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Missing pieces?

Assessing the impact of humanitarian reform in Pakistan

A displaced girl from Mingora sits on a chair at Baghdada's number one primary school in Mardan. Home to 42 families, the school was turned into a temporary shelter when families fled their homes to escape insecurity. Copyright: Alixandra Fazzina/Oxfam

The displacement of more than three million people in Pakistan has triggered one of the biggest emergency responses of the year. Four years after the launch of the UN-led humanitarian reform process, national and international response capacities appear to have improved on some fronts – but on the whole, humanitarian assistance still falls far short of being adequate, timely, impartial and appropriate.

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Summary

In May 2009, Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province became the site of the world's biggest and fastest human displacement in over a decade – and the largest internal displacement ever witnessed in Pakistan's history. Within the space of only a few weeks, an estimated three million Pakistanis fled their homes to escape their army's military offensive against armed insurgents.

The mass exodus of people triggered a major national and international humanitarian response. This paper attempts to assess the extent to which this response lived up to global commitments for providing enough aid, in the right place and at the right time, in a way that is appropriate to the needs of crisis-affected people.

Four years after the launch of the UN-led humanitarian reform process, the humanitarian system in Pakistan appears to have made some progress in terms of mobilising effective and principled humanitarian action – but still falls far short of achieving the stated objectives of the reform process.[1]

With regard to the scale and speed of the response, Oxfam's analysis reveals that late and insufficient donor contributions prevented humanitarian agencies from responding on a scale that would have met the actual needs of affected communities. Oxfam, for example, had to dramatically revise its initial response plan after failing to receive sufficient donor funding, and was thereby forced to exclude 30,000 families (or more than 200,000 people) from receiving emergency water, sanitation and non-food items during the first three months of the response. Using various operational examples, this paper demonstrates that an overall lack of early funding for the Pakistan crisis resulted in fewer people receiving emergency assistance, and for a limited range of needs. An eventual increase of donor funds to the Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan and other emergency activities reflected a gradual acknowledgement on the part of donors of the scale of humanitarian needs created by Pakistan's displacement crisis. Unfortunately, this realisation came too late to allow aid agencies to reach their target number of beneficiaries, and some funding gaps persist today – for example, in the education, agriculture, and early recovery sectors.

In light of the volatile and sensitive operating environment, aid agencies have faced some challenges in terms of upholding their commitment to awarding aid purely on the basis of humanitarian need. While some agencies have taken relevant measures to establish themselves as impartial humanitarian actors, overall efforts to uphold and promote humanitarian principles (including the need to distinguish humanitarian action from military or political agendas) have suffered from a disjointed approach and the lack of a common strategy for engagement with government and other actors. This was particularly visible, for example, in the failure of some aid agencies to

assist displaced families who were excluded from government-led registration processes due to unclear or unfair registration criteria.

While the UN-led clusters[2] have improved since their initial creation in Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake, it would be hard to claim that they are currently operating at full capacity or delivering on their potential to ensure that beneficiaries are targeted solely on the basis of need. Needs identification, prioritisation, and gap analysis remains patchy at best, and does not always translate into the corresponding sectoral strategies or decisions.

Humanitarian agencies did their best to respond to a rapidly unfolding crisis with the tools and resources that they knew well or had at their immediate disposal. Unfortunately, as in many global emergency responses, the humanitarian response in Pakistan reflected a resource-driven approach in which agencies' sectoral mandates and institutional agendas (including the kind of assistance that they would like to provide) has tended to take precedence over actual beneficiary need or preference, which in the case of Pakistan would have required a far greater use of cash-based assistance.

This paper argues that more could be done to ensure that humanitarian assistance in Pakistan and other countries is more adequate, timely, flexible, impartial and appropriate to people's needs. This includes:

More rapid and adequate funding for emergencies

- International donors must provide more assistance in the first days of a quick-onset crisis, and ensure a diversity of funding channels (including multilateral and bilateral ones).
- In order to ensure a genuine rapid response capacity, donors and UN-cluster lead agencies should establish global and country-level systems for pre-positioning emergency response funds with a small number of frontline agencies.
- UN–NGO funding partnerships must be improved urgently to transfer funds in a more timely and predictable fashion.
- Cluster lead agencies should demonstrate a greater commitment to transparency by tracking the length of time that it takes for funding contributions (including those that they manage) to reach beneficiaries.

Greater commitment to needs-based responses

- The Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) must take proactive steps to design common approaches and clear ways of working for upholding impartial humanitarian action.
- An HCT policy group should be created to support the HC and HCT members in principle-based humanitarian advocacy and by providing better context analysis.
- The Inter-Cluster Coordination mechanism must provide the clusters with comprehensive programme recommendations on how

to better analyse, assess and respond to out-of-camp IDP needs in current and future relief operations.

- Cluster lead agencies should radically rethink their standard assistance models and ensure that their cluster explicitly and regularly considers what type of assistance would be the most appropriate in each phase of a humanitarian response.
- Government, donor agencies and cluster leads should increase their support to district-level coordination processes , and continue strengthening both Provincial Disaster Management Authorities and the National Disaster Management Authority.
- The Pakistan government should clarify the roles and mandates of various ministries and departments involved in disaster responses, including appropriate roles for military actors, by establishing a national policy on internal displacement.

Oxfam believes that all national and international actors involved in the humanitarian response would do well to actively analyse and capture the learning of the past five months. To this end, the Pakistan government, the Humanitarian Coordinator and OCHA should jointly organise a lessons-learned workshop before the end of 2009 to take stock of the positive and negative experiences of the emergency response, and to more fully explore how these might inform future programming in Pakistan as well as humanitarian response planning in all major new emergencies.

