”, this tool was initially meant to apply to rapid-onset crises, but was subsequently used in deteriorating conflicts and protracted crises. This raised questions around the utility of the protocols and created challenges regarding their activation and deactivation. For example, L3 declarations were regularly extended beyond the six months originally envisaged, with extensions becoming the norm.³ The repeated prolongation of L3 emergency responses has led to a perception that they are indicators of the relative importance and severity of various crises. This contrasts with their original intent as short-term measures designed for rapid, time-sensitive mobilization. With conflict-related crises continuing well beyond six months, there was a reluctance to deactivate L3 declarations, due to a concern that doing so would indicate that a crisis was no longer critical. This contributed to a build-up of simultaneous active L3 declarations, raising concerns over the system’s capacity to allocate additional resources effectively to all crises.

In wishing to preserve the relevance of this system-wide measure but to address the difficulties associated with deactivation, the IASC Emergency Directors Group (EDG) developed revised protocols in 2018: namely, the current humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols.⁴ Like the previous L3 protocols, the revised protocols purposefully emphasized elements of internal measures for the benefit of the international response architecture, focusing on swift enhancement of operational capacity, strengthened coordination and enhanced leadership at the country level. The latter is outlined by Protocol 2: Empowered Leadership, which replaced the previous concept paper on empowered leadership.⁵

The System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols highlight five criteria for a possible activation:

- Scale (number of affected/potentially affected people, proportional to area affected)
- Urgency (mass displacement; crude mortality rates; lack of access; critical protection risks)
- Complexity (including high risks of politicization; constrained access and high security risks)
- Capacity (inadequate capacity, local or international, in technical expertise and humanitarian leadership)
- Risk of failure to deliver effectively and at scale (including violations of human rights and international humanitarian law; exacerbation of food insecurity; deterioration of civil unrest).

The main intent of these protocols is two-fold⁶:

- To reinforce the temporary nature of the System-Wide Scale-Up activation, specifying a duration limited to six months, with a provision for an additional three-month extension under exceptional circumstances.

1. IASC Transformative Agenda

2. Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation: definition and procedures (IASC transformative agenda reference document PR/1204/4078/7)

3. Interviews with current and former EDG members, IASC secretariat staff; see also Figure 1.

4. Standard Operating Procedures. Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation. Protocol 1: Definition and Procedures. November 2018. Endorsed by IASC Principals, [IASC Scale-Up Protocol 1](#)

5. Standard Operating Procedures. Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation. Protocol 2: Empowered Leadership. November 2018. Endorsed by IASC Principals. [IASC Scale-Up Protocol 2](#) (previous [Concept Paper on ‘Empowered Leadership’](#), 13 April 2012, PR/1204/4069/7).

6. Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation. Frequently Asked Questions. 13 November 2018; interviews for this review.

- To specify that a System-Wide Scale-Up activation does not measure, rank or classify the severity of the crisis, and therefore should not lead to decreased funding or attention for other crises.

In the protocols, a System-Wide Scale-Up activation is defined as “a system-wide mobilization in response to a sudden-onset, or significantly deteriorating, humanitarian crisis, where the capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver assistance and protection does not match the scale, complexity and urgency of the crisis”. The activation triggers agreed IASC mechanisms and tools to ensure that the system delivers at speed and effectively.⁷ The System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols stipulate the procedures for activation, automatic measures that will be triggered and the end of the Scale-Up Designation. The protocols also outline two accompanying measures of benchmarks and a transition plan. Table 1 presents an overview of activations under the current and the previous protocols.

Table 1: Overview of System-Wide Scale-Up activations, January 2024⁸

Country	Reason	Time	Length (as of 01/24)
System-Wide Scale-Up activation, from 2019 onwards			
Mozambique	Cyclone Ida/Kenneth	Mar 2019 – Jun 2019	3 months
DRC	Ebola virus disease	Jun 2019 – Mar 2020	10 months
Global	Covid-19 pandemic	Apr 2020 – Jan 2021	9 months
Ethiopia	Conflict (Tigray) ⁹	Apr 2021 – 2 Oct 2023	30 months
Afghanistan	Conflict (Taliban take-over)	Sep 2021 – Mar 2023	19 months
Ukraine	Conflict	Mar 2022 – Mar 2023	22 months*
Somalia	Drought	Aug 2022 – 2 Oct 2023	14 months
Türkiye	Earthquake	14 Feb – 17 May 2023 (T)	3 months
Syria	Earthquake	14 Feb – 1 Aug 2023 (S)	6 months
Haiti	Conflict	17 Apr – 14 Sept 2023	5 months
DRC	Conflict	16 Jun – 31 Dec 2023	6.5 months
Sudan	Conflict	29 Aug – (28 Feb 2024)	15 months, ongoing
L3 (system-wide) from 2013 to 2018			
Syria	Conflict	Jan 2013 – Dec 2018	72 months
Philippines	Typhoon	Nov 2013 – Feb 2014	3 months
CAR	Conflict	Dec 2013 – May 2015	18 months
South Sudan	Conflict	Feb 2014 – May 2016	28 months
Iraq	Conflict	Aug 2014 – Dec 2017	41 months
Yemen	Conflict	Jul 2015 – Mar 2018	33 months
DRC	Conflict	Oct 2017 – May 2018	8 months

* The expiration of the Ukraine activation is under discussion.

7. Ibid.

8. [IASC Overview of System-Wide Scale-Up Activations and Deactivations](#)

9. Expanded to include drought-affected and other areas with protection and access concerns in April 2022.

2. Purpose and approach of the review

The System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols have been in place for 5 years and have been activated 11 times. During this period, challenges have arisen about deactivation and the increasing number of simultaneous activations,¹⁰ echoing the experiences with the L3 protocols. Extensions beyond six or nine months remain common; while the activation is shorter in duration overall, similar difficulties about deactivation have emerged. The surrounding humanitarian landscape has also seen significant change. The gap continues to grow between humanitarian funding and requirements to address an increased volume of needs. This raises questions about the possibility, through the activation of the protocols, of injecting further capacities and enhancing humanitarian response.

In light of these trends, the EDG commissioned this review to provide lessons within the humanitarian system, to enable learning and to glean insights that could improve future activations and the overall application of the System-Wide Scale-Up Mechanism.¹¹ The primary objective of this review is to provide evidence for reflection on improvements to the use and implementation of the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols. The review set out to answer the following questions:

1. How relevant is the Scale-Up Mechanism?
2. How effective is the Scale-Up Mechanism?
3. How well aligned are the Scale-Up Mechanism and IASC members' corporate emergency declarations?

While the data collection was initially structured around these three questions, it emerged early in the review that there is a misalignment between the intent of the protocols, their implementation in practice and the perception of what they achieved or should achieve. Therefore, the overall approach to this review was adjusted to reflect this. A first line of inquiry explored the reality of implementing the protocols, particularly in the countries under consideration. The second line of inquiry focused on the alignment of the practice with the intent of the protocols as well as the perception of what the protocols might or might not achieve.

Consequently, the findings are not presented as direct responses to the three key questions of this learning exercise, but are structured along the newly emerged lines of inquiry, namely:

1. how the implementation of the protocols manifests in practice, and what are the key functions and characteristics of System-Wide Scale-Ups
2. the different phases of activation, compared to the intent of the protocols
3. the alignment between system-wide and IASC members' corporate emergency protocols
4. a clarification of what the activations are not in practice – i.e. what they do not achieve and what their practical limitations are.

This structure allows the discussion to be framed around key issues and opportunities for improvements, which are presented in part 2 of this paper.

10. Interviews with current and former EDG members, IASC secretariat staff.

11. See Annex 1: TOR. "Mechanism" refers to the protocols and their implementation.

3. Scope and methods

The review was designed to supplement ongoing inter-agency humanitarian evaluations (IAHEs) in Afghanistan and Ethiopia. It aimed to focus on the use of the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols while the evaluations take a broader and deeper view of the results of the response for affected populations.

A primarily qualitative approach was applied. Semi-structured, key informant interviews¹² were the main methods of research. The team interviewed 63 key informants.¹³ This included almost all members of the EDG, global cluster coordinators, donor representatives (at global and country levels), members of operational IASC member organizations and/or members of the Humanitarian Country Team in case study countries, members of the IASC secretariat, senior staff from OCHA including the Peer-to-Peer Project, NGO senior staff (at field and headquarter levels), and some evaluation team members from the ongoing IAHEs in Ethiopia and Afghanistan. Interviews undertaken as part of the IAHE for northern Ethiopia were used as a secondary data source, complemented by a direct exchange with the evaluation team leader of the IAHE Afghanistan.¹⁴

To expand the breadth of this paper, Somalia and Haiti were also included as focus countries. These two countries were chosen from among recent activations following feedback from the initial interviews and due to the level of debate around these activations. Interviewees were also invited to reflect on any recent scale-ups in which they had participated. As such, some observations were collected on the activations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ukraine and Türkiye/Syria, although these countries were not the subject of specific interviews.

