

POST-COVID-19: SCENARIOS



Possible developments in the global humanitarian operating environment throughout 2021



Scenario 1

Continuing adaptation of response mechanisms; existing power dynamics unchanged

PROBABILITY



While overall funding for humanitarian operations reduces slightly and needs increase, assistance is further prioritised leaving higher numbers of people with needs that are unmet by the traditional humanitarian system. Humanitarian programming continues to be largely controlled by actors outside affected countries, despite a growth in the ratio of national to international staff running programmes. While some lower-priority programmes are closed, most programming continues – though it is slightly scaled down and is heavily constrained where severe COVID-19 outbreaks result in reduced access and disrupted supply chains. Monitoring becomes increasingly remote.

There is insufficient capacity to respond to significant new needs in education, mental health, and psychosocial services, especially where COVID-19 health programming is prioritised.

Elsewhere, donors become more selective about how they use their funds, which leaves pockets of humanitarian needs unidentified and/or unmet. Many highly vulnerable people become less visible and totally dependent on local coping mechanisms.

Scenario 2

Increased national influence; reframed international support

PROBABILITY



Funding and operational pressures drive humanitarian organisations to prioritise partnerships with local actors, who become progressively more autonomous in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. New and existing donors increase direct funding to national actors. This occurs predominantly in contexts with high levels of national and local capacity. The costs of humanitarian operations fall in some cases, as low-cost operations are conducted through

solutions more fitting to the local culture. Accountability to communities increases, as communities themselves operate within the response. In other cases, national actors set up responses that are less principled and in which data is collected poorly, assessments are not rigorous, and prioritisation of response activities is not efficient or neutral. In some countries or crises, some sections of the population are marginalised or excluded from the response or support structures/safety net programmes, because of political, ethnic, and religious discrimination.

Some needs, especially protection and health needs, remain unmet where they are overlooked or not perceived as priorities by national and local organisations.

Scenario 3

Increased national control; severely reduced international influence and support

PROBABILITY



National governments assume increased responsibility for the provision of humanitarian assistance, as a result of either the rapid downscaling of internationally funded and managed operations or because of a national desire to exert increased control – or both. While some national response mechanisms manage to successfully scale up, supported by a growth in locally led initiatives, elsewhere limited international assistance and national response capacity are insufficient to meet needs. In such contexts, national authorities struggle to maintain the level and scope of existing social safety nets. Remote and hard-to-access regions are increasingly underserved, as urban areas and short-term needs, such as COVID-19 control, are prioritised, worsening underlying inequalities and vulnerabilities. Marginalised groups are further discriminated against, increasing protection concerns. Accountability decreases, and individual and community coping capacities are reduced, worsening needs.

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INTRODUCTION

Problem statement

As it unfolded during 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic increased humanitarian needs and complicated the delivery of humanitarian assistance. While the virus continues to spread, compounding existing humanitarian crises in some countries and threatening to tip other countries into crisis, a significant change in humanitarian funding is underway – with some donors reducing funding levels, while others increase. The pandemic has highlighted many of the ways in which the global humanitarian system has failed to reform and has illustrated the importance of local actors in the provision of assistance.

Many humanitarian organisations have had to adapt their ways of operating – reducing travel and increasing remote working – and funding shortages remain a significant risk. The following **scenarios consider three different ways in which the provision of humanitarian assistance might change over 2021.**

1. Continuing adaptation of response mechanisms; existing power dynamics unchanged.

The humanitarian system continues to function much as it did in 2020, adapting to the changes created by COVID-19 and the economic environment. Humanitarian efforts continue to be significantly influenced by international actors (such as donors, the UN, or NGOs) and norms.

2. Increased national influence; reframed international support. Positive dialogue and collaboration between international, national, and local actors result in greater empowerment of the local organisations and institutions that are closer to people affected by crises, more context-appropriate responses, improved allocation of resources, and injections of targeted support from the international community as required.

3. Increased national control; severely reduced international influence and support. Humanitarian assistance declines significantly as international support largely ceases, without adequate compensating increases in service delivery by national actors.

Scope of the scenarios

These scenarios focus primarily on the potential ways the global humanitarian situation may change over 2021, although they are anticipated to remain valid well into 2022. It should be noted that the scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Because the focus is global, it is possible for one scenario to transpire in one region or country while the other scenarios may develop elsewhere.

Purpose of the scenarios

The scenarios do not go into detail on specific contexts or countries, but consider the extent to which, and how, humanitarian assistance might be delivered and what part the international humanitarian system may play. They are not forecasts; they describe situations that could occur in the coming year and are designed to highlight the possible impacts and humanitarian consequences associated with each scenario. The primary purpose is to support strategic planning, create awareness, and promote discussion among humanitarian policy-makers and donors, through an understanding of the possible ways in which humanitarian needs may end up being met, or not – whether intentionally or unintentionally.

See the [Methodology section](#) for more information on how these scenarios were developed.

For each scenario, a description of the possible future over 2021 is followed by an analysis of impacts on the humanitarian situation and the response that might be expected.

Compounding factors that could impact any of the scenarios are discussed at the end of the document.

These three scenarios aim to consider significantly different ways in which 2021 may develop. The actual future may lie somewhere between the three (combining different elements of each).

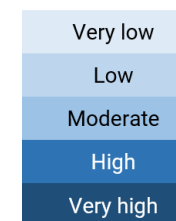
How to read the scenarios

The three scenarios are not mutually exclusive. All three scenarios could play out simultaneously in different contexts. The following table lists various characteristics that a country or context may have and the degree to which each characteristic contributes to the probability of each scenario occurring.

Scenarios 2 or 3 are therefore more likely to develop than scenario 1 in forgotten or underfunded crises; while scenarios 1 or possibly 2 can be expected to materialise in high-profile crises.

