**IASC System-Wide L3 Response**

**Discussion paper for the IASC Principals**

**Introduction**

Agreement around the concept of an *IASC Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation[[1]](#footnote-1)* (referred to here as an “L3 Response”) was a fundamental element of the Transformative Agenda, launched in December 2011 to address shortcomings in collective responses to major sudden-onset crises in Haiti and Pakistan in 2010. The IASC Principals have declared seven L3 Responses to date, of which four are currently active. Although initially designed for “new” sudden-onset emergencies, most L3 activations have been in response to a significant deterioration of a pre-existing crises, requiring adaptations to the mechanism, including during the latest L3 Response, for the DRC.

This paper outlines key features of the L3 mechanism, drawing in particular on discussions within the IASC Emergency Directors Group (EDG), which has been tasked with “supporting the [IASC] Principals in the activation and initial implementation of system-wide Level 3 emergency response[s].”[[2]](#footnote-2) The IASC Principals have also been directly engaged on these issues, and agreed on common messages on the tool in 2015.[[3]](#footnote-3) The paper does not seek to comprehensively describe or evaluate the tool’s impact in individual responses, but is intended to contribute to reflection by the IASC Principals on its use in the future.

**Objective of L3 Responses**

An L3 Response is intended to deliver a rapid, concerted mobilization of capacity and systems to enable accelerated and scaled-up assistance and protection. It is an operational tool, which seeks to address the fitness-for-purpose of the *response.* It is not intended to serve as an indicator of the severity of the underlying *crisis*, even though the scale and complexity of the crisis will inform the initial decision to activate. By extension, deactivation of an L3 Response does not depend upon resolution of the underlying crisis.

**Activation of L3 Responses**

Decisions on activation of L3 Responses are taken by the Emergency Relief Coordinator in consultation with the IASC Principals, based on analysis against five criteria: scale, complexity, urgency, capacity and reputational risk. Of the criteria, capacity is most within the control of the IASC, and therefore at the core of what an L3 Response activation can be expected to address. The IASC L3 Response protocol sets out timeframes for key steps during the activation discussion, reflecting the tool’s genesis during discussions on more effective collective response to sudden-onset emergencies. In practice, with most L3 Responses activated in conflict settings as opposed to natural disasters, flexibility has emerged around activation timelines. The table below summarises current and past L3 Responses.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Response** | **Activated** | **Deactivated** | **Duration (months)** |
| **Syria (ongoing)** | 15-Jan-13 | N/A | 57 |
| **Philippines** | 14-Nov-13 | 11-Feb-14 | 3 |
| **CAR** | 12-Dec-13 | 13-May-15 | 17 |
| **South Sudan** | 11-Feb-14 | 05-May-16 | 27 |
| **Iraq (ongoing)** | 12-Aug-14 | N/A | 38 |
| **Yemen (ongoing)** | 01-Jul-15 | N/A | 27 |
| **DRC (ongoing)** | 20-Oct-17 | N/A | 0 |

**Implications of activation of an L3 Response**

Activation of an L3 Response commits IASC organizations to “ensure that they put in place the right systems and mobilize resources to contribute to the response as per their mandate areas, Cluster Lead Agency responsibilities,” and any other commitments made as part of the activation. Additional steps include establishment of an HCT (if not already in place), deployment of senior leadership support and activation of “empowered leadership,” deployment of surge capacity (framed as a core team of the Inter-Agency Rapid Response Mechanism [IARRM]), implementation of a rapid joint needs assessment, an automatic allocation from the CERF and elaboration of a strategic plan.

As is the case regarding activation timelines, flexibility has emerged around several of these elements, particularly in established operations in which senior leadership and core components of the Humanitarian Planning Cycle (HPC) are already in place. The reference to the IARRM has been interpreted as a collective commitment to the timely mobilization of appropriate surge capacity, as opposed to a standalone, centrally-managed pool. The 2015 HPC Reference module has also clarified that Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations can be initiated by the ERC, upon the advice of the EDG, but that this is not a mandatory step, also in view of the Operational Peer Review (OPR) mechanism, which is typically deployed within 90 days of activation of an L3 Response to help determine whether “course correctors” are needed in the response.

Although not formally required under the IASC Protocol, operational benchmarks have been developed as part of L3 Responses for Yemen and the DRC, in an effort to:

* clarify what the activation is intended to achieve (and support external communication in this regard);
* focus HQ engagement and accountability around key collective support priorities;
* provide a basis for measuring progress of system-wide mobilization; and
* facilitate predictable deactivation of the L3 Response and transition into a more stable operational footing.

**Deactivation**

The IASC Protocol refers to development of an “exit strategy” within 3 weeks of activation, addressing, at a minimum, leadership arrangements and transition from surge to more regular staffing solutions post-deactivation. The Protocol states that activation should not exceed 3 months, initially. Ensuring predictable transition out of L3 Response status in complex crises has been among the mechanism’s challenges. However, the approach taken for South Sudan in March 2016 – in which the HCT recommended deactivation on the basis of progress against agreed operational benchmarks, while also setting out a set of “accompanying measures” needed to ensure operational stability post-deactivation – offers a model “life-cycle” with the potential to be replicated in other complex settings.

1. Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation: definition and procedures [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IASC Concise Terms of Reference and Action Procedures, February 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “What does the IASC Humanitarian System-Wide Level 3 Emergency mean in practice? Agreeing a common understanding of the L3 Response” https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/coordination/ngos/document/what-does-iasc-humanitarian-system-wide-level-3-emergency-response-mean [↑](#footnote-ref-3)