THE ROLE OF THE L3 MECHANISM IN ENSURING FIT-FOR-PURPOSE RESPONSES TO PROTRACTED CRISSES

Background for IASC Principals discussion on the ‘L3 mechanism, protracted crisis and staying the course’

BACKGROUND

This paper is a synthesis of the IASC Emergency Directors Group’s (EDG) recent work on enhancing the fitness for purpose of the Level 3 Emergency Response Mechanism (‘L3’) and aims to inform the discussions of the IASC Principals on the L3 Mechanism and optimizing humanitarian responses to protracted crises. It follows a request in the Principals’ August 2015 meeting to identify ways to balance disciplined and consistent use of the L3 mechanism against the need to communicate coherently about the scale and complexity of major crises and the resources needed to mobilize a system-wide response at a level that meets those challenges. In 2015, the EDG has explored new approaches to track progress in L3 surges and strengthen the collective response to multiple large-scale crises.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

An L3 declaration signals to IASC organizations and donors, the need to scale up rapidly and ensure appropriate resources are in place to meet the demands of an acute, changing humanitarian situation. This has resulted in more focused support and funding, but has also meant that in complex and protracted emergencies, there are challenges in ‘de-activating’ the L3 surge status. There is a hesitance and expectation that the spotlight will shift, redirecting resources to other responses.

Reviews of L3 responses to date have identified a need for greater consistency in applying the L3 mechanism, as well as for clarity in what an L3 surge is meant to achieve. There is a need for more objective and comparable ways to track system-wide progress in mobilizing scale-up when marked changes in the situation outstrip capacity. The fact that many crises become protracted for reasons beyond the scope of humanitarian action means that maintaining focus, mitigating fatigue and managing staff resources across multiple crises remains a challenge.

SUGGESTED APPROACH

It is proposed to plan for two phases of the L3 surge, to differentiate between an initial ‘scale-up’ phase to coordinate an injection of capacity following a marked change in the humanitarian situation, followed by a ‘consolidation’ phase to align resources to a level of capacity that is fit for purpose for longer-term responses - before deactivating L3 status. This would include an appropriate timeframe for the initial L3 operational scale up and surge, and the need to incorporate an accurate assessment of security, access and related challenges at the outset or prior to the declaration, in order to set and apply benchmarks that reflect appropriate expectations for the length of the surge. The existing criteria for L3 surge responses (scale, complexity, urgency, reputational risk and capacity to respond) cover a mix of aspects of both the response and the crisis itself. The L3 surge mechanism needs to maintain a stronger focus on the criterion of ‘capacity to respond’ from among the original five L3 criteria, differentiated from the discussion of the complexity and scale of the crisis itself.

As a way to address these requirements and instil rigour in monitoring and guiding operational progress, the EDG has explored setting specific benchmarks1 to track progress in L3 surges, in response to the request of the IASC Principals for more standard criteria for deactivation2.

There are two main purposes of setting benchmarks: first, to set a standard for the expected level of collective response - and to mobilize efforts to scale up to meet this standard, and second, to provide an objective reference to

1 Benchmark -- Reference point or standard against which performance or achievements can be assessed. (OECD-DAC, 2004, Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management).

set milestone indicators\(^3\) to guide de-activation of L3 surge responses and transition out of surge status. The benchmarks should be simple, light to track in the field, and focused on developing fitness for purpose of the response and a better understanding of results for affected people - as opposed to gains solely against process indicators. They should offer a means to track progress over time and across crises, to enable a global overview of major surge responses underway according to a consistent set of core priority elements. At the same time, they must be adaptable and specific enough to capture operational requirements in each setting. It has been considered, for example, that the benchmarks could be differentiated for complex crisis versus natural disaster settings, with appropriate timeframes.

An initial set of benchmarks for L3 surge responses were established by the EDG, in consultation with the HCT, at the time of activation of the L3 response to the crisis in Yemen on 1 July 2015. They have been recognized as a constructive approach to support decision-making and help prioritize key asks from the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and HCT. The Yemen benchmarks were accompanied by more specific ‘actions required’, as well as a timeline for results. The Yemen experience has also offered an opportunity to take stock and learn from this initial attempt to set benchmarks. This learning has emphasized that the role of the HC and HCT in setting benchmarks is a critical one, though processes will need to be kept light and practical enough for field leaders to engage mid-crisis, given the acute demands on their time in the surge phase. The benchmarks have served – at least partially – the purpose of identifying and mobilizing further support required to close gaps in the response, for example on scaling up sub-national hubs.

Finally, it will be important to avoid over-engineering the L3 mechanism and benchmarks, and to carefully manage communication of developments to a wider audience. A re-alignment of the terminology used to refer to the ‘L3 response’ will be helpful, to differentiate the ‘L3 surge’ mechanism and associated benchmarks from ongoing response efforts once capacity has been scaled up and is fit for purpose. This will include clear and coordinated communication with donors and other partners to ensure that the L3 mechanism and its scope are well understood and applied objectively. It is also recognized that a complementary approach to advocacy and tracking progress in longer-term responses is needed to ensure a ‘spotlight’ on those operations which might be L3-deactivated once surge benchmarks have been met, but remain of a scope requiring constant attention to ensure equity in funding and resources.

**Recommendations for consideration by the IASC Principals**

1) Endorse the approach of differentiating between phases of response—initial ‘Level 3 surge’, which consists of a ‘scale-up’ phase and a ‘consolidation’ phase, to reach a level of capacity that is fit for purpose for ongoing response to protracted crisis

2) Endorse and support the initiative to refine a core set of standard benchmarks, potentially to be accompanied by a flexible ‘menu of options’ for corresponding milestone indicators that can be adapted to each country setting, and continue iterative efforts in each L3 surge to improve the model

3) Explore the feasibility of applying the benchmark model to phases of response beyond the L3 surge, with clear strategies for related advocacy, to maintain a global spotlight of support for responses post-deactivation

4) Endorse realignment of terminology on the L3 mechanism, from ‘Level 3 response’ to ‘Level 3 Surge’, in order to more accurately reflect the concept of an urgent, rapid injection of resources to close gaps

5) Agree to develop key messages to support communication on the purpose and scope of the benchmarks for ‘Level 3 Surge’ and how they contribute to building fitness for purpose of the mechanism and enhancing collective responses

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\(^3\) Indicators: Quantitative or qualitative factor or variable that provides a simple and reliable means to measure achievement, to reflect the changes connected to an intervention, or to help assess the performance of a development actor. (OECD-DAC, 2004, Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management)