THE DISASTERS EMERGENCY COMMITTEE (DEC) LESSONS PAPER: STRATEGIC PERIOD (2019-2024)

About the authors

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PREFACE

In 2024, the DEC Secretariat were delighted to collaborate with Jessica Alexander and John Mitchell through ALNAP, who worked to undertake a learning review across the DEC's most recent five-year strategic period, spanning from 2019 to 2023.

This was a period of enormous global change both within and outside of the humanitarian sector, during which time the DEC launched six appeals, through which associated programming took place across more than 15 countries. Though not explicitly covered within this learning review, during this period the DEC and its members were also managing ongoing responses across the Indonesia Tsunami Appeal and Rohingya Crisis Appeal, both of which had launched prior to the start of the strategic period.

Much of the contextual analysis from across this period is deeply relevant to the wider sector as a whole. Many of the trends, successes, and areas of recurrent challenge for the DEC and its members across this strategic period are likely to mirror, or provide useful learning and implicit recommendations for, the experiences of humanitarian and development professionals working in a range of contexts. As such, a public-facing version of this lessons paper has been developed both as a means of contributing to the learning efforts of the wider sector, and as part of our accountability framework, under our commitment to share both lessons learned and examples of best practices from across all of our appeals.

Recommendations that were highly specific to the DEC and to our internal ways of working have been omitted from this version of the document, but more information about our strategy in the 2024 – 2029 five year period, incorporating ideas and lessons learned from within and outside this strategic review, can also be found on our website.

We would like to extend our thanks to Jessica, John and the wider ALNAP team for their support in undertaking this review, and for sharing their expertise with us, and welcome any feedback or ideas from readers in relation to this piece.
If you would like to learn more or have any additional questions about this review or the themes covered within it, please email accountability@dec.org.uk.

The DEC Programme Quality, Accountability and Learning Team

I. BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND APPROACH

The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) brings together 15 leading UK aid charities to raise funds quickly and efficiently to respond to humanitarian crises. It is a well-known mechanism to co-ordinate the UK public's response to international disasters, in collaboration with national media outlets and corporate partners. Since its founding in 1963, the DEC has responded to crises in more than 60 countries, with the UK public giving £2.4 billion over this time.

The DEC commissioned a meta-review of lessons from its last strategic period (2019-2023), the first review it has undertaken of an entire strategy period. This comprehensive analysis aimed to consolidate insights from the six appeals conducted between 2019 and the end of 2023, identifying strengths, best practices, and areas for improvement. These findings will inform the approach for the upcoming strategic period (2024-2029). The six appeals launched were:

- <u>Cyclone Idai Appeal</u> (2019 – 2021)
- <u>Coronavirus Appeal</u> (2020 – 2022)
- <u>Afghanistan Crisis Appeal</u> (2021 – 2023)
- <u>Ukraine Humanitarian Appeal</u> (2022 – 2025)
- <u>Pakistan Floods Appeal</u> (2022 – 2024)
- <u>Türkiye-Syria Earthquake Appeal</u> (2023 – 2025)

The review team analysed the comprehensive documentation as part of the DEC's accountability framework, DECAF, including:

- 13 individual member evaluations (9 from Covid-19 and 4 from cyclone Idai);
- 13 response reviews of all the appeals during the strategic period including individual and global Covid-19 appeals;
- Various monitoring reports, strategy documents, perception survey data and reports, project proposals, and interim reports provided by the DEC Secretariat.

For each operational response, the team identified and summarised learning in 8 key thematic areas: learning, flexibility, accountability, cash, coordination, climate/environment, inclusion, and sustainability. These were identified with consultation with the DEC Secretariat, based on a combination of priority areas from the last strategic period, as well as areas of richest learning that emerged from initial analysis. Note that the issues of localisation and local partnership are also priorities for the DEC, but

were simultaneously being covered by other reviews, thus excluded from this analysis.

The team compared the DEC's performance with similar thematic areas from the wider humanitarian sector, drawing on global reports such as Global Humanitarian Overviews, Grand Bargain Independent Reviews, the State of the Humanitarian System Report 2022, and the State of the World's Cash Report.   This benchmarking provided insight into how well DEC agencies measured up to the wider system.