1 Introduction

In May 2009, Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province became the site of the world's biggest and fastest human displacement in over a decade – and the largest internal displacement ever witnessed in Pakistan's history. Within the space of only a few weeks, an estimated three million Pakistanis fled their homes to escape their army's military offensive against armed insurgents.[3]

The mass exodus triggered a major national and international humanitarian response, comprising various actors from the Pakistani government, donor countries, international humanitarian agencies, local civil society, and other groups. Drawing on their previous experiences of assisting those affected by major emergencies in Pakistan, these actors utilised both existing mechanisms and new structures to fund, coordinate, and manage their responses.

Four years after the initial roll-out of a number of UN-led humanitarian reform mechanisms (some of which were first tested in Pakistan), this policy paper seeks to assess the progress that the various actors have made in delivering effective and principled humanitarian responses in the face of large-scale, rapidly emerging humanitarian need. The paper explores three key questions to judge the relative impact of the overall response:

1. Was humanitarian assistance provided quickly and flexibly, and at a scale that adequately reflected assessed needs?
2. Was assistance awarded impartially?
3. Was assistance appropriate to actual beneficiary needs?

Based on the findings of this research (see Box 1 on methodology), Oxfam believes that there is significant scope for improving the performance of humanitarian actors in Pakistan, and presents a number of specific recommendations for how this could be done at local, national, and global levels to enhance the delivery of aid to those affected by future crises in Pakistan and in other parts of the world.

Box 1: Research methodology

In addition to Oxfam and its partners' operational experiences, the analysis presented in this paper draws on more than 70 meetings held in Islamabad, Peshawar, Mardan and Swabi between July and September 2009. These include more than 40 key informant interviews with government authorities, UN agencies, donor representatives and national and international NGOs; attendance at more than 20 cluster and general coordination meetings (including inter-cluster coordination, Humanitarian Country Team, and Policy & Strategy Group meetings), and more than a dozen focus group discussions with the internally displaced families themselves.

2 Scale and speed of the response

The unprecedented scale at which internal population displacement occurred in Pakistan in April and May 2009 meant that meeting the emergency needs of affected families in any meaningful way was always going to be an enormous challenge. Despite the daunting task at hand, a range of actors undertook immediate actions to mobilise resources, provide emergency services and organise aid distributions.

Chief among these actors, however, were not professional aid workers or even government officials. Instead, it must be acknowledged that the bulk of emergency assistance was provided by local families who spontaneously offered shelter, food, and other means of support to internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing the conflict areas.[4]

With host families picking up the most significant burden of the Pakistan IDP crisis response, assistance provided by other actors can mainly be seen as complementing local action, and therefore focused on filling specific gaps, including rapid assistance to the most vulnerable groups within the affected population.

Both national and international actors displayed a clear readiness to assume their responsibilities for assisting crisis-affected communities, as evidenced by their presentation of crisis-related needs and response requirements to international donors during the third week of May. Yet, their ability to translate this will into concrete response activities depended to a significant extent on the availability of financial resources.

While the provincial government's Emergency Response Unit (ERU) received an immediate central government transfer of approximately US $10m to quickly set up IDP camps and extend services in displacement areas, the majority of humanitarian agencies lacked this kind of access to ready-made resources.

Following the mass exodus of people (and the UN's announcement on 22 May of a revised humanitarian appeal requiring US $542m[5]), only a handful of donors took immediate measures to allocate new funds for the sudden increase in humanitarian needs. Only two donors, the USA's OFDA and the UK's DFID, rapidly set up a humanitarian response cell within their teams in Islamabad, while many of the smaller donors appeared ill-prepared to analyse humanitarian financing requirements and allocate funds in a timely and efficient fashion. Even donors who have given generously to major humanitarian crises in the past failed to live up to the occasion - the Netherlands, for example, provided only around 3 million euros to the response[6], while DFID gave less than half of the amount that it had provided after 2005 Pakistan earthquake[7]. More than one month into the emergency, on 11 June, the UN's emergency appeal had received less than a quarter of required funds (a significant proportion of which, it must be noted, had been earmarked or already spent to assist the

500,000 displaced people who fled their homes before April 2009).

A lack of international media attention, the global economic recession, as well as the complex political nature of the conflict that caused the displacement were all cited as factors that may have unduly influenced donors to hold back on major funding decisions or to take a wait-and-see approach. In light of the lack of media profile for the Pakistan IDP crisis in most donor countries, NGOs reported unusually sluggish responses to public appeals for donations.[8] Government officials – driven by a desire to look beyond the immediate humanitarian needs to address the underlying causes of the conflict – consistently urged donors to look at recovery, rehabilitation and development needs in NWFP, alongside what they perceived as merely short-term relief needs.[9] This may have sent mixed messages to donor countries regarding the scale of assistance required for immediate emergency responses.

With the overall funding picture looking bleak, emergency finance mechanisms proved inadequate to cover the fundamental response gaps. In May, UN agencies made a difficult decision not to draw any further on an already over-extended UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) facility,[10] arguing that the global objectives of the fund (which is meant to supply only additional funding on top of regular contributions) would otherwise be undermined.

Even more problematic than the absence of sufficient funds were the slow and ineffective disbursement mechanisms chosen by some of the major donors to the Pakistan IDP crisis. There is a global shift away from bilateral funding agreements that channel donor money directly to frontline NGOs (who generally deliver the bulk of global humanitarian assistance). Reflecting this, the majority of donors in Pakistan preferred to deposit their money with UN agencies or to follow other multilateral allocation processes (see Box 2), and this added additional layers of time and bureaucracy to the disbursement.

