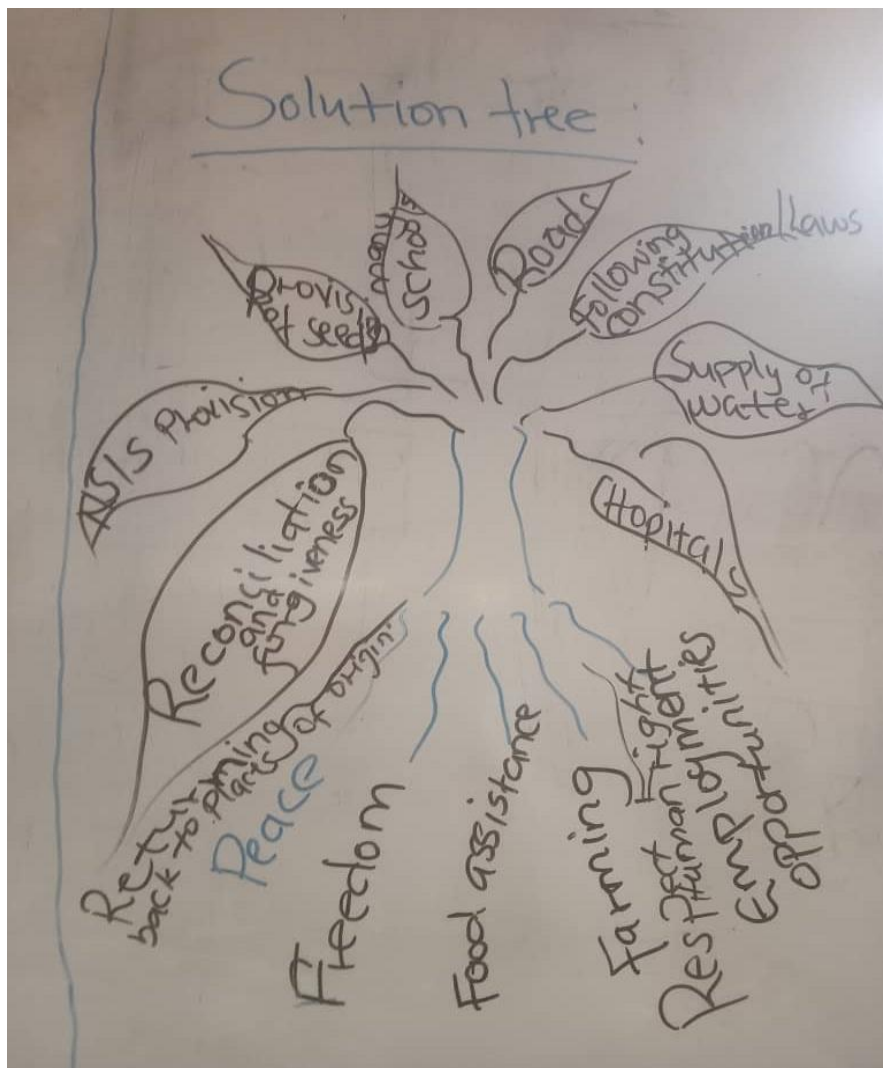




Flagship Initiative First Year Learning Report

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Flagship Initiative First Year Learning Report

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Executive summary

The Flagship Initiative (FI) is a humanitarian change process initially based around four country pilots, namely Niger, South Sudan, Philippines and Colombia. It is an initiative of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and aims to generate a visible operational shift towards stronger community engagement and a people-centred response, including piloting new context-specific coordination and financing structures that are based on affected peoples' needs and capacities.

The FI was started in 2023 and has spent the first year putting in place the conceptual, administrative and partnership-building measures to get the initiative off the ground. It has also spent the first year understanding the barriers to truly putting people at the centre of responses. These include, in-depth thinking and innovation on community engagement; bringing coordination and financing closer to communities; building/establishing new relationships and work with local government and a wider set of humanitarian and non-humanitarian partners to deliver more integrated solutions to vulnerabilities; and efforts to strengthen local capacities and direct support.

Findings

The Flagship Initiative (FI) has clearly demonstrated in its first year that the humanitarian system does not systematically engage communities on their priorities and capacities. Instead, there is a fragmented patchwork of pre-established and standardised 'needs assessments' mostly configured to decide on project implementation, rather than whether it is the right intervention to start with. There is a widespread impression amongst humanitarians that the system is constantly listening to affected populations, but there is little evidence that this is in fact the case. On the contrary, most evidence suggests the opposite and the Flagship exposes a lack of basic infrastructure to do this even at the simplest level.

The FI has also demonstrated in its first year that the system is rigid and unable to adapt to context if communities needs and priorities differ from the standardised aid on offer. Neither are the individual large implementing entities effective at working together in a truly joined up fashion. This brittleness in the system pertains even when the acute phase of an emergency is long past. The overwhelming complexity and heavy humanitarian programming process is one significant barrier to change.

The first year of the FI has primarily focused on better community engagement and participation. The FI has developed a number of key elements that offer the potential to re-set the aid system so that it is driven by the priorities, needs and capacities of affected communities. This starts with a new way of systematically understanding what affected people and communities need, prioritise, and can do for themselves. Once priorities are established the system needs the flexibility to respond appropriately.

However, the Flagship has also suffered from a lack of conceptual clarity and under-resourcing, especially during the first six months. Whilst the reasons for this are both completely understandable and logical, they have also led to uncertainty over the ability of the Initiative to deliver, especially given its high profile. Some over-optimistic messaging at the outset has led to questions a year later when tangible outcomes are yet to be observed. This is a shame as the Initiative does finally look poised to start delivering.

The evolutionary nature of the Flagship, coupled with high profile ambition mean that year two of the Flagship needs to deliver some visible results. Given it is the most promising opportunity to address some of the deep-rooted structural dysfunctionalities in our global humanitarian system, it should be in everyone's interest to ensure it succeeds.

Community engagement

In all four pilot countries the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) offices have invested considerable time and energy in **exploring how to better, more systematically engage communities**. This has led to new insights in terms of affected communities priorities. It has also revealed that despite huge amounts of community interaction, there is no coherent system for recording and documenting this, never mind analysing its output and using this as a basis for the design of interventions.

Deeper and more effective community engagement has revealed that the system struggles to flexibly move into new modes of working or re-configure the type of assistance as people's needs and priorities change. Joint working is also a challenge – rarely taking place even when incentivised by funding – with proximate working the closest the system currently gets.

The FI has highlighted a deep dissatisfaction with the way that international humanitarian assistance is conceived of and is delivered. Whilst this has been known for some time, the FI brings it into even sharper focus. People at all levels want change – people in receipt of aid, humanitarian staff and government counterparts all want to see longer term thinking, and much more emphasis on the capacities and agency of those affected. Whilst emergency assistance in the short term might seem better value for money, when it is delivered over many years without any change in the situation the value diminishes for donors and for those in need. People in humanitarian crises in particular have become frustrated that they are not listened to, and their concerns do not seem to affect how international humanitarians work.

In particular:

- The FI demonstrates that community engagement and participation has not been done systematically as part of building the humanitarian needs overview (HNO) and humanitarian response plan (HRP).
- The FI also demonstrates that currently the 'system' cannot respond to community priorities unless they are part of the pre-existing 'offer'.
- There is a 'missing piece' in the analytical framework, which is qualitative and participatory. The humanitarian system has developed highly sophisticated quantitative work, but deciding what data to collect is done by us, not them.
- The FI is exploring new models of community engagement in each of the four countries. This offers a rich source of analysis and learning that will inform emerging practice.
- The FI demonstrates that the humanitarian community is not listening to affected peoples voices. Are we doing what they want us to do?

Re-designing the system to respond to community priorities

Leadership in all four of the FI countries has enthusiastically embraced the change agenda. All four countries, recognising the scale, duration, depth, and complexity of the challenges they face have signed up to multiple change initiatives, recognising that the current aid system needs greater coherence to achieve genuine change. They have all tried to 'join the dots' between multiple process on climate, poverty, conflict, and acute vulnerability, with the FI proving a useful focus.

However, changing the system is not straightforward. The pilots have all shown in different ways that the complexity of the current humanitarian system means that change is complex too, requiring a '**mindset shift**' that takes time. Knowledge is greatest where crises are most acute, but authority and power is often located much further away in headquarters (HQs) and donor capitals. People spend a disproportionate amount of their professional time in meetings and in 'servicing the

machine', writing proposals and reports and responding to information requests. This has an impact on the time people can spend with communities affected by crisis, and their consequent knowledge, trust and access.

There is another aspect of the mindset shift, perhaps even more difficult to tackle – that the problems as articulated by communities are not within the remit of humanitarianism. Problems such as finding work, access to basic services, education, are seen as outside of the core business of humanitarians, which is focused on short term aid. That these problems are 'too big' and 'too long term'. But this thinking is also at odds with the evidence and the increasing reality. In South Sudan humanitarian aid is a quarter of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Three quarters of the population are estimated to be in need of humanitarian aid. This is not small by any measure. Neither is it short term – there has been a humanitarian appeal every single year of South Sudan's decade (and counting) of existence. This is unlikely to change any time soon.

In response to the need for a 'mindset shift' there has been some tentative FI work during the first year. There is work going on in all four FI pilots to re-think the coordination model. South Sudan has nascent 'area based' leadership. Colombia has a decentralised coordination system sharing leadership with other agencies to facilitate local coordination in 16 provinces. One is led by a local NGO (this seems a really good, promising development). South Sudan is working on achieving its ambition for a humanitarian response plan (HRP) in 2025 which is people centred and evidence based and backed by data collected to demonstrate the priorities and needs of the affected people. Colombia is also looking at something broader involving development and peace actors, starting with a proper joint analysis ('territorial diagnostic' across all pillars of work: humanitarian, peace, development and climate/environment). Niger is developing a very local model led by local authorities and local organisations, focused on locally led and designed development plans. The Philippines is taking advantage of well-developed -but still fragmented- community based shock response systems and a valuable local humanitarian experience in dealing with a wide range of shocks, from natural disasters and climate emergency to conflict. The FI also makes the most of a large platform of humanitarian-oriented partners, including the private sector.

All of these are good initiatives, and just like the community engagement can be tested with a view to taking to scale. Whether they can collectively add up to achieving the mindset shift however, is an open question.

Joined up working to 'solve a problem' is rare. In Colombia a Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocation was specifically used to pilot various workstreams of the Flagship, including incentivising joint working. In reality however, this resulted in agencies 'working alongside' each other, rather than 'with' each other. Moreover, the agency's staff *in situ* did not have the delegated authority to change programmes in accordance with community requests. In South Sudan, there are good examples of agencies collaborating in *ad hoc* consortia for issues such as returns. However, the competitive funding environment means these are not part of a wider strategy, and usually confidential until finalised. There are structural impediments to re-designing the system such as the dual coordination system in Colombia.

These examples speak to the political changes needed ultimately. Donor funding timeframes and restrictions; agency standardised approaches and programme approaches. All will take time to turn around, even if they can be convinced of the new direction needed.

Overcoming inertia and internal resistance in OCHA has also been necessary in establishing the FI pilots. It has been challenging in some cases to re-imagine processes and ways of working that are deeply entrenched. More prosaically it has been difficult to implement change and 'do the day job' at the same time without additional resources.

Financing, process and proximity

The FI has already delivered on a shift of OCHA staff out of capitals more toward crisis affected areas. This is ongoing but hugely positive. Efforts to decentralise coordination and decision making are part of this shift toward greater proximity, as is boosting OCHA presence and OCHA national staff. There is a recognition too, that reducing process is connected to freeing people up to work more closely with communities. This in turn is connected to financing and creative ways in which accountability can be maintained whilst reducing the burden of reporting. Finally, the FI has begun to try and change the so far very small percentage of overall funding going to local organisations and local efforts. Country Based Pooled Funds are at the vanguard of this effort, but there are also important policy measures such as harmonisation of due diligence that can make a real difference.

Scale-up and replication

There are several elements of the FI pilots that are candidates for scale up or replication. Most obviously, elements of community engagement could be taken up in other contexts. Whilst the 'toolkit' is still under development, year two should see some of the new approaches and methods solidify and these could be quickly rolled out to other contexts. Whilst decentralised coordination and operations is not as advanced, again elements of the emerging approach could be fast-tracked. Having strong local organisations lead in some places or contexts, initially with support and accompaniment, is the type of approach that could also lend itself to quick uptake. Finally, using financing to incentivise joint working and greater local capacity is another deserving area, although this is more conceptual than reality at the moment.

Conclusion

The first year of the FI has been about setting up the four country-based pilots and understanding conceptually and practically the measures needed to achieve change. A huge amount of work has been undertaken that is not yet visible, including mapping existing approaches; identifying best practice in working with communities and decentralised coordination; collecting, understanding and appraising tools being used across the sector including by civil service organisations CSOs and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs); exploring the links with development, peace actors and the state; and a more sophisticated exploration of the links across a range of international and national interventions. As a result the FI enters its second year with a much greater sense of purpose and the infrastructure to deliver. Year two should result in more obvious, tangible outcomes.

The FI remains largely an initiative of UN leadership and OCHA in its first year. There is a lot of support from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in particular, local NGOs and some donors. There is cautious support from some UN agencies, less so from others. There are also strong ties and overlap with the Secretary General's Special Advisor on Durable Solutions for IDPs, which also sees emphasising affected people's agency and capacity as paramount.

However, there is also an inherent tension between the open-ended nature of the FI as a genuinely bottom-up process and the need for clarity around the goals and purpose to bring on board the widest group of stakeholders. Moreover, the nature of ongoing crisis means that each of the four countries are having to deliver the 'old system' (humanitarian appeals, coordination processes) whilst at the same time building the new system.

Next steps

The next phase of the FI will work with implementing agencies to broaden new forms of community engagement and joint working. It is anticipated that the new forms of engagement will ultimately influence a new set of tools and approaches that could be more widely replicated across the humanitarian system. The four countries will prioritise:

1. Systematic community engagement and demonstrate how to practically incorporate community priorities in planning and programming.
2. Subnational coordination and decentralisation to bring planning and funding closer to communities.
3. New partnership allowing more integrated, participatory and durable response to priority needs of communities.
4. The issue of financing, country based pooled funds and other modalities to be used for community engagement and local capacity funding.
5. Communications more broadly - quarterly, annual, briefings, communicating clear conclusions.
6. Reinforcing leadership and expanding ownership of the Flagship (beyond OCHA).
7. How the HRP can reflect the priorities of communities.

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ACRONYMS

AAP	accountability to affected populations
ABL	area based leadership
BARM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
CBPF	Country Based Pooled Funds
CCCM	Camp Management and Camp Coordination
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
CSO	civil service organisations
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FI	Flagship Initiative
FSLA	Food Security and Livelihoods Assessments
GAM	Global Acute Malnutrition
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIFMM	Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HeRAMS	Health Resources and Services Availability Mapping System
HNO	humanitarian needs overview
HPC	humanitarian programme cycle
HQs	headquarters
HRNP	humanitarian response national plan
HRP	humanitarian response plan
IASC	Interagency Standing Committee
ICCG	OCHA inter-cluster coordination group
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
INGOs	international non-governmental organisations
IPC	Integrated Phase Classification
JIAF	joint intersectoral analysis framework
KIIs	key informant interviews
LDE	listen, discover and enhance
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex
LRRD	Linking relief, rehabilitation and development
MSF	<i>Médecins Sans Frontières</i> (Doctors without Borders)
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSNA	Multisectoral Needs Assessment
NGOs	non-governmental organisations
NSAGs	non-state armed groups
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OIOS	UN internal oversight body
PIN	People in Need
PFPRR	Partnership for Peace, Recovery and Resilience
PKKK	<i>Pambansang Koalisyonng Kababaihan sa Kanayunan</i>
POC	Protection of Civilians
PRC	Philippines Red Cross
RC	Resident Coordinator
ReBPCA	Resilience-Based Participatory Community Appraisal
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SAM	Severe Acute Malnutrition
SMART	Standardised Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions
SofP	Solidarity of People
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
UFE	under-funded window
UN	United Nations
UNCT	UN Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNMISS	The UN Mission in South Sudan
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

Flagship Initiative First Year Learning Report

1. Introduction and background

In November 2022 the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), Martin Griffiths, proposed an "initiative to pilot a people-centred, agile, locally-driven response in a number of countries" to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals¹. This became the Flagship Initiative (FI) which was then launched in early 2023. Its ambition² is to empower country Resident Coordinator (RC)/ Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) leadership to develop original, context specific coordination and response solutions that are:

- clearly centred around and **accountable to affected people**.
- driven by and responsive to their **priority needs and protection risks**.
- built upon **affected populations' capacities and representation**.
- **lean and tailored** to the context.