The team also analysed key financial data from Financial Tracking Service (FTS) to illustrate how DEC funding relates to global humanitarian spend (see section 4.1). Based on this, and interviews with eleven humanitarian directors from DEC member agencies and 2 DEC consultants working on related analyses, the report provides key considerations for the next strategic period.

Finally, the team reviewed the DEC's Accountability Framework (DECAF) and provided tentative suggestions for fine-tuning and improvements found in Annex I.

II. 2019-2024: A PERIOD OF GLOBAL DISRUPTION AND HUMANITARIAN REFORM

The 2019-2024 strategic period was characterised by global instability and uncertainty, with numerous implications for the humanitarian system. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerability and inequality globally, but especially in fragile settings, leading to a sharp increase in the number of people in need by 2023. For example, the UN estimates that over 333 million people faced acute food insecurity by the end of 2023, a rise of 200 million compared to pre-pandemic levels. The pandemic also drove up the amount of aid needed - with long term setbacks for countries who were on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, now needing humanitarian assistance. At the same time, donor countries faced recession and tended to focus spending domestically, making less aid available for the most fragile countries. Aside from these financial constraints, humanitarian operations faced logistical challenges, prompting adjustments such as greater donor flexibility and increased reliance on local capacity.

Simultaneously, the resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2020 triggered deeper scrutiny of colonial legacies and power imbalances within the aid system. However, despite hopes that Covid-19 and a heightened decolonization discourse would prompt systemic change, a comprehensive reset did not materialise. Many adaptations made during the pandemic proved temporary, and today, underlying power dynamics in aid remained largely unchanged.

Meanwhile, climate-related crises continued to escalate over the strategic period, resulting in a surge of internal displacements, with 32.6 million disaster triggered displacements in 2022 alone. Protracted mega-crises further fueled internal displacement, reaching an unprecedented high of 110 million globally by June 2023. The conflict in Ukraine had far-reaching implications, intertwining humanitarianism with geopolitics and raising questions about the impartiality of assistance, as funds were diverted from other crises to respond to Ukraine. Food insecurity in fragile regions like East Africa were exacerbated due to grain shortages.

2.1. WORSENING FUNDING CRUNCH, HUMANITARIANS' "EXISTENTIAL CRISIS OF OUR TIME"

During this period, as new conflicts, the climate crisis and economic factors converged to drive up needs, the humanitarian sector faced a severe funding crisis, as the gap between humanitarian requirements and actual funding widened significantly, depicted in Graph I below.

Graph I. Appeal funding gap 2012 - 2023 (as of 5 December 2023)