Country characteristics for each scenario:

	DEGREE TO WHICH EACH CHARACTERISTIC CONTRIBUTES TO THE SCENARIO											
	1				2				3			
Is of traditional or strategic interest to key donors				X			X		X			
High-profile ongoing crisis			X		X				X			
Significant, high-profile sudden onset/new crisis requiring a system-wide emergency response			X		X				X			
Limited disaster management/humanitarian response capacity			X		X					X		
Emerging or strong disaster management/humanitarian response capacity	X							X				X
Forgotten/underfunded crisis	X				X			X		X		
Low(est) income		X							X			
Emerging economy recovering earlier than expected, or more strongly, from the effects of COVID-19	X						X					X
Belongs to strong regional groups/organisations		X					X			X		
Strong nationalistic sentiment	X							X				X
Established central governments (in some cases democratic, in others non-democratic)	X				X							X
Countries accustomed to facing regular/frequent/seasonal crises	X							X				X
Established social safety net programmes	X						X			X		
Strong civil society organisations	X						X					X
Known significant presence of armed groups		X			X				X			
High presence of/potential for non-traditional donors (active private sector)	X							X	X			
Active diaspora ready to support citizens back home	X							X		X		



1 Continuing adaptation of response mechanisms; existing power dynamics unchanged

PROBABILITY



As the spread of COVID-19 reduces and vaccine roll-out progresses in many high-income countries, economies start to recover. Overall funding for humanitarian operations declines as some traditional institutional donors substantially cut funding – although this is partially compensated by increased funding by non-traditional donors, both government and private sector, to humanitarian organisations. International travel increases but remains below 2019 levels. Humanitarian programming continues to be largely controlled by actors outside affected countries, despite a growth in the ratio of national to international staff running programmes. While some lower-priority programmes are closed, most programming continues – though it is slightly scaled down, and is heavily constrained where severe outbreaks of COVID-19 result in reduced access and disrupted supply chains. As the overall number of people in need of humanitarian assistance increases, assistance is further prioritised, which leaves higher numbers of people with needs unmet by the traditional humanitarian system.

Possible triggers/assumptions

- UN agencies and INGOs continue to receive funding for in-country humanitarian operations on a scale similar to 2020.
- New humanitarian donors emerge.
- COVID-19 infection rate among humanitarian staff remains low because of effective vaccine roll-out.
- Most countries successfully contain COVID-19.
- International travel restrictions eased.

Impact

As the severity of COVID-19 outbreaks in many countries reduces there is an overall easing of containment measures, although the health, economic, and social impacts of COVID-19 continue to be felt in many countries and the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance grows. Programme costs – which were already high – rise because of increased logistical and COVID-19-related costs, despite slightly reduced international staff costs. Even with this increased gap between funding and needs, the humanitarian system is unable to transform in a 12-month period. There are no substantial changes to the delivery of humanitarian aid. While agencies employ more national staff and work more with partners – aiming to reduce costs – the unbalanced relationship between local and international actors persists, as power remains outside the affected countries and the localisation agenda does not progress at a greater pace than in previous years.

Reductions in funding mean that institutional donors refine their focus and provide assistance to fewer crises via fewer international actors. Institutional donors continue the trend to contract for-profit development companies as delivery agencies for major humanitarian programmes. This exposes the most vulnerable people in countries with populations at risk of falling into humanitarian crisis and those already in crisis who are no longer prioritised for response. The system struggles to respond to these needs and pockets of extreme need can be found, even in some middle-income countries. Marginalised and socially excluded groups are particularly at risk. They are excluded from vaccination campaigns as well as COVID-19 recovery programmes that are often inadequate.

Humanitarian consequences

In countries continuing to receive significant international and regional assistance – such as the most severe and high-profile humanitarian contexts – the humanitarian response continues as in 2020, largely determined by the priorities of international actors, with little meaningful empowerment of national actors. Most humanitarian workers are vaccinated, although not all national staff, and programmes continue to operate as before. Basic needs continue to be largely met but capacity is insufficient to respond to the significant new needs, specifically in education, mental health, and psychosocial services. Partiality is increasingly an issue as local actors have more control over the disbursement of assistance and remote monitoring and evaluation becomes widespread. In countries experiencing severe COVID-19 outbreaks, health programming is prioritised over other needs.

Elsewhere, donors become more selective about how they use their funds, which leaves pockets of humanitarian needs unidentified and/or unmet. Many highly vulnerable people become less visible to the international humanitarian system and become totally dependent on local coping mechanisms and, where available, limited state assistance. Needs increase significantly in countries with uncontained outbreaks or where strict containment measures are enforced because of delayed vaccine roll-out. Violations of basic rights increase.

2 Increased national influence; reframed international support

PROBABILITY



Reduced humanitarian funding from traditional donors – coupled with the continued uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 and associated containment measures that significantly restrict international mobility and affect the global economy – drives humanitarian organisations to prioritise the development of partnerships with local actors. This happens predominantly in contexts with high levels of national and local capacity. In some countries, new donors take over the role of traditional donors. Some new donors have less regard for humanitarian principles and for tailoring programmes to the population's needs. Traditional donors continue to mostly support countries where they might have greater (political and economic) interests, often through bilateral cooperation.

International travel remains restricted and logistics chains are delayed. Some countries continue to enforce strict containment measures (at borders, internally, or both), while others prioritise maintaining economic activity and, eventually, accept a higher infection rate. In some cases, low-cost operations are conducted through solutions more fitting to the local culture. Accountability to communities increases, as communities themselves operate within the response. In other cases, national actors set up a response that is less principled and in which data is collected poorly, assessments are not rigorous, and the prioritisation of response activities is neither efficient nor neutral.

Possible triggers/assumptions

- Traditional funding to international organisations reduces substantially from 2020 levels.
- New humanitarian donors emerge.
- National and/or regional authorities receive increased funding for humanitarian activities.
- International humanitarian business costs increase.
- International travel and logistic options become more restricted or expensive.
- National support to local humanitarian actors increases.

- Movement of international humanitarian staff is severely restricted.
- Global roll-out of COVID-19 vaccination is slow.
- Trust between donors and national partners increases.

Impact

In contexts with strong national and local humanitarian organisations, existing links with international organisations change as some (non-traditional) donors increase direct funding to national and local organisations. This enables them to assume a leadership role and seek support from international organisations as desired or needed. This significantly advances the localisation of humanitarian assistance and has multiple potential benefits for humanitarian response. These include becoming potentially more cost-effective and timely because of the increased use of local resources and staff, and becoming more relevant and appropriate to the context. At the same time, localisation is not without risks, especially risks linked to the dynamics of the context and leadership. In some contexts, aid becomes more politicised and excludes groups that are not favoured by those in control, while elsewhere interventions become more fragmented at the national level.