By 24 June, seven weeks into the crisis, OCHA's Financial Tracking Service showed that only 13 per cent of NGO-implemented projects had received any funding from donors. UN projects also remained under-funded at 47 per cent, but had fared proportionally better than those of their NGO counterparts. Given UN agencies' tendency to work through international or local partners (rather than implement their own operational programmes) and the additional limitations that the insecure environment has placed on the UN's ability to operate in Pakistan, it should have been clear to donors that the majority of their funds would ultimately be transferred from UN-cluster lead agencies to operational NGOs. Unfortunately, global experiences have shown that this is rarely a rapid or simple process.

Bilateral contributions to NGOs from donors such as OFDA and Ausaid managed to reach affected people quickly and effectively, but a number of multilateral contributions to UN-cluster lead agencies (including major actors like UNHCR and UNICEF) did not manage to pass through the system in time to reach thousands of displaced

families waiting for assistance with water, sanitation, health and even shelter.

NGOs interviewed in Pakistan expressed significant concerns about both the length of time it took to approve and transfer funds (with two to three months being seen as a required minimum), as well as the management of UN funding contracts; especially the unwillingness of UN agencies to fund essential elements of NGO projects (such as security management, overhead costs, expatriate salaries or banking fees). Only two NGOs reported a rapid receipt of UN funds, made possible through a topping up of funds within the framework of a pre-existing contract between that NGO and the UN agency.

While some donors were aware of the significant delays caused by channelling funds through additional layers of bureaucracy, a surprisingly high number of donors interviewed in August and September remained unaware of whether their funds had actually reached beneficiaries yet.

Box 2: Clusters as funding mechanisms?

Having acted as the original quick-onset 'test-case' for the global roll-out of the cluster approach in 2005, Pakistan has seen its fair share of experiments in the implementation of the UN-led humanitarian reform process – including funding mechanisms – over the years. Increasingly, donors have looked to the clusters and to the UN Humanitarian Coordinator to advise them on the allocation of emergency funds – in some cases, explicitly transferring their responsibility for deciding on which projects to fund to the clusters.[11]

While donors' instincts to look to the HC and the clusters for advice on prioritisation or gap analysis is reasonable and positive, the transfer of responsibility for taking decisions on funding allocations or the use of clusters as a disbursal mechanism has been problematic. Broadly speaking, this approach fails to acknowledge the operational reality that clusters (in Pakistan as in other countries) remain too weak to systematically and predictably assume their responsibility for effective prioritisation and gap analysis. The approach also makes insufficient provision for addressing the inherent conflict of interests arising from asking cluster members to decide on a 'fair' allocation of funds from which their own agencies are hoping to benefit. An OCHA-led global inter-cluster mission that visited Pakistan in July 2009 concluded that clusters and cluster lead agencies should not be used as disbursement mechanisms for donor funding,[12] a view which the majority of the operational agencies interviewed for this paper supported.

Donors should continue to invest in the improvement of the cluster approach and to push the clusters to assess needs more systematically, to identify sectoral priorities and to address response gaps. However, they must also be patient in supporting the system to overcome outstanding weaknesses, and resist the urge to replace functional bilateral funding streams with new multilateral models at the expense of a rapid response for beneficiaries.

Driven by a mostly well-intentioned desire to increase coherence and to support the objectives of the humanitarian reform (though also, it must be acknowledged, to keep down their own overhead costs), donors have shown themselves too eager to roll out their new multilateral

systems without a clear assessment of the cost of their experiments to the beneficiary community.

The overall impact of donors' decisions regarding the size of their humanitarian contributions or disbursement mechanism is difficult to quantify, but examples provided by operational actors during interviews speak volumes about missed opportunities to prevent human suffering.

While most frontline agencies were able to set up operations and launch initial assistance activities by drawing on their own funds, the overall funding gaps proved too wide to transition seamlessly from this small start-up phase to the implementation of more substantial donor-funded projects. In essence, it meant that fewer beneficiaries received assistance, and in a smaller number of emergency sectors. To provide illustrations from just four NGOs:[13]

- A lack of readily available funding forced Oxfam GB to exclude 30,000 families from receiving emergency water, sanitation, and non-food items in the first three months of the crisis.
- Lack of funds prevented Save the Children from scaling up health and nutrition services that could have assisted an additional 2400 beneficiaries each day, and from launching an emergency education programme that could have benefited 10,000 children.
- The slow arrival of funds through unwieldy disbursement mechanisms meant that ACTED beneficiaries had to wait for three months before the NGO could provide shelter materials to more than 1000 families who were suffering from intense temperatures in their IDP camp.
- Slow disbursements of promised funding forced Islamic Relief to borrow start-up funds for the emergency response against their longer-term programmes – causing several months of delays in the implementation of valuable development work (including the construction and rehabilitation of schools and basic health units) in other parts of Pakistan.

Today, nearly five months after the mass population exodus in NWFP, the funding picture for humanitarian needs looks somewhat healthier than it did in the initial phases of the response. With the arrival of new or topped-up funding from a few key donors throughout July and August, the UN's appeal is now more than two-thirds funded, with significant additional contributions outside of the appeal. In a further positive development, UN agencies and NGOs have unanimously reported a high degree of donor flexibility in the contributions received to date, and expressed appreciation for donors' willingness to accept repeated changes to funding proposals to accommodate fluid population movements and a volatile external environment.