Interviews were supplemented by a limited desk review of available documentation from the scale-up activations to provide the background and to improve the design of the research questions. The desk review covered an analysis of the protocols, documents produced during activations in various contexts, ongoing evaluations in countries subject to scale-ups, and agency-specific emergency protocols of IASC member organizations.

As a result of the desk review, two additional elements were produced:¹⁵

- Analysis of the timing of activation of system-wide and IASC member-specific emergency protocols (FAO, IOM, OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO and WFP).¹⁶
- Descriptive comparison of operational actors' internal emergency protocols.¹⁷ This included, among other factors, their emergency classification systems, the relationship between the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols and their corporate activations, the criteria used when declaring emergencies, time frame and duration of scale-ups, and partnership agreements.

This review has been conducted under the auspices of the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group. The process was overseen by the Management Group of the IAHE Afghanistan and the IAHE Northern Ethiopia.

12. See Annex 5: Interview protocol.

13. See Annex 2: List of interviewees.

14. One of the research team was part of the evaluation team for the Northern Ethiopia IAHE. The full list of individuals interviewed as part of the Northern Ethiopia IAHE can be found in the final evaluation report.

15. OCHA's evaluation unit supported the consultants with the development of this.

16. Data was available only from UN agencies and OCHA. This analysis is shown in visual form in section A (figure 1) and more fully in Annex 3.

17. This information was available for UN agencies (UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, FAO, IOM, WHO), UN OCHA and three INGOs that have acted as INGO representatives on the EDG: Save the Children, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Care International and Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

Comments from members of the EDG were reviewed. This review was finalized after a discussion of findings and areas for considerations during the EDG stock-taking exercise in December 2023.

4. Limitations

This exercise is not an evaluation and was not designed or undertaken as such. Accordingly, a key limitation of this review has been the difficulty to analyse the effectiveness of the scale-up activations. Effectiveness is understood as a measure of operational capacity delivered as a direct consequence of the System-Wide Scale-Up, and/or the contribution of the scale-up to improved performance of the collective response. This pertains largely to the lack of a system-wide performance measurement system, the difficulty to attribute results in a complex environment and the absence of comprehensive operational (deployment/financial) and outcome data.

It has also proven impossible to conduct a thorough analysis of the potential effect of the scale-up activations on external funding because there is not enough available data about funding, allocations and resources. Therefore, findings in the report on the effect of the scale-up activation on funding are based on interviews.

The protocols themselves make no specific mention of localization, other than a recognition that local capacity might be lacking. In essence, the System-Wide Scale-Up is a UN-centric mechanism that delivers additional operational capacity largely through UN agencies, in a top-down fashion. Other evaluative material on contexts subject to scale-up highlight shortcomings in this approach. These significant, broader issues related to scale-up were beyond the scope of this review. This exercise could not reach out, in a way that would have been sufficiently robust, to national governments, senior political leaders in the international community and local actors. Gathering their perspectives on the meaning they would give to the protocols would undoubtedly add more to the reflection proposed here. This knowledge could be collected in the future, for example as part of the inter-agency humanitarian evaluations.

The short amount of time available for this review of such a complex system as the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up Mechanism is considered its own limitation which has contributed to the limitations mentioned above.

5. Structure of the learning paper

This learning paper is structured in the following way.

The findings and points for reflection are presented in the following part 2 of this learning paper. It is structured as follows: section A gives a detailed picture of how the protocols are implemented in practice, including:

- four key functions of System-Wide Scale-Ups as seen in practice and four of their main characteristics
- phases of the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols (pre-activation, activation, extension and deactivation) and the accompanying measures of scale-ups: benchmarks and transition plans
- alignment between System-Wide Scale-Up and IASC members' corporate emergency declarations
- what the evidence suggests the protocols are not achieving in practice.

Section B identifies challenges linked to the protocols:

- the difference between intention, practice and perceptions
- managing the signalling function
- sustaining scale-up and managing transition
- the implication of a large number of simultaneous scale-up activations
- improving collective accountability
- practical considerations.

The paper was explicitly designed to provide the basis for discussions in the EDG and beyond. As such, section B contains key points for reflection as opposed to hard conclusions or recommendations.

PART 2: **FINDINGS**



SECTION A:

THE IASC SYSTEM-WIDE SCALE-UP MECHANISM IN PRACTICE

This section describes findings on how System-Wide Scale-Up manifests in practice. The evidence base for this section is strong with a clear consensus and narrative that emerged across all interviews conducted.

6. Four functions and four characteristics

The review identified four main functions of activations:

- mobilizing operational capacities
- instating (or reinstating) the humanitarian nature of the response
- strengthening the collective nature of the response
- signalling the severity of a crisis.

It also identified four characteristics common to the collective understanding of how scale-up manifests in practice, and which are important for further analysis.

- The functions are interlinked and interdependent.
- System-Wide Scale-Ups are perceived as relevant mainly to UN bodies.
- System-Wide Scale-Ups motivate actors in the response.
- Other than “signalling”, the functions and characteristics of System-Wide Scale-Ups appear time-limited.

Activations are formally justified in accordance with the protocols’ five criteria (scale, urgency, complexity, capacity, risk of failure to deliver effectively and at scale). Respondents did clearly identify the need to mobilize operational capacity as a common, core justification for supporting scale-up, as well as elements of the other criteria. Two of the other functions here—the need to instate, or re-instate a more humanitarian stance and the need to signal the relative priority of a respective crisis—were also raised as key justifications in support of activation, despite not appearing in the protocols.

6.1. Function 1: Mobilizing operational capacity

System-Wide Scale-Up is associated with an increase in operational capacity in-country.¹⁸ This is clearly in line with one of the core objectives of Protocol 1. This usually translates into, firstly, a surge of personnel, followed by the creation of additional medium- or long-term positions, particularly in coordination functions or positions dedicated to serve a collective effort. At system level, those positions include, for instance, national or sub-national cluster lead positions, experts in access negotiation or advocacy, increased staffing in OCHA teams with a role to support the collective response, and often senior leadership positions with coordination responsibilities such as the role of the deputy humanitarian coordinator. In general, profiles with a humanitarian and emergency background are prioritized.

¹⁸ Interviewees frequently referred to “boots on the ground”

There was a clear consensus from interviews and document review¹⁹ that System-Wide Scale-Ups do increase operational capacity:

Cluster lead in Afghanistan: "After activation we got a full-time IM [information management] team, we have new technical positions, we have recruited seven region cluster coordinators... big scale-up in capacity [overall]."

6.2. Function 2: Instating (or reinstating) the humanitarian nature of the response

This function was ascribed to scale-ups in all four countries albeit to varying degrees. Activation was seen as a means of triggering a reset, total or partial, of the approach at country level, and therefore of instating, or reinstating, a humanitarian mindset. This intersects with the increase in operational capacity, in that the mobilization of specialist emergency teams and support staff should support field teams in adopting a principled humanitarian approach. It is listed as a separate function because interviewees were clear that the desire to "shock" the system into change is part of the motivation of an activation—a means of initiating rapid and urgent change processes. This push towards instating or reinstating the humanitarian nature of the response is reinforced by the fact that the activation is seen as a collective, high-level statement from the entire humanitarian system.

Interviewees in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Somalia spoke, for instance, of how the international humanitarian system had been working increasingly in support of government. The embedded nature of support had made it more difficult to maintain an independent and impartial humanitarian response, or the space from which to launch one, even in the event that crises might have been predicted. A number of interviewees from the EDG and HCTs saw this required shift as one function of activation:

EDG member, about Ethiopia: "The scale-up was seen as a way to push the RC/HC [Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator] and the HCT move [sic] towards an emergency mode, a signal to make sure there is a shift to [a] humanitarian response, which includes stronger engagement with all parties to the conflict." It was "...a shift in how to think [about] the approach of collaboration with the government"

6.3. Function 3: Strengthening the collective nature of the response

Across the four focus countries, there was a very clear consensus among interviewees that a scale-up strengthens the collective nature of the humanitarian response. In addition, it clearly provided a significant degree of motivation to operational actors at the country level. In large part, the reinforcement of the collective nature of the response is linked to the tools and enhancements prescribed by the protocols. Strengthening of clusters, collective working on a statement of key priorities and rapid/multisector assessments, the development of a Flash Appeal and/or discussions around CERF allocation, Operational Peer Reviews (OPRs), and discussions around collective benchmarks can all be reasonably stated as reinforcing the sense of collective working. A large number of statements in interviews support this idea:

HCT member in Haiti: "The scale-up did help. Once there was a consensus, it brought the country team into the same mental place."

