



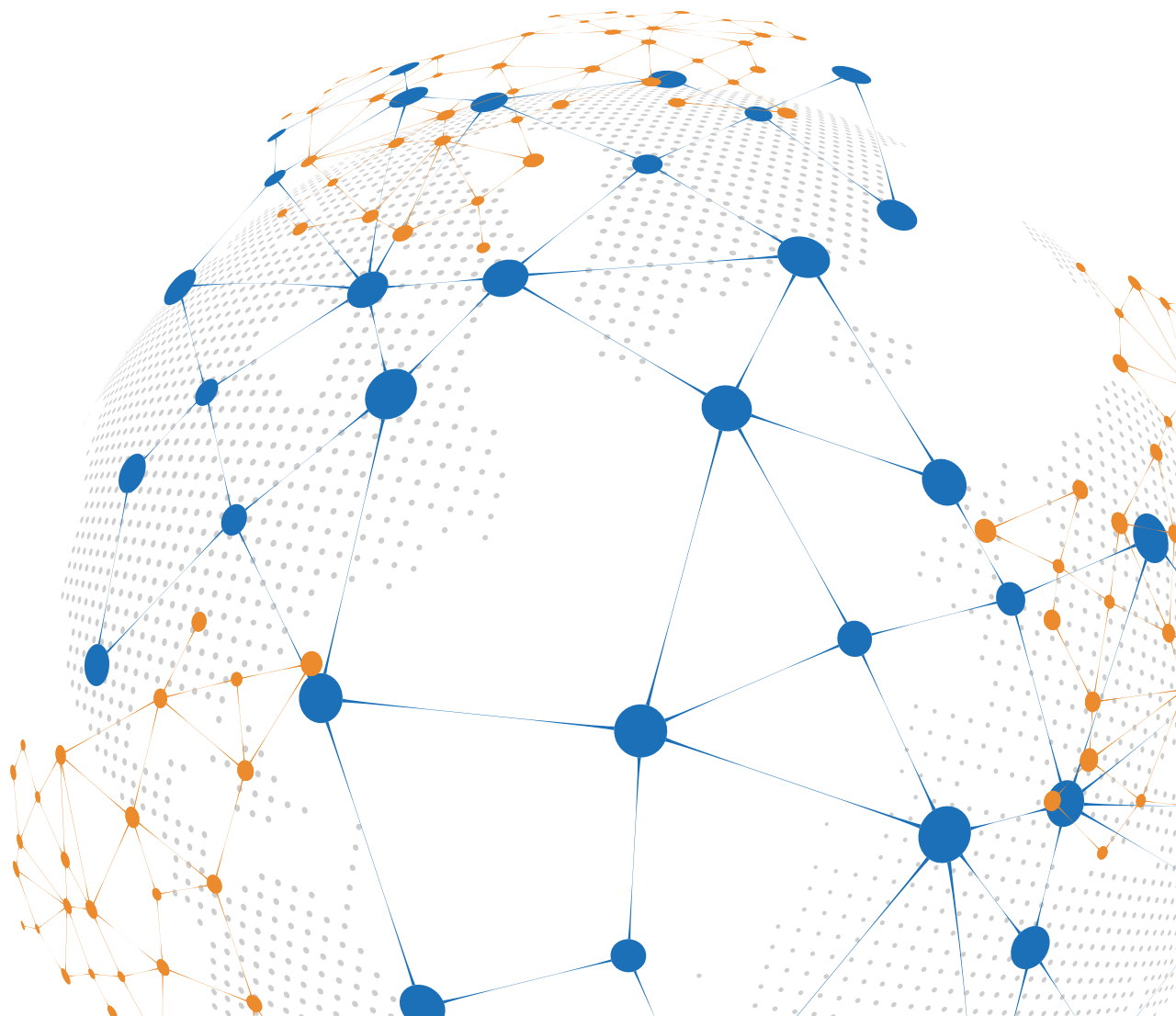
A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Coordinating in crisis

Strengthening NGO coordination
and collective response in rapid
onset humanitarian emergencies

Summary learning report

June 2025



About ICVA

ICVA is a global network of over 160 non-governmental organisations whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice.