The ERC selected four countries as pilots for the FI, namely Colombia, Niger, Philippines and South Sudan. It has a three-year time frame, from 2023 - 2025. The Flagship Initiative is led by the RC/HCs in each of the four countries, supported by the OCHA teams.

1.1 Learning and evaluation in the FI

The initiative has built in a learning and evaluation component from the outset, seeing it as essential for taking change to scale. The monitoring, learning and evaluation function is split across the core team in OCHA centrally, and a contracted-out facility hosted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University in the UK.

The learning and evaluation team at IDS comprises a small central unit of academics and practitioners, as well as country-based research leads in each of the four Flagship pilots. Country based leads are nationals who are in turn supported by junior researchers, mostly based in locations where the FI is being implemented.

1.2 Method

The learning and evaluation component of the FI has been designed to be highly adaptive. It combines developmental evaluation and formative evaluation, with the emphasis shifting gradually between the two over the course of the three years. The main strands of data collection are, 1) key informant interviews and literature review to document the process as it evolves, 2) collection of secondary data to understand the humanitarian context over the timeframe of the FI and, 3) primary qualitative research with FI targeted communities to understand the evolution of perception of the aid system over time.

¹ [Summary Record, IASC Principals Bi-Annual Meeting, 28 November 2022 .pdf \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

² ERC Flagship Initiative (2023). Innovation multi-page. UN OCHA, New York.

2. Overview of the Flagship

"For international humanitarian assistance to have the greatest impact for the greatest number of people in the years ahead, the priorities of affected communities must drive response efforts and local actors must be supported and empowered to deliver the response wherever possible. To achieve this, a bold new way to coordinate, deliver and finance humanitarian action is needed."

Martin Griffiths, Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC).

The Flagship Initiative (FI) is at core an ambitious reform programme, aiming to re-orient the humanitarian system so that it is better focused on what really matters to the people it aims to serve. The FI sits within a tradition of humanitarian reform, which has increasingly focused in recent years on 'people-centred response'.

Since its emergence on the nineteenth century European battlefields, humanitarianism has saved millions of lives.³ Such achievements were possible thanks to an aid system under constant evolution. Internal and external pressures have consistently shaped and re-shaped humanitarianism, ranging from fluctuating global politics to advances in technology, changes in the nature of conflicts and disasters, and a growing recognition of the rights and needs of affected populations.⁴ Early humanitarian pioneers, in small organisations driven by charitable, religious, or moral imperatives have given way to a global aid architecture.⁵ Likewise, the humanitarian mandate has increased, from solely assisting soldiers to providing aid and protection for all civilians.

While this institutional trajectory has led to professionalisation and standardisation, aid workers today increasingly call for another evolutionary shift. On the one hand, the number of protracted crises increases year-on-year, with the current system struggling to move individuals from short-term assistance to longer-term independence.⁶ On the other hand, aid workers consistently bemoan a system that has become too centralised, too bureaucratic, and too dominated by big UN agencies headquartered in New York and Geneva.⁷ Unsurprisingly, such views are reflected by those humanitarians seek to assist. A recent report from Ground Truth Solutions and OCHA makes clear that affected populations feel disempowered by aid bureaucracy, that their own priorities are not being met, and that decision-making power has failed to shift towards them.⁸

All this is taking place against a backdrop of relentlessly rising needs and calls for resources. Despite the system increasing in size in dollar terms over 20 fold in the almost same number of years (from

³ That is not to suggest humanitarianism does not have global origins within other traditions, like Islamic ideals of charity. Rather, the focus here is on the global humanitarian system, which webbed together and formalised various strands of existing ethical orientations and activities, from human solidarity to religious traditions.

⁴ Michael N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁵ Emily Baughan, *Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire*, vol. 19 (Univ of California Press, 2021); Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Univ of California Press, 2011).

⁶ Logan Cochrane and Alexandra Wilson, 'Nuancing the Double and Triple Nexus: Analyzing the Potential for Unintended, Negative Consequences', *Development Studies Research* 10, no. 1 (2023): 2181729.

⁷ Jessica Alexander, 'What's the "Flagship Initiative", and How Might It Transform Emergency Aid?', *The New Humanitarian*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/04/05/whats-flagship-initiative-emergency-aid>.

⁸ Ground Truth Solutions and OCHA, 'Listening Is Not Enough: People Demand Transformational Change in Humanitarian Assistance', November 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/listening-not-enough-people-demand-transformational-change-humanitarian-assistance-global-analysis-report-november-2022>.

\$2bn received in 2000 to \$47bn received in 2022), the gap between what is asked for and what is received has never been higher. Something has to give.

The Flagship Initiative responds to a number of challenges to the humanitarian system, both external and internal.

- **Protracted Crises:** the number of protracted crises across the globe grows year-on-year (the average humanitarian country appeal is now ten years and rising); needs are rising across the planet with resources flatlining. Climate related disasters and climate change seem certain to exacerbate this trend.
- **Accountability Gap:** despite multiple pledges and reform agendas designed to enhance accountability and place affected populations in the driving seat, the gap between aid workers and those they assist remains too wide.
- **Excessive Standardisation:** While timely humanitarian responses require a reasonable level of standardisation in tools and approaches, the universalisation of the 'toolbox' and the uniformity of the humanitarian approach have obscured distinct elements of communities, instead treating all with pre-cooked vulnerability assessments and pre-established needs.
- **A Disconnected System:** The professionalisation of the humanitarian system has also contributed to the creation of rigid budget mechanisms and procedures in both donor and humanitarian organisations, contributing to an already fragmented business model with very narrow communication with the development community.
- **Bureaucratic Bottlenecks:** with the professionalisation of the humanitarian system a 'time-sink' and wasteful bureaucracy is separating humanitarians from communities.

2.1 Protracted Crisis

The Flagship Initiative is rolling out within a global context of increasing protracted crises. The average appeal (HRP) is now ten years in duration, a significant increase that has taken place in the last years.

The notion of a "protracted *conflict*" initially emerged in peace and conflict studies in the 1970s⁹, developing into what OCHA in the late 1990s and early 2000s described as complex emergencies, defined as "humanitarian crises in a country, region or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing UN country program."¹⁰

Today, a more restricted definition is deployed by humanitarian actors: a crisis is 'protracted' when it faces over five years or more of coordinated UN appeals.¹¹ This typology emphasises the urgency of the situation the FI seeks to address: four out of five people-in-need (83 per cent) are located in protracted crisis contexts.¹² Meaning they are "...acutely vulnerable to death, disease, and disruption of their livelihoods over a prolonged period of time."¹³

⁹ Edward E Azar, Paul Jureidini, and Ronald McLaurin, 'Protracted Social Conflict; Theory and Practice in the Middle East', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 1 (1978): 41–60.

¹⁰ OCHA, 'Orientation Handbook on Complex Emergencies' (Geneva: OCHA, 1999), <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ocha-orientation-handbook-complex-emergencies>.

¹¹ Development Initiatives, 'Key Trends in Humanitarian Need and Funding: 2022'.

¹² Development Initiatives, 'Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023', 2023.

¹³ J Macrae and A Harmer, 'Beyond the Continuum: Aid Policy in Protracted Crises. HPG Report 18', 2004.

Protracted crises are, in other words, the norm. In practice, this means humanitarians are increasingly taking on roles for which the system is not particularly well-equipped; ranging from "addressing prolonged displacement; filling gaps in social safety nets; promoting preparedness; coping with the changing nature of violence and new hazards; and facing urbanisation and climate-driven crises."¹⁴

The problem has been steadily building. As early as the late 1990s the humanitarian system had started to think in terms of how so called complex emergencies might be addressed beyond the immediate response to acute emergencies. A series of initiatives and frameworks starting with 'the relief to development continuum', through 'Linking relief, rehabilitation and development' (LRRD), the 'resiliency agenda,' and, most recently 'The Humanitarian-Development-Peace' nexus have tried to express this conundrum. These initiatives have tended to be 'top-down' in nature, and generally 'programmatic,' 'conceptual,' or concerned with changes in coordination structures and financing¹⁵.

As humanitarian needs change, due to changing contexts, responses must also change, as articulated by Meg Sattler of Ground Truth Solutions:

"When people affected by protracted or repeated crises consistently tell us that aid is not meeting their needs because it's too short-sighted, it's time we recognised that the right response is not, 'but we are busy saving lives!', but rather, 'so how can we reorganise to address that?'"

Meg Sattler, director, Ground Truth Solutions. ¹⁶

2.2 Accountability

The Flagship initiative seeks to directly address longstanding criticism of accountability in aid operations. Accountability gaps are magnified in today's prolonged emergencies, where the post-World War Two humanitarian system is, in many contexts, transforming into a "protracted crisis management system" – a role for which its orthodox toolkits are not particularly well suited.¹⁷ Affected populations are increasingly reliant on humanitarians while lacking means to *genuinely* influence the system. The FI seeks to change that.

Until relatively recently, 'accountability' in the aid world meant, for the most part, accountability to donors. It was a largely technical area of activity concerned with promoting transparency, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting. Accountability, then, meant addressing misuse of funds, lack of oversight, and ineffective programming.

The first signs of change began in the 1990s, with various emergencies (most notably the Rwandan genocide) and perceived failures of the humanitarian system leading to fresh accountability drives. Humanitarian organisations began to acknowledge the importance of involving what was then called "beneficiaries," which largely meant soliciting feedback. At the same time, accountability took a

¹⁴ OCHA, 'Leaving No One behind: Humanitarian Effectiveness in the Age of the Sustainable Development Goals', 31 December 2015, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/leaving-no-one-behind-humanitarian-effectiveness-age-sustainable-development-goals>.

¹⁵ Oxfam, 'The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus: What Does It Mean for Multi-Mandated Organizations?'

¹⁶ Meg Sattler, 'Five Ways the Aid System Can Improve Its Accountability to Affected People', 5 April 2023, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2023/04/05/ways-aid-system-can-improve-its-accountability>.

¹⁷ See for example, Lewis Sida *et al.*, 'Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis', 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis>.

more formal route through the development of various codes of conduct, including The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1994) and the Sphere Project (1997). These documents set down principles and minimum standards for humanitarian action, emphasising the importance of accountability, transparency, and quality in aid delivery. Such important projects were guided by a 'rights' framework, meaning they set down precisely the sorts of assistance all humans should expect in the event of an emergency.¹⁸

In 2012 the Transformative Agenda focused on accountability to affected populations (AAP) amongst several other themes, leading to an IASC working group being established. In early 2016, The Grand Bargain, agreed upon during the World Humanitarian Summit, included clear commitments from major donors and humanitarian organisations to enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency in humanitarian action, alongside the localisation Agenda – which aimed to empower and strengthen national humanitarian actors. According to the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC), AAP is "an active commitment by humanitarian actors to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people they seek to assist."¹⁹

The actual integration of AAP is highly varied. More often than not, independent evaluations find limited adherence to the entirety of its objective, where it has, as Julien Schopp put it, largely remained a question of "do you like it or not." Indeed, the 2022 Ground Truth report found that much AAP activity is "...at odds with the participation agenda where people should be the ones determining aid programming, not just consulted about it, and not only complaining about it."²⁰

"As humanitarians, our primary responsibility is to people affected by crisis. They are the sole reason our institutions and programmes exist. How communities experience and perceive our work is the most relevant measure of our performance."

Statement by Principals of the IASC on AAP in Humanitarian Action, April 2022. ²¹

Despite, this principle of humanitarian action, accountability to affected communities has been largely superficial and inward facing.

"We arrive with our clusters and tools, and the way we interact with communities is, 'do you like it or not? Here's the suggestion box.' And then we deal with the fallout and consequences."

Julien Schopp, Vice president of humanitarian policy and practice, InterAction. ²²

¹⁸ Hilhorst, 'Being Good at Doing Good? Quality and Accountability of Humanitarian NGOs', *Disasters* 26, no. 3 (2002): 193–212; Charlotte Dufour et al., 'Rights, Standards and Quality in a Complex Humanitarian Space: Is Sphere the Right Tool?', *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004): 124–41; Jacqui Tong, 'Questionable Accountability: MSF and Sphere in 2003', *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004): 176–89; Maryam Z Deloffre, 'The Sphere Project: Imagining Better Humanitarian Action through Reflective Accountability Institutions and Practices', in *Imagining Pathways for Global Cooperation* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), 147–69.

¹⁹ IASC, 'Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) : A Brief Overview', https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/iasc_aap_psea_2_pager_for_hc.pdf.

²⁰ Ground Truth Solutions and OCHA, 'Listening Is Not Enough: People Demand Transformational Change in Humanitarian Assistance', 7.

²¹ [Statement by Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) on Accountability to Affected People in Humanitarian Action | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

²² Alexander, 'What's the "Flagship Initiative", and How Might It Transform Emergency Aid?'

2.3 Bureaucracy

The Flagship Initiative also seeks to break with bureaucratic process, which have become unwieldy, time consuming, and a significant barrier to change. Bureaucracy slows response times, imposes high administrative costs, reduces space for flexibility and adaptation, and acts as another wall separating local organisations, affected populations and the international humanitarian system.

While bureaucratisation is a response to the necessity of professionalisation in the sector, it can also, if too heavy-handed, function to further blur decision-making processes. This point is made in the aforementioned Ground Truth report, where persistent 'needs assessments' are framed as 'extractive.' Speaking to that report's research team, a host community member in the Central African Republic said, "To [humanitarians], our needs can be summed up by their needs assessment surveys conducted on what we eat during the day and how we live. But asking us what our basic needs are, they don't do that. So next time, when organisations want to help us, they should approach us and ask us what our real needs are."²³ As a result, "needs assessments, post-distribution monitoring surveys, and other community consultations are not enabling people to feel like they have a real say."²⁴

During preliminary field visits, the learning team heard from senior humanitarian colleagues at a country level that they spend a huge amount of time producing knowledge that ultimately 'servicing the machine,' this has the knock-on effect that they are spending more time in offices writing proposals and reports and responding to information requests. This means they are spending less time with communities affected by crises, which limits information flows and weakens their ability to produce more tailored and context-specific responses.

"I still believe the system needs a reset, and OCHA will progress in 2024 on its journey to generate a visible **operational shift towards stronger community engagement and a people-centred response, including piloting new context-specific coordination and financing structures that are based on the peoples' needs and capacities**. This budget also resources our efforts to meet our commitments on gender, accountability to affected people, cash, as well as anticipatory action".

Martin Griffith's email to OCHA staff with 2024 budget allocations.

"We look forward to how the Flagship initiative will further improve the way we work. This will make us grow in the eyes of our local populations who will now have more confidence in us. We are not going to disappoint their expectations."

Mr Amadou Amidou, President of the NGO ACD/Bonferey in Ouallam.

"We celebrate the wealth of knowledge within these communities, their generosity in sharing their wisdom, and their openness to guide us in complementing them effectively as first responders,"

Nini Marín, OCHA's DRM expert, Colombia.

"Once in a while, we need to shake it up, we need to break through bureaucracy because it loses touch with what it was meant to achieve [...] We're not wedded to what we've done before. If something needs to be rejigged, let's do it."

Louise Aubin, former RC/HC Niger.

²³ Ground Truth Solutions and OCHA, 2.

²⁴ Ground Truth Solutions and OCHA, 11.

3. Getting started: the first six months of the Flagship

The initial idea of the Flagship Initiative (FI) was that the pilot countries would be given carte blanche to re-arrange the system according to community priorities. RC/HCs, supported by OCHA offices, would have a 'blank piece of paper' on which to re-design the system. This approach proved to be more challenging in practice than first anticipated. The current humanitarian system is highly evolved: a multi-stakeholder complex web of moving parts. RC/HCs lead by consensus rather than by fiat, and OCHA has a defined set of annual tools and products that the system needs it to deliver.

