

PLANNING FOR PEOPLE, NOT PROCESS

Key requirements for a collective, principled and lightened humanitarian planning process

June 2025

The humanitarian system is facing a defining moment. Amid a rapid decline in global funding and increasing scrutiny over effectiveness, many humanitarian stakeholders are calling for a fundamental reset in the way humanitarian planning processes are designed and implemented. This paper sets out what a credible, inclusive, and efficient humanitarian planning process must look like in today's constrained and complex operational environment.

BACK TO FUNDAMENTALS: REAFFIRMING THE PURPOSE

At its core, to ensure principled, people-centred and accountable humanitarian assistance, collective planning processes must answer the following essential questions:

1. Who is in need, how severely are they in need, and where are they?
2. What type of assistance is required, who is best / well placed to deliver it and how should it be delivered?
3. What resources are required to deliver this assistance?

These questions underpin decisions around prioritization, response design, and resource allocation. Our current collective humanitarian processes, the HPC and RRP, do not yet consistently answer these questions in a timely, inclusive or credible manner and have been criticized for process 'heaviness':

- **Trust gap in outputs:** NGOs and donors have expressed concerns about the lack of consistent and transparent application of the JIAF methodology to estimate the magnitude and severity of need, which mean users struggle to trust the final numbers for planning decisions.¹
- **Supply driven response planning:** Community insights are not meaningfully captured and included in analysis, which means the HPC response planning remains a "top-down" process driven by agency/sector mandates rather than crises affected people's own understanding of their realities.²
- **Cumbersome process:** The process takes up a lot of time and resources, pulling focus from real-time operational coordination and response delivery.^{3, 4}
- **Siloed and Duplicative Planning:** Lack of linkages and joint planning between OCHA, UNHCR and UNDP-led planning processes for humanitarian and development responses, which often serve the same population groups in the same crises.⁵

¹ ICVA; NGO proposals for a strengthened HNO/HRP Cycle, 6th May 2024; ICVA, NRC, IMPACT, "The HPC: What is it useful – and for who? Summary of Survey Findings", May 2025

² UNICEF; Integration of a People Centered Approach in the 2022 HNO/HRP process. Found [here](#).

³ Health Cluster; HNO Lessons Learned 2021. Found [here](#).

⁴ IASC Principals Bi-annual meeting; Summary Record and Action Points, November 2023. Found [here](#).

⁵ IASC; Light Guidance on Collective Outcomes, June 2020. Found [here](#).



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

IMPACT

Shaping practices
influencing policies
Impacting lives



Sphere

h—h
H2H Network
Humanitarian
Action Support



NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Four critical shifts are required to restore trust and effectiveness in humanitarian planning:

1. Clarify and Streamline Purpose of Humanitarian Planning Processes

- ✓ Define the key HPC outputs as strategic planning documents that inform cross- crises and within crises needs-based resource allocation.
- ✓ Operational planning should be separated from strategic planning. It should follow resource allocation—not drive it.
- ✓ Streamline the process and strip away what doesn't add value to the core purpose. Shifting indicator reporting, activity sheets and project costing to operational coordination tools.
- ✓ Consider either merging or making interoperable key humanitarian and development planning processes, currently led by OCHA, UNHCR and UNDP.^{6, 7}

2. Rebuild Credibility in Needs Estimation

- ✓ Use robust, representative data, including sex, age, and disability disaggregated data, that reflects the full scope of affected populations' needs—not just those needs where agencies operate or those who are easiest to reach by agencies.⁸
- ✓ Ensure impartial, consistent methods, such as the JIAF (or equivalent), are applied transparently and uniformly across contexts.
- ✓ Ensure the entire process, including the analysis, is inclusive by actively involving crisis-affected people and diverse local response stakeholders in all steps of the process.⁹

3. Make Response Design Demand-Driven

- ✓ Move beyond top-down, agency-centric planning and shift to contextualized community-centred response design.
- ✓ Participatory, inclusive area-level research is not just feasible – it's being done.¹⁰ What needs to change is incorporating these community insights into decision making processes.
- ✓ HPC response priorities should be based on an understanding of what affected people and local actors, both from civil society as well as governments, say they need and how and by whom they want aid delivered.
- ✓ Affected people want both immediate humanitarian lifesaving needs to be met and longer-term root causes to be addressed. Needs assessments, situational analysis and response design efforts should as much as possible be done jointly with development actors to operationalize the HDP Nexus and better maximize shrinking resources of these different sectors.¹¹

⁶ IASC; Light Guidance on Collective Outcomes, June 2020. Found [here](#).