While overall figures present an encouraging picture, it must be noted that there are significant disparities across the different sectors within the appeal, with some key sectors – such as early recovery, agriculture, education, and protection – remaining seriously under-funded. In addition, humanitarian actors remain keenly aware that they may need

to launch new emergency responses in the coming weeks and months should further humanitarian needs arise (as was the case, for example, in September when tens of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes in response to fresh fighting in Khyber Agency).

This section has demonstrated how donors' hesitancy to commit significant and timely funding in the early days of the crisis has had a serious impact on humanitarian actors' ability to respond at a scale that would have met actual needs. The following sections will examine the way in which aid agencies performed in providing assistance impartially and appropriately, and how this was received by their beneficiary populations.

3 Impartial allocation of aid

Discussing the impartiality of humanitarian responses in a context like Pakistan, where government agencies are usually among the first and most visible actors to provide relief assistance, is not a straightforward task. This section will therefore begin by briefly analysing the way in which the Pakistan government considered need and vulnerability within its relief response, before turning to the performance of the humanitarian community. It will explore both how the humanitarian community has applied the principle of impartiality to its overall profile and operations, as well as the role that the UN-led clusters have played in delivering needs-based responses.

Following the mass displacement, the Pakistan government rapidly created new structures to deal with the emergency needs of the affected population. Judging the existing capacity of the Provincial Disaster Management Authority to be insufficient for dealing with a crisis of this scale, the NWFP provincial government immediately established a temporary Emergency Response Unit (ERU) to act as the operational arm of the relief response in displacement areas. For the first time in recent history, this decision appropriately entrusted a provincial and civilian government body with the management of a disaster response, rather than a federal or military body.[14] Drawing on a solid base of institutional expertise gained by civil servants during the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the ERU worked hard to carry out its responsibilities in an efficient and professional manner.

The ERU and government line ministry involvement in humanitarian coordination mechanisms such as the cluster approach was seen by most humanitarian actors as offering more benefits for beneficiaries than drawbacks, with UN agencies and cluster members arguing that the positive outcomes of local ownership and sustainability of coordination processes outweighed the potential risks of politicisation of sectoral humanitarian responses (which to date do not appear to have posed any major problems at this level).

At the policy level, the creation of a temporary federal-level Special Support Group (SSG) under the leadership of Lieutenant General Nadeem Ahmad presented the international community with a slightly more complex coordination challenge. While many appreciated the appointment as providing humanitarian agencies with a competent and well-respected contact point for coordination with the national government, others regretted the fact that the National Disaster Management Authority created by the Pakistan government after the 2005 earthquake had not yet established enough capacity or confidence among high-level policy makers to be entrusted with such a task. Furthermore, putting a serving army commander in charge of the relief response raised serious concerns about the role that the Pakistani army – an active participant in the hostilities that caused the displacement – should play in making decisions about the coordination of humanitarian assistance.[15]

Recognising the inherent tension between a government's legitimate desire to address the underlying causes of the armed insurgency and their own obligation to respond impartially to assist those affected by the hostilities, humanitarian actors found it difficult to agree on the level of proximity and support that they could or should display to government actors. Government efforts to break away from their past reliance on using military assets and personnel to deliver relief assistance at an operational level were appreciated. But humanitarians could not escape the fact that at the policy level, a number of major decisions regarding affected communities (including their right to registration and movement, and the ability of aid agencies to access beneficiaries in areas controlled by militants) were clearly linked to political and military considerations rather than purely humanitarian objectives.

Upholding humanitarian principles

The ability of humanitarian actors to remain impartial in their allocation of aid has obviously been shaped by the environment in which assistance was provided. Recognising the sensitivities of operating within such a complex context, humanitarian actors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have employed their usual approach of bilateral coordination and negotiation, with a clear effort to distinguish themselves as neutral, impartial, and independent of UN-led coordination efforts or donor governments.[16]

Meanwhile, UN agencies and the Humanitarian Country Team[17] (HCT) members have also made some valid attempts to establish an impartial humanitarian operating space by drafting a set of 'Basic Operating Rules' and proactively engaging with the government on basic humanitarian principles and documents (for example, respecting communities' rights to a voluntary, safe and dignified return under the IDP Guiding Principles). Unfortunately, these efforts have often suffered from a poor or inconsistent articulation by the range of different agencies interacting with government, and have not always succeeded in reaching the highest levels of government, where key decisions challenging humanitarian impartiality have often been made.

While the Humanitarian Coordinator and some HCT members have regularly attempted to devise common operational strategies and have advocated for an adherence to basic humanitarian principles in theory, they could not always demonstrate an ability to hold humanitarian agencies accountable for upholding them. For example, despite clear agreement within the Humanitarian Country Team that aid agencies operating in southern NWFP should not distribute branded relief items (which were judged to pose a potential security risk to both beneficiaries and aid agencies themselves), at least two major agencies (the World Food Programme and UNICEF) ignored the HCT decision and proceeded to distribute branded items to beneficiaries.

Some early efforts to uphold humanitarian principles showed a certain level of responsiveness on the part of government (for example, the successful lobby effort by UN agencies and NGOs to remove military presence from IDP camps), but were regrettably not always built on to establish clearer and more widely respected common approaches or ways of working. As a result, humanitarian agencies (including UN and NGOs) have continued to struggle when faced with clear threats to their ability to impartially assist affected communities. This could be observed, for example, during recently launched responses in areas of return, where most humanitarian actors have struggled to effectively confront operational challenges such as those posed by the Pakistan army's attempts to inappropriately assume[18] a more active role in the selection of beneficiaries and other aspects of aid delivery.

