INTER-AGENCY HUMANITARIAN EVALUATION OF THE COVID-19 HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Key messages

1. About the evaluation. The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) is an independent assessment of the preparedness and response of Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) members to the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-2022. It is the first-ever evaluation of the IASC's humanitarian response to infectious disease events and to a global response. The evaluation provides feedback on the humanitarian system's response to COVID-19, identifies best practices and lessons learned, and highlights strategic and policy challenges and opportunities to improve responses to global crises in the future.

2. Quick facts. The evaluation team conducted 640 interviews; 169 focus group discussions that involved 510 men and 593 women and reviewed over 3,500 documents. Eight case studies were conducted in Bangladesh, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Syria, and Turkey.

3. Key actors. The evaluation was undertaken by the IASC-associated Inter-Agency Evaluation Humanitarian Steering Group, chaired by OCHA. The management group consisted of ALNAP, DRC (on behalf of the ICVA), IOM, SCHR, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. The Global Evaluation Advisory Group included Action Aid, Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, AUB, FCDO, German Federal Foreign Office, Ground Truth Solutions, GMI, McGill University, UN, USAID, United Nations Resident Coordinator, Chad, and the World Bank.

4. Unprecedented global crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused a global crisis, impacting health systems, economies, and societies. Vulnerable populations were hit hardest. Over 758 million confirmed cases and 7 million deaths have been recorded as of 28 February 2023. The pandemic exacerbated existing humanitarian needs and overwhelmed response systems. In response, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee launched the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, the first crisis-specific global plan, to contain the virus, protect vulnerable groups, and mitigate negative impacts on human rights, assets, and livelihoods.

5. Key highlights

a. Rapid mobilization of humanitarian aid. The global humanitarian response plan galvanized the global humanitarian community and provided a framework for the quick mobilisation of resources. The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) expedited substantial grants, enabling responders to address urgent needs promptly.

b. Missed opportunities for long-awaited reforms. The international humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic was commendable, but global restrictions on international aid highlighted missed opportunities for long-awaited reforms. These include supporting locally led humanitarian action and improving accountability to affected people. If more progress had been made in these areas, the response could have better met the needs of vulnerable populations, improved delivery capabilities, mitigated the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, and built trust with communities. This trust was crucial for promoting healthy behaviours to curb the pandemic.

c. Preparedness. The humanitarian system was aware of the risk of a pandemic but was not adequately prepared, leading to missed opportunities for a faster response. Although individual organizations had

plans, they were often outdated and not coordinated for a collective response to the complex COVID-19 pandemic.

d. Localization. The pandemic highlighted the crucial role of local actors and communities, leading to increased support for locally led humanitarian action. However, the humanitarian system failed to shift power from international to local and national responders, undermining these positive developments.

e. Collaboration across the three pillars of the COVID response: health, socio-economic and humanitarian. Although a comprehensive response to COVID-19 was recognized as necessary, the humanitarian, development, and peace sectors remained divided, hindering effective planning. Even a crisis like COVID-19 failed to generate enough political will to overcome institutional interests and address this long-term structural problem.

5. Recommended action. The lessons learned from the global response to COVID-19 provide an opportunity to develop the structures, processes, and capacities needed to respond to future pandemics effectively. The evaluation recommends that the humanitarian system expedite structural reforms to become more anticipatory, inclusive, holistic, and locally focused. While certain necessary changes may be beyond the control of the humanitarian system, eliminating obstacles (such as policy and legal barriers) and providing incentives (particularly financial ones) can stimulate change at different levels within the sector. The global humanitarian community should prioritize a people-centred, locally-led response that places affected individuals at the forefront of response efforts. This includes prioritizing those in greatest need and those that are the least visible, building trust and empowering local actors, and providing necessary resources. It is crucial to develop a coherent and cohesive system while also learning from COVID-19 adaptations to enhance the collective response capacity.

6. Using the evaluation for accountability and learning. The evaluation results and recommendations can be utilized by the humanitarian sector to improve accountability in delivering humanitarian action and responding to global crises. The evaluation is particularly relevant for the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, IASC Principals, and other member organizations, while donors, front-line responders, and local actors can also benefit from the report's conclusions and lessons learned. Additionally, the report provides Member States with evaluative evidence and analysis to inform their national policies and protocols for crises involving international agencies and other actors. The report also provides international organizations, donors, and the affected people with information for accountability and learning purposes.

7. Related products. The evaluation report is accompanied by an executive summary, and two learning papers on the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) process and the contribution of the COVID-19 response to localization. The materials are available here.

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