Instead, the first six months of FI implementation involved trying to establish some conceptual clarity on what the main elements of the FI approach would be. The OCHA FI leadership team in New York spent a lot of time traveling to the four pilot countries, and the country-based teams spent a lot of time talking to each other, establishing consultative groups at national level, and gradually evolving a localised version of the broad direction.

The FI is a substantial change in tack from previous reform initiatives, and this has led to some disquiet and confusion. The main difference from the outset was that the FI aimed to transform humanitarianism 'from below,' thereby replacing a centralised and supply-driven model with an approach that places the priorities of affected populations at its centre, thus being demand-driven. The four pilot countries were to be part of an 'experimental' agenda that empowers RC/HCs to trial and develop bespoke approaches to coordination and humanitarian solutions. In so doing, the primary criticisms of the current system – its interlinked struggle with protracted crisis contexts, accountability deficits, and weighty 'time-sink' bureaucracies – could be overcome through novel, lean and tailored approaches that genuinely centre and empower affected communities.

To genuinely design such an experimental approach is time consuming and difficult. The fact that by and large this is in place after a year is extremely impressive, but the difficulty in designing this set of changes, novel approaches and experiments was almost certainly under-estimated. Moreover, a decision was taken early in the initiative that there would be no, or limited, additional resources for the FI work. This was partly to signal to all concerned (donors, OCHA internally, IASC partners) that this was not an 'add on project' but rather a fundamental change to the business model. It was also partly driven by pragmatism – it is not a good look to be spending extra resources on what might be perceived as internal issues, when the system is struggling to fund basic necessities.

The impact of no additional resources, and an evolving (and challenging) concept, meant lots of work in the first six months that did not have an immediately obvious outcome. The traditional change management approach in the IASC system is a set of big change headlines i.e. 'accountability' which then rapidly translate into a working group that draws up policies and guidelines, and ultimately programmes that get funded. The FI is quite different – no programmes, no policies, no guidelines and no working groups. Instead the idea was to let the design emerge organically and 'from below.' RC/HCs were empowered to build their own customised responses to affected populations needs, capacities, and local solutions.

The immediate difficulty for the initiative and the pilot countries, was precisely the lack of detail a bottom-up approach necessitates. From the outset there has been pressure to deliver a plan – 'what does the FI mean in practice?' – both from donors at a global level and partners at a country level. This pressure has been felt intensely by OCHA heads of office, and to a lesser degree by the RC/HCs, who found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to create something new and experimental whilst simultaneously being scrutinised intensely.

The language of innovation is all about learning and experimentation and not being afraid to fail. The culture of the humanitarian aid system is all about pragmatism, speed, well-rehearsed routines, and certainty of purpose. The culture of the UN is of bureaucracy and hierarchy. Failing is to be avoided at all costs and straying too far from the orthodoxy is to invite suspicion. Moreover, OCHA itself has even less of a learning culture than other UN humanitarian organisations. Whilst it commissions system wide evaluations, it rarely evaluates its own operations and there has been a tendency to conflate external learning promotion with a readiness to learn and adapt internally.

At heart, the FI requires a **mindset shift** if it is ever truly going to achieve systemic change. As the material in section 5.1 makes clear, the things that communities want are often quite different from the ones that the humanitarian system has to offer. If such a mis-match occurs, then the reaction is usually that what communities are asking for is too difficult, or not within the humanitarian remit. Agencies with a more developmental mandate might try and offer different approaches but will often struggle to find the financing as programmes are not 'emergency' focused.

In South Sudan the vice president, responding to the FI, complained that the country did not need food aid, but needed the investment to grow its own food. Looked at from even a small distance the footprint of the humanitarian system in South Sudan seems difficult to comprehend. The current HRP estimates three quarters of the population of 12 million – 9 million people – are in need of humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian appeal is US\$2 billion, somewhere between a quarter and a sixth of the nation's GDP (depending on whose figures you believe). And yet the country is no longer at war, has oil revenues and vast amounts of productive land. Getting out of this humanitarian trap must be a priority for all concerned.

The difficulty of bringing about the mindset shift is exacerbated by three further factors.

First, the bureaucracy that the FI is intended in part to counter, is a significant barrier to its success. Donor reports still need to be written, updates to HQ delivered, appeals, assessments, high level missions, change initiatives (!) – all have to be accommodated as part of the day job. Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) are a good practical mini-example of this. Identified early on as one of the tools that might enable the FI, Colombia decided to initiate (reinstate) one. But there is a minimum amount that must be secured from donors before the CBPF team will take on the task of setting one up (there is understandably a lot of work). Rather than experimentally establishing one and seeing what can be done differently, the fund has to be set up within the current system. As this report notes in the financing section, this "staying within the current concept" also has implications for its use once up and running.

The second problem is that establishing a 'bottom up' change process is an implicit admission that previous 'top down' approaches have not delivered or not delivered enough. The decision to not establish the FI as an IASC process initially is part of the same implicit analysis: that the current system is unable to reform itself with the current tools it has. This challenges much of the established orthodoxy and hierarchy and certainly creates the conditions for opposition. When people and institutions are not included in such processes they may be more likely to be suspicious of them, or even hostile.

The final problem is that the FI also challenges OCHA itself. The humanitarian response plan (HRP) and humanitarian needs overview (HNO) are amongst the most visible OCHA products, alongside the cluster system, the inter-cluster coordination group (ICCG) and all of the supporting humanitarian programme cycle (HPC) architecture (multisectoral needs assessment (MSNA), joint intersectoral analysis framework (JIAF), etc). In calling for these to be radically overhauled the FI again implicitly critiques OCHA and the way it has been working. It threatens established skills, positions, even ideologies. OCHA to some degree 'sets the narrative' for the overall humanitarian response. The HRP frames how a particular crisis is seen, even if the document itself does not result directly in every

project contained being funded. It is a food crisis, or a protection crisis, or a health crisis. The FI asks the question as to whether these narratives have always been correct and sets out to develop different narratives and different framing.

The practical upshot of these practical and conceptual dilemmas has been two-fold. First, the countries largely adopted FI 'elements' that already somewhat existed in-country and looked to boost or enhance them (capitalising on good work that was already in progress):

- In South Sudan, the FI initially co-opted the area based leadership (ABL) model that was in the process of being established anyway.
- In Niger, the FI sought to work with communal development plans and committees already somewhat established by government.
- In the Philippines, the FI worked through the joint UN Country Team (UNCT)-HCT, including local NGOs and the private sector, again already established.
- And in Colombia, the FI started with community interaction which was already extensive.

At the end of the year, with work starting to coalesce, ideas starting to take shape and the pressure for some kind of conceptual framework becoming too difficult to ignore, the central FI team introduced a set of benchmarks to guide the second year. These were derived from a head of FI office retreat in the Philippines that saw extensive sharing of ideas and challenges to each other, meaning their origin was still organic and in keeping the spirit of the FI. Nevertheless, they are also a centralised framework, proving how difficult it has been to preserve the space for completely open innovation and 'learning by failing'.

The **benchmarks** are set out below and also in the relevant Findings sections below.

Benchmarks:

1. Meaningful and continuous participatory community engagement that provides an understanding of community priorities/ambitions/capacities rather than validating our assumptions and pre-programmed responses.
2. Area based/subnational/decentralized coordination footprint that leads/supports/coordinates participatory community engagement.
3. Humanitarian programming that reflects consultations, supports local initiatives, and delivers community priorities.
4. Financing delivers solutions to community priorities and supports local actors.
5. Evolved plan from the HRP that is organised by community priorities and areas-based coordination.

As this report makes clear, despite each office using what existed as its starting point (and it is hard to think how to do otherwise), at the end of the first year there are a coherent set of both community engagement and participation approaches and decentralised coordination approaches established and starting to be tested. The spread of these and the diversity offer a rich source of learning into the second year, and a spring board to move into the next phase of FI work around programming and financing. The following section set this out in detail.

4. Overview of the Flagship Initiative by country and region

The following is a summary of the geographical focus and key elements of Flagship work in each of the four countries.

4.1 Colombia

Despite a peace agreement in 2016 that saw the end to decades of fighting between the Government of Colombia and the main opposition group (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) FARC, there continues to be conflict, criminality and lawlessness in peripheral areas of the country. The legacy of the past and continuing conflict is that millions remain displaced, and newly displaced, and government presence and infrastructure is largely absent in many areas of the country. A new refugee and migrant crisis has also affected the country since 2018, driven by economic collapse in neighbouring Venezuela and high levels of crime and poverty across the region. Colombia also experiences a range of natural hazard disasters, exacerbated by climate variability.

The international humanitarian presence in Colombia is substantial, with over 100 humanitarian organisations working under the umbrella of the Humanitarian Country team (HCT), two coordination systems (IASC and refugee). OCHA initially scaled down significantly after the peace deal in 2016 but has since been building back up again in the face of ongoing humanitarian need.

Colombia has a 'dual coordination system' whereby the IASC humanitarian system sits alongside an Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (GIFMM in Spanish). This has consistently been identified by NGOs as an extra source of bureaucracy and confusion and was highlighted by the UN internal oversight body (OIOS) as having "challenges and risks associated with the existence of multiple coordination frameworks"²⁵, although on the ground there is a good working relationship between UNHCR, IOM and OCHA.

During the first year of the Flagship Initiative (2023) the HCT created a Flagship Thinking Group consisting of UN agencies, funds and programmes, international and national NGOs, and donors, to identify good practices, opportunities for streamlining and innovation, and formulate recommendations. The Thinking Group identified priority actions for the implementation of the Flagship Initiative in Colombia around 6 key areas which are all inter-related and mutually reinforcing: 1) community engagement; 2) area coordination; 3) localisation; 4) financing; 5) HPC lightening and 6) rationalising compliance requirements. Some aspects of the financing work did not go ahead due lack of capacity, although a new country based pooled fund is being developed.

Three geographical areas were chosen to test a new model of decentralised, integrated coordination. These are:

- **La Guajira:** Located in northern Colombia, La Guajira is a region grappling with multiple complex issues. It has the highest rates of child mortality and morbidity, widespread malnutrition, and severe food insecurity. The region is predominantly inhabited by indigenous communities and faces conflicts, recurrent climate-related disasters, and a significant presence of Venezuelan refugees.
- **Buenaventura:** Situated on the Pacific coast, Buenaventura has been profoundly affected by conflict, with numerous non-state armed groups (NSAGs) vying for territorial control of Colombia's largest port (responsible for 60 per cent of the country's imports and exports),

²⁵ <https://oios.un.org/file/9829/download?token=RW8EhlgR>

alongside issues related to gang violence. The Colombian government has designated it a priority area for peace initiatives, making it an ideal setting for collaborative work in humanitarian, peace, and development sectors.

- **Guaviare:** Located at the doorstep of the Amazon rainforest, Guaviare has historically been a red zone, with FARC remnants refusing to demobilise and forming dissident groups. It remains the financial and political stronghold of one of the largest dissident groups in the country, FARC-EMC, with whom the Colombian government is currently negotiating. The region experiences recurrent humanitarian concerns due to extensive social control.

Currently the humanitarian system has 15 territorial (departmental) teams, with two thirds of these coordinated by a lead agency, and a third by OCHA. The newly appointed leads in the three FI areas were tasked with leading a comprehensive area-based diagnosis across humanitarian, peace, development and climate issues, as well as the development of area-based outcome level plans.

In Buenaventura and Guaviare, there are also innovation labs being established to test new ways of programming around key priorities identified: 1) promote the role of women; 2) link humanitarian and development; 3) promote the participation and empowerment of local actors; 4) ensure humanitarian work also accounts for climate and environmental issues and 5) ensure the participation of the private sector.

Colombia has also been advancing on localisation. A mapping was conducted to identify all national NGOs working under 'humanitarian principles' recording 80 national/local NGOs. Capacity assessments were then carried out to identify capacity requirements which will be followed by training offers and capacity development efforts. An HCT strategy to increase national NGO participation in national coordination is being worked on. The Colombia Humanitarian Fund has as an aspiration to fund capacity strengthening work.

In addition, Colombia also initiated pilots for promoting integrated or joint programming (with challenges that are being documented to enhance learning); it is testing new methodologies to merge and thereby streamline accountability procedures. The team also tested out a new HPC process with the aim of enhancing community participation and reducing bureaucracy, the results of which are being documented.

4.2 Niger

Niger has been buffeted in the last decade by conflict in neighbouring states, refugee flows, climate crisis and increasingly incursions by radical Islamic armed groups. The troubled tri-border area with Burkina Faso and Mali has become a hard-to-reach area, with NSAGs terrorising local villages in the province of Tillaberi, leading to mass displacement. Along the border with Nigeria Boko Haram has caused displacement and conflict for the best part of a decade, with sprawling Internally Displaced Person (IDP) and refugee camps around the main town of Diffa in the far south-east. Niger is also one of the poorest countries in the world, and one of the most affected by climate change, mostly manifested as drought and flooding. The unpredictability of the climate, population growth, competition around resources feed the cycles of violence. As a symbol of the changes confronting Niger, Lake Chad (on its eastern border) has shrunk by 80 per cent since the 1960s, dramatically affecting both farming and fishing. A military coup in 2023 has led to regional sanctions and put more pressure on already fragile communities.

The Flagship has chosen the two more conflict affected provinces of Tillaberi and Diffa for its Flagship innovations, and within these, 3 communes:

- **Diffa:** Diffa region has experienced major internal displacement and refugee flows since 2016, connected to the Boko Haram insurgency in neighbouring Nigeria. The FI initiative has chosen three 'communes'; Diffa town (urban), N'Guigmi (very remote, next to Lake Chad) and Chetimari (closer to Diffa town at only 30km, but very conflict affected). In each of these an 'antenna' has been established whereby local NGOs, supported by OCHA and INGO partners, support local mayors and community groups to plan and implement aid via the commune development plans (i.e. OCHA has identified a local NGO partner to support the mayor and the community in planning and implementing the communal plan).
- **Tillabéri:** Tillabéri region is experiencing major armed conflict with NSAG conducting operations cross border from Mali and Burkina Faso. Flagship communes in Tillabéri are Ayorou, Ouallam and Banibangou. These are operating on the same model as Diffa.

OCHA Niger has adopted a subtly unique approach to understanding 'community priorities'. Rather than seeking to identify overarching priorities (which may be broader than a sectoral need), they are exploring the detailed priorities which underpin those needs. For example, rather than settling with a community's request for 'education', they want to drill down into what that really means: e.g., electricity in the classrooms, or additional teachers. The rationale for this is that partners will focus their assistance on what communities really want, rather than a rough sectoral approach. The main thrust of the Niger Flagship plan has been to instigate joint planning between the humanitarian community and the mayors, who are head of the communes and custodians of the statutory Economic and Social Development Plan, alongside civil society groups as represented by local NGOs. In the commune of Nguigmi, OCHA Niger has set up an antenna to work with a local NGO to effectively support local community involvement in these committees. In the other communes, the staff from the existing OCHA sub-office are working with local NGOs to effectively take on the local community engagement. In each pilot communes, OCHA Niger is establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a local based NGO, outlining roles and responsibilities, division of labour and complementarity with OCHA's antenna.

Despite the coup in July 2023, the local mayors have continued in their positions and the local collaborations have advanced. In Diffa it has been possible to organise local groupings to develop a 'baseline' of community representation and priorities, and to follow up with periodic monitoring missions. Unfortunately the coup has led to a suspension of development finance, that had been part of the plan to address both humanitarian and structural needs simultaneously. In Tillabéri the access situation has deteriorated further since the coup making work quite challenging.

In Diffa, OCHA will be testing a pilot approach of financing via regional funds. Projects will be developed based on priorities identified by the communities and will be implemented by local NGOs.