UN agencies have also acted hesitantly to resolve challenges arising from the government-led registration process. With its advanced technological capacity and ability to function at immense scale, the government registration mechanism was quickly adopted by many humanitarian actors as a key instrument for targeting beneficiaries during the initial phase of the displacement. While the system itself has the potential to act as an effective vehicle for delivering large-scale responses, its practical implementation was rapidly criticised for undermining the delivery of impartial, needs-based assistance. In particular, humanitarian actors expressed serious concerns about the government's registration criteria, and specific decisions to include or exclude actors in the registration on the basis not of their displacement status but of their area of origin, tribe, and in some cases even of their gender[19].

However, instead of advocating for a more needs-based registration criteria or overcoming exclusion errors by supplementing government beneficiary lists with agencies' own lists of vulnerable individuals (as was done, for example, by the ICRC and several NGOs), most members of the HCT simply continued to base their response on what they knew to be flawed registration lists. Recent proposals for government agencies and UNHCR to carry out a re-screening exercise that could help to rectify exclusion errors are welcome and positive, but will unfortunately come too late to make a difference for many of the affected families.

Humanitarian coordination

At the technical and sectoral levels, the cluster approach is generally seen as a mechanism that has the potential for strengthening the impartiality of humanitarian responses. While the clusters have improved since their initial creation after the 2005 earthquake, it would be hard to claim that they are currently operating at full capacity or delivering on this potential to ensure that beneficiaries are targeted solely on the basis of need. Needs identification, prioritisation, and gap analysis remains patchy at best, and does not always translate into the corresponding sectoral strategies or decisions.

The fact that it took most clusters – with the notable exception of the food cluster - at least one or two months to identify a major assistance gap among IDPs living in host families bears testament to the clusters' weakness in explicitly identifying unmet needs and responding to gaps that fall outside of the 'usual' ways of operating. Despite the fact that nearly 90 per cent of displaced families chose to shelter with friends, family or total strangers – rather than settle in one of the formal IDP camps that were rapidly erected in various districts of NWFP – very few UN agencies took immediate steps to shift attention to humanitarian responses in out-of-camp areas and families. Predicting these needs, and adapting their humanitarian responses accordingly, should have been a priority for all clusters in Pakistan.

At the inter-cluster level, there was widespread agreement that the re-establishment of a full OCHA office and the appointment of a stand-alone Humanitarian Coordinator have helped to promote the coordination of impartial and effective humanitarian responses. While many criticised the late arrival of OCHA in Peshawar, they also commended the HC and OCHA colleagues for setting up improved systems and inclusive processes at the inter-agency level.

While it still faces some challenges in terms of delivering concrete outputs and holding its members accountable for common decisions, the HCT has made significant progress in identifying and discussing strategic response issues at its weekly meetings.

Broadly speaking, the new humanitarian coordination structures were felt to hold a strong potential for promoting more needs-based humanitarian responses, though many questioned whether agencies had mustered sufficient political will and commitment to beneficiary accountability to realise this potential. Until the structures become more explicitly beneficiary- and output-focused, some have argued, humanitarian coordination will continue to struggle to deliver a genuinely impartial humanitarian response.

Box 3: Clusters' performance in promoting effective coordination

Beyond improving the identification and prioritisation of needs, the cluster approach also aims to strengthen communication and coordination across the range of humanitarian actors involved. While the coordination process itself should obviously not become the main focus of cluster activity, clusters in Pakistan and elsewhere must continue improving the basic structures and processes that are required to support effective response analysis, planning and implementation.

In Pakistan, significant weaknesses persist across many of the clusters. Interviewees expressed concern about poor or non-existent vertical coordination and communication across the national, provincial and district-level cluster groups; with district-level coordination in particular being cited as requiring sustained investment and capacity-building. With the possible exception of the WASH and health clusters, humanitarian agencies interviewed also worried that a persistent confusion between the roles of the 'national' (Islamabad-level) and 'provincial' (Peshawar-level) clusters often

resulted in duplication of meetings and activities, which diminished the amount of time that the cluster can afford to spend on other issues. Clear terms of reference and adherence to them were seen to be an effective method for preventing this kind of confusion.

Similarly, information management across the clusters – and at inter-cluster level – has generally been weak across the Pakistan response. Most clusters took nearly two months to establish basic 3Ws (Who does What Where) matrices or maps, and to this day, OCHA has not yet compiled an inter-sectoral version of this key coordination tool. At the time this paper went to print in September 2009, two-thirds of all cluster web pages (including agriculture, camp management, food, health, nutrition, protection and NFIs) did not contain even the most basic information, and meeting announcements/minutes were several months out of date. Compared with the government's emergency response website (www.helpidp.org), which is updated several times each day, the cluster approach's efforts seem particularly feeble.

Even where data did exist, some cluster members expressed frustration at their inability to analyse and present their information in a way that would have led to practical actions or recommended interventions, arguing that more professional information management support would have been required for this purpose.

Meanwhile, cluster leads reported difficulty in holding their members (especially international and local NGOs) accountable for response planning, and explained that agencies' desire for visibility and branding left the cluster incapable of preventing duplication (especially in camps) or of filling agreed gaps. Clusters cited a particularly high risk of duplication at the assessment and planning stages of any sectoral response, and wondered whether there was a need for new forward-looking tools that could help them overcome this challenge.