Key: the blue (upper) line refers to amount of funding required across coordinated humanitarian response plans, whilst the lower (yellow) line refers to the amount of funding available in practice. The difference between these lines is known as the 'funding gap' for a given period of time.
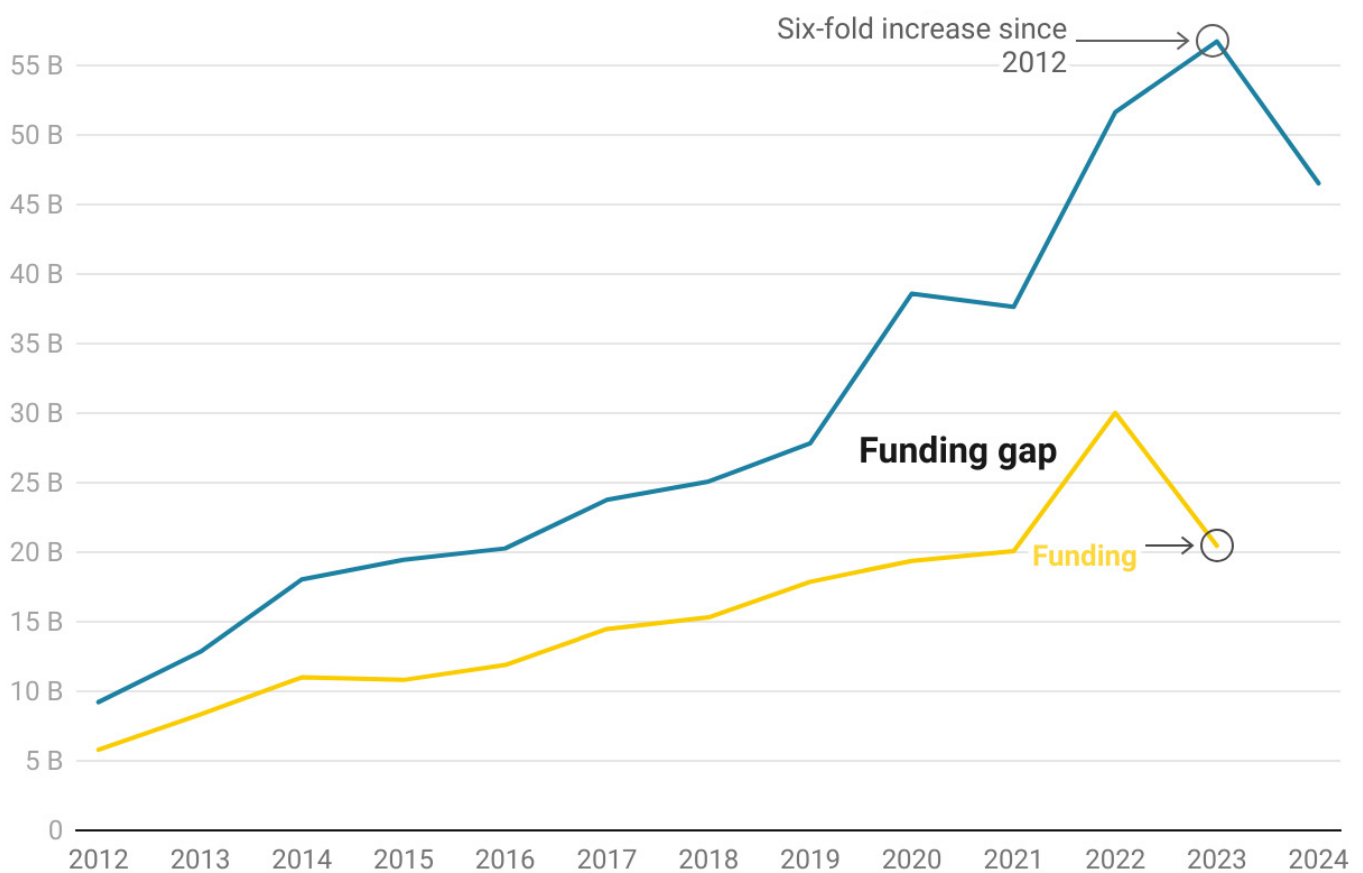
Source: GHO 2024

In 2023, the humanitarian system received just over one third of the $56.7 billion required funding, marking the worst year on record. Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths described the situation as "the existential crisis of our time."

In response to declining funding, the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) 2024 requirements dropped to $46.4 billion, the first e ver r eduction i n h umanitarian appeals. This year also marks the lowest ever percentage of people targeted for humanitarian assistance versus a people in need, implying challenging prioritisation and targeting decisions for humanitarians.

In the UK, Official Development Assistance (ODA) has decreased steadily since 2019, partly due to the government's temporary reduction in aid spending from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income (GNI) after the pandemic. The UK government, as well as other European countries, increasingly include refugee hosting costs in these figures, meaning that even less finance is available for fragile countries. In 2022, OECD donor governments spent $7 billion more to help refugees at home than they did on humanitarian assistance overseas.

2.2 AID POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

As the humanitarian system weathered significant stress tests, it was also busy introducing new reforms. The Grand Bargain underwent a 2.0 upgrade in 2021, emphasising bolstered support to local leadership, participation of affected communities, and long-term, flexible funding. The UN introduced new pledges to respond to the world's internally displaced, and new commitments to integrate a more concrete climate focus into their work. Additionally the Emergency Relief Coordinator's Flagship Initiative aimed to make aid more people-centered and responsive to the priorities of affected people. Several major INGOs pledged to shift power more directly to local organisations in the Global South through the Pledge for Change.