About the UKHIH

The UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH) is a humanitarian initiative funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). As a UK-based humanitarian initiative, hosted by Elrha, UKHIH leverages expertise from the UK and across the globe to improve international humanitarian action, connecting the people equipped to bring about systemic changes that will strengthen and support humanitarian response.

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1 Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction_____ 2](#)
- [2 Emergency response in complex humanitarian crises_ 2](#)
- [3 Personnel surge during humanitarian emergencies____ 5](#)
- [4 NGO coordination in emergencies_____ 8](#)
- [5 Recommendations_____ 10](#)
- [6 Literature review_ 11](#)

2 Introduction

In early 2023, the wide-ranging Independent Review of the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Response to Internal Displacement concluded that the humanitarian system was too slow to respond to crises and inadequately coordinated when it did respond. This finding is echoed throughout agency and interagency evaluations and reviews of major emergency responses in recent years with recurring issues noted in the most urgent and complex crises. Too often the international humanitarian system lacks agility to rapidly pivot towards new ways of working when the context requires adaptation and agility.

In short, current emergency coordination approaches do not sufficiently enable the timely delivery of lifesaving emergency assistance.

The main reasons identified include a lack of emergency response expertise at humanitarian leadership levels, and chronic underinvestment in emergency preparedness - particularly outside of natural disaster contexts. Furthermore, local actors, including local authorities, government, community and civil society actors, often receive little support during the initial phases of emergencies, despite frequently being the first on the ground (and last to leave), responding days and weeks before international assistance arrives.

Effective international emergency response requires striking a difficult but necessary balance between avoiding deploying surge capabilities that are unnecessary or poorly suited to a given context, while also addressing the persistent under-prioritisation of support and need to adapt existing response operations.

Since 2021, ICVA has supported NGO coordination in several 'system wide scale up' emergencies, including deploying dedicated NGO coordination capacity in rapid onset, large scale emergencies, including Ethiopia, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Türkiye, OPT and Sudan. These deployments were initiated to reinforce existing in-country NGO coordination capabilities, which had limited capacity to rapidly adapt to the scale and complexity of the unfolding crises. These challenges mirror those experienced by operational agencies themselves.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of key lessons from recent humanitarian responses, with a focus on international surge deployments and NGO coordination.

The findings were based on:

- **Key informant interviews and workshops** between August 2024 and March 2025 with senior emergency preparedness and response stakeholders in UN agencies, International NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, Country level international/national NGO Forums and Networks, and Emergency Management experts in national Government and civil society.
- **A literature review** of documents relating to 'system wide scale ups' or L3 emergencies including Interagency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs), Operational Peer Reviews (OPR), Peer to Peer (P2P) missions, Emergency Director Group (EDG) mission reports, internal agency evaluations and reviews.
- **Emergency procedures and internal strategy documents** were also reviewed from six humanitarian organisations that are not publicly available.

The paper also proposes a set of concrete recommendations to enhance ways of working across NGOs and with the IASC system in complex, sudden onset emergencies. Lessons learned from emergency response in complex humanitarian crises

This section summarises key lessons on emergency preparedness and response capacities.

2.1 Quicker and more agile pivots are often needed in complex emergencies

In many major emergencies in recent years, both humanitarian agencies and inter-agency coordination structures have struggled to be agile and adapt quickly to sudden changes in context. This is particularly true in contexts with ongoing international development support and a high presence of international UN and

NGO networks focused on non-emergency work, and even more so in politically sensitive environments. In these contexts, humanitarian agencies have prioritised protecting existing relationships with governments?, agency-access and delivery modalities, at times to the detriment of providing what crisis affected populations require in an emergency. This has had long term negative consequences in several high-profile emergencies, including Myanmar, Syria, Sudan and Ethiopia. To avoid this, greater agility is critical in the early days of an emergency, particularly in complex and politicised crises, rather than defaulting to the position of providing 'more of the same, faster'.

2.2 Emergency preparedness is most effective when it is *operationally* focussed

Standardised global guidance and minimum standards on inter-agency emergency preparedness exist, and many international humanitarian agencies have strengthened their own internal emergency preparedness approaches in recent years. Multiple ongoing humanitarian responses do have emergency preparedness or contingency planning in place, but these are seen to have limited impact when a crisis occurs. As several senior leaders put it, *'preparedness plans are thrown out the window on day 1'*.