4.3 Philippines

The Philippines is the most natural hazard disaster prone country in the world. In 2021, disasters triggered 5.7 million internal displacements, of which storms accounted for 91 per cent. Typhoon Rai, known locally as Odette, led to the largest number of disaster displacements of the year worldwide. Without action, climate change will impose substantial economic and human costs, affecting the poorest households the most. Over the last decade, the government has made significant progress in preparedness and response to disasters, but issues remain at the local level and with integration of climate change adaptation.

The World Bank estimates show that the economic damages due to climate change in the Philippines could reach up to 7.6 per cent of GDP by 2030 and 13.6 per cent of GDP by 2040, clearly outpacing its growth. The business case for resilience building investments in such context is compelling with

an average US\$1.00 spent saving US\$4.00 –\$7.00 in response. Climate action in the Philippines needs to consider both extreme and slow-onset events, and responses will need to vary across the country.

Three regions were chosen for Flagship investments (jointly within the HCT-UNCT) and its ‘enhancing community resilience’ (ERC) approach, the Philippines interpretation of the FI concept. This is broadly based around the idea of community-based climate resilience and recognition that good local practices exist that need strengthening. By mid-2023, the HCT-UNCT developed a Flagship Roadmap, defining key priority areas for the initiative: 1) community engagement; 2) integrated resilience programming; 3) aid localisation; 4) cash transfers and digital payments; 5) protection and rights-based approaches and 6) public and private partnerships.

Two national officers have been appointed for three regions to facilitate collaboration and coordination among local government and local humanitarian and development partners, promoting a bottom-up approach to the Initiative's implementation. A local NGO and a private sector representative have also been embedded in the OCHA Flagship team to incentivise innovation from within.

The three regions are:

- **Region 5:** 12 barangays (villages) were selected where the population is exposed to multiple hazards including landslides, flash floods, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and storm surges.
- **Caraga Region and Region 8:** where 11 barangays were selected that were hit by Typhoon Rai/ Odette, suffering major damage and are also anticipatory action pilot areas. Caraga is a region that has not been historically exposed to typhoons.
- In 2024, FI plans are to expand to the **Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)**, a conflict-affected area at the southern-most island of Mindanao.

4.4 South Sudan

South Sudan is the world's newest country, founded in 2011 after almost 50 years of intermittent conflict with its now northern sibling. Immediately following independence South Sudan experienced harrowing internal conflict leading to millions being displaced inside and outside the country. Since 2016 an uneasy peace has allowed for some progress, with the country beginning to rebuild its shattered economy and citizens trying to rebuild their lives. Despite this the country remains incredibly precarious in terms of humanitarian risk and need, with World Food Programme (WFP) estimating that three quarters of the population are food insecure.

The Flagship concentrates on three areas with varying risk and humanitarian profiles:

- **Wau, Western Bahr El Ghazal:** somewhat stabilised, the bulk of almost 100,000 IDPs have now returned home leaving a small number still in camps and a major job of return and resettlement to undertake for local authorities and their partners. Wau is also experiencing some returns of South Sudanese from Sudan.
- **Bentiu, Unity County:** has the largest camp for internally displaced in the country on the former Protection of Civilians (POC) site. These camps were affected by flooding for four years in a row, leading to a major humanitarian effort, with the site now protected by a dyke (see figure 4.1 overleaf).
- **Malakal, Upper Nile State:** Malakal hosts nearly 50,000 internally displaced people in another former POC site. Conflict between the two main groups in the camp has broken out periodically,

resulting in armed clashes and deaths. Malakal is also the primary transit point for South Sudanese fleeing the conflict in Sudan.

Figure 4.1: Dikes protect the main IDP (internally displaced persons) camp in Bentiu



Source: © UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

While decentralised coordination is being piloted in the three locations of Wau, Bentiu and Malakal, the intention is to gradually roll the approach out to the entire country and humanitarian operations.

In the 2024 humanitarian needs and response plan (HNRP) for South Sudan, the Flagship Initiative is presented as addressing the pressing challenge of escalating humanitarian needs that outpace available resources. To effectively respond, the Initiative emphasises the importance of community engagement and resilience-building to prepare the affected communities for future shocks. The primary goal (as set out in the HNRP) is to shift from a reliance on short-term humanitarian aid to fostering self-sufficiency, dignity, livelihoods, and independence to maximise impact among affected populations. The HRP identifies four strategic focus areas for the FI: 1) Reducing food insecurity; 2) increasing returns of internally displaced persons and refugees; 3) delivering basic social services and 4) mitigating the impact of climate change. The Flagship Initiative sets out to take a holistic and community-centred approach to addressing humanitarian challenges in South Sudan. By fostering collaboration, empowerment, and resilience-building, the initiative aims to achieve sustainable durable solutions and to reduce dependency on humanitarian assistance.

The OCHA Head of Office said that the OCHA strategy for the FI in South Sudan is for, “a well-tailored response and coordination that addresses the priorities and needs of the people in a particular context and location. The idea at its simplest is to organise at the sub-national level the main actors who can contribute to the solution of the problem affecting the community. Such groupings need to be action-oriented and will be clearly different from the traditional Inter-Clusters where only emergency humanitarian response is discussed.”

5. Key Findings

The Flagship Initiative has largely focused on community engagement and decentralised coordination during its first year. It has built on existing strengths and capacities in each of the four countries to develop working models for these two ‘first steps’ to implement the ERC’s vision. Each country has developed a different model, largely a result of context. This allows for a rich source of comparison across and within the countries, to try and understand where new approaches might work and in what circumstances.

5.1 Community engagement and participation

Benchmark:

Meaningful and continuous participatory community engagement that provides an understanding of community priorities/ambitions/capacities rather than validating our assumptions and pre-programmed responses.

The FI has generated several key insights around community engagement and participation during its first year. These are:

1. Identifying that existing humanitarian responses in Colombia, South Sudan, Niger and the Philippines are largely not all meeting the expectations or addressing the priorities of affected people, despite the rhetoric on enhanced participation.
2. Broad consensus across all four FI countries around the types of interventions communities prioritise, many of which are at odds with the current system.
3. Experimentation with various types of community engagement, drawing on existing tools and developing new ones.
4. Engagement with the challenge of aggregating individual community plans and priorities into a coherent national picture, informing macro strategic approaches.

This section deals with each of these insights and themes in turn.

5.1.1 Participation has not advanced significantly, despite a deep rhetorical commitment

“The early stages of implementation of the FI have been an eye opener in terms of how we record and speak about our response and the ways in which we may need to adjust our systems. We have very sophisticated systems to track numbers: people reached with how many activities in which areas; funding available etc. it’s all numbers. And yet, we found out we have no means of systematizing the more qualitative aspects of our work such as community engagement or how to establish the relationship between community engagement and the response collectively delivered by humanitarian actors. We will need to rethink this and do so without creating additional processes and compliance requirements!”

Flagship Country Office.

All four FI countries prioritised community engagement as a first step in the process of ensuring, “the priorities of affected communities must drive response efforts”.

In all four countries this started with various forms of mapping existing community engagement efforts, and discussions with partners on existing methods and approaches. What is clear from this initial focus, is that in all four countries, there is a lot of community *interaction*. In Colombia the OCHA office estimated some 5,400 ‘community interactions’ *per month*²⁶ across the 100+ partners connected to the IASC system. What was also clear in Colombia, however, is that the vast amount of these interactions were not recorded. As a result, neither were they joined up, jointly analysed or aggregated, meaning they were not made available to other partners, and therefore finally, were not informing macro response strategies. It is also unclear from this lack of documentation what form these ‘community interactions’ took.

This picture is replicated in South Sudan. There are multiple layers and levels of community interaction – from structured, elected, IDP camp management committees, to ongoing dialogues with local leaders, to myriad groups established as part of projects.

However, the FI has also highlighted that the overwhelming nature of these interactions can best be described as transactional. Given how fundamental this community engagement/ interaction/ consultation is, it is worth taking some space in this report trying to set out the issues. These are clearly exposed by the FI focus on this aspect of the humanitarian programme cycle, but none of the issues are new and most have received quite extensive analysis and study over the years.

“In most qualitative interviews where it was discussed in the 2022 ISNA, participants stated that consultations with aid agencies about humanitarian assistance had taken place. However, in many interviews, participants raised concerns regarding whether consultations had taken place in the right way and whether they had an impact. Some respondents reported that the consultations did not lead to positive changes in humanitarian assistance in line with the needs and preferences communicated by affected populations. This perceived lack of impact of the consultations reportedly reduced trust in humanitarian agencies and in community leaders.”

REACH, South Sudan, 2023.

Broadly, current forms of community interaction can be broken down into four elements – needs assessment, beneficiary selection, project implementation and feedback mechanisms.

Needs assessment is the cornerstone of humanitarian programming and the first step in the programme cycle. The literature and various technologies are too extensive to summarise here, but if there is any point at which the system establishes ‘the priorities of affected communities’, it is during needs assessment.

Whilst there are plenty of ‘participatory’ needs assessment approaches, these are not the mainstream. Moreover, needs assessment is the primary vehicle for securing donor financing of projects, and as such speaks as much to what donors want to fund as it does to what communities say they prioritise.

²⁶ OCHA Colombia used the final mission data for 2023 from UNDSS, which shows that the UN system conducted a total of 32,721 field missions last year, averaging 2,726 per month. Assuming a comparable output from NGOs, this would equate to an average of approximately 5,400 missions per month.

The humanitarian system is financed entirely by voluntary contributions from states and individuals. What this statement means in the context of this report is that the funding is not ‘assessed contributions’ as it is for certain aspects (and agencies) of the United Nations i.e., peacekeeping, regular budget, International Labour Organisation (ILO) etc. The patchwork of UN agencies funds and programmes, international and national non-government organisations, international and national Red Cross and Crescent; all are financed via projects and fundraising. There is some divergence: Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is almost entirely funded via public donations which are not ‘earmarked’ (allocated to a specific project); most UN entities get some kind of core funding that is not earmarked (the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) for example calls this Regular Resources in contrast to Other Resources). These funds can be spent as the agency (organisation) wishes. But for the vast majority of humanitarian funding monies are allocated against a project proposal.

Project proposals are based on needs assessments, and a logic of input – output – outcome. Typically the donor (a government donor) is told by the organisation asking for funds that there is X acute need and that Y intervention will alleviate this. Needs assessments justify the project; a nutrition intervention is justified on the basis of a nutritional assessment. If it is shown that there is very high acute malnutrition then the justification for funding is much higher than if the levels of malnutrition are quite low.

Over the years the main humanitarian agencies have become highly specialised, a trend accelerated by the cluster system which explicitly breaks down the humanitarian response system into a number of key specialised-technical areas. What this has resulted in – in turn – is much (highly credible) technical work in refining ‘needs assessment’ in these technical areas. Food security has Food Security and Livelihoods Assessments (FSLA). Nutrition has SMART surveys. Health has various epidemiological tools at its disposal (typically monitoring a handful of reference communicable diseases), but in crises the health cluster tends to roll out the Health Resources and Services Availability Mapping System (HeRAMS). The list is extensive. Each cluster has assessment methodologies, and each agency too.

These types of national or wide-area based assessments are primarily used to ‘target’ – decide which areas need a particular type of intervention. There are then follow on, individual organisation-based assessments that are used for funding proposals. As an example, a food security and nutrition specialised NGO might assess an area that has an Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) 4 categorisation and high Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM), resulting in a proposal to target X households with an intervention – perhaps a mix of cash and nutritional specialised services. This assessment might interview community leaders, local government officials, perhaps women-led organisations, perhaps disability representative organisations. These interviews might be semi-structured, key informant interviews (KIIs), but most likely they will be surveys using enumerators to ask a set of standardised questions using a Kobo- (or similar) based assessment tool. Whether surveys, or KIIs, or a mix, the assessment will be narrowly focused on the topic at hand – food security and nutrition. This again is replicated many times over, by sector and by organisation.

People are being engaged with, but crucially on the organisations terms.

However, according to affected communities, this form of engagement is insufficient and inadequate.

“Community engagement is when our voices count – our collective voices- and when we can live being part of and leading our own processes. It’s not about humanitarian assistance; it’s not about giving us things. It’s about co-construction, transformation, and accompaniment in our own vision for our communities.”

Community Leader from Chocó, Colombia during the FI Community Engagement Forum in Bogota, 2023.

When the funds are secured and the humanitarian organisation is ready to start work, there will be another interaction with community. This will revolve around ‘beneficiary selection’ – who will get the assistance or participate in the project. This may require another type of assessment, it may be a collaborative effort with local authorities, community leaders, local organisations or similar. People may be able to choose from a list of interventions. This is often called ‘participatory’. In South Sudan for example, a large food security organisation has a programme to build community assets, allowing people to choose from a list of road rehabilitation, food production support, flood prevention embankments and well digging. Each of these activities is basically ‘food for work’ whereby the community receives food aid in support of their efforts in these areas. This is choice, but within a proscribed range of activities.

In the course of implementation, interactions with communities are at their most intense, probably accounting for the majority of the 5,400 interactions a month recorded in Colombia. Although as these are not recorded it is impossible to say with any certainty. Once again, these interactions run along proscribed lines – once projects are approved there is rarely much flexibility in their implementation. Indigenous communities in the Choco region of Colombia, as one example of this, have been lobbying two large humanitarian organisations in receipt of CERF financing to alter their modalities – a different type of foodstuff, and a different approach to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) provision. Neither organisations’ representatives at local level felt they were empowered to deviate from standard organisational approaches, despite the funding actually being flexible enough to accommodate this. Often of course it is the other way round – the organisation wants to change but feels the donor will not allow this, especially if the switch is sectoral i.e. from a WASH project to a livelihoods one.

“There remained, however, limited examples provided in self-reporting or upon request during interviews showing how affected people have been afforded influence over or helped drive programme design and planning.”

HPG Grand Bargain report 2023 (reviewing workstream 6 on participation).

Finally, there are the various ‘accountability to affected populations’ (AAP) mechanisms. These take the form of feedback systems whereby – theoretically – people who are in receipt of aid can tell the implementing agency if there is something wrong and then their feedback goes on to re-shape the response. However, the actual implementation of AAP has typically resulted in the addition of complaint boxes (in camps) or more recently phone hotlines.²⁷ One observed mechanism was a telephone hotline operated in a language not understood by the population receiving aid.

27 IASC, ‘Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP): A Brief Overview’; Sherine El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Kerrie Holloway, and Yazeed Al Jeddawy, ‘Accountability Dilemmas and Collective Approaches to Communication and Community Engagement in Yemen’ (ODI, July 2020), <https://odi.org/en/publications/accountability-dilemmas-and-collective-approaches-to-communication-and-community-engagement-in-yemen/>.

The dominant paradigm exposed by the Flagship Initiative's first year of trying to understand, genuinely, how to respond to community priorities, is one in which **expert humanitarian officials, rather than communities**, determine what is most important. Needs assessment is data collection that is then analysed by humanitarian experts (whether implementing organisations or donors or both). On the basis of this analysis programmes are designed, finance secured, supplies procured, agreements with local authorities negotiated, and then finally, communities are informed. Consultations then take place with communities about which individuals participate in/ benefit from the project and any practical arrangements that need to be put in place. While there were attempts to validate expert interpretations, these were not meaningful spaces in which communities could alter decisions already made.

“The most significant challenge – as previously identified by the workstream co-conveners – is the lack of incentives. It is clear, given the decades-long debate on participatory approaches, and more recently on AAP within the IASC and the participation revolution in the Grand Bargain, that the ethical and moral arguments for working in this way are not on their own sufficient incentives for change.”

HPG Grand Bargain report 2023 (reviewing workstream 6 on participation).

5.1.2 What do people want? And what do they prioritise?

In 2021 the humanitarian system responded to widespread floods caused by a dam bursting in the central region of La Mojana, Colombia²⁸. Although this region is wetlands and has some annual flooding, the dam rupture led to a situation people had not previously encountered. The humanitarian system responded with emergency relief assistance, securing a CERF grant of US \$4million alongside other partners interventions.