Despite these reforms, the translation of these initiatives into tangible changes at the country level remains uncertain. The conclusion of the first Grand Bargain period fell short of expectations, with unrealized commitments to localization and flexible funding, while progress on initiatives like the humanitarian-development nexus are deemed "excruciatingly slow." Despite opportunities for radical change presented by disrupters like Covid-19 and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the humanitarian system appears entrenched in familiar ways.

This juncture underscores the importance of both generating and leveraging learning to enhance efficiency and effectiveness, especially when major disruptions like those presented during the strategic period arise. As the system grapples with current radical shifts and is forced to prioritise to which countries and target populations aid is dispersed, relying on learning becomes increasingly vital for both funding bodies like the DEC as well as humanitarian response organisations.

III. THE DEC'S STRATEGIC PERIOD 2019-2024

The strategic period saw the DEC engaging actively, launching a diverse range of appeals to address major crises throughout this time. Additionally, the DEC effectively tracked and aligned with aid policy developments, prioritising issues that resonated with the global discourse.

The levels of funding, crisis and response, context and scope of these appeals varied considerably and, along with key learning features, is summarised in Table I below. This diversity and uniqueness of appeals made it challenging to generalise findings and conclusions across them.

- **Cyclone Idai** was a natural disaster, seasonal in nature and affecting multiple countries; here there should have been a substantial amount of prior learning.

- **The Covid 19 global pandemic** represented a low risk/massive impact shock with global reach; there was little prior learning or experience in place, apart from previous Ebola responses. This crisis was seen as an opportunity to localise the response.

- **The Afghanistan crisis** had all the elements of a classic, complex political emergency, in addition to social and economic collapse. There was prior DEC experience and contextual knowledge, with member agencies present.

- **The Ukraine war** represented a seismic shock to the European continent, with the biggest war in Europe since World War II. With a record £419 million funding, one of the largest appeals ever, this emergency facilitated experimentation and innovation.

- **The Pakistan floods** were another rapid-onset disaster where there should have been a reasonable amount of prior learning in place and DEC partners on the ground. The DEC had also run an appeal a decade earlier in response to flooding.

- **The earthquake in Syria and Türkiye** a rapid-onset disaster characteristic in North West (NW) Syria of a 'compounded crisis' or a 'crisis within a crisis' including a large refugee population and widespread infrastructural damage. Critics raised concerns about the lack of prior risk reduction and preparedness measures.

Table 1. DEC Appeals 2019-2023

	CYCLONE IDAI	COVID-19	AFGHANISTAN CRISIS	UKRAINE	PAKISTAN FLOODS	TÜRKIYE-SYRIA EARTHQUAKE
DURATION	2019-2021 (closed)	2020-2022 (closed)	2021-2023 (now closed)	2022-2025 (Phase 2 ongoing)	2022-2024 (Phase 2 ongoing)	2023-2025 (Phase 2 ongoing)
COUNTRIES COVERED	Multiple (Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe)	Multiple (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, DRC, India, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen)	Afghanistan	Multiple (Ukraine, Romania, Poland, Moldova, Hungary)	Pakistan	Türkiye-Syria
KIND OF RESPONSE	• Seasonal Natural Disaster. • Focus on WASH and livelihoods.	• Global Health Pandemic in fragile states. • Focus on WASH and health.	• Compounded crises (conflict, covid, economic collapse, drought). • Focus on multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA).	• War and widespread destruction of infrastructure. • Focus on multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA).	• Seasonal, natural disaster. • Focus on WASH and shelter.	• Predictable natural disaster. • Focus on shelter and WASH.
UNIQUE FEATURES	• Seasonal disaster, learning and good practice available. • Severity associated with climate change. • Predominantly rural with focus on agriculture and health. • Prior DEC experience with local partners on the ground.	• Low probability, high impact event with global reach. • Absence of relevant learning in place (mainly from Ebola responses). • Need to implement a new humanitarian business model. • Potential 'tipping point' for localization.	• Chronically undeveloped with fragile Government institutions and infrastructure. • Complex security and political situation. • Prior DEC experience and contextual knowledge and DEC partners in situ.	• Biggest war in Europe since WWII. • Only comparison is from Kosovo and the Balkans war (pre-digital age). • One of the Biggest DEC appeal ever. High technical and digital literacy in country. Biggest ever multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) responses • Copious funds allow opportunity for innovations.	• Seasonal disaster with learning and good practice available. • Severity associated with climate change. • National civil preparedness and response in place. • Predominantly rural focus along with preparedness and recovery. • DEC partners on the ground.	• Compounded crisis - 'a crisis within a crisis.' • Government/ civil response mechanisms in place. • Major access problems. • Both urban and rural affected. • Refugee and local populations affected. • DEC partners on the ground