When collective emergency preparedness is overly focused on large scale scenario analysis and highly detailed documents, it risks becoming a theoretical exercise. Several agencies have raised concerns that preparedness is largely a tick box exercise at country levels. Furthermore, when emergency preparedness is perceived as a compliance exercise and not meaningfully invested in or incentivised, response to emergencies can suffer.

By contrast, more effective preparedness approaches tend to be practical: They involve operational exercises around supply lines, evacuations and collective mobile or rapid response team deployments. Operational emergency simulations are still rare at inter-agency level. Few HCTs, inter-sector groups and NGO networks have run a joint exercise before major emergencies, contributing to challenges and confusion in the critical early phase of emergency response.

2.3 Capable emergency leaders can make a significant positive impact

Strong, experienced leadership in emergency settings can have a significant positive impact on both individual agency and interagency responses. However, in several high-profile emergencies, humanitarian leaders, including Country Directors, Humanitarian Coordinators and UN Agency Representatives have lacked the necessary emergency response experience or training. This has hindered rapid and agile response during the early stages of an emergency.

These challenges are particularly evident in contexts with ongoing development programming or protracted humanitarian operations. In response, several agencies are exploring approaches such as "step aside" policies (i.e. deploying an alternative Country Director or Humanitarian Coordinator during an emergency), temporary leadership from global emergency departments, mandatory deployment of Emergency Coordinators, and shadowing support to existing leadership.

2.4 Transition *out of* emergency response approaches can be slow

Just as the humanitarian system is slow to respond to emergencies, it is also slow to pivot *out of* emergency response approaches and mechanisms. Multiple renewals of 'System Wide Scale Ups' or L3 emergencies are symptomatic of this issue and can undermine both the effectiveness and signalling value of the Scale up. These delays risk missing opportunities to transition to community-led recovery and development, which crisis-affected communities often prefer and serves their needs better.

2.5 Emergency 'Common Services' can be too narrowly focussed

In recent decades, significant investments have been made in common humanitarian services, including in transport (through UNHAS and the European Airbridge), supply and pipelines, safety and security, and facilities. However, concerns are frequently raised that these services focus on supporting UN agencies rather than the broader humanitarian community, and in particular operational delivery actors and community first responders.

There are also questions over whether the most cost-effective approaches are being used. Duplication across agencies, such as in facilities, warehousing, transport, access, safety, and technical specialities, is common in emergencies and may become increasingly unsustainable in light of the 2025 global funding crisis.

In response, several initiatives have emerged in recent years to strengthen NGO common services approaches before, during and after major humanitarian emergencies. These include [HULO](#), [the H2H network](#), [the Global Interagency Security Forum \(GISF\)](#), [INGO Safety Organisation \(INSO\)](#), as well as assessment and analysis agencies such as [ACAPS](#) and [REACH](#).

2.6 Learning inside and outside the humanitarian sector is limited

Cross-organisational learning on emergency response remains surprisingly limited within the humanitarian sector, despite humanitarians working in some of the world's most emergency prone environments. Literature on emergency preparedness and response is more limited than many other technical topics in humanitarian response, particularly at inter-agency level. Furthermore, there are fewer global and regional communities of practice of emergency response experts than in other technical areas, and it is rare for interagency networks, whether at global, regional or country levels, to have dedicated emergency expertise.

Critically, there is limited cross-learning between the international humanitarian sector and emergency management professionals working in national government, civil society or even Red Cross organisations. This is particularly true in complex and conflict emergencies which are often disconnected from Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and disaster response mechanisms, despite significant opportunities for cross-learning.

As a result, valuable lessons and improved approaches from emergency management experts have not been widely taken up in emergency preparedness and responses mechanisms within humanitarian organisations. Instead, parallel, and often, siloed conversations on key topics such as systems leadership in emergencies, community-led preparedness and response, and agile emergency management continue.

In focus: Impacts of the 2025 global funding crisis

In early 2025, the US government abruptly suspended much of its overseas aid, including front-line lifesaving emergency assistance. This has coincided with real-term cuts or reductions to humanitarian budgets by other major traditional donors. Despite the highest level of global humanitarian needs on record, it is unfortunately highly likely that this major reduction in humanitarian financing will be sustained in the coming months and years.