In 2022 the region flooded again, and once more there was a response. In 2023, when there was again major flooding, the community formed an action group and requested that the humanitarian agencies, instead of providing assistance a third time, helped them lobby government to fix the dyke that was the root cause of the flooding. Partially in the spirit of the Flagship Initiative – by now up and running in Colombia – OCHA took this idea seriously and with other humanitarian partners worked with community activists and leaders. First they made a community action plan together, and then OCHA facilitated access in Bogotá for the action group to meet relevant Ministers and Ministries. At the time of writing the government has allocated funding to fix the dyke, but work has yet to commence.

The need in this instance – the priority of the community – was not to receive more short-term assistance, but to address the structural problem causing their humanitarian need. By doing so their ongoing suffering is not only alleviated but also the humanitarian organisations do not need to spend precious resources again.

Two lessons can be drawn from this example, which as can be seen from work in the other Flagship countries (below) are broadly applicable. First, the initial emergency intervention is much needed and appreciated. Second, people very quickly – once the acute moment has passed – want to be part of their own solution. They want to get on with their own lives, have agency and work toward a

28 See for instance OCHA sitrep: 25082023 Situation Report La Mojana.

sustainable solution. They want help to do this, but they do not want to be dependent, and they certainly do not prioritise short term assistance.

What communities – when asked – tell Flagship consultation exercises over and over again is that they want to be involved in design. They want to decide what the priorities are, and shape how these are addressed. They also, overwhelmingly, want interventions to give them agency – to help them tackle the problems they face, rather than being passive recipients. Whether it is newly returned South Sudanese women in Western Bahr el Gazal who wanted micro grants to start their business again, or community leaders in Colombia, or Niger who want training and knowledge transfer the theme is always, ‘build on our capacities’ rather than ignore or neglect them.

In the Philippines the situation with regard to community activism is quite similar to Colombia. In November the heads of the four Flagship OCHA offices visited two post-Haiyan reconstruction projects outside Tacloban town. One was built by the government and whilst the infrastructure was sound, services and access to livelihoods are lacking and as a result the habitancy is low. Those living there are struggling. By contrast, a community-based organisation Urban Poor Associates, together with faith-based and other associations, spent the first few years of reconstruction working with the community on design and implementation, making them responsible for large aspects of the rebuild (and making them use their own resources). The result of this enhanced community organising is a vibrant and functioning community with high occupancy and a well-functioning economy, drawing people in. Whilst it took longer to build, long term the outcome is radically better.

In the Flagship area of Tiwi, Albay Province, the population is exposed to multiple hazards including landslides, flash floods, volcano, tsunami, and storm surges. It is also vulnerable to at least five typhoons that directly hit the Bicol Region annually.

In consultations with the community for the learning component of the Flagship, they were asked to talk about the problems they are facing as a result of natural hazards (disasters) and what their solutions are. The area is predominantly rural, relying on agriculture, fisheries and employment in the local geothermal power plant. The Philippines has a crop insurance scheme for farmers, meaning that they are somewhat protected from the economic damage associated with disasters. Problems identified related to timely provision of information, local leadership, well-constructed evacuation sites and the need for strong community morale. Table 1 sets these out as well as identified community solutions and capacities.

Table 5.1: community proposed solutions to their humanitarian risk. Albay Province, Philippines

Problem	Effect	Coping Strategies	Community Solution	Local Capacity	Support Gap	Outcome
Inadequate information	Inability to prepare and evacuate immediately	Listen to radio or television	Local government conducts tracks storms and informs them regularly	Adhere to prep and evacuation guidelines	Access to effective communication channels (radio, TV, internet connectivity); Alternative energy sources	Preparedness and immediate response to disaster
Unfair leadership	Disorganised response; unfair distribution of aid and poor registration	Request for aid; Use scrap materials for house repair	Improved transparency in aid distribution	New barangay administration	Accountability and transparency measures (data);	Efficient and just aid distribution and disaster response

Problem	Effect	Coping Strategies	Community Solution	Local Capacity	Support Gap	Outcome
Lack of safe evacuation sites	Residents exposed to disaster hazards; Injuries and deaths	Evacuate to centres near town; Seek shelter in concrete homes	Construct safe and proper evacuation centres	Barangay resolution to allocate or seek government budget	Possible sites to construct evacuation centres	At-risk residents encouraged to evacuate, resulting in less injuries and death
Repeated destruction of homes/ poor house structures	Cycle of poverty, emotional and mental distress	Repair of houses using scrap or available materials; Relocate to government housing	Concretise houses; Relocate to safer areas close to livelihood source	Capacity to rebuild houses; Apply for relocation program	Access to livelihood in relocation site; Provision of financial support to pay for housing fees	Improved living conditions; avoid loss love lives and property
Poor morale, confidence, and economic insecurity	Anxiety and depression	Going to church/ prayer	Improve resilience of livelihoods; Alternative sources of income	Empowerment by local government agencies	Building skills for alternative livelihoods; Improve educational assistance and increase employment opportunities	Improved security in terms of food and other basic needs
Poor community spirit	Slow recovery after disasters	Reaching out to relatives or external support	Unity in the in community	New barangay council	Mediator to open conversations on disaster response and resilience building	Faster recovery post-disaster; Ability to achieve normalcy sooner

Source: Author's own

The community does identify assistance-type interventions, alongside many issues that relate to their own capacities, or government action. But most of these are not 'traditional' in terms of the way the current humanitarian system is structured. A traditional set of needs assessments following a tropical storm and flooding might identify the need for financial support (and this is probably the only thing on their list that would get identified), but even then it would be unlikely to be given for rent subsidies.

Figure 5.1: communities in Albay, Philippines discussing disaster risk



Source: Author's own

In some senses the knowledge discussed here is decades old. It is tempting to ask the question, “how can we be talking about this as if it is new in 2024?”. But the reality is that the sector, as it has become more technocratic, has become less attuned to the desires and the capacities of communities rather than more. Of course these sweeping statements are unfair on the many organisations trying to genuinely progress empowerment and localisation, but they are also broadly true at a macro level. The Flagship Initiative is a genuine attempt to try and understand this, develop new models and enhance some existing ones, albeit in a highly challenging context.

Two examples from South Sudan (below) further illustrate this prioritisation. Table 5.2 shows a prioritised list of aid interventions in one of the two IDP camps in Wau, Western Bahr El Gazal (south Sudan). Box 5.1 shows a list of prioritised interventions by a group of recently returned South Sudanese women from Sudan, following the war in that country.

Table 5.2: Flagship Initiative Community Dialogues outcome in Hai Masna IDP camp, WBG State, 19-20 July 2023

Population groups	Women	Elderly/Men	Youth
Solutions to identified problems in order of priority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic empowerment such as: bread making, provision of initial capital for businesses; provision of agricultural inputs such as seeds/tools, ox-plough, community-based tractors, and livestock support with goats. Provision of basic social services such as Health, Education, and clean water in return areas. HLP issues: grabbed land, occupied houses, and landlessness. Peace & Security. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peace & Security. HLP Issues. Livelihood support (agricultural). Provision of basic social services such as Health, Education, and clean water in return areas. Economic empowerment through skill development in areas such as tailoring, carpentry and joinery, driving and mechanics, building, welding. The acquisition of the above skills should be complemented with initial capital to start businesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HLP Issues (including rental in town). Livelihood (agricultural). Economic empowerment skill development in areas such as tailoring and design; carpentry and joinery, driving and mechanics, building, computer literacy, electrical training, catering, hair dressing and initial capital to start business.

Source: UN OCHA South Sudan

Box 5.1: community consultation with 18 recently returned women from Sudan. Raja County, Western Bahr El Ghazal

During the dialogue, the OCHA team noted that despite the loss of their material property and money, the women have remained with two key things that have kept that going and these are **Hope and Courage**.

- **A hope** that their future will be brighter despite losing all that they have worked for in life and,
- **A courage** to keep pushing on with life despite all its shortcomings to realize the hope of a brighter future.

Key Needs:

The key needs identified among the returnee women are:

- Lack of capital for starting small scale business such as bakery and restaurant services among others,
- Lack of resources for construct their own houses in their own plots of land. It is important to note that land and security concerns are not an issue for the returnee women in Raja. They all have either their ancestral land or a plot of land they had previously acquired in town that are not contested by anyone.
- Lack of money for paying children school fees and,
- Finally, lack of drugs in Raja hospital despite availability of qualified medical personnel and functionality of the hospital.

Solutions:

- Support with initial capital for starting small scale businesses. According to the women, this support can be in kind through buying for them physical items for kick-starting their business, or in cash. Alternatively, it can be a combination of both. It is important to note that the women are already skilful as they have

been initially trained in their respective business fields while in the Sudan and have already been running these types of businesses before returning to South Sudan.

- Support with construction materials including the cost for labour to address the housing challenges.
 - Support their business initiatives to generate money for paying their children's school fees.
 - Government and partners to prioritise stocking the hospital with medical supplies including drugs.
- Additionally, the women proposed the need to construct primary health care units (PHCUs) at Boma level to shorten the current long distance they must travel in reaching the hospital.

Source: UN OCHA South Sudan

What is particularly interesting about Box 5.1 is that this group of women had received only very small amounts of humanitarian assistance despite fleeing Sudan with nothing. They had returned to a very remote area of South Sudan where they had originally come from and had been welcomed and hosted by the community there. Despite this, their priorities were all future oriented – establishing an income, educating their children, building a home. The only one item on the list that might be construed as an immediate need was health care, and even here they were predominantly looking to government for a structural solutions.

A final example in South Sudan comes from the participatory workshop carried out by the learning team as part of community perception 'baselines'. Participants told the learning team that while work opportunities exist in town, IDPs are unable to access them as they lack the local language skills. Their 'capacity,' then, are skills relevant to the local labour market, but their 'need' is language skills. Yet language lessons are well outside the typical humanitarian remit. As such, this is a clear example of where the affected population's needs do not match the humanitarian systems divide, but an aid system with 'people' at its centre would mean finding a way to bridge that gap.

In a workshop in Bogotá organised by UNHCR and OCHA jointly, and hosted by the Pontificia Javeriana University in September 2023, community leaders from crisis affected communities across the country came together to talk about their priorities. Participants talked about "the parade of waistcoats" that would come to assess their situation, and whilst hugely grateful for the solidarity and help over the years they gently called for this model to stop. Instead they wanted their own capacities to fix their own situation enhanced. Speaker after speaker talked about the need to address structural causes of their crisis (whether conflict, environmental pollution or neglected infrastructure and services). But they also talked about the need for their capacities to address these issues to be enhanced. Above all they want the skills, the knowledge, the networks and the resources to fix their own problems.

In Niger, the crippling combination of extreme poverty, conflict, displacement and climate disruption has led to huge basic needs amongst highly vulnerable populations. Despite this, a Flagship baseline in both conflict -affected provinces (Tillabéri and Diffa) showed a mix of short and long term needs, as well as the universal desire to be involved in project conception, design and implementation.

Table 5.3: Niger baseline N'guigmi commune, Diffa province

<p>Important needs and preferred subjects for further information:</p> <p>Food; Health security; Education; Employment or income-generating activities; Shelter; How and where to access aid; Protection, hygiene and sanitation; What happens in the aid response; How to ask questions or provide feedback to organisations; Income generating activities.</p>	<p>Proposals to take account of community views:</p> <p>Stakeholders should consult communities and take their real needs into account; through local elected representatives and community representatives; through awareness-raising.</p> <p>Use community intermediaries; target the real beneficiaries, but also consult communities through meetings and gatherings</p>
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Source: UN OCHA Niger

Table 5.4: Niger baseline Ouallam commune, Tillaberi province

<p>Important needs and preferred subjects for further information:</p> <p>Health; Food; Education; Safety; Employment or income-generating activities; Hygiene and sanitation; Protection; Utilities; Electricity; First aid; Psychosocial support; Shelter rehabilitation, How and where to access aid (Hosts), First aid, disaster preparedness (Hosts)</p> <p>Ways of spreading information:</p> <p>Word of mouth, social networks, fada, tontine, social events, markets, places of worship, TikTok</p>	<p>Proposals to take account of community views:</p> <p>Strengthen inclusive meetings (leaders, communities, council representatives, religious leaders, site managers, etc.).</p> <p>Through community associations (women's associations, youth clubs, PBS committees, etc.); setting up local development consultation frameworks (NGOs).</p> <p>Involve communities in all phases of projects, seek their feedback, involve them in project design, use local languages more and more when explaining our projects (NGO); Monitor activities, share data and information.</p> <p>By setting up specific PBS committees; Avoiding inequality within the community, through meetings or training, taking account of recommendations.</p> <p>Sharing information with chiefs or leaders, responding quickly to our needs, involving all social strata; consulting all vulnerable groups regardless of gender, culture or religion; putting people on the same level of information; doing things transparently; monitoring activities; equity between all communities.</p> <p>Suggested composition of community representation frameworks:</p> <p>By parity (men and women, young people, etc.), through agreement between each sub-category of the population; Youth committee representation; through nominations by a local leader, in the form of a quota (a well-defined percentage for each category, even if it is not equal); individual representation.</p>
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Source: UN OCHA Niger

Figure 5.3: community consultations in Diffa province, Niger



Source: UN OCHA Niger

In a follow up mission in N'guigmi commune, Diffa province an OCHA team observed that at least in one site, a combination of investment in community structures and aid oriented toward self-reliance was having a positive impact.

Box 5.2: first evaluation/ follow up mission to N'guigmi commune, Diffa province

The findings from the sites evaluated show that the Liskidi village community is a model of success. Two well-structured women's groups are involved in market gardening and livestock farming, with young girls and boys getting involved. This is a very successful model of empowerment and integration that communities at other sites could well adopt as a reference group for good community organisation. Follow-up is needed to find out more about the IDP households and to see what their needs are according to the methodology put in place (monitoring by OCHA/local NGO and partners working in Klakmana with ACF and other operational actors in the village).

Source: UN OCHA Niger

5.1.3 Active consultation, participation, and agency: tools and approaches

In each of the four Flagship countries, as already highlighted, there have been new methods and approaches to community engagement. This has in fact been the main work of the second half of the first year – practically trying to work out what ‘community engagement’ means in practice, and crucially starting to develop new models that can be tested and potentially scaled.

The models being developed in each country are significantly different from each other. This is largely due to context and is completely in keeping with a ‘bottom up’ approach. From a learning perspective, it offers the potential to test several quite different ways of working, with a view to understanding scalability and replicability.

- In the Philippines, OCHA together with a wide range of partners, including government, have developed a new set of participatory tools, ‘listen, discover and enhance’ (LDE) and Resilience-Based Participatory Community Appraisal (ReBPCA) building on genuine listening and agency of affected communities.
- In Colombia, OCHA and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) developed participatory community action plans in La Mojana, leading to government addressing structural problems causing disaster. OCHA and UNHCR together with several NGO partners and a Bogotá University organised a national community leaders forum that has led to a ‘community engagement manifesto’ that will be used to measure how well this is done.
- In South Sudan, OCHA national officers have conducted focus groups with affected communities in the three Flagship areas.
- In Niger, OCHA together with local partners and local government (Mayors) have put in place new joint planning and implementation models at the most local level. This involved conducting baseline assessments with community representatives, community capacities mapping with a cross section of groups and establishing new commune based presence for jointly running programmes.

In Niger, the methodology applied in community engagement consists of analysing the context and priority needs of communities while involving all layers of the community. In practice this consisted of a series of workshops carried out by the local NGO ‘antennas’.

The data is processed and analysed at the municipal level and the same communities of concern validate the data in the end. The validated results are then shared with all stakeholders operating in the commune and they serve as guidance in the planning of various municipal programs, including the Communal Development Plan and project design. Said results are used to respond to community feedback requiring immediate action and to make adjustments to ongoing activities.

In Colombia, a first challenge has been to identify the best standard for community engagement given the vast multiplicity of guidance and standards available in this regard and the different terminology used. The workshop referenced above resulted in a Community Manifesto that was subsequently endorsed by the HCT and by the community leaders who had participated. This is a set of principles that will guide community interaction, meaning that the quality of these engagements can be assessed in a standardised fashion (signed off by the community). OCHA has also collected all of the various participatory tools in use in Colombia with a view to establishing which ones work in the eyes of the communities themselves, and which ones produce tangible results.