IV. PROJECT AND PROGRAM LEVEL LEARNING

This section summarises findings from each of the DEC thematic priority areas. It provides a snapshot into how the humanitarian system is faring overall, followed by an overview of the DEC performance during the strategic period.

4.1 LEARNING

DEC Strategic Goal 3: Evaluate DEC funded programmes and share learning amongst Members

Where is the humanitarian system

Despite 25 years of steady growth in an evaluation culture and a corresponding increase in the evidence base, the wider humanitarian system struggles to effectively apply this knowledge to drive change. Learning that has led to improvements has typically been confined to narrow technical areas and has been frustratingly slow and incremental. There has been considerably less learning that sparks new ways of working, enhancing flexibility and adaptability in operational responses. Even scarcer are instances of learning that catalyse transformations in organisational culture and practice.

However, there is a noticeable shift within the humanitarian system towards generating real-time learning for immediate course corrections. In recent years, there has been a perceived 'renaissance' in Real-Time Evaluations/Reviews conducted by operational agencies. Moreover, complex change processes are being initiated by major humanitarian organisations like UN OCHA's Flagship Initiative and the International Red Cross/Crescent Societies New Way of Working, based to some degree on generating learning. This indicates a potentially heightened seriousness towards learning within the humanitarian system compared to the past.

Where is the DEC

The reports from the operational responses show widespread support for learning across agencies and, even in situations where there were minimal opportunities for

learning, there was still an openness and enthusiasm for the idea. As noted in Cyclone Idai for example, 'opportunities for learning were welcome.'

Despite the enthusiasm, actual application on the ground was mixed. On the one hand, learning experiences were seen as positive, for example in Ukraine where 'a solid pattern of continuous learning and improvement was seen' and in Cyclone Idai, where 'overwhelmingly evaluations were useful and people were able to learn and implement from them.' On the other hand, a key finding from the Afghanistan crisis stated that at the programme level 'collaborative learning amongst members is very limited and needs proactive solutions and spaces' and that 'the most critical gaps revolve around the need for greater engagement and learning' within programmes and also between DEC Member agencies.

Some of the most positive examples of learning came from real time reviews in phase 1 of the response which were then acted upon in phase 2 to make changes and improvements - for example in the Türkiye/Syria earthquake. These included informal peer to peer knowledge-sharing such as navigating sanctions and ways of conducting money transfers in Syria. This kind of in-situ learning helped create a more flexible response.

Experiences with utilising insights gleaned from both across reports from different contexts were varied. For instance, in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai, lessons learned from the Nepal earthquake proved beneficial. Notably, in Nepal, staff from partner agencies were not asked about the welfare of their families in the quake's aftermath. However, this was rectified during Cyclone Idai, with a review highlighting country offices' ability to balance empathy for affected staff with the imperative to promptly conduct needs assessments. Furthermore, insights drawn from the Rohingya response regarding the inefficacy of complaint boxes for populations with low literacy, were applied in Cyclone Idai, resulting in adaptations of complaint mechanisms tailored to local cultural norms.