These reductions will have serious implications for humanitarian emergency preparedness and response, as these areas were already chronically underinvested.

At the same time, growing humanitarian needs will increase demand for effective emergency response support and short-term surge and mutual aid. As realignment of the humanitarian sector progresses throughout 2025, it is essential that emergency response capabilities are not simply downsized, but strengthened to be more efficient, more targeted and better connected to existing emergency responders in country.

3 Personnel surge during humanitarian emergencies

In addition to these broader lessons on emergency response, surge capabilities have received significant attention in recent years. [Humanitarian Surge: Stuck in a Rut](#), built on significant pieces of work in the [2000s](#) and [2010s](#) on surge capabilities within the humanitarian sector. Several UN and NGO agencies have also reviewed their surge capabilities in recent years.

This section provides a synthesis of key lessons on personnel surge capabilities, noting that broader surge encompasses personnel, financial, supplies and technical assistance surge approaches.

3.1 Surge is only part of an effective emergency response approach

At times, humanitarian emergency response is equated too narrowly with surge deployments. This highlights that emergency management expertise remains a gap across the sector.

Whilst surge is an important tool, principled and effective emergency response does not always require more resources or people. It may instead demand pivoting, agility and alternative ways of working. Discussions on humanitarian response planning and management should include surge, but only as one component of broader, efficient and agile response and not the default.

3.2 Developing emergency preparedness and response expertise is fundamental

Several senior humanitarian emergency leaders and evaluations have noted that where staff members have strong understanding and experience of emergency preparedness and response – and where there are agency incentives to prioritise preparedness – there is often a quicker response and less need for surge.

Several agencies have noted that surge can be overemphasised in emergency preparedness, and often to the detriment of training and support to existing staff members.

3.3 Balancing external surge with context specific expertise

There is documented resistance to surge support by some humanitarian leaders in emergencies, often linked to broader challenges in how humanitarian organisations adapt and pivot in emergencies. Several reviews and evaluations have highlighted that resistance to surge support have had detrimental impacts on responses, particular in the early stages.

This resistance appears to be most acute where there are strong existing relationships and operations in country, and where distrust exists between headquarters and country offices. Agencies also noted that experienced senior humanitarian leaders are *more* likely to request surge support, and those with less emergency expertise can be more resistant.

Most organisations consulted reported challenges in applying ‘step aside’ policies at leadership levels, i.e. temporarily putting in place an alternative Country Director or Humanitarian Coordinator during an emergency. Agencies who have made progress have worked to create a culture to normalise the step-aside process, treating it not as a failure but as a standard emergency protocol in contexts without active emergencies.

Some level of balance is key. International surge that does not understand the culture and nuances of a context risks undermining existing trusted relationships and contextualised approaches.

3.4 Tailored surge

Surge support is generally most effective when it is tailored to the specific requirements of a given context and country team, rather than large scale deployments of standard teams. There is no one size fits all approach to effective surge, as it is dependent on the existing profiles and existing expertise in country.

Surge personnel therefore often require flexible profiles and roles. For example, the ability to actively lead response efforts in one context or provide shadowing and advisory support to existing leaders in another, or to pivot between them to cover gaps as required.

3.5 Limited available surge personnel

Many large humanitarian agencies have established surge mechanisms, including standing teams, internal redeployment mechanisms, and rosters that can be called on. However, the pool of available emergency responders is much smaller than it appears:

Many emergency response experts are listed on multiple agency rosters and agencies often report difficulties mobilising qualified staff, as they have already been deployed elsewhere. Recent efforts to develop

regionalised and cross-country surge mechanisms, and global south-global south mutual aid surges show potential promise in expanding the pool and diversity of available surge capacity.

3.6 Limited coordination between surge capabilities

Coordination of surge capacity across the UN, NGOs and the Red Cross Movement has historically been limited. While initiatives such as collective rosters and the Standby Partnership Programme (SBP) are positive steps, active working-level discussions between global/country rapid response mechanisms are limited. Several internal reviews of surge capabilities have taken place within agencies, but opportunities for collective learning, joint approaches and avoiding surge duplication are potentially being missed.