As in other parts of the world, cluster members also complained about the lack of stand-alone cluster leads, equipped with the right skills and experiences to chair meetings, manage processes, and work systematically towards agreed sectoral objectives.

On the positive side, most cluster leads and members agreed that participation (including of national and international NGOs) in the Pakistan clusters was generally stronger than in other contexts. Interviewees also commended the UN-led efforts to tackle remaining weaknesses in the cluster approach through the deployment of an OCHA-led Inter-Cluster Diagnostic Mission.

4 Appropriateness of the response

As the previous section has illustrated, the humanitarian response in Pakistan has struggled to deliver assistance purely on the basis of need. As this section explores, it has also not always managed to mobilise the right kind of assistance to provide what people needed the most.

Humanitarian agencies did their best to respond to a rapidly unfolding crisis with the tools and resources that they knew well or had at their immediate disposal. Unfortunately, as in many global emergency responses, this reflected a resource-driven approach, in which agencies' sectoral mandates and institutional agendas (including the kind of assistance that they would like to provide) tend to take precedence over actual beneficiary need or preference.

Skilled at distributing standardised in-kind relief goods, humanitarian agencies in Pakistan quickly reached out to displaced people with assistance such as tents, food rations and packages of 'non-food items' (e.g. blankets, mattresses, buckets, and soaps). While much of this assistance was obviously appreciated by families who had fled with little more than the clothes on their backs, it actually fell far short of meeting beneficiaries' priorities and own preferences for assistance.

The food cluster immediately received complaints about the types of food initially distributed, such as the wheat provided in the early days of the response, which beneficiaries were unable to consume since they had no access to milling facilities and subsequently sold on at very low prices. Shelter agencies struggled to find appropriate solutions for displaced families both in camps (where only the government seemed to have thought of the impact that the intense summer heat would have on the tents, responding appropriately with distributions of electric fans and ice) and in host families (where widespread distributions of tents were carried out without any assessment of how they might be used within the context of a host family displacement).

What most of the humanitarian community ignored was the fact that the vast majority of displaced people were not living in a classic IDP camp situation in a remote or inaccessible area, but had instead taken refuge in large or mid-size towns and cities, with well-serviced facilities and fully stocked shops. What families needed – to pay for food, transport, rented accommodation, medical treatment or even summer clothes to withstand the heat - was cash.

While it was widely recognised that relief food and non-food items were being sold in local markets, only a few agencies translated this observation into a more appropriate cash emergency response. Government agencies were among the first to spot a major need at significant scale, quickly announcing a cash grant of 25,000 rupees (approximately US $300) for all displaced families. Significant problems were observed in the implementation of the programme (perhaps above all, the government's decision to link cash assistance to IDP registration, which ultimately had a very damaging impact on government's willingness to register IDPs). However, the general

'smartcard' concept and cash-based approach showed remarkable innovation and an excellent appreciation of actual beneficiary need.

Evaluations of smaller-scale cash programmes run by international and national NGOs in the initial phase of the response found cash assistance to be highly appropriate within the Pakistan context, not just in terms of meeting the needs of displaced families, but also those of host families who were themselves struggling to get by.[20]

Asked to critically examine their own shortcomings in providing emergency responses, a number of aid agencies interviewed felt they had done their best to cover beneficiaries' material needs, but had dedicated insufficient attention to the dignity of the affected communities. This was particularly apparent where assistance was not provided in a gender-sensitive way (e.g. no separate female queues for IDP registration, food distributions, or cash withdrawals at ATM machines) or with respect to a cultural appreciation for privacy. This included a lack of awareness of the impact of the displacement on women's mobility and access to even the most basic services, such as women's strong preference for using sanitation facilities that were contained within a larger utility compound surrounded by purdah walls.

As the humanitarian response moves into an early recovery phase, particularly in the returns areas, humanitarians should draw on these lessons to adapt and refine their approaches. Away from the pressures of quick-onset responses, there is currently a window of opportunity for moving from a resource/assumptions-based response to a more comprehensive, analytical and assessment-based approach that looks at needs at the household-level and considers both actual vulnerability as well as beneficiary preferences before determining the most appropriate assistance mechanism. These are likely to require a high degree of inter-cluster and cross-sectoral coordination, as genuinely needs-based responses don't always fall into the neatly distinct sectors that humanitarian agencies have designed to coordinate their activities.

The Pakistan experience suggests that the international humanitarian system requires a significant rethink of the way in which assistance is provided and the kind of support that crisis-affected people actually require. The final section of this paper will attempt to make a number of specific recommendations for how this might be done.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This paper has attempted to provide a snapshot of the way in which the humanitarian response to the Pakistan IDP crisis lived up to global commitments for providing enough aid, in the right place and at the right time, and in a way that was appropriate to the needs of crisis-affected people. The preceding sections have demonstrated that significant efforts were mobilised in response to an unprecedented and fairly sudden displacement crisis, but that the humanitarian system still contains significant weaknesses.

Four years after the launch of the UN-led humanitarian reform, coordination and response mechanisms in Pakistan have become more active and operational – but still fall short of being fully functional, particularly with regard to maintaining an explicit focus on the outcomes of processes for beneficiaries.