As local organisations switch from effectively being used as contractors for international organisations to leading the response, the historical lack of capacity building in areas such as humanitarian principles, monitoring and evaluation, and donor reporting becomes apparent. While interventions become more accountable to the affected population in many instances, some organisations struggle to increase their capacity to meet international standards. International involvement in aid provision becomes increasingly remote, and traditional donors struggle to accept monitoring and evaluation systems in which they cannot participate.

As UN agencies and INGOs adopt a more advisory role, the response becomes significantly more localised, driven by recipient countries and their priorities. The way aid is delivered changes significantly and cash assistance modalities increase. Although the response is more tailored to the local population, this does not always translate into a more efficient response. As some sectors or areas of response are overlooked, some humanitarian needs or structural problems that drive needs remain unaddressed.

Faced with increased foreign funding to national humanitarian organisations, some recipient governments may seek to step up bureaucracy, influence, and – in some cases – control over these humanitarian funds. Some countries either politicise or militarise aid provision, and in some contexts local priorities do not align with those of donors or international partners. This leads to tensions as established humanitarian principles are challenged or ignored, especially where they clash with cultural or community norms. Despite support from international organisations, some actors fail to adequately assess needs or distribute aid in a fair, equitable, and transparent manner, leading to outcomes as described in scenario 3.

Humanitarian consequences

Successful reframed local partnerships in which national or local organisations take the lead result in significantly greater impact, as the localised response becomes increasingly relevant and accountable to beneficiaries and their communities. This more locally driven system addresses some of the long-entrenched inequalities and structural discrimination inherent in the internationally led humanitarian response system. Some of these issues remain however, and new issues arise. The coping strategies of affected people are strengthened, supported by greater solidarity within communities and a widespread principle of 'community serving the community'. In some countries or crises however, some areas of the population are marginalised or excluded from the response or from support structures/safety net programmes based on political, ethnic, and religious discrimination.

Some needs, especially some protection and health needs, remain unmet if they are not perceived as priorities for action by national and local organisations. This is mainly driven by different political agendas, a different approach in prioritising the response, and some cultural differences over what is socially acceptable and what is not – and what can be changed within a society and what cannot. In some contexts, programmes or activities like vaccination campaigns or most protection-related programmes (e.g. GBV sensitisation campaigns and assistance, or child protection) are overlooked.

3 Increased national control; severely reduced international influence and support

PROBABILITY



Increasingly inward-looking policies adopted by the major donor countries result in significant reductions in international aid funding in order to fund domestic needs. Reprioritisation and reallocation of international funds towards severe humanitarian crises and extremely fragile states result in large-scale funding reductions for international operations in countries with lower-profile crises and weak ties to donor countries, as well as reductions in countries where authorities already provide some social services and have response experience. A number of international humanitarian organisations progressively disengage or scale down operations.

Governments assume increased responsibility for the provision of humanitarian assistance within their own territories. This results from reduced external assistance, governments being empowered by a surge in executive powers deployed to curtail COVID-19, and – in some cases – increased nationalism fostered as a result of border closures and the need to fight the pandemic as a national collective. Some support for this comes from regional donors and response mechanisms. Some national response mechanisms manage to successfully scale up, while others find the transition to a more national response challenging and the limited international assistance available fails to integrate effectively with the national response.

Possible triggers

- Traditional funding (from large state donors) to international humanitarian organisations reduces substantially from 2020 levels.
- International humanitarian business costs increase.
- Movement of international humanitarian staff is severely restricted.
- International travel and logistic options become further restricted (because of COVID-19 variants) or more expensive, including for humanitarians.
- States increase controls (such as bureaucratic procedures and costs) over external humanitarian funding.

- Regional, national, and local donors are unable to scale up/restructure funding and resources in a very short timeframe.
- Delayed and slow economic recovery.
- COVID-19 surveillance, response, and vaccination continue to consume significant state resources.

Impact

In countries with established national disaster management systems and protocols or countries with a limited presence of international organisations, a rapid and significant decrease in international actors and funding is replaced by strong state management of humanitarian operations and the growth of national actors and community-led initiatives. Initial economic recovery and revitalisation of the labour market, resumption of remittance inflows, and more livelihood opportunities towards the end of 2021 further enable the national response capacity. In these contexts, the impact and humanitarian consequences are similar to scenario 2.

In contexts where state authorities lack resources or well-established emergency management structures – or are overwhelmed by the COVID-19 crisis – and there is no managed transition of internationally led operations to national or development actors, the provision of humanitarian assistance falls largely to national humanitarian organisations and communities themselves. Many national organisations struggle to replace international funding sources as national economies are slow to recover, limiting national and subnational funding options. Low levels of remittances continue. While local solidarity and community support enterprises strengthen, and many locally led responses increase community ownership and are more relevant and sustainable, local response capacity falls overall – while needs continue to rise.

Response in urban centres is often prioritised over rural and remote areas where access is more difficult, state leadership might be disputed, and provision of services has been historically weaker. Response capacity is patchy where training programmes are not rolled out sub-nationally and where there is limited national and local participation – especially in areas where all or part of the population mistrusts the government. In these areas, government-led initiatives struggle to gain legitimacy and meet needs effectively. In some contexts, reduced international oversight and shrinking space for national and local civil society leads to the decreased accountability of authorities. Violent crackdowns and repression targeting marginalised areas and groups become more likely.

Governments struggle to maintain the level and scope of existing social safety nets. Remote and hard-to-access regions are more easily omitted from lists of targeted areas. Individual coping capacities to respond to shocks are also reduced, as the population keeps tapping into dwindling personal savings.

Humanitarian consequences

Some people in need fall between the cracks, and their needs – especially for food assistance and health services – are unmet during the initial transition of activities from international to national actors. In the short term, internal displacement/migration increases as people migrate to centres where provision of services is better (or is perceived to be) and opportunities are greater, or where the cost of living is lower (or is perceived to be).

Faced with limited financing and the impossibility of a rapid, systemic shift of the humanitarian response, countries allocate funds only to the most urgent needs and on a selective basis, privileging certain groups over others (for example, the workforce over children), and decreasing prevention and non-life-saving activities. As resources are diverted – for example, from education and regular (childhood) immunisation campaigns – to address short-term needs, the risk of triggering long-term and unmet needs rises, as do underlying vulnerabilities. Discrimination against marginalised groups and areas increases.