EDG member on Ukraine: "The scale-up was a way to bring them [agencies] back together."

19. [IAHE Mozambique](#); [IAHE Ethiopia \(drought\)](#); [IAHE Afghanistan \(forthcoming\)](#)

Interviewees also noted the extent to which activations brought both peer-to-peer support and peer pressure. In the first instance, staff of operational agencies described checking in with counterparts to understand who was scaling up and how. It is important to note that improved collective working does not automatically imply full agreement with the response strategies across the HCT. In Ethiopia, for example, interviewees reported ongoing tensions between HCT members over the results of the scale-up.

6.4. Function 4: Signalling the relative severity of a crisis

One of the objectives of the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols was to suppress the tendency under the L3 protocols for activations to be perceived as a means of “ranking” crises.²⁰ However, a very clear consensus emerged among interviewees that the System-Wide Scale-Up continues to signal the severity of a particular crisis and implies a relative priority, whether or not this is intended. Further, this continues to be actively used to elicit attention and a change in behaviour towards a focus on the response required. There were numerous quotes similar to these:

EDG member: “A system-wide scale-up activation is about getting attention. There is no better way to ring the bell.”

Another EDG member, speaking about Haiti, said they “... supported activation because the country has been off the radar for a long time, people [are] starting to realize how complex the crisis is.”

The concept of signalling is nuanced. In the broadest sense, scale-up is seen as a public statement of the severity and relative importance of a crisis, backed by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and the whole IASC. Equally, actors that support scale-up and strengthening of the collective response use the signal before and during activation to elicit attention and to try to influence the behaviours of other actors in the system. This could be by using existing channels, i.e. different departments or levels of one organization, or from one organization or group of organizations to another organization or group of organizations. Discussions with donors and exchanges within donor organizations is another approach. In some instances, the signalling function is aimed indirectly at host governments, in expectation that scale-up will support advocacy for improvements on access.

Moreover, it was widely understood in interviews that the signalling function is being more widely used with the intention of soliciting additional attention and funding, due to the global context in which a constant and chronic shortage of funding in relation to stated needs exists alongside a larger number of protracted crises.

This signalling function plays a role along the continuum of an activation, starting in the preparation phase before the protocols are activated. It is also of central importance in discussions around extension and deactivation.

6.5. Four characteristics

Interviewees ascribed four characteristics common to the collective understanding of how scale-up manifests in practice.

The functions are interlinked and interdependent. The functions described are inter-related; it is not an option in the current configuration of the System-Wide Scale-Up to invoke some of the functions while suppressing others. The System-Wide Scale-Up is a single tool, often described as “the only tool in the box”. It is an effective tool, but also a “big, blunt instrument”. Recognizing and understanding this interdependence is important. As long as the protocols remain a single, “one-size-fits-all” tool, it seems

²⁰ The protocols state that “A Scale-Up activation does not indicate a ranking of the severity of the crisis”.

impossible to avoid triggering any one of the functions. In other words, the “set menu” always comes in full — the individual functions are not available à la carte.

System-Wide Scale-Ups are perceived as relevant mainly to UN bodies. It is important to note that not all actors in the system are bound to respond to the activation to the same degree. There are clear expectations across the system that OCHA and UN agencies, in their operational role and as cluster leads (or co-leads), are closest to the “centre of influence” of the scale-ups; non-UN actors sometimes referred to scale-up as mainly a UN thing. INGOs form a key part of the IASC, but there was less available evidence of the extent to which they responded or conformed to activations. They were perceived overall to be more loosely bound to the mechanism. The impact of the protocols on actors’ engagement decreases the further away those actors are from the central core of the IASC.

System-Wide Scale-Ups motivate actors in the response. While somewhat intangible, the idea that scale-up motivates those in the response was highlighted consistently by interviewees. At field and global levels, respondents noted the “energetic boost” that a scale-up brings; some linked this to the need to “do something together”.

Other than “signalling”, the functions and characteristics of System-Wide Scale-Ups appear time-limited. The initial three functions appear to have a relatively similar limited lifespan. There was a clear consensus among interviewees that, overall, the collective energy behind a System-Wide Scale-Up naturally dissipates at around six months. In other words, extending the duration of an activation beyond six months does not revitalize these functions. While there may be some exceptions where targeted energy continues, it was generally understood that there was little prospect of significant additional operational capacity after six months, for example. What does endure however, is the function of signalling the relevant severity of the crisis. That function is then critical in discussions around deactivation and/or extension. As long as the scale-up remains active, that function persists and the signalling continues. It only ceases once the protocols are formally deactivated.

7. The phases of System-Wide Scale-Ups

This sub-section analyses the three different phases of the activation: i) the pre-activation phase; ii) the initial six-month activation (or deployment) phase; iii) the extension and deactivation phases.

7.1. The pre-activation phase

This phase starts with discussions about the need for activation and ends either with the declaration of a scale-up by the Emergency Relief Coordinator or with the decision not to activate. This phase is extensively described in Protocol 1.²¹ Scale-ups are justified according to the protocols’ five criteria: scale, urgency, complexity, capacity and risk of failure to deliver effectively and at scale. Expectations and experiences regarding why the protocols are activated vary significantly depending on the actors involved and the context. Interviewees tended to describe scale-up activation in terms of the four functions more than in relation to the formal criteria—although there was some overlap.

The need for additional operational capacity. Multiple interviews recognized that the need for additional operational capacity was a key justification for scale-up. This is firmly in line with the protocol criteria of capacity, scale and possibly risk of failure. Examples include:

21. Standard Operating Procedures. Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation. Protocol 1: Definition and Procedures. November 2018. Endorsed by IASC Principals, [IASC Scale-Up Protocol 1](#)

INGO member discussing the UN in Ethiopia: “[we wanted to see improvements in the] quantity and quality of staff.”

EDG member at the global level: “Through a System-Wide Scale-Up activation, we expect agencies to put in more (internal) resources.”

As noted, donors and non-UN actors tend to emphasize activation as a way to exert pressure on the UN and more broadly on the international humanitarian system to provoke rapid change.

The need to instate (or reinstate) the humanitarian nature of the response. Arguably, this function is aligned with the criteria of urgency, scale and risk of failure. Interviewees spoke of needing to protect and/or strengthen a principled humanitarian approach; of increasing pressure on the humanitarian system for better delivery and to “change the gear” of the response. This need to reinstate the response’s humanitarian nature is not, however, an explicit activation criterion in the protocols. This function was raised as justification in every focus country, but messages were especially stark in Ethiopia and Afghanistan:

EDG member on Ethiopia: “parts of the country team were not ready to accept what was happening... [...] the HCT needed to wake up and push for things that they weren’t ready to push for.”

UN agency staff member in Afghanistan: “the modality had to change. We needed a 180-degree shift from ‘on-budget’ support through Government. Suddenly ... we needed emergency staff, moving from development.”

The need to strengthen the collective nature of the response. This function was less commonly used as justification in the pre-activation phase. Interviewees did, however, reflect on the need for clusters and coordination functions to be strengthened, as well as leadership, in line with the specific intent of the protocols to strengthen those elements.

Signalling the relative severity of a crisis. Many interviewees recognized that actors across the system support System-Wide Scale-Up in the belief that it will send a signal to donors that a particular crisis is of relative importance and consequently deserves more funding. The protocols, however, clearly state that activation “does not indicate... that the crisis should, at this stage, be prioritized for funding by the international community”. Interviewees were also clear that activation does not equate to a direct request or appeal for funding. For example, staff in operational agencies described how they viewed this phase of scale-up: “We are looking to leverage attention and resources. We are using it as a virtual signalling tool.” “We think that we can influence [donor] governments by stating ‘this is the biggest crisis in the world’.. we think we can overcome donor fatigue.” Donor representatives interviewed at country level justified activation as a way to signal the need for additional funding to other donors and to their own headquarters.