Based on the analysis presented above, this paper recommends that all stakeholders learn from the lessons of the past five months to address outstanding weaknesses and to improve their performance in the following areas:

Rapid and adequate funding for emergencies

- **International donors must provide more assistance in the first days of a quick-onset crisis, and ensure a diversity of funding channels**. Improved multilateral funding mechanisms such as an Emergency Response Fund could be explored, but should not replace bilateral contributions to frontline agencies.
- In order to ensure a genuine rapid response capacity, **bilateral donors and cluster lead agencies should establish global and country-level modalities[21] for pre-positioning emergency response funds with a small number of frontline agencies** (for example 5–10 capable and committed international NGOs, covering all major emergency sectors) which could draw on these funds to launch immediately life-saving humanitarian action as a crisis unfolds.
- **UN–NGO funding partnerships must urgently be improved to transfer funds in a more timely and predictable fashion**. Specifically, this requires clearer communication of funding intentions,[22] the immediate standardisation of proposal and reporting formats, and adequate provisions for accommodating all essential costs.
- **Cluster lead agencies should demonstrate a greater commitment to transparency by tracking funding contributions**, and publicly recording the length of time it has taken for funds (including those that they manage) to reach beneficiaries.

Greater commitment to needs-based responses

- **The Humanitarian Coordinator and the Humanitarian Country Team must commit themselves to demonstrating a high degree of impartiality to maintain operational credibility within the complex and volatile context**. Specifically, this should include establishing clear agreements on ways of working in returns areas. The HC must take proactive measures to manage local perceptions of humanitarian action and prevent a fragmentation of actors by holding all agencies accountable to agreed ways of working and to humanitarian principles.
- **An HCT policy group should be created to support the HC and HCT members in principle-based humanitarian advocacy and to provide better context analysis**. This should include making concrete proposals for adapting current assistance models to ensure humanitarian responses and early recovery activities are based exclusively on beneficiary needs.
- **The Inter-Cluster Coordination mechanism must explore in more depth the humanitarian community's failure to respond to host family displacement, and provide the clusters with comprehensive programme recommendations on how to better analyse, assess and respond to out-of-camp IDP needs in current and future relief operations**. This process should include an examination of the small-scale successes and innovative ideas that a small number of actors have implemented to respond to host family displacement in Pakistan[23] and elsewhere[24].
- **Cluster lead agencies should radically rethink their standard sectoral assistance models and ensure that their cluster explicitly and regularly discusses what type of assistance would be the most appropriate in each phase of a humanitarian response.** In Pakistan, this discussion is likely to lead to a more widespread use of cash assistance, where humanitarian actors should work together with the government to build on the successes of original ideas like the 'smartcards' for both relief and early recovery phases..
- **Government, donor agencies, and cluster leads should urgently increase their support to district-level coordination processes (including District Coordination officials and their staff) to ensure a smooth continuation of humanitarian relief and early recovery activities**. Stakeholders must also continue to strengthen both Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (in NWFP and elsewhere) and the National Disaster Management Authority, which must include a clear commitment to addressing well-known leadership difficulties in the latter.
- **The Pakistan government should provide more clarity on disaster responses by establishing a national framework or policy for responding to internal displacement.** This should include clarifying the exact mandates of each ministry and department in major emergencies, and reiterate appropriate roles for military actors[25].

Within the context of the current response, military actors should be strongly discouraged from taking an active or operational role in both relief operations as well as the recovery and reconstruction process.

Learning from past experiences

- **The Pakistan government, Humanitarian Coordinator and OCHA should jointly organise a lessons-learned workshop before the end of 2009 to take stock of the positive and negative experiences of the emergency response**. This workshop could provide a forum for deeper discussion on a number of major response issues raised in this paper and in other independent reports.[26] Key items for discussion should include upholding humanitarian principles within a complex operating environment; appropriate management of civil-military relations; effective humanitarian financing mechanisms; and improved needs assessment and analysis (including for host family displacement).

Notes

[1] See, for example www.humanitarianreform.org.

[2] The cluster approach represents a renewed effort on the part of the UN system to fill identified gaps in humanitarian response, and ensure accountability with strengthened leadership and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. In Pakistan, the UN and the government first decided to launch the cluster approach in response to the 2005 earthquake, and have reactivated 12 clusters or inter-sectoral working groups (agriculture, camp management, early recovery, education, food, gender, health, logistics, nutrition, shelter and non-food items, protection, and water and sanitation) since the start of the displacement crisis in April/May 2009.

[3] By September 2009, the Pakistan National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) had verified 383,192 internally displaced families, or approximately 3.2 million people, as part of the IDP registration process. This number is in addition to an estimated 500,000 internally displaced people who had already fled conflict-affected areas in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) or Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) before April 2009.

[4] While displacement occurred across large parts of NWFP and even other provinces of Pakistan, the majority of internally displaced people who fled the military offensives were eventually hosted in one of the five districts (Mardan, Swabi, Peshawar, Charsadda and Nowshera) immediately adjacent to their areas of origin.

[5] The Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan and related appeal has recently been revised upwards again from this figure to accommodate additional needs. The September revision of the appeal requests a total of US $680 million.

[6] This includes a 1.5 million euros contribution made in 2008 (in which funds were allocated to UNHCR and the International Committee for the Red Cross), prior to the mass population movement. Since May 2009, the Netherlands has given 1 million euros to UN agencies and 1 million euros to the International Committee for the Red Cross.

[7] During the first six months that followed the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, DFID provided more than GBP 53 million for an estimated 1 million affected people. DFID has still only allocated GBP 22 million to assist more than three times this number of affected families (estimated at 3.2 million, see footnote 3) who have fled in the past 13 months.

[8] For example, UK-based aid agencies, who for an emergency of similar scale and need under different circumstances would have launched a joint Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) appeal (which usually raises significant amounts of public funds), were constrained by the lack of media profile of the Pakistan IDP crisis in the UK.