Humanitarian principles are not consistently applied, especially in countries where levels of social cohesion are low and population groups have been historically discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity, religion, caste, gender, age, and migration status. These groups are excluded from national relief packages, deprioritised in humanitarian assistance, and are not involved in government-led humanitarian responses.



COMPOUNDING FACTORS

The following developments can occur in parallel to any of the above scenarios and have the potential to significantly change the nature of humanitarian response.

Elections and major political events

Changes in the humanitarian, development, military, and diplomatic policies of international administrations, including funding allocations, directly affect crises. One example is the re-prioritisation of humanitarian issues and funding within the new US administration. The Biden administration has announced a reversal of the funding cuts to the UNRWA imposed by the Trump administration, and has abolished the designation of Ansar Allah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in Yemen, restoring the conditions of humanitarian access that were present in early January 2021 (BBC 27/01/2021; CNN 06/02/2021). It remains to be seen how this momentum will keep playing out in fragile and conflict settings – for example, where crises have stagnated for years and issues of sanctions and troop deployment remain relevant (The Washington Institute 25/01/2021).

Rapid and unexpected political changes such as coup d'états can quickly alter the political trajectory of a country and impact humanitarian operations. An example from 2020 is Mali, where a military coup triggered regional sanctions – though these were temporary – and humanitarian operations were disrupted (IOM 29/01/2021). Myanmar is another recent example: some INGOs have temporarily suspended operations, and further limits on already restricted humanitarian access could follow (The New Humanitarian 02/02/2021).

A number of countries with high to very high severity crises in the INFORM Severity Index are hosting elections in 2021, among them Somalia, Niger, Chad, Haiti, Ethiopia, Honduras, and Iraq (NDI 2021). In fragile states affected by conflict and inter- and intra-communal divides, election periods can result in increased underlying tensions and usher in potential instability if results are disputed. In other cases, they are a logistical and security challenge for authorities who need to ensure the safety of voters and candidates amid increased attacks from armed groups that oppose the electoral process.

Conflict

Conflict is one of the major drivers of humanitarian needs. It also largely shapes the humanitarian response. A major deterioration in security within a country will severely restrict humanitarian response as international staff movement and, to a lesser extent, national staff movement is severely restricted. National and specifically local or community response actors often have a more impactful response because of their access and acceptance, especially where responses are locally led. Although a country descending into conflict in any of the above scenarios will struggle to provide humanitarian assistance, if there are strong local

and national capacities with established mechanisms for external support, as envisioned in scenario 2, a more effective response is possible.

Large-scale natural disaster

Should the UN declare a system-wide emergency triggered by a large-scale natural disaster – which meets the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) complexity, capacity, urgency, and reputational risk thresholds – funding will likely become available to enable international humanitarian organisations to support the affected country with emergency response activities (IASC 04/01/2013). This form of support can be expected to be similar to recent sudden-onset crises; although if, as foreseen in scenario 3, many international organisations have withdrawn or substantially scaled down their presence in the affected country, this international support may be slower to materialise. This delay would be compounded if the national authorities decide to require substantially different operating modalities for international assistance.

Disease outbreaks (other than COVID-19)

While media attention is focused on the global pandemic, new outbreaks of other diseases were reported throughout 2020, with varying numbers of cases and geographical reach – adding to ongoing health emergencies. These include yellow fever, cholera, measles, dengue, Ebola, and Chikungunya (WHO 2020). These new outbreaks have mostly affected countries in Africa, Asia, and South America. While surveillance, monitoring, and response systems to emerging outbreaks are in place, severe deterioration of health infrastructure (as reported in Venezuela), a sudden surge of COVID-19 cases and related hospitalisations (as seen in Lebanon), or the reduced coverage of routine immunisation campaigns during the pandemic could contribute to a higher than normal number of cases and a weaker response to emerging health emergencies (HRW 2020; Reuters 18/01/2021; Lassi et al. 22/01/2021; Shet et al. 27/01/2021).

Spread of COVID-19 variants

For more information on this compounding factor please refer to the [Current situation](#).

Speed and scope of COVID-19 vaccination campaigns

For more information on this compounding factor please refer to the [Current situation](#).

CURRENT SITUATION

Before answering the question on how humanitarian needs might be met for the rest of 2021, the report presents some key points on how humanitarian needs were met in the last year. This section is by no means comprehensive, but rather outlines trends and debates to facilitate understanding of the elements at play in the three scenarios. Country examples in this section are taken from ten humanitarian crises with a Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and a very high level of severity in the INFORM Severity Index of January 2021: Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, Ethiopia, Chad, and Venezuela. In terms of state funding, attention was focused on the five largest donors for 2020 according to the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) data: the US, Germany, the EU, the UK, and Japan (FTS 2020).

Country examples considered in the current situation section

1. Ten countries affected by humanitarian crises that are covered by a Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and displaying a very high level of severity in the INFORM Severity Index as at January 2021.

2. Five largest donors for 2020 based on FTS data.



Among the five largest donors is the EU, which is not displayed in the current map as it includes multiple countries.