The different approaches in each of the four FI countries theoretically allows for a rich source of comparison and learning and is in line with the experimental nature of the FI. The Philippines has developed a system that has a number of participatory approaches, leading to community plans. By

working with GenCap support, the tool already integrates gender and intersectionality. Figure 5.5 below shows the process.

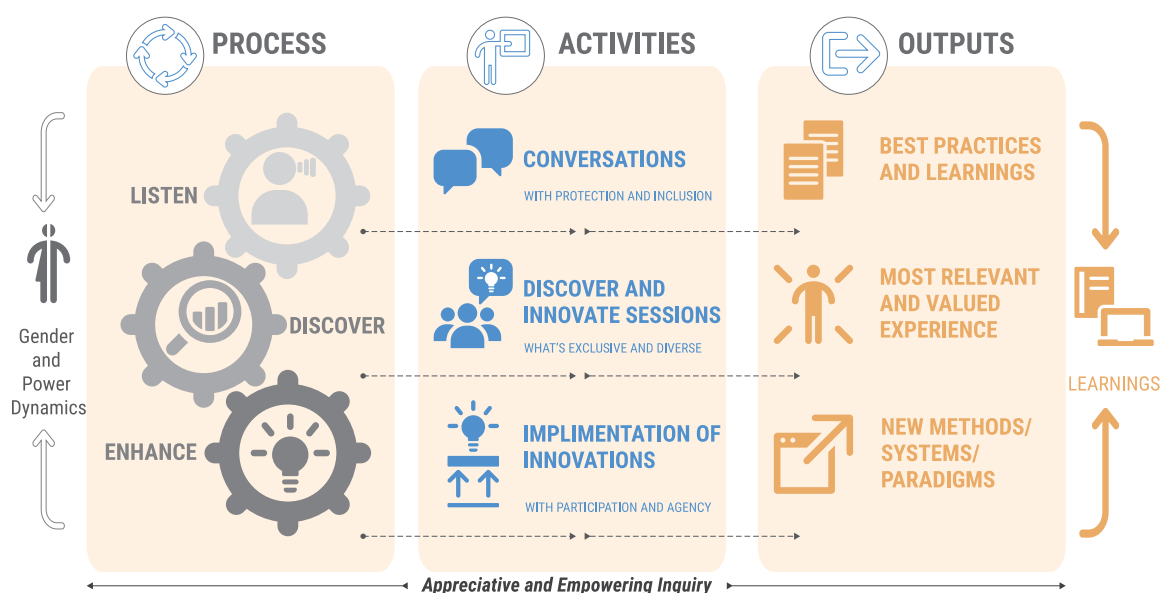
Figure 5. 4: Philippines – moving away from needs assessment toward community plans



Source: UN OCHA Philippines

Figure 5.5: the Philippines Listen, Discover and Enhance (LDE) community engagement framework

THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MODEL WITH GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY








Source: UN OCHA Philippines

The Philippines has also piloted the Resilience-Based Participatory Community Appraisal (ReBPCA) framework and conducted a pre-testing phase in Tiwi, Albay Province (see section 4.1.2 above for a short description of Tiwi). This was carried out with the Philippines Red Cross (PRC), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), UN Women, Solidarity of People (SofP), CARE Philippines, Save the Children, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Catholic Relief Services (CRS),

CBM Global Philippines, Simon of Cyrene, The *Pambansang Koalisyon ng Kababaihan sa Kanayunan* (PKKK) and Good Neighbours International Philippines.

A conclusion of the pre-testing phase noted, “In the community conversations, the men’s segment highlighted significant post-disaster challenges such as providing for families and coping with stress and trauma, leading to mental health issues and impacting family dynamics. Women emphasised the need for their inclusion in disaster recovery, facing disproportionate impacts and calling for gender-sensitive approaches. The youth segment focused on educational disruptions and the importance of maintaining educational rights during disasters. The elderly faced mobility and accessibility challenges, compounded by health and psychosocial impacts. The LGBTQI+ segment highlighted the need for inclusive approaches considering their unique challenges, such as social stigma, discrimination, and legal barriers. Indigenous communities’ unique cultural and social dynamics were recognised, along with their challenges and vulnerabilities.”

Figure 5.6: how the FI in the Philippines aims to update current CE practice

	Aspect	Current Practice	FI Initiative	Initial Learning
	PURPOSE	Inform response plans per the Humanitarian Program Cycle.	Design preparedness and response plans, empower communities.	Identifying community assets is crucial for resilience.
	PERCEPTION OF AFFECTED PEOPLE	Viewed as aid recipients or information sources.	Capable individuals, first responders, and partners in self-reliance.	Recognizing capacities over needs reduces dependency and fosters resilience.
	METHODOLOGY	Consultations, coordination platforms, FGDs, KIs, DO.	ABCD Concept, LDE Methodology built on gender and intersectionality at the center.	Focus on community assets in response plans, integrate gender and intersectionality in activity design.
	TOOLS	Rapid Needs Assessment, VCA, RICAA, MIRA.	ReBPCA, Community-Driven Resilience Planning Tool, CHIS, 1CISP, SCLR.	Existing tools show promise but require further support, testing, and evaluation
	FOCUS	Delivery of life-saving goods, services and information.	Preparedness enhancement, community organizing, meaningful participation in government platforms, leveraging community assets	Community organizing is vital for resilience, capacity building to understand community participation laws effectively.

Source: UN OCHA Philippines

5.1.4 But consulting communities poses some challenging questions

Another early finding that emerges from the FI – also not new, but certainly highlighted – is that there are serious challenges just below the surface of the seemingly simple idea of asking communities what their priorities are.

Two obvious aspects to unpack are definition and representation. The definition of community is clearly not precise. In humanitarian language we often talk about ‘affected communities’, or less common, ‘communities in crisis’. But this in reality is easier to conceptualise when communities are largely homogenous, ideally geographically separate, and relatively small in number. A sprawling inner city is much less obviously a ‘community’ than a village in a conflict zone hosting IDPs. Furthermore, even among geographic and ethnic communities there may be vast differences in

priorities between men and women, children and adults, boys and girls, those who have greater access to resources and those who have less, etc. Flagship areas in all four countries cover this range of contexts, theoretically allowing for insights into the effectiveness of tools and approaches in different typologies of ‘community’.

Representation is perhaps more immediately challenging. In South Sudan the IDP crisis is several years old and the Camp Management and Camp Coordination (CCCM) cluster has established a well-functioning system of camp representation. In Wau the two remaining IDP camps have camp committees whose members, including the chair and officers, are elected. Their committee in turn represents sub-committees that are also elected, based on a ‘block’, or certain numbers of households. These committees are representative – they are elected, they have had training on how to carry out their role, and until the aid ran out they also had a fairly proscribed role – advocating with aid providers for the IDP camp population.

In villages that people have returned to, or where returnees from Sudan are crossing into, representation becomes more complex. South Sudan – like most countries – has a complex social hierarchy with village elders, traditional chiefs, land holders and customary leaders. These are inevitably the people who will speak on behalf of their communities – and the community will expect them to fill that role. But, clearly there are also pitfalls, even in the best functioning contexts.

Whilst not a direct FI example, a cautionary tale from Fiji (below) illustrates this point well.

Box 5.3: Cautionary tale from Fiji

Vunidogoloa, a village of about 140 people on Vanua Levu, the country’s second-biggest island, has an unfortunate prestige in Fiji. It was the first place to be relocated due to the climate crisis. It took the better part of a decade before the new site, about a mile farther inland and higher up, was ready for them. Ultimately, “It was a good decision relocating here.” Before, Naidrua, 74, said, “We were fearing for our lives because of cyclones, inundation of waves in the village.” Now, “We feel safer here.” Even so, mistakes were made. Speak to people working on Fiji’s relocation guidelines, and one omission in particular comes up time and time again. The houses at the new Vunidogoloa site were all built without kitchens. Makereta Waqavonovono, from Climate Tok, an organisation that does climate crisis education work with rural communities, said that what this blunder points to is something more fundamental than just a lack of funding or an incomplete building project: a failure to consult the entire community, rather than with just a few male village leaders. “One of the most glaring parts of it is that they forgot to put kitchens in,” she said when asked about the lessons have been taken from the Vunidogoloa relocation. “Now, what does it say? It means that women were not involved.”

Source: Extract from the Guardian newspaper, 8 November 2022

In South Sudan the recent conflict, and the decades of on-off conflict prior to independence, complicate matters further. Some groups remaining in the IDP camps in Wau (most have returned over the course of 2023) still cite safety as a reason they have not returned. This at the very least tells us something about communal relations not being homogenous.

The humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence speak to these dilemmas. Working in conflict zones means working with parties to the conflict. Communities and especially ‘community’ leadership can be aligned with parties to the conflict, or even integral. Preserving distance is a

fundamental tenet of humanitarianism, allowing for access to multiple conflicted zones. But this is often in opposition with the idea of empowering communities and let their priorities drive the response. This in turn has given rise to recent ideas of “activist-humanitarianism”²⁹ or “humanitarian resistance” – “politically committed humanitarian action” in the words of Hugo Slim, who coined the latter term³⁰. South Sudan is no stranger to this type of humanitarianism, with the Nuba Mountains operations in the 1990s, and open support by some NGOs for the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) during their struggle.

More prosaically there is also a problem of capacity. In Niger OCHA together with the German NGO Welthungerhilfe (WHH) conducted capacity building workshops with a cross-section of community representatives³¹ in two of the Flagship communes of Diffa (N’guigmi and Chetimari). Table 5.5 shows the communities analysis of the challenges linked to the operation of community structures.

Table 5.5: Niger community capacity building workshop in Diffa

What has not worked	Causes of challenges	Solutions	Existing opportunities
Inadequate financial management capacity	Lack of qualified human resources, lack of strategic documents, etc.	Institutional capacity building	Adherence of donors to localisation of aid and community engagement
Insufficient planning capacity	Nepotism and opportunism	Documentation of best practice	Making NGOs aware of their responsibility (not to pursue individual interests)
Lack of trust between members	Inefficiencies in the power of local administrative leaders	Strengthening accountability mechanisms at community level (communities and grassroots leaders)	Raising the awareness of leaders at all levels of community structures
Lack of accountability to donors and communities	Cultural barrier	Capacity-building on leadership for NGO	Action by NGOs on community engagement
Failure to take awareness of NGO principles	Lack of self- confidence	Strengthening communities based on the principle of accountability	Community radio
Inadequate consideration of inclusion and diversity	Selfishness	Reinforced monitoring of operationalisation of NGOs by community leaders	Telephone network coverage
No respect for communities	Break in the communication chain		
Failure to take account of the expertise of communities	Lack of awareness of their rights and duties		
Blurred vision of NGO's missions	Vulnerability		
Non-sharing of information	Fear of losing support (community)		

29 Ali Reda and Philip Proudfoot, ‘Against Abandonment Activist-Humanitarian Responses to LGBT Refugees in Athens and Beirut’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (2021): 1494–1515.

30 Slim, H (2022). *Humanitarian resistance: Its ethical and operational importance*. ODI, London.

31 In N’guigmi, these activities involved 23 representatives of community groups and associations - 9 women and 14 men, including one person with special needs. For local and national NGOs and women's networks, 22 people took part in these activities - 8 women and 14 men - while the session with the PAA focal points was attended by 20 people, including 3 women and 17 men. In Chetimari, 25 representatives of community groups, including 6 women and 19 men, attended the first session. The second, which brought together NGOs and women's networks, was attended by 11 people, including 4 women and 7 men. The PAA focal point session was attended by 5 women and 16 men.

Inadequate delegation of powers		Respect for community expression	
Willingness to receive goods with ease		Raising community awareness of their rights and duties	
Insufficient transparency leading to erroneous decisions by communities		Involving communities in the implementation of various actions businesses in the community	

Source: UN OCHA Niger

Once again, the FI pilots are sufficiently diverse that these issues of representation can be looked at in some detail. Whilst the problematic is theorised at a generalised level in humanitarian policy circles (“well how can we be sure these community leaders are representative?”), this can too easily be used as an excuse for inaction. In actually trying to work with local government in the four countries, and with local NGOs and local community groups in a systematic, documented and analytical way, the FI should produce evidence on representation and how it can be done effectively.

5.1.5 And there is a technical question about how you bring it all together

A final challenge posed by community engagement is aggregation. The HRP brings together technical assessment across key humanitarian needs – clean water, food, health care, shelter – and combines them into an overall ‘narrative’ of need. This in turn allows for donors, implementing agencies and authorities to think strategically and allocate resources accordingly. Even if there is no direct line from the HRP to individual grants, there is a sense in which the general framing is set by the HRP. A crisis is one of protection, or of food security, or of displacement. This gives the leadership and the collective focus.

Sophisticated tools have been developed to underpin this process. First there is the Humanitarian Needs Overview, which sets out in detail the technical rationale for the objectives and budgeting in the HRP. This is nearly always underpinned by a Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) typically carried out by the specialised NGO REACH, often under the auspices of IOM. This uses primarily quantitative data collection to look at key sectors but will often also contain a perception survey element. It also specifically targets key groups judged to be most vulnerable, whether displaced or people living with disabilities, or women and girls in protection crises and so on. There are also, as noted above, sector assessments such as Food Security and Livelihoods Assessments (FSLA) or SMART nutrition surveys that also feed into the HNO and HRP analysis.

The HNO brings together the various data strands using a tool called the Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) now in its second iteration, hence JIAF 2.0.

As can be seen from Box 5.4 (below) the JIAF produces an estimate of the overall number of people in need, the ‘intersectoral severity’ (what their priority needs are) and which populations (areas) are worse off. This is done by combining the various individual assessments – as set out above – and is primarily quantitative in nature i.e. the output is numbers. Number of people in need, ranked sectoral needs (i.e. food is 5, health 4) and usually a colour coded map showing the areas in greatest need/ at greatest risk.

Box 5.4: Key outputs of the JIAF

An estimation of the joint overall magnitude of a crisis: *How many people are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, irrespective of which sectors the needs originate from.*

An estimation of intersectoral severity: *How severe is the humanitarian situation that results from the compounding effect of overlapping needs in different sectors.*

Estimation of sectoral needs, in an interoperable and commonly understood way: *How many people face needs in specific sectors, and how severe their needs are, using a common interoperable reference.*

Identification of linkages between sectoral needs: *How people's needs overlap, co-exist and interrelate.*

Identification of those most affected: *Which population groups and geographic areas face the most needs.*

An explanation of the drivers: *Why a crisis is happening and what is the underlying context.*

This is an amazing effort of aggregation and has taken years to evolve. Like any such process, it has acknowledged flaws – its only as good as the underlying data, it does not deal with scenarios, but even so it is a genuine effort to try and see the big picture.

Clearly aggregating lots of qualitative community interactions presents a significant technical challenge. If one community is rural and wants enhanced agricultural technology to cope with climate induced unpredictability that is at the core of their food insecurity, how to aggregate this with another community that prioritises education for their children. And this might even be within a geographical area, never mind across a country.

Whilst this issue has not been resolved in the first year of the FI, there is work in progress. In Colombia the 2024 HRP has incorporated several indicators on Community Engagement (CE) into its monitoring. The team is also developing and testing an AI based-tool to process

qualitative-community level engagement reports that are being collected to see if this could help process all this information in a manner that can inform macro-level decision-making.

The core interpretation of the FI in the Philippines context, given their exposure to multiple natural hazard risk, is 'enhancing resilient communities'. They have three outcomes they have identified: 1) a community driven resilience framework, 2) a climate resilient communities model and 3) a new generation of coordination tools.

On a recent monthly inter-office learning exchange the Philippines presented their latest concept on how the FI is changing their engagement with communities, both in how they understand needs and priorities and, perhaps more importantly, how they understand capacities (see figure 5.5 above). As a result of this new understanding, they are piloting a new generation of engagement tools, such as Resilience-Based Participatory Community Appraisal (ReBPCA) and People's Plans. In a debate between the four offices from the FI they reflected on the challenge of taking the outcomes from these types of tools and aggregating them such that they might inform an HRP.