3.7 Planning surge transition early is critical

Where surge personnel are deployed, early transition planning is key. In several major emergencies, a lack of such planning has led to emergency responders being repeatedly extended or to positive achievements being lost due to poor handover.

Identifying a clear scale down and transition approach - whether internally or through handover to local or other international actors - can help a response transition more effectively out of emergency mode.

3.8 Rosters and surge mechanisms require investment and management

To be effective before, during and after emergencies, surge mechanisms require significant effort: This includes managing rosters, screening potential surge personnel, and maintaining a strategic understanding of needs and skills. Where surge capabilities have been most effective, they have functioned not just as HR tools, but as centres of excellence for emergency preparedness and response. Achieving this, however, demands time, financial investment, and dedicated coordination.

3.9 Access challenges are increasingly threatening international surge

Increased politicisation of aid and direct attacks or blockages of humanitarian staff visas is threatening the ability of international agencies to deploy surge staff quickly to major emergencies. This access constraints vary across contexts and disproportionately affect the UN or INGOs. As a result, there has been an increase in 'remote surge' deployment. In some cases, this can be highly beneficial for providing cost effective support to local actors and staff already in situ in a complex emergency. In other instances, remote approaches may have limited impact, and alternative approaches should be prioritised by international actors based on the needs of the context.

3.10 Existing community, civil society and local government benefit least from surge

International surge mechanisms are typically centred in the UN, INGOs and the Red Cross Movement, which maintain global or regional standing or flexible capacities. As a result, surge capabilities are often prioritised these agencies, even where local community, civil society or government actors are better placed to lead or support emergency response delivery and could benefit more from the support.

There is some positive work ongoing in several agencies to proactively prioritise partnerships approaches and mutual aid to existing first responders through surge capabilities, but it remains an under prioritised area in global approaches to surge capabilities and emergency response.

4 NGO coordination in emergencies

This section presents specific lessons for NGO coordination in emergencies. They were drawn from the literature review, experiences from ICVA's NGO coordination support to Lebanon, Syria, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Türkiye-Syria, Gaza, and from roundtables and bilateral discussions.

4.1 Cross-NGO operational preparedness is often limited

Collective emergency preparedness planning between NGOs (international and national/local) is frequently weak or absent. In response to acute early warning signals (for example the likely outbreak of conflict in Lebanon, or conflict escalation in South Sudan in recent years), several NGO Forums have undertaken detailed contingency planning and preparedness exercises amongst themselves and with local civil society agencies with mixed success. Live simulations or table-top exercises have been rare.

The most effective NGO preparedness approaches tend to focus on practical steps, such as establishing agreements on common safety supports and evacuation procedures, and developing simple inter-agency tools, contact lists and protocols. These efforts are more common in contexts with recent emergencies, and are often missing in more stable or protracted contexts, which can lead to significant challenges when a rapid-onset crisis occurs.

4.2 Emergency NGO coordination expertise can be lacking

Whilst there has been significant growth in the roles and effectiveness of NGO Forums and networks over the past decade, NGO Forum secretariats and steering committees can lack emergency coordination expertise – mirroring gaps seen IASC coordination structures. This can result in emergency preparedness and response not being prioritised ahead of major emergencies and/or delays in collective response during an emergency. Rapid Response Mechanisms (NGO-only, or NGO-UN) exist in many contexts, but these often do not contribute to a broader collective strategic emergency preparedness framework.

4.3 Collaboration between NGOs, UN, local authorities yields benefits

When diverse actors come together in emergencies, it can significantly enhance the overall response, particularly in highly complex emergencies. For example, the sharing of workspace between NGO Forum or local NGO network staff with UNDAC on OCHA has yielded positive benefits. Active, strategic discussions on comparative advantages of differing response modalities can also be highly beneficial. Conversely, competition or silos between the UN, INGOs, NNGOs and/or local governments can significantly hamper collective action in emergencies.

4.4 Effective NGO coordination requires buy-in and ownership

The most successful examples of NGO coordination – among both national and international actors – have been driven by the operational agencies themselves. These efforts often emerge organically in response to clear needs during a major crisis.