Sources: FTS; INFORM Severity Index. Created with Datawrapper

i. In review: February 2020–February 2021

An evolving context for humanitarians

The context in which humanitarian action takes place faced long-standing and new challenges in 2020. Crises were complex and layered, as the impact of phenomena like climate change continued to intensify them. Areas of protracted insecurity, such as in the Sahel region, saw the fragmentation of armed groups and expanding conflict lead to an erosion in the application of international humanitarian law. Sudden onset disasters compounded a number of pre-existing crises, such as in Lebanon (the Beirut port explosion) and Sudan (nationwide floods). Throughout 2020, the direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic added another driver of needs in several countries. The pandemic brought long-debated issues of inequality and systemic racism once again to the fore within the popular conscience in multiple societies and within the humanitarian system, even if the discussion is still a widely Western-dominated one. The very definition of humanitarian needs and the scope of humanitarian work are also up for debate, as the pandemic has blurred barriers between sectors and response actors in a number of countries. Analysts are divided over how this will shape 2021, with some more hopeful about the opportunity for systemic changes in the sector, and others more sceptical of the capabilities for renewal (The New Humanitarian 29/10/2020). While systemic reforms require years to take place – if they happen – some emerging and recurring trends and approaches were observed in 2020.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic has brought with it much uncertainty, which affects humanitarian planning and operations. 11 vaccines have been approved worldwide with doses administered in over 80 countries (Our World in Data accessed 15/02/2021; McGill University 2021). Access to vaccines has not been equitable so far, with certain countries – many in the African continent – struggling to obtain access. This means that virus containment and herd immunity targets will be reached at very different stages throughout the world, with some high-income countries aiming for a return to 'normality' in late 2021, while other low-income countries may only see substantial progress in vaccination campaigns as late as 2024 (The Economist 25/01/2021; Fortune 07/02/2021). Adding to this uncertainty are four new variants which are emerging and spreading in multiple countries. Tests and further research are needed to verify the efficacy of currently used vaccines and therapies against specific virus variants (MedPage Today 09/02/2021). The emergence of new and potentially more contagious and/or deadly COVID-19 variants in 2021 remains a risk, and global disease surveillance systems are on high alert. The quality of available COVID-19 data also varies, and depends on methodologies for analysis, reporting at country and subnational levels, and the testing and tracing capacities of different nations. This makes the assessment of the current and future trajectory and impact of the pandemic more challenging.



COVID-19 has not only manifested itself as a health crisis with increasing hospitalisations, fatality rates, and mental health issues, but also as a socio-economic and protection crisis (WHO 05/10/2020; ACAPS 2020). Multiple sources globally point both to the risk and actual increase in cases of domestic violence (Time 03/02/2021). From a socio-economic perspective, movement restrictions during the pandemic and the stall of entire business sectors that are based on face-to-face contact have caused both temporary and definitive job losses and a reduction in work hours and salaries. Latest estimates of the number of additional people worldwide who fell below the threshold of extreme poverty in 2020 because of the pandemic are at least 119 million – 60% of whom are in South Asia (World Bank 11/01/2021). This figure is also connected to worldwide job losses, with the number of working hours lost in 2020 equivalent to the loss of 114 million full-time jobs. Job losses are expected to continue globally in 2021 with the equivalent of 90 million full-time jobs lost. Differences based on geography and sex have emerged, with the Americas and women being the most affected by job losses in 2020 (ILO 25/01/2021).

This directly affects humanitarian caseloads. With reduced income, households face difficult choices that affect current and future expenditure on basic needs such as children's education, primary healthcare, and basic food items, which can also impact households' food security in the long term (World Bank 14/12/2020). Cautious predictions for 2021 hint at a moderate economic recovery by the end of the year, but the extent and speed of this recovery will vary hugely based on countries' fiscal conditions at the start of 2020, including levels of national debt, and policy space (IMF 26/01/2021; ILO 25/01/2021). Rising poverty and the overall cost of the crisis are of particular concern for low-income countries (IMF 26/01/2021).

ii. Response strategies

Remote (technology)

As COVID-19 spread throughout the globe, those who could work from home were encouraged to do so, while other sectors of work were restricted. The humanitarian sector already had experience in digital solutions and remote management before the pandemic. Where digital approaches were already in use, they were scalable (such as protection-related consultations, cash and voucher assistance (CVA), remote assessments, and Communication with Communities), while the implementation of radically new technological solutions did not prove as effective in the past year (ODI 11/2020; ICRC 28/09/2020; Geneva Solutions 01/12/2020). This is either because they were found to be inadequate for aid delivery or because not enough time was available for testing and upscaling (ODI 11/2020).

While digitalisation has provided new opportunities to work with data and information, the same pre-pandemic trade-offs and limitations remain. Not all people in need have equal access to technology, with a digital divide that persists on the basis of gender, socio-economic

status, urban/rural location, and other factors, which means that people who can be reached in person by humanitarian responders might be left out in virtual efforts and vice versa (OCHA 01/12/2020). Even when people in need are connected, making the most of digitalisation in aid programming has proved challenging for humanitarians. Restricted access to affected areas means there is less feedback from staff in country and subnational offices and from communities, which is essential to ensure remote monitoring and assessments are accurate (LSE 17/04/2020). Data breaches by state and non-state actors can also put both people in need and responders in danger (The New Humanitarian 29/01/2020). In the context of the pandemic, misinformation campaigns threaten to reduce the effectiveness of response activities and spread fears and uncertainty over the effectiveness of vaccinations (Geneva Solutions 01/12/2020).

In person (deployment and employment)

In-person operations have resumed in all ten country examples mentioned in the scope of this section. New social distancing measures and use of personal protective equipment for humanitarian staff and beneficiaries have been introduced when equipment is available. For sudden onset disasters it has not always been possible to deploy national and international staff during the pandemic. For example, when Cyclone Harold hit Vanuatu in April 2020, staff deployments were not possible and assistance was sent instead, following strict protocols. On the contrary, after the explosion at Beirut port on 4 August, disaster response mechanisms were triggered, including the deployment of local volunteers and national and – limited – international staff. Response measures and strategies were tested out and initial insights were gained into the additional preparedness measures needed for emergency response during a pandemic (OCHA 01/12/2020). In terms of staff employment, anecdotal evidence shows that the pandemic has compounded existing financial problems for INGOs, NGOs, other CSOs, and international agencies. Programmes have been suspended or reduced, recruitment processes halted, and funding lost (The New Humanitarian 30/11/2020; Devex 20/08/2020; University of Ghana 05/11/2020; Bond 07/10/2020; Humanitarian Alternatives 22/11/2020).

iii. Collective response actors

Humanitarians (staff of local, national, and international organisations)

There is not yet enough data to assess the impact of the pandemic on localisation. Data available so far shows that local staff and organisations have taken on increasing responsibilities out of temporary necessity, rather than because of fully embraced changes in the system that grant local and national actors higher stakes in decision-making, more technical support, and funds (Start Network 15/12/2020; ODI 07/2020). In the early stages of the pandemic many international responders left, leaving mostly or only national staff directing the operational adaptation to COVID-19, as well as the completion of existing response activities



(ODI 07/2020). In countries such as South Sudan, Sudan, DRC, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and Chad, the re-entrance of international staff has started as flights resume and quarantines, temperature checks, and/or negative PCR tests enable returns (UK Government 2021). The full potential of local responses has not yet materialised in the pandemic, hindered by a lack of direct funding partly resulting from risk-averse policies among donors, as well as a lack of horizontal and equal partnerships with local actors (NRC 07/2020; ODI 07/2020; HPG 06/2020). Crucially, these issues cannot be separated from long-standing debates on the decolonialisation of aid and wider inequalities within the sector, which have gained new traction in light of the Black Lives Matter movement (HPN 29/09/2020; The New Humanitarian 04/01/2021).