This multitude of justifications demonstrates the diversity of expectations surrounding activation in any given country. The Protocols’ five criteria are interpreted flexibly. It was also clear from interviews that the criteria themselves allow for contradictions and tensions. Of the contexts under consideration, Ethiopia and Haiti had access challenges and high levels of insecurity as key characteristics, directly in line with the activation criteria of “complexity”. In these cases, there was support from some interviewees. Activation was seen, in part, as a signal to the respective national authorities and, more broadly, to UN Member States and the political channels in the UN to advocate for change which might improve access for humanitarian agencies. A significant number of interviewees took the contrary position, stating that a scale-up was likely to build capacity, but was unlikely to resolve underlying challenges, like access and security constraints, therefore increasing the risk of failure of the planned response, in relative terms. Again, recognizing that these functions are interlinked and interdependent, activation also triggers

the enhancement of operational capacity which raises expectations but does not solve such challenges.

Ultimately, it was recognized that some activations were seen by some as a “last resort”, essentially a signal that “something needs to be done”, which trumped any potential challenges to an effective scale-up. This feeling of an “urgency to take action” in the face of escalating needs and the system’s limited abilities to respond to a severe crisis becomes the driving force behind the possibility of an activation.

7.2. The initial six-month activation (or deployment) phase

Each focus country saw an increase in operational capacity in the initial phase. Clearly, not all the responses had the same increase in capacity. Within any given response, the increase was not necessarily timely or consistent across sectors, actors or locations. There was a strong sense in interviews that significantly stronger capacity was built in Somalia and in Afghanistan. In Haiti, capacity was seen as slower to build, there being less of an immediate acceptance that an activation was warranted; it was ultimately focused on a small number of clusters and positions. Ethiopia saw a significant number of additional deployments in the first two months of scale-up, but visa issues tempered numbers and the speed of deployment. Moreover, the inability of agencies to deploy staff beyond the capital was a key factor. Challenges of deploying staff to the field in Ethiopia notwithstanding, one EDG member stated that the scale-up of operational capacity was justified: “it was a signal to draw down staff on a no-regrets basis... [We were] signalling a state of readiness, readiness to respond”.²²

The strengthening of cluster coordination (national and sub-national) is a key feature of the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols. This is also prioritized in agency-specific emergency protocols.²³ The System-Wide Scale-Up is seen as adding useful pressure for cluster lead agencies to keep this capacity in place for the duration of scale-ups and extensions. Global cluster coordinators interviewed indicated how an activation orients their own prioritization. Challenges persist, however, because resources are ultimately finite. One cluster coordinator noted that their system was running very close to its limits. The agency’s capacity to maintain temporary or surge posts was directly related to their ability to fundraise for those posts, which was an ever-increasing challenge with higher numbers of scale-ups. In Haiti, for example, internal funding had allowed for the deployment of a coordinator for six weeks, but there was little prospect of funding for a long-term position. Similarly, global cluster coordinators noted the limits not just in funding but in human resources to fill approximately 150 sub-national coordination posts in countries subject to activations.

Furthermore, a significant number of interviewees underscored the importance of activations for delivering field-level capacity to reinforce field coordination, accompany local partners and engage with communities directly; this did not happen consistently, however. Some respondents described how field-based posts were harder to fill in general than capital-based positions. It echoes a 2015 International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) report on NGO perspectives on the scale-up mechanism in a level-three crisis which noted that most additional posts were capital-based.²⁴ In more recent activations — for instance, Ethiopia and Haiti — access challenges made it impossible to deploy some sub-national extra capacities.

In some countries with a Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) already in place, interviewees acknowledged that a change of leadership at that level would be ideal. The System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols do not support such a change. They can, however, leverage additional capacity through the deployment or

22. It remains particularly challenging to quantify this increase of operational capacities, as the Northern Ethiopia IAHE (forthcoming) shows. Monitoring tools and data are not sufficient to get a more accurate picture of the resources injected following a scale-up activation.

23. See Annex 4: Overview of Agency-Specific Emergency Protocols.

24. [NGO perspectives on Humanitarian Response in Level 3 Crisis. ICVA](#)

instatement of a deputy humanitarian coordinator. This was the case in Afghanistan, Ethiopia,²⁵ Haiti and Somalia. In Ethiopia, an additional regional humanitarian coordinator was deployed. The Protocol 2 on Empowered Leadership, as experienced by interviewees, plays a limited role although staff at the country level reported the sense of enhanced, or at least shared, leadership from headquarters. Around the time of activation, there was a sense that engagement from the Emergency Directors, IASC Principals and/or their own agency headquarters implied that headquarters were taking a greater leadership role.

7.3. Extension or deactivation

This phase is barely described in the protocols. Despite a planned automatic expiry, the EDG is advised to meet towards the end of an activation to review the situation. Extension is foreseen only in exceptional circumstances with a further deterioration of the humanitarian needs or a specific recommendation of the OPR. Protocol 1 clearly states that drivers of the crisis that are beyond the control of the humanitarian community should not justify extension; instead, the next step should be transition to the normal humanitarian programme cycle. The protocols provide no guidance for a situation where the scale-up of operational capacity has not yet been achieved. It is important to note that the wording of Protocol 1 allows for extensions. Activations which focus on the “complexity” criteria — i.e., access and security issues — trigger the full scale-up and all of the functions. Ethiopia and Haiti were cited as examples in which enhanced operational capacity could not overcome overtly political challenges, which arguably exacerbated the perceived risk of failure, in relative terms.

The simplest scenario for a deactivation decision arises when there is a consensus that the crisis, or at least its peak, is over and the four functions of the protocols are no longer needed. The activation has boosted the operational response and strengthened coordination to the full extent possible and the trigger for activation is unlikely to persist or occur again. This has been the case for the sudden-onset disasters of a cyclone (Mozambique) and an earthquake (Türkiye/Syria). In these cases, the activation lasted three to six months only. Challenges with deactivation were clearly more prevalent where the protocols were activated because of a deteriorating humanitarian situation in protracted crises (Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo) or a new situation or conflict that is not solved within the first six months of the activation (Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Ukraine). In such situations, interviewees suggest that the concern around potential extension or deactivation centres around two main issues.

The first issue relates to the question of how to sustain the enhanced operational capacities. Here, an extension, in the absence of a clear understanding of how to transition to “business as usual”, is seen to provide an ongoing boost, to consolidate what has been gained in the initial activation phase. Many interviewees noted that there is a need to plan a transition because the resources are either not yet fully in place or need to be regularized because the needs persist (Afghanistan, Ukraine, Ethiopia). In addition, further shocks might be expected: for example, Somalia faced the probability of further increased humanitarian needs caused by the impact of El Niño later in 2023.

The second issue relates to the signalling function. The clearly perceived need to continue to signal the relative importance of a crisis becomes the overarching function—i.e., there is concern that deactivation will indicate that the crisis is no longer severe or no longer requires attention and prioritization. One interviewee, speaking about Afghanistan, stated that while the scale-up had been seen as largely successful, the idea of deactivation was clearly linked with the potential to lose attention and possibly funding. Recognizing that major new crises had occurred, and that the global media spotlight had moved on, the idea of “maintaining your place on the league table” was one factor in conversations about extension. Ukraine was seen as the epitome of this phenomenon. It was widely understood that

25. A deputy humanitarian coordinator was deployed before the official scale-up in Ethiopia.

irrespective of the capacity which had been built, there was widespread reluctance to signal (to the world, to the Ukrainian Government and supportive Member States) that the crisis response in Ukraine had been de-prioritized. One EDG member stated: “Ukraine donors were against deactivation. No way [the ERC] was going to say ‘yes—deactivate’ in the face of donor pressure.”

A sample of quotations from interviews illustrate this issue, which goes well beyond the humanitarian response.

An HCT member in Afghanistan recognized the same phenomenon: “[The system needs to] make additional efforts to de-link the deactivation from the communication side [signalling]. [Extension] can’t be linked to the severity of the crisis but the capacity of the system to respond. But this is misused sometimes by agencies as a fundraising tool, and by HCs.”

OCHA headquarters senior staff: “For Ethiopia, a deactivation would have been seen as a bad signal to give to the government, stating that all is fine [when we still did not even have access].”

Considering the lifespan of the first three functions of the activation, a deactivation or an extension takes on a different nature. It concerns more than simply extending or ending an activation because it involves managing the persistence of the signalling function over time and reflecting further on how to sustain gains. Thus, extension and deactivation cannot be considered as the continuation or the opposite of an activation. They carry their own significance, disconnected from the initial justifications and objectives of the initial six-month activation period. However, the protocols provide no guidance on this.