It is not for this learning report to pre-empt what will emerge from this surge of creativity across the four FI countries. However, it is clear that tools such as the JIAF are not completely incompatible with the approach being formed in the Flagship. JIAF is simply (this does the work and the elegance a disservice, but simplicity can also be celebrated!) an aggregation tool, and as such could be modified to aggregate qualitative material as well as quantitative. In fact it already does this to an extent with its incorporation of crisis drivers data.

In Colombia, OCHA used JIAF for prioritisation, but then took the results to communities to expert-check the results (and asked to have an 'expert analysis' adjustment modality that could make the results reflective of how communities perceive the situation). Communities in Colombia say that

they like the data analysis at macro level, as it helps them in their advocacy efforts, and they do not have the capability to do the data crunching. This advocacy element of the HRP numbers has always been very powerful and will continue to be extremely important.

However, whilst the JIAF could be reformulated to incorporate the plans and aspirations of communities as well as the assessments of their risk and vulnerabilities, there is an inherent tension between the current and the emerging approach.

Crudely – and not necessarily pejoratively – the current JIAF approach can be described as reductionist. Drivers, vulnerabilities, risk are summarised in indicators and ascribed a numerical value. These numbers are then combined to output the type of geographical and sectoral prioritisation we see in current HRPs. Community participation and agency does not lend itself to a reductionist approach. Its inherently expansive – the essential idea is that from small acorns oak trees grow. Externals help plant the seed, but the communities make them grow.

In fact what this pushes towards, is a more *outcome* based approach. It is not as easy to measure *ex ante* what the relative capacity of a community might be, or how a synthesis of external knowledge and resource might combine with community energy and effort. But it is easier to measure *ex post* what has happened, including using ‘hard’ indicators such as malnutrition, morbidity and economic growth/ asset creation.

LEARNING QUESTIONS ARISING FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

1. How can we combine needs, capacities and plans generated locally by communities into a compelling humanitarian narrative at a national level? What is needed to demonstrate rigour, and how do we best balance qualitative and quantitative approaches?
2. How can we scale best practice in community engagement and participation generated by the Flagship, such that it is adopted by implementing agencies and across the sector?
3. How can we systematically incorporate community representation into the whole of the humanitarian programme cycle, including design, monitoring and implementation? What might this mean for HRP, HNO and other such processes?

5.2 Re-designing the system to deliver on community priorities

Benchmarks:

- Area based/subnational/decentralized coordination footprint that leads/supports/coordinates participatory community engagement.
- Humanitarian programming that reflects consultations, supports local initiatives, and delivers community priorities.

If, in Martin Griffiths' words, "*the priorities of affected communities must drive response efforts*", then two things must naturally follow. First we must understand the priorities of affected communities. This is largely dealt with in the preceding section 5.1 (or rather the first year of the Flagship four countries' efforts to better understand priorities is documented). Second, these priorities must "*drive response efforts*", meaning of course that the 'system' should be able to arrange itself to deliver on these priorities.

This has three distinct elements. First, and probably most straightforward is to have sufficient operational presence proximate to communities. Second, and connected, the coordination system should also be proximate to those communities, and crucially, accessible to them. Third, the collective response should reflect these priorities.

Whilst there is somewhat of a sequencing issue (it is hard to know whether the response is responding to the priorities generated by the new community engagement systems until they are in place) all four countries have tried to advance on this area at the same time as the CE work.

This is most easily done in regard to coordination and proximity and there has been work in all four countries on this, especially around the new and emerging area of 'area based coordination'. There has also been some tentative work on joined up working.

In South Sudan, Colombia and Niger there are area based coordination models in place. In the Philippines, area based coordination is established on an ad hoc basis in the aftermath of disasters. With the FI, a more permanent presence is established in areas often affected by typhoons.

As with community engagement having different models in each of the four countries provides a rich opportunity to learn. With a significant push toward 'area-based' coordination across the sector (and increasing focus on what this might actually mean in practice), it is also important that the Flagship can say something about how this can be implemented practically, the various models emerging, and practical lessons that should be considered.

In South Sudan area based coordination was set up almost simultaneously with the initiation of the Flagship. It had its origins largely outside the Flagship, but the Initiative was seen as a good opportunity to build on what was seen as success.

The area based approach was initially put in place by the then Humanitarian Coordinator after flooding in Bentiu, and on the recommendation of a peer to peer mission. The floods affected the massive IDP camp – formerly POC camp containing nearly 100,000 people. The system was not responding quickly enough to time-sensitive needs, and the HC asked IOM to step in and lead the response locally. This proved to be a success, galvanising both the community and the response, with the result that (and taking into account the just announced Flagship) three area based pilots were announced. These were Bentiu: IOM, Wau: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Malakal: UNHCR. The rationale was that in each of these places there was a different context

and dynamic that needed some energy to advance the situation, and piloting an area based lead might prove – as it had in Bentiu – the catalyst needed.

In fact the area based experiment has not proven to be entirely successful, or rather not yet.

Bentiu seems to have worked for two contextual reasons. First, flooding was an emergency and IOM is an operational agency. Its model is direct implementation, it runs the CCCM cluster, and is pre-disposed toward emergency response. It is good at it and had pre-existing capacity. Second, the other big operational agencies recognise the IOM strengths in this area and supported their lead.

In Wau the picture is very different. UNDP was asked to be the area based lead, again because of context, and the need to start turning to IDP returns, durable solutions and the transition to development. UNDP is a logical choice in such contexts with its development mandate and its deep expertise of transition (e.g. early recovery cluster).

However, area-based coordination was established in Wau as an ‘add on’ rather than a wholesale change. In addition to the area based coordination, the OCHA inter-cluster coordination group (ICCG) continued to operate. The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has a weekly coordination meeting bringing together humanitarian, development and peace actors – led by the head of the mission - and actively working on issues such as IDP returns. There is a durable solutions working group co-led by UNHCR and the Governor of Wau, with support from the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC). There are also two further groupings led by IOM that may not be that active, the PFPRR (Partnership for Peace, Recovery and Resilience) and the HDP nexus.

UNDP initially interpreted the area based leadership role as a ‘mini-RCHC’, according to key informant interviews, but this mandate was not formal. Clearly this cut across the role of the head of UNMISS, and moreover it was not clear how all of the other groups fit with/ reported to the area based leadership. Leadership and coordination also takes time – it requires resources, and it requires knowledge and tools. Simply appointing someone, especially into a pre-existing aid architecture, is not enough. Establishing the parameters of the role also seems to be important.

In Colombia the area based model is better established, and as mentioned has been in place for some time. Here, again the model somewhat varies from area to area, and agency to agency. One key constraint for the Colombia model is that lead agencies do not have additional resources for the coordination role, meaning in reality this is also an ‘add on’ to all of the other work. Neither do many of the leads have specific coordination backgrounds or training, although more recently OCHA has been able to deploy some support capacities in key areas. Clearly this is another obvious lesson around area based coordination models – without additional resources or expertise coordination will become a lesser priority.

Importantly – perhaps most importantly for the FI ‘experiment’ – is that there are a range of organisations leading, including a local NGO. *Corporacion Infancia y Desarrollo* is one of Colombia’s largest national human rights, development and humanitarian NGOs and supported by Diakonie and ECHO it has assumed the lead in Vichada Department, a remote region of Colombia bordering Venezuela with a high number of indigenous communities.

Colombia is further establishing – as set out in the introduction – three FI coordination pilots in La Guajira, Buenaventura and Guaviare that combine efforts across all elements of the aid system. These are at currently in the design phase, but have an ambitious agenda beyond immediate humanitarian aid, again providing another layer of potential insight.

In Niger the model is different again to both South Sudan and Colombia in that it targets two administrative levels down. In the two examples above ‘area based’ coordination takes place at the next geographical administrative unit down from the national level. In South Sudan this level is

called ‘state’ (there are 10 states and 3 administrative areas), in Colombia ‘department’ (there are 32). In Niger, there are 7 regions, 36 departments and 265 communes³², and it is at this latter level – commune – that Niger’s area based experiment is taking place. Niger has chosen very remote, very risk prone areas, and because of the difficulty of establishing a permanent international presence in such places has instead worked with local NGOs to deliver this presence. These are genuinely remote places – precisely the sort of places envisaged by the Flagship intent. N’Guigmi in Diffa region is 130 kms from the town in the direction of Lake Chad. Diffa town itself is considered a remote location for aid workers, with only a handful of organisations maintaining permanent presence. N’Guigmi is at the front line of the Boko Haram and climate crisis simultaneously and exemplifies the sorts of intractable problems confronting modern humanitarians. The approach here too is novel – getting local community groups, local authorities and local aid providers (connected to international aid) to jointly develop plans to address their most pressing problems.

Finally, in the Philippines, there has always been an ‘area-based’ coordination model in place for humanitarian response to disasters. Coordination structures are established rapidly after sudden onset disasters and downsized once humanitarian response is finished (usually 6-9 months after a disaster). As a result, field offices are being routinely opened and closed based on a disaster cycle. For the typhoon Rai response (as an example), OCHA opened two field offices for six months (in Region 8 and in Caranga), with many other organisations doing similarly. This has been described as an ‘accordion principle’ of expansion and downsizing to be fit for purpose based on operational requirements.

In BARMM (Mindanao) there is, and has been for some time, the only ongoing area presence due to protractedness of the crisis. With the FI, a more permanent presence is now being established in the pilot regions that can engage more in preparedness/resilience/ anticipatory action activities before the disaster.

The four models of area based coordination described here as part of the Flagship again offer an extremely rich test bed for the concept more widely. There is “big UN agency led emergency response”, “OCHA led provincial coordination”, “delegated humanitarian-development-peace system coordination”, “large national NGO led coordination” and “hyper local NGO-authority-community led coordination”. All will inevitably encounter challenges and demonstrate successes. Understanding these will be vitally important to informing the evolution of the coordination system.

In all four countries OCHA has also established new capacities to lead on community engagement and to reinforce or develop new models of coordination. The push to decentralise OCHA capacities has also been driven by the Flagship analysis – and the ERC’s analysis – that operations had become too capital focused, and that staffing was too concentrated there. In both Colombia and Niger, estimates were that too much staff time and effort was concentrated in the capital and on managing/ supporting capital or HQ processes and priorities.

- In South Sudan, offices in the Flagship areas of Wau, Bentiu and Malakal were established with national officers, increasing local knowledge.
- In Niger, OCHA established a sub-office in Nguigmi with a national officer, co-located with a local NGO, in addition to an existing antenna in Ouallam. The other four communes are directly

³² As a point of comparison, Niger and Colombia are roughly the same size geographically at about 1.2 million square kms. South Sudan is just over half that size at 650,000 square kms. In population terms South Sudan is the smallest at roughly 12 million, Niger is roughly double that number at 25 million and Colombia roughly double that again at 50 million. What this means is that the geographical units are all roughly equal in size (Colombia departments, Niger departments and South Sudan states) and Niger and South Sudan roughly similar in population but Colombia less so. Of course, population distributions in all three countries are very unequally disbursed making like for like comparisons complex.

supported by OCHA sub-offices working in collaboration with local NGOs. These partnerships have been put in place to use local NGOs in Flagship areas to support local authorities and lead local community engagement.

- In Colombia three positions have been recruited to lead coordination of humanitarian, development and peace actors in the three Flagship areas.
- In the Philippines, two positions have been recruited to establish and run OCHA presence in the three Flagship areas, working with local communities to develop people's plans.

Whilst the crude numbers may not tell the whole story, it is true that this dynamic has already comprehensively shifted over the course of the first year of the Flagship. OCHA has always – arguably – had to face in two directions. Deep in the locations where humanitarian need is greatest, bringing the humanitarian system together, leading convoys, getting permissions, helping with access, dealing with local authorities: whilst at the same time feeding New York and Geneva the information it needs for international advocacy and fund-raising, supporting the humanitarian coordinator, leading on the HRP, briefing donors, running pooled funds, convening the clusters and coordination and so on. One of the basic premises of the Flagship is that the pendulum may have swung too far toward the capital centric – HQ serving end of the spectrum and a re-balancing is needed. This is consistent with recent evaluative and academic work that notes a tendency toward 'bunkerisation'³³, and the sheer amount of time that is consumed by process, for instance due diligence and donor reporting³⁴.

The Flagship has resulted in tangible progress in this area. More missions from capital based staff, more positions moved from capitals to sub-regional level. However, this is also against a back-drop of the same process requirements – this element of the equation has not yet shifted. What this has meant in practice is either increased workload, increased staffing, or both. It should also be noted that there is a temporal element to these observations – operations expand and contract as context and funding change. OCHA significantly reduced its Colombia operations in 2016 after the signing of the peace deal between the government and the FARC. This led to a reduction in OCHA presence in the 'territories' (regions). Previously there were full-fledged OCHA sub-offices in most of the 16 crisis affected territories. Following the draw-down, coordination duties were shared among operational agencies (leading to a *de facto* 'area based' system, of which more below). However, with the realisation that the peace agreement was not the end of humanitarian need in Colombia, OCHA has once again expanded its operation, now running five of the 16 territories and providing capacity in others. The point here is that OCHA was already pushing to rebalance its capital/ territory profile as the Flagship commenced.

In 2021, the Philippines too saw a significant downsizing, going from a Country Office with 26 staff to one with nine, mainly national, OCHA staff positions in the Humanitarian Advisory Team, out of which three are in BARMM. As a result, the team struggled with resources once the Flagship started in 2023.

The final piece of the jigsaw is arranging response capacities. Clearly coordination is a significant part of this and so the various area based initiatives outlined above are critical. But ultimately programming is undertaken by operational agencies, UN and NGOs. This is also the most complex part of the vision to implement because OCHA does not implement directly.

³³ Duffield, M (2012). Challenging environments: Danger, resilience and the aid industry. Security Dialogue. [Vol. 43, No. 5, Special issue on "Governing \(in\)security in the postcolonial world" \(OCTOBER 2012\)](#), pp. 475-492 (18 pages)

³⁴ Whilst there is no clear metric demonstrating this to be the case – the Grand Bargain reporting cited elsewhere in this report does have some information suggesting minor improvements – the overwhelming feedback is that process is a major issue. This is true for large UN organisations all the way to community based hyper-local organisations.

In 2023, Colombia was successful in securing a CERF under-funded window (UFE) grant for one of the poorest, most marginal conflict affected areas on the Pacific coast. A key tenet of the grant was inter-agency collaboration – that the various UN entities in receipt of the CERF funding would genuinely work together to address the priorities expressed by the community. Four inter-agency missions took place covering 32 communities across three different departments. During these missions, the teams spent over 20 days cumulatively traveling from one community to another. This allowed for previously underserved areas to be reached, many of which had never received assistance from internationals.

Whilst joint missions saw good collaboration, the actual programming was less joined up than hoped. In effect, the programmes ran along agency lines – many of these set at a global, or at the very least national level. The scope for local staff to adapt programmes was very limited (in several cases), and for genuinely integrated working was almost non-existent.

There were some small ‘signals’ in terms of collaboration. FAO, UN Women and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) adjusted their original design to incorporate income generating activities for indigenous women based around traditional crafts. Each of the three provided inputs, training, marketing or premises. WFP adapted its programming to incorporate community kitchen gardens and orchards to compliment FAO and UN Women programmes. The CERF funding was flexible enough to accommodate these changes, but in reality these were small changes within a pre-existing programme framework rather than radical re-design or actual joint working. Eventually, at the request of the communities themselves, there was an agreement reached that all CERF partners would coalesce in building, ‘leadership schools’ for the communities which would bring together all the capacity-building offers of the agencies. Agencies also worked together on outcome level community plans with theories of change.

The ability for agencies to adapt to communities’ needs, to be ‘joined up’ and genuinely collaborative under the current model is severely limited. Funding systems – both internally and externally require single agency accountability i.e. you report on your grants results, not the results of a joined up effort. Moreover, the achievement of outcome level results is not financially relevant.

In Colombia, as elsewhere, the tools and the intervention logic are somehow at odds with each other. Needs are assessed at community and provincial (territorial) level; planning is done at departmental level, and this then gets aggregated to capital level for the HNO and the HRP (it goes back to the territories to be ‘checked and tested’). Project development processes, however, start at capital level and the link to the territories gets lost. Projects are developed by organisations covering vast areas of the country in one project. Then donors choose the projects they want to fund and teams on the ground are lucky if they get to know about it. There is no link between the programming and the funding with the territories. Teams on the ground often don’t know which projects/activities are proposed for their areas nor how much money is mobilised.