International development and peace actors

As further explained in the section on states below, international financial institutions have destined funds for COVID-19 relief and economic recovery to countries currently affected by major humanitarian crises, occupying a prominent role in the donor system (OCHA 01/12/2020). As the worst impact of the pandemic on people in need so far has been socio-economic, it is clear that humanitarian and development issues are as closely intertwined as ever (Al Jazeera 18/12/2020; OCHA 01/12/2020). There is no agreement in the humanitarian sector regarding how rigid the distinction between humanitarian and development activities should be. Some deem a strict distinction essential for the observance of humanitarian principles and in reflecting different timings of programmes, while others who conduct both development and humanitarian operations implement different degrees of separation between the two (ICRC 11/2020). For some responders at the national and local level, self-identification in one of the two sectors might not be formalised at all. The rigid separation of the two in the response to the multiple crises triggered by COVID-19, rather than a more fluid interaction, has puzzled some analysts however (IPI 19/06/2020). In fact, the pandemic has triggered a mental and physical health crisis, but also a socio-economic recession and a protection crisis – all while compounding needs in several countries affected by major humanitarian crises (ICRC 20/05/2020; ICRC 11/2020). While a conceptual agreement on the triple nexus (humanitarian/development/peace) seems to be shared, the operational, financial, and power-related constraints that fuel the humanitarian-development divide are unlikely to be solved during the pandemic. Staff working at country and subnational levels might still need guidance on the actual implementation of the nexus and deep and wide-ranging coordination changes in human resources would also be required, but these are discussions that have not had consistent momentum since 2016 and are unlikely to take centre stage now (SIPRI 29/11/2019; HPG 06/2020).

Other CSOs and communities

CSOs and communities were the first responders to COVID-19 outbreaks and their secondary impacts. This response is in line with previous emergencies, and benefits from established, tight-knit connections within urban neighbourhoods, villages, associations, businesses, and philanthropic initiatives (UNDP 20/05/2020; Centre for Humanitarian Leadership 27/03/2020).

Of the ten countries considered in this section, community responses based on the efforts of volunteers and citizens were reported in South Sudan, Afghanistan, Sudan, and DRC (ODI, HPG). Technical cooperation networks in low-income countries among CSOs and civic movements help these actors expand their reach and identify solutions to common challenges (NEAR; ANCSSC). In this category it is worth mentioning the activism of women and youth groups – two categories that benefit from the flexible nature of CSO commitments – which have successfully engaged fellow citizens and joined international networks of activism, including during the pandemic (OCHA 01/12/2020). They have grown a stronger voice on key societal issues (for example climate change and inequalities) in social media-driven environments. Actors from the diaspora have also proved efficient in fundraising for rapid onset emergencies and in providing advocacy and media attention to crises in countries of origin – as in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion – as well as being historically key in supporting national economies in countries like South Sudan (World Bank 04/2020). Remittances, however, have been impacted by a lack of economic growth and job losses because of the pandemic; global remittance flows decreased by 7% in 2020 and are projected to decrease a further 7.5% in 2021. Even in countries where remittance flows continued in 2020, the risk of a slowdown in 2021 remains (World Bank 29/10/2020). A lack of financial resources and exclusion from key coordination forums remain a challenge for some of the actors in this category in 2021.

States

Most countries have implemented some form of social assistance programmes targeted at needs created by the pandemic (World Bank 11/12/2020). A number of these are in countries with pre-existing humanitarian crises (OCHA 01/12/2020; The New Humanitarian 04/01/2021). The governments of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and South Sudan, in collaboration with the World Bank, mobilised funds for programmes of in-kind and/or financial assistance targeting hundreds of thousands of people (OCHA 01/12/2020; World Bank 14/01/2021; World Bank 11/12/2020). These scale ups of social protection systems during the crisis have limitations, however. Of the 1,400 social protection measures tracked by the World Bank, one-third were cash transfers. Of these, most programmes lasted less than four months, with low-income countries spending an average of only USD 6 per capita (World Bank 11/01/2021). States also play a key role in vaccination campaigns for COVID-19, whether planned or already underway. For humanitarians, these state initiatives underline the need for continued coordination with governments in matters of CVA, health provision, and other forms of financial support and programmes, in order to ensure access to existing and new services – such as COVID-19 vaccines and scaled-up social protection – for all groups in need, including IDPs and refugees (CGD 07/04/2020; discussions with operational partners 01/2021).

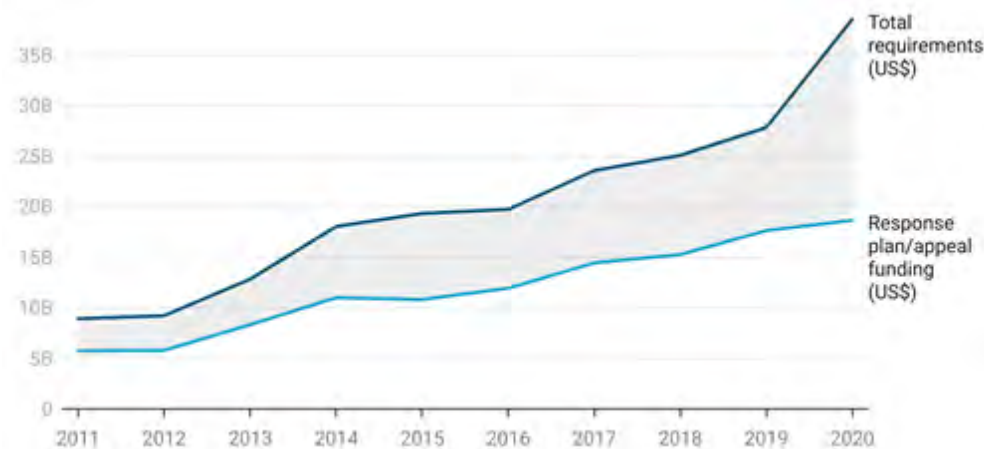
The need for closer collaboration and increasingly active national governments can pose ethical and operational issues in countries where human rights violations at the hands of authorities are ongoing, where data sharing could be dangerous, and in contexts where

the military takes on tasks within the scope of humanitarian action. Humanitarian access constraints related to governmental restrictions have continued, with some governments assuming even more restrictive stances during the past year (ACAPS 14/12/2020; discussions with operational partners 01/2021). The risk of a further politicisation of aid, with allocations based on the political goals and interests of governments, continues to cast a shadow over the desire to tighten collaborations with national and local authorities in certain contexts (ODI 07/2020; ICRC 20/05/2020; CGD 07/04/2020). A highly localised and contextualised analysis of the policies of national and subnational governments can give humanitarians more precise indications on the most appropriate avenues of collaboration and devolution of responsibilities. The level of population trust in the government, for example, is one of the key variables to be considered, especially in light of previous or current government-imposed COVID-19 containment measures and their negative socio-economic impacts.