7.4. Accompanying measures

Benchmarks are an accompanying measure of a scale-up activation, only lightly detailed²⁶ in Protocol 1. They are also one basis for supporting the monitoring of the scale-up and linked clearly to the planning of the transition from scale-up to regular response.

The extent to which benchmarks are embraced as a relevant tool varies from country to country. In the best-case scenario, they are perceived by stakeholders at the country level as a useful exercise that contributes to the reinforcement of the collective nature of the response. In these cases, the benchmarks facilitate an exchange of views on the operational context within the HCT and between the HCT and the EDG or leadership at headquarters. These usually include the areas of advocacy, coordination, cross-cutting priorities, enablers, humanitarian financing, leadership, resource mobilization and response capacity. In Afghanistan, the operational benchmarks were described as an important tool for planning through the initial six to nine months of the scale-up. The original 30-plus benchmarks covered issues directly related to the scale-up, including coordination, resource mobilization and response capacity. They also included issues not directly related to the scale-up, although arguably influenced by it, such as financing, advocacy and communications. In Somalia, the benchmarks are presented in a detailed format covering 16 areas. As was the case in Afghanistan, some of these areas are directly under the influence of the scale-up and some only indirectly. Somalia’s benchmarks, however, each have a number of targets, with specific measurable indicators, a clear timeline for reporting and a clear line of responsibility for each target. In other countries, specificities of the context are added. In Ethiopia, for example, the area of duty of care was added after one year of activation. Haiti’s benchmarks focus on protection outcomes. In Ethiopia, the IAHE²⁷ found that the benchmarks initially developed did not reflect the reality of the response and, after two months, they were barely followed.

26. “To complement the activation, the HCT shall draw up context specific benchmarks and develop context specific collective key messages based upon the Frequently Asked Questions document. During the activation period, the HCT shall also draw up a transition plan and post-activation measures.” [IASC Scale-Up Protocol 1](#)

27. IAHE to the crisis in northern Ethiopia (forthcoming).

This review also identified weaknesses in the current practice of using benchmarks. Benchmarks were described as ambitious and broad in their formulation. In some instances, they were not fully embraced as a useful tool, and were sometimes cut and pasted from other countries' exercises. They were also described as "reporting for reporting's sake" (driven by OCHA's need to report on progress rather than being useful in their own right). A number of interviewees raised the challenge of public or open discussion about why some benchmarks are not being met. In Afghanistan, for example, interviewees described a closed-door meeting, under the Chatham House Rule, to discuss why some benchmarks would not be met and that deactivation made sense in terms of operational capacity. Benchmarks are understood as a country-level tool, giving the HCT the responsibility and autonomy to decide how to manage and measure scale-up. Consequently, these types of benchmarks are barely examined at the global level, including at the EDG.

As in other areas, attention to the benchmarks was often described as fading after three to six months, although serving as one focus for an **Operational Peer Review** (OPR) mission. If a timely OPR was launched, the benchmarks were typically seen as useful up to that point. If not embraced in the first instance, energy for meeting benchmarks dropped off relatively quickly. If seen as a useful and collective exercise, after the six-month juncture, HCTs recognized the need to transition to standard, ongoing monitoring and reporting functions—in other words, re-aligning with the normal humanitarian project cycle. Protocol 1 requires the construction of a **transition plan** which sets out specifically to answer the question of how to bridge the scaled-up response and the new humanitarian situation into the response plan of the existing or next HRP, including sustaining a suitable leadership model. No respondent in any of the countries could recall the use of transition planning.

The OPR is another of the tools designed to provide reflection of the overall response, no later than five months after activation. In practice, however, it is often difficult to meet this deadline. The Afghanistan OPR mentions the activation of a System-Wide Scale-Up in its introduction, but makes no further reference to scale-up, nor the operational benchmarks. As noted above, however, the final set of benchmarks does take the OPR action points into consideration, albeit after the scale-up was seen as having lost energy. The OPR, released approximately nine months after scale-up, makes frequent reference to points of direct relevance to the scale-up. It does not, however, make any reference to the role of the scale-up in reaching the level of operational capacity prevailing at the time of the visit. More importantly perhaps, the report makes no reference to possible extension of the scale-up as a means to build the capacity still required. Nor is there reference to the post scale-up phase including a transition back to the HRP.

8. The alignment between System-Wide Scale-Up and IASC members' corporate emergency declarations

In considering the findings above, it is critical to note the challenge of attributing results in a collective response to the activation of this collective scale-up mechanism. It is often impossible to be sure that changes occurred in a situation because of an IASC activation. The relationship between the System-Wide Scale-Up activations and IASC members' corporate emergency protocols is of central importance in this respect. From the perspective of the IASC (the collective), System-Wide Scale-Ups can only succeed if each agency plays its part. From the perspective of IASC members, it is important to understand what they consistently expect from a System-Wide Scale-Up, in addition to what they contribute.

The desk review shows that all the UN agencies refer to the IASC protocols in their corporate emergency protocols,²⁸ and three agencies make a direct link.²⁹ None of the INGOs that took part in this review refer to the IASC protocols. UN agencies reserve the right to act independently of System-Wide Scale-Up activation based on their own contextual analysis, especially in their areas of expertise. The UN agencies state that their emergency protocols, once activated, are in place for six months and each sets out criteria for possible extension. In simple terms, an analysis of protocols and policies demonstrates a likely correlation between UN agencies' internal protocols and that of the System-Wide Scale-Up—i.e. they are sufficiently similar to expect that they will be activated at a similar time and/or most agencies do consider the existence or likelihood of a System-Wide Scale-Up activation while making their own decisions. The analysis does not, however, support the notion of an automatic or mechanical link between the two.

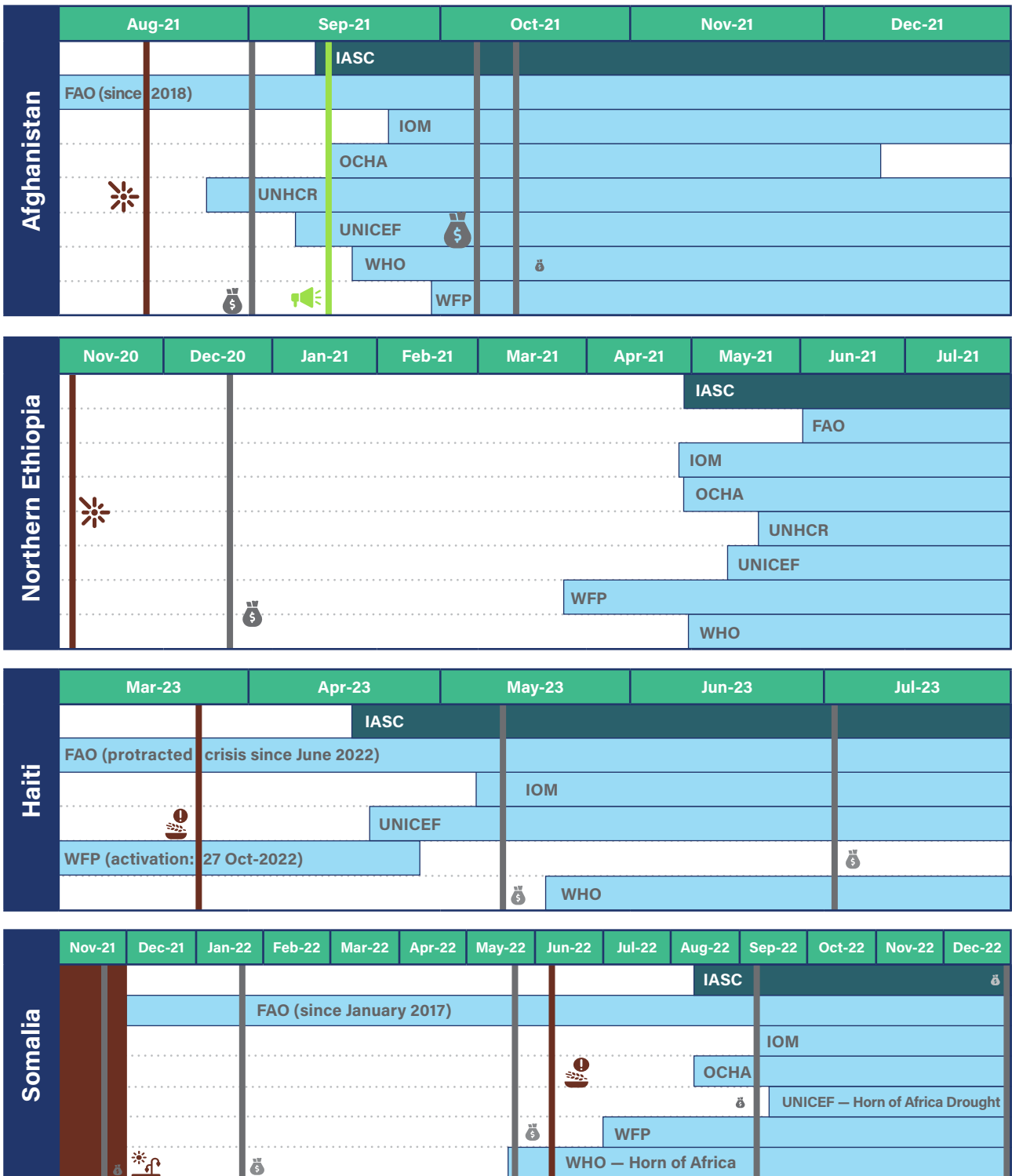
The analysis shows a correlation between the IASC scale-up and corporate activations. In a number of cases, agency procedures are activated in advance of the IASC mechanism, most likely because activations are supported by each agency's respective analysis. In Haiti, only five of the eight UN bodies triggered a corporate emergency. This did not include OCHA. Its staff in interviews stated that typically an IASC activation would offer a significant amount of leverage for the declaration of a corporate emergency, but that limits, including budgetary constraints continued to apply. In the sense that the rationale for activation is not known for every agency in every context, the diagrams in Figure 1 can be taken to show a clear correlation but not a causal connection between the System-Wide Scale-Up and an agency's internal triggers.