“Integrated programming requires dedicated coordination capacity. Left alone, and even with all the good will in the world, agencies are not able to coordinate all this (programme, logistics, etc) by themselves as its almost a full-time job. The two OCHA staff deployed in our suboffices cannot take this role either as it would consume all of their time. In future projects, a dedicated inter-agency programme manager or coordinator needs to be pooled in by all agencies. Funding for inter-agency travel and logistics also needs to be pooled in by all agencies. The administrative modalities for this do not exist.”

UN OCHA Colombia.

LEARNING QUESTIONS ON DECENTRALISED COORDINATION AND JOINT WORKING

1. Should the system move towards area-based coordination? What could this look like, and how can we get there?
2. How can funding and incentives be structured to encourage joint and joined up working?
3. What can we do practically (structurally) to routinely and systematically ensure local organisations and community representatives are in coordination mechanisms?

5.3 Financing, localisation and reducing process

Benchmarks:

- Financing delivers solutions to community priorities and supports local actors.
- Evolved plan from the HRP that is organised by community priorities and areas-based coordination.

Analysis provided by OCHA indicates that there has been little if any improvement in how HCTs integrate affected people's priorities in Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs). In the multi-stakeholder quality-scoring process for HNOs in 2022, the indicator on participation and community engagement ('HNO presents which humanitarian needs affected people and/or their representatives consider a priority') was rated as one of the lowest-scoring indicators across HCTs.

HPG Grand Bargain report 2023 (reviewing workstream 6 on participation).

The main focus of the Flagship Initiative in terms of financing has so far on two aspects – country based pooled funds (CBPFs) and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) process.

There are CBPFs in South Sudan and Niger and Colombia and the Philippines are actively setting up regional funds.

Despite the increasing focus of the FI on CBPFs as being the principal financing tool to deliver on the vision, there is little evidence yet to back this. South Sudan is the only one of the four countries with a dedicated country based pooled fund (Niger is a regional one technically).

In South Sudan of the US\$55million disbursed in 2023, only US\$5million went to local NGOs (10per cent). Out of 57 grants made, 12 were to local NGOs which is 20 per cent. US\$33million (almost 60 per cent) went to UN agencies in only 18 grants of which two thirds were over US\$1million. One agency alone – IOM, got US\$20million in eight grants, meaning over a third of the CBPF. Half of the US\$20million was cash assistance, which is arguably aligned to the FI agenda of choice and agency, nearly all of it to people returning from Sudan. However, all said the South Sudan CBPF in 2023 was very emergency, and very traditional.

Niger is somewhat different, although it is also quite a lot smaller at US\$11million. Of the US\$11million, about a third went to local NGOs, and the rest to international NGOs. There were no UN agencies. Again, all were relatively large grants (18 in total), ranging from US\$400,000 - \$950,000 and most were for "response d'urgence". Emergency response is ultimately the purpose of humanitarian assistance, so again, this is hardly inappropriate. However, it is once again, quite traditional.

One of the main financing shifts envisaged, or at least conceptually debated, is that it would be more 'localised'. And in particular that grants might be made directly to communities, or quite close to direct and that they could be small – 'micro-grants' – that would facilitate/ catalyse the efforts of communities themselves. Looking at the CBPFs in South Sudan and Niger in 2023 it is questionable as to whether this could actually be delivered in the timeframe that the FI has left to run. It would

require quite a bit of design work, including new risk assessment and tolerance tools, and new modalities for delivery. It is possible to envisage a 'hyper local' window of the CBPFs that could disburse micro-grants, or partner with NGOs to do something like this. Reporting would have to be radically different, as would 'due diligence'. Even the relatively straightforward issue of transferring the money (to a bank account?) might not be plain sailing.

The Humanitarian Response plan process is simultaneously to the FI – undergoing its own reform/transformation globally, known as the 'Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) lightening process'. These two processes overlap but are connected and are part of the same vision of humanitarian staff spending more time with affected communities and less time on process.

The HNRP 2024 in South Sudan is a good example of this (both Niger and Colombia are still being worked on, and Philippines does not have one), with its combined Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) running to just 25 pages. This is in contrast to the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) that was 70 pages long and the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) that was another 76 pages. The 2024 HNRP refers to the Flagship but is still organised along traditional cluster lines.

The HNRP South Sudan has gone a long way toward addressing the criticism that these products were over long and unwieldy. There are links to the clusters websites and through those to individual strategies and datasets. It is possible to stay quite high level with the HNRP, but also if you want to, to then go and find the detail.

The degree to which this change has genuinely reduced people's time on 'process' has not been measured and is probably quite difficult to assess. Individual clusters still have to do the rigorous work needed to get a national picture of need. If we take the nutrition cluster as a good example of a data driven sector, there is still a need to run SMART surveys, food security and nutrition surveys, monitor service coverage and so on.

The Nutrition cluster employs a multifaceted monitoring approach, combining field visits, routine data collection through the Nutrition Information System (NIF) and 5Ws, and surveys to understand and address the needs of affected populations. SMART surveys in priority areas gauge malnutrition prevalence and related factors. Biannual FSNMS surveys provide insights into acute malnutrition, service coverage, maternal, infant, and young child nutrition practices, and malnutrition drivers. Partners conduct mass mid-upper arm circumference screenings. Collaboration with inter-sector/multi-sector assessments enhances effectiveness.

UN OCHA South Sudan.

Previously more of this detail would have been in the HRP (for instance cluster objectives and indicators). Now this is online for those who want to see it. It still exists – the work has still been done. The only real difference is that you now access it via a weblink embedded in the HNRP rather than having it in the main document.

The same holds true for budgeting and for the process of coming up with overall numbers and overall objectives. Inter-sector workshops via the ICCG were still conducted in South Sudan, and the JIAF 2.0 previously referred to was still used to get to the overall number of People in Need (PIN) and the prioritisation.

And there is a very strong argument to say that this is still needed. Nutrition surveys methods are robust scientifically, and current SMART surveys are gold standard in terms of their rigour and approach. Malnutrition remains one of the few scientifically objective indicators that can be used as a proxy for humanitarian need. South Sudan has historically suffered from very high levels of

malnutrition, including the famine in 1999. This is an indicator, and therefore a process that is worth investing in, at the core of the humanitarian mission.

It similarly holds true that understanding the scale of need is vitally important for communicating the level of resource needed to all serious humanitarian actors – NGOs, UN agencies, donors, even the government. Combining the various national exercises such as the nutrition surveys is important, and currently the only method available. This is an evolution from two decades previously when such numbers/ estimates did not exist.

Whilst the South Sudan HNRP is still organised along cluster lines rather than community priorities or area based priorities, it was clearly too early in the FI process to do otherwise. The HRP process starts at the beginning of the year, setting the overall framework, and throughout the year data is gathered, workshops are held and eventually drafting and re-drafting is done. To have completely reorganised the 2024 HRP would have required the new template to be developed at the beginning of 2023, before the FI had properly started.

In Colombia, the latest HRP and HNO is an interesting ‘half way house’ experiment. The HNO and the HRP have been merged into a ‘Community Priorities Response Plan’. The team increased community participation to 40 per cent in the CPRP development process and aimed to reflect community voices and concerns more clearly in the plan. The plan was also reduced by half in the number of pages and was made bi-annual to reflect people’s desire that interventions be longer term. An after-action review is being carried out to assess whether these steps really reduced ‘time spent on process’. Community engagement indicators are being included in monitoring systems. This will be aligned with an overall FI plan for the year, derived in turn from conversations with the broad based ‘think-group’ and under direction from the RC/HC.

Moving from the current model to a very different type of HRP that instead of a national picture presents a series of sub-national pictures, and instead of sector priorities, present community priorities would be a very radical change.

“Financial Model Limitations: Despite some efforts made by some donors to accept multi-year planning, this is still a very limited number of donors and most of our projects are funded on a yearly basis. With such short-term span of planning and without any guarantees of continuation, it is very difficult to engage in the real transformations we wish to see for communities. We can aim to move beyond survival; enhance agency; support them in their own planning and capacities to respond and recover; stretch humanitarian mandates to offer some sustainable solutions, but it will remain difficult to obtain outcomes/impact and transformative results in such short timeframes and without sustained funding.”

OCHA FI head of office, reflecting on financial model challenges.

In summary then, in the first year, the FI has not delivered financing that speaks to community priorities or supports local actors any more so than existed already. Nor has the HRP process yet been reformed so that it presents community priorities on an area basis. However some of the groundwork for this has been set in motion, and the new HPC lightening process has definitely resulted in much shorter headline documents.

Aside from the HPC process, there are other processes that are equally, if not even more consuming. For local NGOs one of the largest barriers to securing financing is the so called, ‘due diligence’. This means satisfying a number of minimum requirements for donors to be able to qualify to apply for

funding. These typically relate to financial processes and procedures, procurement, HR, IT and data handling and so on. They require organisations to be officially registered, with proper bank accounts, several years of audited accounts and other administrative safe-guards. Whilst all of this seems quite sensible on paper, the reality is that nearly every donor, UN agency INGO and managed fund will have its own due diligence requirements and procedures. This can be an overwhelming burden for local NGOs who might typically be applying to several donors and then also reporting. These bureaucratic requirements pose significant obstacles where humanitarians may wish to formalise their relationship to looser groups of activists, who might be politically prevented from registration in a particular country, or they might necessarily work more clandestinely given their mandates. The latter is often the case among LGBTQI+ organisations, who are often the only group providing assistance to their constituents but cannot formalise due to fears of reprisal.³⁵

One seemingly straightforward proposal from the Colombia NGO forum is to harmonise these due diligence requirements – at least amongst the UN agencies, funds and programmes (i.e. make them the same). This would immediately reduce enormous amounts of process for local NGOs, making applications easier and freeing up time and resources for the actual work.

For OCHA, UN agencies and international NGOs, the time taken to provide information to their HQs can also be significant. This aspect of ‘process’ has been less focused on but may in fact be the most significant. Finding some simple way to measure this aspect of process for OCHA might be a revealing insight.

5.3.1 Measuring outcomes

Humanitarian strategies (HRP + R4V) follow one after the other and there is no impact measurement. The search for impact and resilience should be the main objective of HRP+R4V. This has come about because of:

1. The temporality of the projects: in general, they do not exceed one year.
2. Lack of ongoing presence in territories, when massive and specific situations are attended, without effective continuity.
3. The over-emphasis on “counting people” rather than transforming lives and territorial realities.
4. Lack of adaptability of coverage and territories (of the organisations, but especially of the donors).
5. The logic of financing projects, not intervention programs. This is reinforced when, in order to provide multisectoral responses to a territory, projects are proposed based on the sum of individual sectoral responses.

Humanitarian NGO forum, Colombia: Flagship Initiative, key ideas.

A key deficiency of the humanitarian system that has been highlighted in numerous analyses over the years is its lack of focus on what it has achieved. As a good example, there is no annual report on the HRP, only an annual appeal (there is typically a mid-year report which is very numerical – people reached – and these types of figures are usually reproduced in the following years HRP). This has a

³⁵ Ilaria Michelis, ‘Later Is a Cis-Hetero Patriarchal Time Zone: Narratives of Resistance to LGBTQI+ Inclusion amongst Humanitarian Practitioners’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2023, fead072; Ali Reda and Philip Proudfoot, ‘Against Abandonment Activist-Humanitarian Responses to LGBT Refugees in Athens and Beirut’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (2020): 1494–1515, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez114>; Mahdi Zaidan, *We Live in Shadows: Identity, Precarity, and Activism among LGBT Refugees and Activists in Beirut And Athens* (Georgetown University, 2018).

‘groundhog day’ effect, whereby each new annual appeal is presented as if the situation was unexpected or new – an anomalous situation that has just arisen, rather than the reality that has pertained for decades. This is true in South Sudan (first outbreak of conflict post-independence from Britain with what is now the north but was then internal in 1957); in Colombia (first outbreak of conflict with the FARC in 1964); in Niger (famine in 1972 as part of first Sahel crisis, refugees from Mali conflict in 2011), and in the Philippines (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and typhoons since pre-history).

This is not to suggest the system does not evolve or learn. There is a healthy culture of evaluation, there are peer to peer learning missions to help countries reflect. In the Philippines they conduct ‘after action reviews’ following every big disaster response – this is the case in many other operations. Over the years the system has improved its practice and technologies with such learning exercises, with the food security and nutrition sectors being good examples of how better scientific practice has resulted in lives saved.

The point being made here is at the strategic rather than the technical level. Whilst we are very good at assessing dietary diversity, we are less good at knowing over the long term whether health and nutrition outcomes are improved by a focus on livelihoods, or support to government health systems, or investments in potable water. Or if the answer is all three, then what the optimal balance is. We set ourselves strategic priorities, but we measure activities.

As the quote from the Colombia NGO forum above suggests, the current HRP/ HPC process focuses on numbers of people affected and numbers of people reached. With a turn toward the priorities of affected communities, there is the possibility that the system may have to think differently about how it measures success. This too would constitute quite a radical shift – holistic joined up strategies that sought to solve problems, and measured the degree to which this happened would be a very different system to the one that is in place today.

LEARNING QUESTIONS ARISING FROM FINANCING

1. How can we use/design/change financing tools to support community-based initiatives? What due diligence mechanisms would we need to enable micro-grants and direct community support?
2. How can finance be used to incentivise meeting community priorities? How can we ensure funding is more likely to flow to priorities as expressed by communities, and less likely to flow when activities are not priorities?
3. How can community priorities such as livelihoods, better information, leadership skills training and other non-traditional humanitarian areas be financed, especially when they offer a clear pathway to reducing humanitarian need?

6. Conclusions

The first year of the Flagship Initiative has been a challenging, yet ultimately rewarding process of developing the foundations for a major shift in the humanitarian aid system. It is far from complete – arguably at the beginning of the journey rather than even the mid-point. The work by all four countries has confirmed the thesis that despite much lofty rhetoric, affected populations are not at the centre of the humanitarian system, and they do not set the priorities. Whilst there are ample interactions between aid providers and those they seek to help, these interactions are largely transactional. This system does not include affected communities in the design of interventions, neither are there many opportunities to genuinely influence their implementation.

The FI is one of several linked humanitarian change initiatives currently underway such as HRP lightening, and has strong ties and overlap with the Secretary General's Special Advisor on Durable Solutions for IDPs, which also sees emphasising affected people's agency and capacity as paramount.

The FI has started work on a set of tools and approaches that might put people at the centre. These are different in all four countries but involved some common elements including early and ongoing dialogue on priorities and design, and some form of joint planning that factors in community capacities as well as needs. The FI countries and the sub-regions they have chosen to model these approaches cover a wide cross section of contexts and crises, meaning that together with the different approaches there should be a good evidence base to understand what works.

The challenge of integrating genuine community plans, capacities and priorities with traditional needs assessment approaches has yet to be fully interrogated. This will be an interesting area of work in the second year, as will the conundrum of how to scale many individualised community engagements and plans to form a coherent national picture and strategic directions.

The FI has also started work on decentralised coordination and partly through design and partly through a smart choice of countries also has a significant menu of approaches to follow in year two. With 'area based coordination' increasingly being taken seriously, the work done by the FI to understand how this can work in practice will be an extremely valuable contribution.

There has been less work done in year one on how to adapt programming to community priorities once these are understood, and connected, there is still much work to do on how financing might genuinely support this. Year two of the FI is likely to see both of these areas receive significant attention.

The second year of the Flagship is likely to see the generation of significant material on community priorities, community capacities, inclusive coordination mechanisms and a host of ideas on how humanitarian resources can achieve more, in a more durable fashion. The next set of challenges will relate to the incentive structures that have kept the system looking largely the same for several decades. This will move the FI into more political waters, demanding more support and more allies. There will be a lot of work to be done in forming alliances, and eventually a simple set of messages that can rally the necessary support. The contours of these next steps should emerge over the course of the next year of the Flagship, alongside the more detailed technical work on models, approaches and tools.