[9] In their presentation to donors on 21 May 2009 and various press statements, the Pakistan government estimated that the displacement crisis would last only a matter of weeks, and that IDPs would be able to return very quickly to their areas of origin.

[10] By April 2009, the CERF had already contributed US $15n to assist families displaced throughout the second half of 2008 and early 2009, thereby becoming one of the top five donors to the overall humanitarian response rather than an 'additional' fund. See Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan, Revision May 2009: http://ochadms.unog.ch/quickplace/cap/main.nsf/h_Index/RevisionMay_2008-2009_Pakistan_HRP/$FILE/RevisionMay_2008-2009_Pakistan_HRP_SCREEN.pdf?OpenElement

[11] Since 2007, the UK's DFID and Australia's Ausaid are among those donors who have increasingly looked to the UN and the UN clusters to assume responsibility for allocating donor funding to priority sectors and projects within emergency appeals. Until recently, this has involved transferring significant amounts of donor funding to one UN agency (most frequently UNICEF) and tasking the Humanitarian Country Team and the clusters with deciding which sectors and projects should receive how much money. Funds were then passed from the administrative agent to the agency implementing the selected project. By early 2009, donors had realised that there were significant delays in the transfer of funds from the UN agencies passing money on to the NGOs who were implementing projects. Donors have since stopped using UN agencies as administrative agents, though some – especially DFID – continue to insist on a more active involvement of the clusters in funding decisions.

[12] Final report of the Inter-Cluster Diagnostic Mission to Pakistan, Islamabad and Peshawar, July 13-17, 2009.

[13] All examples given here refer to planned activities that could have been implemented (and in most cases were listed in the Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan), but were not funded by donors or received funds too late to respond to initial emergency needs. NGOs unanimously agreed that the overall lack of funding for the response

did not allow other actors to readily step in and fill these gaps, and that in most cases needs went unmet.

[14] Under Pakistan's decentralisation approach the responsibility for the management of disasters falls not to the federal government but to provincial authorities.

[15] Se also key Inter-Agency Standing Committee documents on civil-military relations, including IASC 'Reference Paper on Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies', http://ochaonline.un.org/DocView.asp?DocID=1219 and 'Guidelines on the Use Of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies' (MCDA Guidelines), http://ochaonline.un.org/GetBin.asp?DocID=426.

[16] MSF in particular has taken a conscious decision to underline its independence from donors by refusing to accept any institutional bilateral or multilateral funding for their work in Pakistan, drawing exclusively on the organisation's own resources to implement their programmes.

[17] Led by the Humanitarian Coordinator, the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) currently meets at Islamabad-level once per week and consists of a range of different humanitarian actors including UN agencies and NGOs. The Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement is included in the HCT as an observer.

[18] See endnote 15.

[19] In order to be registered and verified by the government-led registration process in Pakistan, internally displaced persons had to fulfil certain criteria. Controversially, registration criteria relied heavily on both an IDP's area of origin (with the government determining which areas of NWFP were considered 'notified' or affected by the conflict, and which were considered 'cleared') and the area to which the person had fled (with government refusing to register any displaced person who had fled to an area outside of NWFP). In thousands of cases, these criteria led to genuine IDPs being excluded from the registration process. In southern NWFP, IDPs arriving from Waziristan encountered a similar challenge when they were told that only members of the Mehsud tribe would be accepted for registration (while IDPs from other tribes were excluded). While gender was never formally considered a criteria in the registration process, humanitarian agencies expressed widespread concern about women (including female-headed households) being excluded from the registration process. This problem was evidenced by the low number of female registrations, particularly in the initial phase of the humanitarian response.

[20] See for example Sungi's 'Cash for Choice (CfC) Project, Process Monitoring and Evaluation Study', August 2009.

[21] This idea has been explored by some donors and UN agencies, though many initiatives continue to face implementation challenges. A positive example of this approach is the Sweden's International Development Cooperation Agency's (SIDA) experience with the prepositioning of dedicated funds for NGOs who can draw on resources that area already in their bank accounts (subject to SIDA approval within 24 hours of the request). The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) is currently in exploring options for similar models, though it is not yet clear whether these will assume the same model of prepositioning that it is required to genuinely reduce response times when an emergency hits. On the UN side, the UN refugee agency UNHCR has a standing global agreement with Oxfam GB to facilitate immediate transfers of funds for water and sanitation provision in refugee situations – but so far this agreement has never been invoked in an operational response.

[22] Some agencies have found the receipt of 'letters of intent' in advance of final contract signing helpful in this regard, though it was acknowledged that the predictability of such tools can be sometimes limited by a lack of clarity over the extent to which pre-contract agreements are actually binding or enforceable.

[23] OFDA, for example, took proactive measures to encourage their partner NGOs to explore innovative cash-based responses targeting IDPs and their host families with utility vouchers. Similarly, the provincial government's Emergency Response Unit (ERU) recommended the implementation of district-wide utility subsidies as a way of assisting IDPs and their host families; unfortunately, this suggestion was rejected by the central government due to an absence of funds for implementation. A timely intervention by donors or relevant cluster leads to mobilise the required resources could have encouraged a more appropriate response to host family displacement.

[24] See for example Oxfam's research report 'Out of Site: Building better responses to displacement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by helping host families', September 2008.

[25] For appropriate roles for military actors in humanitarian responses see endnote 15.

[26] Including, for example, the inter-cluster diagnostic mission report and the Humanitarian Policy Group's HPG Policy Brief 36, September 2009,' A Clash of Principles? Humanitarian action and the search for stability in Pakistan'.

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