The diagrams represent a visual comparison between the timing of System-Wide Scale-Up activations and the triggering of UN agencies' corporate emergency protocols in Afghanistan, Haiti, northern Ethiopia and Somalia. The system-wide activation is placed on top with IASC member organizations following in alphabetical order. The picture also indicates the timing of the 'trigger', in the case that they are discrete events, the date of a CERF allocation as well as the Flash Appeal. An overview of all system-wide activations can be found in Annex 3.











28. A descriptive comparison of corporate emergency protocols of FAO, IOM, OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO and Save the Children, Care International and IRC was conducted. Refer to Annex 4 for details.

29. For example, FAO's protocols are described as deliberately mirroring those of the IASC. Additionally, FAO states that if no corporate activation is in place, they will activate automatically in line with a System-Wide Scale-Up. Again, however, there is a clear caveat that FAO reserves the right to act independently based on its own analysis.

Figure 1: First four months of System-Wide Scale-Up and corporate activations for focus countries



Legend

	Date or period of event		Date of CERF distribution
	Conflict		< 10M
	Drought		10-20M
	Food insecurity		20-50M
	Date of Humanitarian Flash Appeal		>50M

Note:

- This visualization covers periods of currently active and deactivated/expired system-wide Scale-Ups and L3s (post-2018).
- Individual agency declarations depend on agency's mandate and procedures. Not being presented in this overview does not responded to this emergency.
- A corporate or system-wide activation indicates the beginning of a set of changes to internal procedures.
- The date of activation does not give an indication of the level of response activities that are ongoing before or after the declaration.

This analysis, though providing a useful illustration, highlighted that a significantly larger review would be required to provide a fuller analysis and correlations. Interesting lines of enquiry might include a more detailed look at each agency's protocols, justification for activations and different levels of activations. Also worth considering are how the activations translate into practice, the extent to which each corporate emergency was influenced by the system-wide activation, the extent to which each agency might be able to quantify boosts to operational capacity and the release of internal funding reserves in relation to the System-Wide Scale-Up mechanisms.

9. What System-Wide Scale-Ups are not

9.1. No automatic trigger for external funding

The System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols are clear that “the Scale-Up activation does not indicate [...] that the crisis should, at this stage, be prioritized for funding by the international community”.³⁰ In line with this intent, there was a widespread consensus in interviews that it would be inappropriate to use chronic ongoing shortfalls in funding as justification for activation. This does appear somewhat contradictory of the finding that activation is widely understood to function as a signal to donors that the crisis is a priority in relative terms and that activation brings the expectation or hope of additional funding.

Donors at the global level stated that there was no direct correlation between their decision-making and System-Wide Scale-Ups. In the case of Somalia, for example, one donor stated that the data was clear, and was the basis on which their decision was made: “The IPC³¹ was more powerful ... Somalia was flashing red anyway”. They described the scale-up as a positive signal, but only by way of supporting a decision which had been made. In the case of Haiti, one smaller donor stated that they had supported activation, recognizing the need for a strengthened response. The situation, however, still fell short of their own capital’s threshold for a new, rapid event and, as such, there was no prospect of the release of additional funding “unless their internal political priorities changed”. In interviews, it was clear that in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Somalia there was significant correlation between donors’ own perception of relative severity of the crises, an alignment of political interests (or at least the absence of a clash of interests), and the scale-up. This means that it is likely that additional funding would have flowed, irrespective of a System-Wide Scale-Up. The wish by the IASC to send a signal of relative priority to donors while acknowledging that it is naïve to suggest that an activation would make a difference to funding is a difficult conundrum.

Though Protocol 1 does prescribe the development of a system-wide Flash Appeal, this is not routinely implemented and generally, the success of Flash Appeals varies across crises.³² Similar to activations, donor priorities appear not to be easily changed by appeals and therefore no correlation between activation and the success of a Flash Appeal can be drawn. Of the four case study countries, only Afghanistan launched a Flash Appeal as part of the scale-up activation.³³ Ethiopia prepared a Northern Ethiopia Response Plan after the activation.³⁴ Haiti had two Flash Appeals before activation and Somalia prepared no additional fundraising plans.³⁵ Flash Appeals as a fundraising tool are not unique to scale-up activations—see for example Pakistan.³⁶ Interviewees confirmed that Flash Appeals are not a significant component of System-Wide Scale-Ups.

Protocol 1 foresees a CERF and/or a country-based pooled fund (CBPF) allocation. All four case study countries received one or several CERF allocations before or around activation (see Figure 1). Yet CERF allocations are not unique to activations and are given to humanitarian responses on a needs basis regardless of the activation. Even with this limited analysis, it is fair to say that a scale-up activation

30. Standard Operating Procedures. Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation. Protocol 1: Definition and Procedures. November 2018. Endorsed by IASC Principals, [IASC Scale-Up Protocol 1](#)

31. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification

32. In 2022, the six Flash Appeals were funded in a range between 9.9 per cent (Haiti) and 87.1 per cent (Ukraine). [Humanitarian Action Info Overview 2022](#)

33. [Afghanistan Flash Appeal September 2021](#), funded at 172 per cent (Humanitarian Action Info Overview 2021)

34. [Revised Northern Ethiopia Response 2021](#)

35. Haiti launched a Flash Appeal prior to activation in November 2022 ([Cholera and Flash Appeal Haiti 2022](#)) and in August 2021, [Earthquake Flash Appeal Haiti 2021](#)

36. [Pakistan Flood Response Plan August 2022](#). This review did not undertake a full analysis of UN agencies’ individual appeals for any of the events in question, nor HRP revisions.

contributes to mobilizing additional internal funds within the international operational humanitarian system. It is also likely that donors may be able to re-allocate resources for “new” rapid-onset crises (e.g. major earthquakes) as well as instances where scale-ups coincide with their analysis and/or political interest. There is, however, no automatic connection between scale-ups and additional external funding.

9.2. No solution to systemic weaknesses and contextual challenges

Interviewees were clear that activation does not automatically lead to an improved quality of response.³⁷ It is also apparent that scale-up does not contribute significantly to solving external contextual challenges, such as lack of access, instrumentalization of aid, or security constraints. For instance, System-Wide Scale-Up does not address perceived risk aversion in security management; in fact there is no mention of a specific required security management approach in either of the two protocols.³⁸ Indeed, interviewees widely noted that to benefit from an increase in operational capacity at field level, a more “forward-leaning” stance on operational security, that is a less risk-averse approach, would be required. This was specifically cited in relation to the responses in Ethiopia, Somalia and Haiti. Interviewees also highlighted direct contradictions between scale-up and other system-level security directives. Hard caps on staffing levels in Somalia and especially in Haiti were noted as working against the scale-up of operational capacity. In other words, one part of the system is saying “scale-up”, another is saying “hold or reduce” staffing in country.