Donors

Response plans and appeals: funding required versus funding received

Tracked global appeal coverage per year, 2011–2020



Sources: FTS. Created with Datawrapper

It seems that a feared collapse in funding for traditional humanitarian responses did not materialise, according to a 2020 overview of funding flows of UN-coordinated appeals, including

1 The Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020 tracks funding through the OCHA FTS platform, the platform of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee, and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund, as well as a dataset of private donors (DI 06/2020).

those in response to COVID-19. The amount of money going into response plans was actually slightly higher than in 2019, increasing from USD 17.6 billion to USD 18.2 billion in 2020. The main difference was in the total amount of funding initially requested and in the proportion of appeals that were not funded. In 2019, a total of USD 28 billion was requested compared to USD 39 billion in 2020, with 48% of appeals and response plans funded in 2020 compared to 63% in 2019 (FTS). This was a result of the predicted rapid growth in the figures of people in need in 2020: the initial prediction of 168 million people in need worldwide in 2020 ballooned to 235 million for 2021 (OCHA 12/2020). This rise is driven by the secondary impacts of the pandemic and related containment measures on households' economies, livelihoods, and mental health, but also long-standing drivers of needs such as conflict, climate change, and outbreaks of other diseases (OCHA 12/2020).

While FTS data allows a quick overview of 2020 funding trends, a wider tracking of funding flows for humanitarian assistance in 2019 had already registered a funding decrease of more than USD 1.5 billion compared with 2018, highlighting sector-wide financial issues predating the pandemic (DI 06/2020).¹

As countries invest in domestic financial relief packages, and other urgent dossiers such as climate change top the policy agenda, there is a risk that humanitarian funding will diminish and only limited resources will be left for humanitarians to respond to both pandemic and long-standing needs (The Lancet 15/08/2020). While COVID-19 is not the only reason for reducing funds to humanitarian aid, it is a factor that decision-makers consider when justifying cuts; for example in the UK, where the aid budget has been cut by 20%, with further cuts anticipated (The Guardian 17/11/2020). Other donors have increased their aid budgets. The EU adopted an initial budget of EUR 1.4 billion for humanitarian aid, 60% higher than the EUR 900 million of January 2019 (European Parliament 2020; European Commission 26/01/2020). Germany's initial budget for humanitarian aid provision for 2021 is EUR 2.1 billion, an increase from the 2019 initial draft budget of EUR 1.6 billion (Federal Foreign Office 22/12/2020; Federal Foreign Office 04/12/2019). Up-to-date and comprehensive information on Japanese spending was not found in English sources. Because of the current economic crisis, even when new governments are expected to be more proactive on aid and development spending, as in the US, funding prospects might improve but not dramatically so (Devex 07/01/2021).

In terms of funding instruments, pooled funds have come to the fore as a flexible tool that can contribute to better representation of national and local NGOs among recipients (OCHA 01/12/2020; Start Network; NRC 07/2020). The main issue with these is the relatively small size of funds allocated (CGD 07/04/2020). Fund releases correlated to anticipatory action have also been developed with implementation in countries such as Ethiopia, but extensive data on the effectiveness of anticipatory financial disbursements in the pandemic response is not yet available (OCHA 01/12/2020; START Network; NRC 07/2020).

The private sector

Engagement or attempted engagement with the private sector has been pursued for years, with limited data on the efficacy of humanitarian-private partnerships and varying levels of commitment. Private donors have been considered as a potential alternative to state funding, as they contributed over one-fifth of the total international humanitarian assistance funding between 2015–2019. It is individuals rather than foundations and corporations that constitute the largest sub-share of private donors however, as data for 2014–2018 shows (DI 06/2020).

The humanitarian sector has showed interest in engaging private companies and professionals for their technical skills and for improving the quality or reach of their programmes. Two examples are the WFP-UPS partnership in the logistics sector, and the contribution of the Mastercard Aid Network in the digital distribution of CVA (The New Humanitarian 28/01/2019). Partnerships with academic and research institutions have also continued, with new connections made with public health researchers during the pandemic. These collaborations have aimed to support the humanitarian response in adapting to a COVID-19-affected world by bringing together policy, research, and practice (University of Geneva 20/04/2020; Aluisio et al. 06/08/2020). For-profit development companies have also obtained increased space and funding for the implementation of humanitarian projects as contractors (DevelopmentAid 03/09/2019; DevelopmentAid 06/12/2019).

As humanitarians increasingly rely on technology provided by private organisations such as WhatsApp or Viber to reach a wider number of people, there are key ethical and operational questions (OCHA 01/12/2020). How can digital ‘do no harm’ principles be guaranteed in these partnerships? How can the goals of for-profit realities be reconciled with not-for-profit goals while advancing the interests of targeted populations? (ODI 11/2020; The New Humanitarian 26/08/2013). Clear terms of engagement, partnership goals, and fundraising strategies are repeatedly highlighted as being key to reducing misunderstandings and lack of confidence (ICVA 2017; Start Network 15/12/2020; Oxfam 30/07/2019; Potter et al. 07/2020). Adding to the obstacles that hindered humanitarian-private partnerships before the pandemic (The New Humanitarian 20/03/2019) and considering the current socio-economic crisis in many countries, companies might have to reprioritise and refocus on domestic programmes/issues – rather than international ones – with less resources for piloting new collaborations with humanitarians.