However, there were also instances where despite prior lessons and relevant experiences, agencies did not act upon them. For instance, in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake, challenges related to including people with disabilities. These were not addressed during Cyclone Idai, where door-to-door assessments to identify disabled individuals were neglected. Similarly, insights from the Rohingya response, particularly regarding difficulties in implementing a coordinated response at the onset of a rapid crisis, were overlooked. Similar challenges emerged in Cyclone Idai's initial response phase, characterised by "widespread failures to communicate between members."

Additional lessons from Cyclone Idai found that ex-post evaluations were most likely to be read and used when the evaluation had been conducted by the agency itself, whereas evaluations from external bodies were more likely to be missed or ignored. Competing priorities and time constraints sidelined learning opportunities - with staff in country offices complaining that because the work was so intensive 'there

were few opportunities to lift one's head.' Other learning constraints included high staff turnover; learning points being too general and not tailored to the specific needs of field personnel; lack of learning opportunities; and assessment fatigue amongst affected communities, with whom learning was rarely shared or validated.

Overall, the learning experiences of DEC agencies, both positive and negative, are similar to those inherent in the wider humanitarian system. In essence, there's palpable enthusiasm for learning, with a myriad of methods capturing more knowledge than ever before. However, it's not always the pertinent kind of learning, nor is it consistently accessible when needed. Additionally, the demanding nature of humanitarian operations often limits opportunities to take on and apply new learning. In the next strategic period, the DEC should consider refining some of the evaluative elements of the DECAF (see Annex 1) to enhance the usability of the learning, and to find fresh opportunities for learning, both at operational and HQ levels.

4.2 FLEXIBILITY

DEC Strategic Goal 3.4: Maintain the DEC's flexible approach to funding and enabling adaptive programmes that best meet the needs of people affected by crises.

Where is the humanitarian system

Flexible funding, a key aspect of the Grand Bargain, has long aimed to enable organisations to swiftly address evolving humanitarian needs and enhance accountability to affected populations. Despite these long standing commitments, the Grand Bargain 2022 Annual Independent Review (AIR) identifies persistent challenges in flexibility, limiting the system's ability to adapt to dynamic humanitarian contexts and align with the priorities of affected communities.

Although the volume and in some cases the percentage of flexible funding has increased over the years, it mainly comes from private sources rather than institutional donors. Data on how much of this flexibility is extended to local and national partners remains incomplete, but is typically not passed down as flexibly as it was received. According to the 2022 AIR, part of the issue stems from organisations' failure to adequately demonstrate to donors how quality funding enhances effectiveness and efficiency.

Recent studies highlight that few operational agencies have the processes (including funding) to facilitate course corrections on the basis of community feedback throughout the project lifecycle. There is often a misunderstanding between donors and agencies, wherein donors express openness to revising project plans based on community feedback, but that agencies are either unaware they have authority to ask for alterations, tend to self-censor, or prioritise quick delivery over adaptability.

Emerging recommendations from recent literature on accountability to affected

people (AAP) advocate for humanitarian leaders to embrace adaptive management and programming approaches focused on achieving outcomes identified by communities, rather than rigidly adhering to proposed activities and outputs. Similarly, donors are encouraged to support more flexible, outcome-oriented approaches to grant management for both local and international agencies, enabling the utilisation of adaptive programming that is responsive to the needs of affected people.

Where is the DEC

Given the degree to which the system struggles in this area, the DEC distinguishes itself as a market leader in flexibility, facilitating program adaptation throughout the appeals. DEC members, and in some cases their local partners, have consistently been able to tailor support in response to people's expressed needs, priorities and evolving response contexts. As one interviewee said, the DEC "[trusts] the front lines and what the affected people are saying," when making program adjustments. DEC members appreciate this trust, with one remarking, "DEC is the best donor. ...They are flexible and understanding and have had to go to them with the tail between our legs so many times we need to change this plan, and they always are good about it." Another noted, "the nature of the DEC's flexibility is so implicit that it goes without saying."