Overall, it was clear that System-Wide Scale-Up does not override the perceived inflexibility of UN Secretariat bodies and systems (including UNDSS). A small number of references were made to the change in HC/RC recruitment, previously under UNDP and now under the Secretariat. Recruitment under Secretariat rules and regulation was seen as significantly less flexible than the previous arrangement. In the case of OCHA, a number of staff referred to ongoing challenges in flexibility of human resources.

An OCHA staff member at country level said: “we have a surge pool, the surge function was triggered but... we can’t bypass Umoja. We can’t bypass Secretariat systems, so [after the surge] our systems undermine scale-up... To the point where there is no point [relying on the system]”.

A UN staff member stated, of UNDSS: “its configuration was fixed 10 years ago ... Essentially scale-ups make no difference... that level of responsiveness [is not there].”

The scale-up protocols do not have the intent to fix the humanitarian system. A number of interviewees did raise the point that problems of the system become inherently the problem of each scale-up because the activations are unable to overcome challenges that are systemic in nature. Mechanical analogies were used: “[the activation] works like a turbocharger in a car engine: it provides temporary extra power but does not alter the fundamental characteristics of the engine”. In simple terms, while the System-Wide Scale-Up is a tool used by the international response system, it is also a tool which is part of that same system. Therefore, it embodies the strengths of that system, but it has inherent weaknesses. As such, the tool cannot automatically address limitations of the system, such as the capacity to increase operational footprint in hard-to-reach locations, to enhance collective accountability, or to reduce bureaucracy, beyond the emergency measure built into each agency’s own protocols.

37. Various evaluations of humanitarian responses show that a focus on scale is often to the detriment of quality.

38. See for example, [IAHE Yemen](#).

SECTION B:

AREAS FOR REFLECTION — OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS

Most interviewees believe that the System-Wide Scale-Up mechanism is an extremely valuable tool for enhancing collective humanitarian response even when acknowledging its shortcomings and limitations. This section concludes the learning paper and aims to provide the basis for discussion around the future use and design of the System-Wide Scale-Up Mechanism.

10. The differences between intention, practice and perceptions

The review team deliberately focused on evidence from interviews analysing how the System-Wide Scale-Ups are perceived and experienced by those closest to decisions and implementation. Knowledge and understanding of the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols varies considerably among people, actors, countries, levels (headquarters/field). In part, this creates unrealistic expectations, making it difficult to reach a collective agreement on the objectives and deliverables of a scale-up activation in a given context. Moreover, it appears that perceptions of what System-Wide Scale-Up should deliver are deeply embedded in the collective views of interviewees. Despite the shift from the L3 to the System-Wide Protocol, the perception of what these can and should deliver in practice remains broadly unchanged and therefore not fully aligned with the intention of the current protocols. As long as the scale-up mechanism remains the only collective tool regulated through protocols to respond to crises and to support Humanitarian Coordinators and their teams, it seems unlikely that small adjustments to the protocols themselves might bring significant, 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 more logical and pragmatic approach to support changes in practice.

When considering an activation, three essential questions must be answered:

- *Is it acceptable that the activation will invoke all four initially interdependent functions, and considering their characteristics and limitations, does the activation of a System-Wide Scale-Up remain appropriate in the context under consideration?*
- *If yes, what precisely does an activation seek to achieve in this context? Considering the functions and characteristics of the protocols, is an activation the right answer to the needs of the crisis?*
- *What else must be done and by whom to address identified issues that the activation, in its current form, will be unable to address?*

Ultimately, when continuing to use the system-wide activation, it is important to recognize and accept the protocols and their limits in order to maximize their positive effects.

Lastly, given the varying knowledge and understanding of the protocols, it is worth considering the development of easy-to-digest communication materials for members of the humanitarian community when activating and for use in countries at risk of activation in the future. A better collective and realistic understanding of what the protocols can and cannot do will support their utilization.

11. Managing the signalling function

It is clear that multiple actors in the system support or justify activations on the basis that they signal the severity of a crisis and its relative importance. The protocols were intended to break this signalling function by focusing on internal operational capacity, but the activations continue to use the signalling function regardless. The use of the signalling function is increasing in line with the gap that is growing between available resources and the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance. This tension is likely to continue and grow.

The signalling function often remains a key factor that delays or undermines deactivation. While recognizing that the activation inherently signals a priority, operational agencies repeatedly stated the notion of any formal prioritization or ranking of crises was flawed, and specifically that the idea of ranking the extent of suffering was “simply wrong”. Similarly, interviewees were clear that the IASC has resisted the development of formal mechanisms to prioritize responses. In interviews however, donors described themselves as pushing the UN to improve prioritization of emergencies on the basis of objective needs assessments and data, such as systems to support data-based decision-making like those produced by ACAPS,³⁹ ACLED⁴⁰ and ongoing use of IPCs.

Solving this paradox is beyond the scope of this exercise. However, an automatic deactivation after three, six or nine months and announced on the day of activation, remained a popular suggestion among people interviewed. This review found that this is a popular and logical option. Yet, an automatic expiry is still likely to create the impression of a withdrawal of attention and support and is likely to be politically unpalatable.

Key areas for reflection to manage the signalling function:

- Consider the possibility of automatic deactivation—i.e. remove the possibility of extensions under any circumstances. This may be useful for the EDG, even hypothetically or conceptually. Consideration of alternatives to extension, including re-activation under exceptional circumstances and/or the use of the balancing or tempering elements suggested below, might be fruitful.
- Consider diminishing the need for an ongoing signalling function through other means of attention. This might include, for example, targeted press releases, country-specific conferences, visits from the highest-ranking or influential representatives, like the ERC, the Secretary-General or special envoys.
- Consider a softer approach to avoiding extensions. Make the extension harder to reach, shielding the protocol from political considerations by focusing on the technical and substantive elements.
- Consider the creation of a “watch list”—a category for countries where the system is or remains on alert, but is not scaled-up. This could either be countries where there is some deterioration but not yet enough for an activation, or countries in transition after deactivation of a scale-up. There is a possible link here to agencies’ use of graduated scales.

39. ACAPS website: <https://www.acaps.org/>

40. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is a disaggregated data collection, analysis and crisis mapping project: <https://acleddata.com/about-acled>

12. Sustaining scale-up and managing transition

The production of benchmarks was recognized in every country as an important tool although their quality could be improved and they could be used more consistently and linked to transition planning. While a somewhat distinct tool, timely OPRs could more consistently reference benchmarks, transition plans and extensions of deactivations, creating alignment among the accompanying measures.

Key points for reflection:

- Benchmarks could be set to reflect the typical time frame of an activation: for example, detail the progress expected within a six-month time frame.
- Benchmarks could take scale-up as a principal framework, rather than the broader response.
- While retaining the HCT's autonomy, country-specific benchmarks could be discussed at the EDG, enhancing the sense of collective responsibility.
- While retaining benchmarks as a mandatory tool, a swifter conclusion could be considered once they have reached the end of their useful life, reducing the workload of the OCHA team and removing the sense of reporting for reporting's sake.

This review identified transition planning as a 'missing link' between benchmarks and the ongoing humanitarian response cycle. The challenge of sustaining scale-ups has already been the subject of extensive discussions in the EDG.⁴¹ In addition, the protocols clearly state the need for a "transition plan", to supplement benchmarks and to plan for bridging from scale-up to longer-term response planning.

Key points for reflection:

- The use and importance of transition planning and a "sustain" protocol could be re-considered.
- Using benchmarking, transition planning and timely OPR missions in a complementary fashion could provide the basis for planning the sustainability of resources and programming, and for reinforcing the link with the development of the next country HRP (or a revision of the current HRP).
- Further investigation of the alignment of agencies' internal protocols and System-Wide Scale-Up might be useful here. Internally, most agencies retain a graduated system (typically L3, L2 and L1) for emergencies and FAO has introduced its own sustain protocol.

13. The implications of many simultaneous scale-up activations

There were an unprecedentedly high number of activations in 2022 and 2023 (see Figure 2). Combined with a high number of extensions, this leads to a consistently high number of countries that are simultaneously subject to scale-up. Many stakeholders are concerned by this because they fear that the activations become less effective the more there are. Qualified, deployable human resources are finite. In addition, the overall funding envelope does not expand with additional scale-ups. By extension, some see these factors as possibly increasing the risk of failure—i.e. activations that cannot deliver additional capacity of resources, or are harder to sustain beyond an initial surge, exposing the humanitarian response to further criticism.