⁷ NRC, IMPACT; Reprioritization of Resource in Refugee Responses, Recommendations from NRC and IMPACT initiatives, April 2025

⁸ See for instance on understanding severity of needs and links with disability (with analysis incl. gender, age), REACH Impact report on [Using Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Disability in MSNAs across crisis 062025](#).

⁹ Ensuring representative engagement of organizations focused on age, gender and disability inclusion.

¹⁰ There have been multiple mixed methods initiatives to capture community insights: [REACH MSNAs](#) and [Area Based Assessments](#), [GTS Community Perception Surveys](#) and [Talk to Loop](#).

¹¹ IASC; Light Guidance on Collective Outcomes, June 2020. Found [here](#).

4. Improve and Lighten Costing Estimation:

- ✓ Humanitarian appeal costings must reflect the response to total need, not existing agency capacity or previous funding levels, enabling fair resource allocation both within and across crises.
- ✓ The process to estimate and communicate response costs should be lightened and strengthened to provide a transparent, robust and consistent approach to estimating overall response costs across all crises.

REFORM WITH PURPOSE, NOT JUST EFFICIENCY

While lightening of collective processes is welcomed this must not come at the cost of the integrity of core planning outputs. Lightening the HPC should be driven by what is needed to achieve the core purpose: the focus should be on trimming redundant and streamlining existing processes, not eliminating critical functions.

Reforms such as area-based coordination or cluster reduction must preserve the ability to produce credible needs analyses and response plans.

IN SUMMARY

The HPC must evolve—not by diluting its ambition, but by reclaiming its core purpose: enabling principled, needs-based and people-centred humanitarian decision-making. That means defending credible analysis, elevating local voices, clarifying the purpose of appeals, and stripping away what no longer adds value.⁶ It means disaggregating strategic planning requirements from operational coordination tools that are better placed elsewhere. In a world of constrained resources and growing demands, we cannot afford to plan blindly or plan alone.

See Annex 1 and 2 for a summary of the key practical recommendations and outputs that should be included in a collective, accountable and principled humanitarian planning process.

ANNEX 1. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS PAPER:

1. Re-focus the Humanitarian Programme Cycle on strategic prioritization and planning process, which only produces the core elements outlined in Annex 1.
2. Safeguard and ensure representative [across all sectors and population groups affected by crises] and robust data as the starting point for analysis. Ensure this is updated as the crises evolves.
3. Apply JIAF methods consistently and transparently across all crises, ensuring to include local communities and response actors across HPC processes.
4. Develop a new component of the HPC, which systematically includes what communities themselves prioritize as a starting point for deciding what type of response to launch.
5. Adjust costing methodology to be lighter using an approach which is not dependent on evaluating previous funding levels, helping to ensure the financial appeal is needs-based not donor-interest-based.
6. Advocate with donors to base allocations and resource prioritization decisions against collective humanitarian planning processes, on condition of their credibility, accountability and impartiality.

ANNEX 2. CORE OUTPUTS OF A COLLECTIVE, PRINCIPLED AND LIGHTENED HUMANITARIAN PLANNING PROCESS

Decision type	Questions to answer	Core humanitarian planning outputs	Key criteria for impartiality and accountability
To determine the quantity and urgency of assistance required.	Who, where and how many are in need?	A Population in Need [PiN] number, broken down by caseload and urgency [severity] per relevant administrative planning level.	This needs to be based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Robust and representative data ✓ Impartial and consistent analysis ✓ Inclusive and transparent process
	How severely are they in need?		
To determine the type of assistance to be delivered, and how.	What types of assistance do they need?	Typology of assistance by area, sector and modality type, broken down by caseload.	This should be determined by and with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Affected populations self-expressed priorities for humanitarian assistance ✓ Local actors, based on their existing capacities Not driven by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agency mandates and capacities
	Through what mechanisms should this assistance be delivered? Who is on the ground and well placed?		
To determine how much funding is needed to deliver the quantity, type of assistance.	How much will this assistance cost?	A financial estimate per type of assistance, broken down by caseload.	This should be determined by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Estimation of full resources needed to assist different caseloads within a crises