METHODOLOGY

These scenarios were developed in conjunction with a small pool of experts with a global perspective. ACAPS uses the chain of plausibility approach to scenario-building, as outlined in our [guidance note documents](#), although it should be noted that the consultative approach used in the development of these scenarios differs. These scenarios are far broader in scope than the situations we usually analyse and, while we normally use and advocate for face-to-face workshops with context experts in order to proceed through a structured process of scenario-building, these scenarios were by necessity developed through remote working sessions, discussions, and document exchanges. The four main sessions involved:

- agreeing the research question and current situation and mapping a wide array of variables that affect the provision of humanitarian needs
- creating mini scenarios from seven of the 81 different combinations of assumptions on how the four main variables (national capacity to provide services; international assistance capacity; movement restrictions; and humanitarian needs) might change over 2021
- selecting and developing the three most interesting mini scenarios
- reviewing and further developing the scenarios.

Key terms used throughout the scenario-building process and the report are:

- Variable: development or event likely to cause a change in a situation.
- Assumption: the direction that a variable can take (i.e. increase, decrease).
- Scenarios: a verbal picture of a possible future state based on a number of assumptions (which may be more or less probable) as to how certain key variables will change. Scenarios describe both the future state and the impact and consequences on people and society.
- Triggers: events that, should they occur, may contribute to a scenario materialising.
- Compounding factor: a development that can occur in parallel to any of the above scenarios and which have the potential to significantly change the nature of humanitarian response.

For the identification of international, national, and local actors within the humanitarian sphere, reference was made to the definitions given by the Localisation Marker Working Group established by the IASC Humanitarian Financing Task Team ([IASC 24/01/2018](#)).

Scenario probabilities: are the subjective estimates of the experts involved in the creation of the scenarios and are indicative only. While scenario 1 is judged to be the most probable overall, each scenario description and the table on page 4 detail the characteristics of countries in which that scenario is more probable.

Limitations

Scenarios can seem to oversimplify an issue as the analysis balances details against broader assumptions. This is especially true when considering humanitarian operations on a global scale, when so much is dependent on local dynamics. Scenario-building is not an end in itself; it is a process for generating new ideas and provoking thought that should, in turn, lead to changes in project design or decision-making.

Thank you

These scenarios were developed in January and February 2021, with input from Mercy Corps, the Norwegian Refugee Council, Save the Children, the Humanitarian and Stabilisation Operations Team of the FCDO, two UN organisations, and two independent experts who contributed via participation in online workshops, bilateral meetings, and/or reviews. ACAPS would like to thank all organisations that provided input to these scenarios.

ANNEX 1: SCENARIO TRIGGERS

Scenario 1 = Continuing adaptation of response mechanisms; existing power dynamics unchanged

Scenario 2 = Increased national influence; reframed international support

Scenario 3 = Increased national control; severely reduced international influence and support

TRIGGERS	1	2	3	BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Funding changes				
UN agencies and INGOs continue to receive funding for country humanitarian operations on a scale similar to 2020.	X			The amount of money going into response plans in 2020 was slightly higher than in 2019, from USD 17.6 billion to USD 18.2 billion. The main difference was the total amount of funding requested and the proportion of appeals not funded. In 2019, USD 28 billion was requested compared to USD 39 billion in 2020, with 48% of appeals and response plans funded in 2020 compared to 63% in 2019 (FTS).
Traditional funding (from large state donors) to international humanitarian organisations reduces substantially from 2020 levels.		X	X	Looking at the five largest donors, funding strategies for 2021 differ markedly. For instance, Germany and the EU have increased their initial proposed budget for humanitarian assistance in 2021, while the UK has announced large cuts within its 2021 aid budget, reduced from 0.7% to 0.5% of its gross national income (Federal Foreign Office 22/12/2020; Federal Foreign Office 04/12/2019; European Parliament 2020; European Commission 26/01/2020; DI 11/02/2021). The overall reduction of funding from multiple actors has been highlighted as a key risk for the humanitarian sector in 2021 (The Lancet 15/08/2020).
New humanitarian donors emerge.	X	X		
National and/or regional authorities receive increased funding for humanitarian activities.		X		
Trust between donors and national partners increases.		X		
Regional, national, and local donors unable to scale up/restructure funding and re-sources in a very short timeframe.			X	
Delayed and slow economic recovery.			X	Emerging markets and developing economies – as per IMF categorisation – are expected to follow different paths to recovery in 2021 (IMF 01/2021). Decisive factors for recovery are pre-existing vulnerabilities and economic growth patterns, economic structures, the severity of COVID-19 outbreaks, and the scope of policies enacted to counteract the impacts of the pandemic (IMF 01/2021). Low-income countries had less space for policy manoeuvring during the pandemic and were hit by this shock when they already had high levels of debt (IMF 01/2021). They were identified as being in need of international financial support to sustain crisis costs and avoid a surge in poverty figures (IMF 01/2021).
Impact of COVID-19				
Most countries successfully contain COVID-19.	X			
Global roll-out of COVID-19 vaccination is slow.		X		11 vaccines have been approved worldwide with doses administered in over 80 countries (Our World in Data accessed 15/02/2021; McGill University 2021). Access to vaccines has not been equitable so far, with certain countries – many of them in Africa – struggling to obtain access. This means that virus containment and herd immunity targets will be reached at very different stages throughout the world, with some high-income countries aiming for a return to 'normality' in late 2021, while low-income countries may only see substantial progress in vaccination campaigns as late as 2024 (The Economist 25/01/2021; Fortune 07/02/2021).
COVID-19 infection rate among humanitarian staff remains low because of an effective vaccine roll-out.	X			

COVID-19 surveillance, response, and vaccination continue to consume significant state resources.			X	
Operating environment				
International travel restrictions eased.	X			
International travel and logistic options become further restricted or more expensive.		X	X	As at 1 February 2021, 32 countries still had total border closures to international travel, 70 had imposed bans on travellers from high-risk regions, 43 had quarantines for travellers coming from high-risk regions, and 36 were enforcing screening measures only. No country was reported as having no enforced international travel controls (Our World in Data accessed 01/02/2021; University of Oxford 2021).
International humanitarian business costs increase.		X	X	
National support to local humanitarian actors increases.		X		
Movement of international humanitarian staff is severely restricted.		X	X	
States increase controls (such as bureaucratic procedures and costs) over external humanitarian funding.			X	