⁴¹ A number of interviewees described discussions at the time of the protocols' revision related to the construction of a "sustain" protocol, which never came to fruition.

Figure 2: Overview of all IASC activations over time

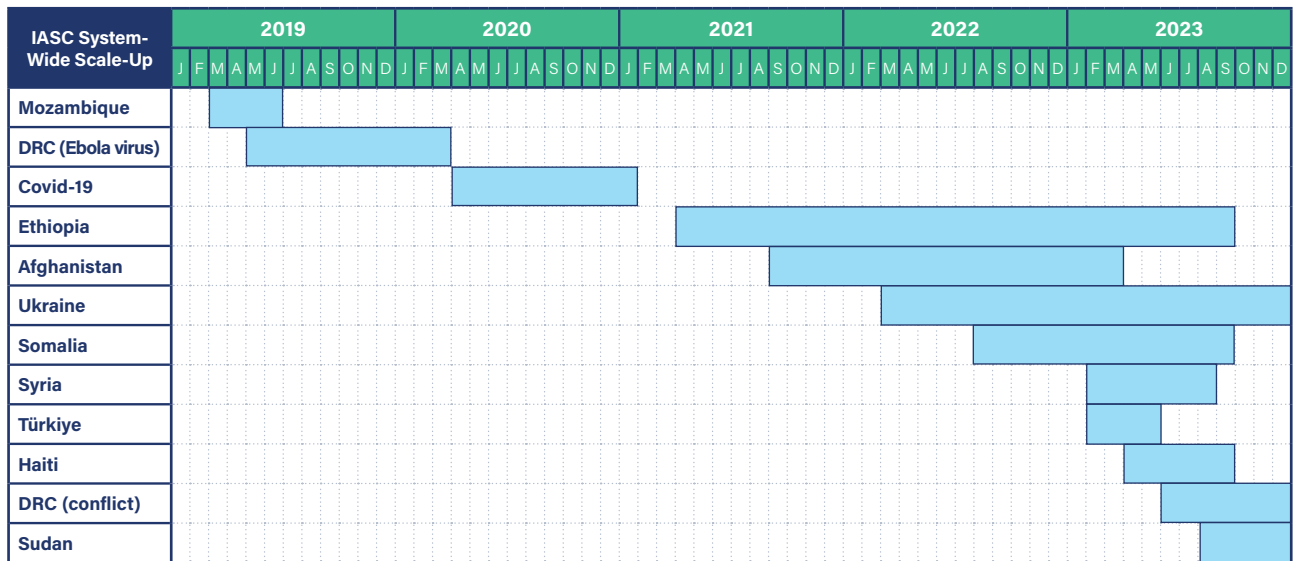
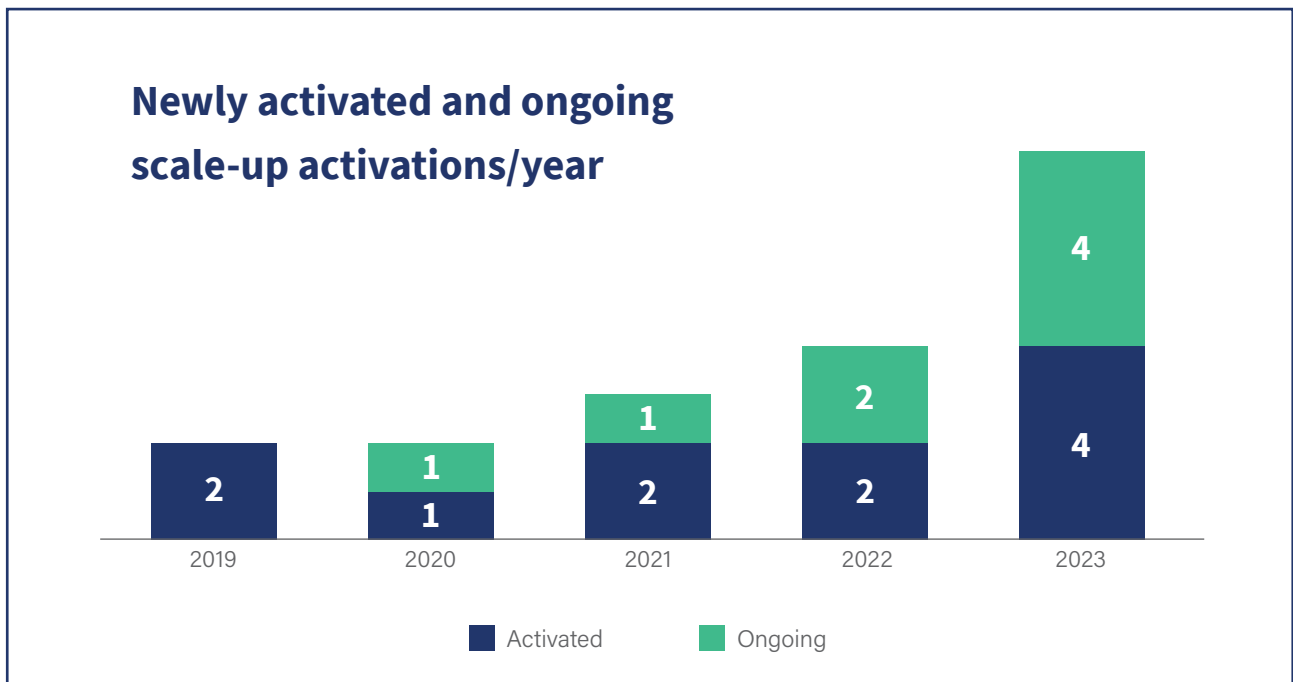


Figure 3: Overview of newly activated and ongoing activations/year



The question of whether the number of scale-ups should be limited, or not limited, is beyond the scope of this paper. While recognizing that capacity limits are real, it seems appropriate that discussions about potential activation should continue to be taken independently and as objectively and consistently as possible, rather than being influenced by the number of “standing” activations. The management of activations cannot escape the reality that prioritization of resources is inherent in humanitarian action and will be increasingly difficult as the gap between assessed needs and available funding grows.

Protocol 1 does contain criteria that allow for a full activation, including the rapid expansion of capacity where this is unlikely to solve challenges associated with security and access. This is a challenge which will persist while the protocols remain a “one-size-fits-all” tool that triggers multiple, interdependent functions.

Key points for reflection:

- Consider folding discussions around scale-up activations into any ongoing discussions with donors. Include donors' own role in influencing activations at the country level.
- Explore options to effectively split the functions of the System-Wide Scale-Up Mechanism to support more targeted actions.

14. Improving collective accountability

System-Wide Scale-Up was seen to enhance the collective nature of the response, albeit for a limited time. The sense of collective action was enhanced, in part, through the strengthening of clusters, and an influx of new international staff, often on surge missions. Scale-up, in addition, is recognized as being UN-centric, in general terms: all top-down and centre-out. Scale-up is noted as being an enhanced reflection of the current system, with its weaknesses as well as strengths built in and therefore it does not enhance collective accountability per se.

Key points for reflection:

- Any reflection triggered by this paper should ensure that System-Wide Scale-Up enhances accountability to affected populations and is inclusive and supportive of NGOs and the key role of local and national actors.
- As part of the development of benchmarks, it is a good practice to clarify which actors are responsible for specific actions (at country and global levels).
- Consider a data-sharing agreement among agencies as part of the protocols. In several contexts, some members of country teams were particularly explicit on the urgent need to include in the protocols an inter-agency agreement on data-sharing. The difficulty or unwillingness to share data among agencies has been highlighted as a major obstacle to better collective planning, transparency and collective accountability, which undermines the "collective nature of the response".
- Continue to conduct IAHEs to foster accountability towards affected communities and within the system.

15. Something practical

Individual IASC members acting in support of a System-Wide Scale-Up must be able to act quickly and with agility. In addition to surge mechanisms, this means rapid recruitment, procurement and support services, including security risk management. Corporate emergency protocols regulate such procedures and provide flexibility. UN bodies without such protocols struggle to respond to the requirements of scale-up.

Key points for reflection:

- Where such protocols do not exist, consider the development of corporate emergency protocols that allow for adapted and faster procedures, especially in procurement and recruitment, to support the response in an agile manner.
- Review opportunities to enable UNDSS to provide security risk management procedures that are fully supportive of scaled-up operations.

PART 3: **ANNEXES**



Annex 1: TOR

Annex 2: List of Interviewees

Annex 3: Timeline of IASC Activations since 2018

Annex 4: Descriptive Comparison of Corporate Emergency Protocols

Annex 5: Interview Protocol