Where there is limited appetite for collective approaches among NGOs, NGO Fora and other coordination mechanisms tend to be less effective. In some instances, buy-in once NGOs have seen the benefits of proactive coordination after support has been deployed, but this is significantly less preferable to NGOs actively driving coordinated approaches themselves. Recent deployments have shown that existing experience of emergency directors or team leads can be instrumental – where surge personnel in an emergency are familiar with coordination and where agencies prioritise it internally, it is likely to drive stronger collective efforts. Where those leading operational response are less used to working collectively or agencies do not incentivise inter-agency coordination internally, more siloed approaches tend to be seen.

4.5 There are significant opportunities for NGO common services

NGO initiatives to share services have shown strong potential to improve cost effectiveness and agility of humanitarian response. These include formal initiatives by NGOs, networks and consortia in areas such as collective safety, logistics and supply chain management, data and analysis. Informal collaboration also shows benefits, for example NGOs sharing warehousing, supply, transport or facilities, or mobilising collective rapid response teams. These joint initiatives are likely to become more widespread, both due to the savings and efficiencies they offer, as well as opportunities to develop technical specialisations across agencies.

4.6 Agency support to formal NGO networks has been highly useful

In several contexts, individual NGOs have seconded specialist staff or coordinators to NGO Fora and networks to support collective NGOs efforts, with generally positive results. These secondments have been most useful for humanitarian coordination, advocacy, access and safety coordination.

However, these practices remain largely ad hoc and driven by personal relationships, rather than being systematically supported at global or regional levels. Support to national NGO networks and fora has been more limited. This gap needs to be further explored and addressed given the lack of resources available for coordination and shared services for local NGOs.

5 Recommendations

1. Reprioritise emergency preparedness and response capacities - recognise it is a core technical function

As budgets shrink, emergency management must be prioritised as a core technical area. To maximise efficiencies, this requires integrating emergency management into humanitarian training curricula, investing in dedicated emergency experts and systems, and embedding learning from past emergencies to inform future practice.

2. Strengthen overall agility in emergency preparedness and response

Humanitarian emergency response must become more agile and adaptive. This will require a range of solutions including sharing resources and mobilising the comparative advantages of the UN, Red Cross, INGOs, local civil society, government and communities. Practical preparedness exercises and the development of safety protocols and evacuations ahead of time can help build trust among the collective, which is vital to response success. Exploring step-aside policies, shadowing or empowering emergency response leaders for a *short* period of time can also improve agility and reduce the risk of a “business as usual” approach.

3. Ensure emergency coordination is operationally focused and context driven

Coordination at all levels needs to prioritise the facilitation of operational delivery in the most principled and effective manner possible and be a catalyst for agility during emergencies. This requires adapting emergency coordination structures, membership, locations and coordination leaders in accordance to the needs of a context rather than using a standard model.

4. Support local first responders in an emergency where possible

As the first responders, local communities, civil society and local authorities should be actively supported and reinforced, to the greatest extent possible. This can include financing, people surge, mutual aid and technical assistance as relevant for a context. Supporting diverse pooled funds and rapid financing mechanisms led by foundations and NGOs, as well as initiatives such as due diligence passporting and reducing barriers to accessing financing and risk transfer to local actors will also yield positive benefits. Short term emergency assistance, technical support and shadowing for local coordination structures can be particularly beneficial.

5. Strengthen shared services

Greater efforts should be undertaken by international actors to support collective approaches before and during emergencies, with a particular focus on making these available to local actors. This can include mobilising coordination platforms and sharing technical experts on issues such as safety, access and sectoral approaches. Investing in shared assets such as facilities, warehousing and transport and harnessing specialist common service initiatives and organisations beyond the UN will also be of benefit.

6. Foster a culture of learning, drawing from inside and outside the sector

A culture of continuous collective learning on emergency preparedness and response between agencies and inter-agency structures must be fostered. This will require establishing mechanisms for real-time learning during emergencies and incorporating findings into forward planning. Given the overlapping learning and discussions, drawing lessons from both within the humanitarian sector, but also from other actors from disaster risk reduction, public health and national emergency response seen with emergency management actors outside the humanitarian sector is key.

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