The DEC response reviews highlight numerous instances where members redirected funds based on newly identified needs or priorities raised by affected people. For instance, during the Cyclone Idai response, flexible funding enabled a "swift and effective" response to government policy changes regarding cash distribution. In the Ukraine crisis, DEC members adapted quickly by initially providing multi-purpose cash, and later integrating non-food items (NFIs) like generators for electricity and heat. In Afghanistan, where members had a longstanding presence, regular adjustments, such as reallocating funds from winterization kits to cash assistance, were feasible due to funding flexibility. Moreover, in Turkey and Syria, members revised phase I plans based on input from local partners and monitoring exercises, while in Pakistan, organisations appreciated the ability to retroactively charge expenses, allowing them to make swift decisions on the spot. As one interviewee summarised, "it really makes no sense to be tied down to a proposal written six months ago. That's something we're proud of - that the funding goes where the needs are."

The Covid-19 pandemic necessitated frequent program adjustments to address emerging priorities and the DEC flexibility facilitated these shifts. A staff member from a partner in the Bangladesh COVID-19 response, highlighted this stating, "One of the great features of DEC's support was the fact that they were always receptive to changing plans, if needed." This adaptability was evident across Covid evaluations; for instance, in Syria, CARE responded flexibly to "enormous, ongoing needs" by collaborating with local and IDP camp authorities to tailor activities to rapidly changing circumstances. Similarly, during the Cyclone Idai response, adjustments were made to reach marginalised groups affected by Covid-19, with reviews specifically acknowledging the ability to repurpose funds for this.

The DEC's flexibility had two significant ripple effects. First, it fostered an environment conducive to ongoing monitoring, needs assessments, and community engagement, as organisations were aware they could make program adjustments. In Türkiye and Syria, for example, the review notes members and local partners continuously reviewed their responses to ensure it remained relevant to changing contexts. Second, this flexibility enhanced relations with local partners, with response reviews highlighting instances where flexibility was extended to them. In one case, a local partner decided on additional health activities for the final two months of Phase 1 based on budget savings, illustrating the empowering approach of DEC member agencies. This aspect of the DEC is distinctive, particularly as the 2022 State of the Humanitarian System report notes that where such flexibility exists, it is seldom transferred to local actors, thereby impeding adaptive delivery.

While the DEC is deemed flexible, humanitarian directors (HDs) noted that it's still a risk-averse source of funding. Some described demarcating DEC funds for elements of a program that will have the lowest risk, or the most tangible elements of a response. "As soon as you start using DEC funding for more hard to measure things, it becomes tricky," one said. As a result, members note that they tend to treat DEC funds on predictable, output oriented items.

In a global context of continued uncertainty, this level of flexibility will remain critical. The DEC is positioned to offer insights into how it has upheld this flexibility and its impact on partners, both local and national, as well as affected communities. This adaptability reflects the DEC's learning culture and serves as a tangible example of its implementation.

4.3 ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE

DEC Strategic Goal 3.2: Support members to meet the Core Humanitarian Standard.

DEC Strategic Goal 3.6: Explore collaborative approaches to increasing the accountability of DEC-funded programmes to people affected by crises – including adapting the response based on communities' feedback and their perception of impacts.

Where is the humanitarian system

Despite system-wide commitments, progress on accountability outcomes for people affected by crisis remains disappointing. Recent literature highlights persistent technocratic and siloed approaches to AAP, with operational agencies often prioritising the implementation of standard feedback mechanisms as a formality, neglecting meaningful engagement with communities or responding to feedback when it arises. In addition, there is confusion among aid recipients due to the proliferation of diverse agency communication and feedback channels.

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) has been acknowledged as a vital prerequisite

for organisations' involvement in collective accountability to affected people, offering a unified framework to assess, measure, and enhance accountability to affected people. A recent AAP report from the IASC suggests that donors mandate CHS verification to ensure agencies uphold their accountability commitments.

Where is the DEC

The DEC's mandatory adherence to the CHS underscores its pivotal role in advancing a more accountable humanitarian system. Other initiatives demonstrate its commitment: the inclusive data dashboard implemented in Afghanistan, for example- while difficult to take forward in practice- aims to establish a collective understanding of accountability practices among members. Moreover, the implementation of perception surveys from affected individuals which were undertaken in all responses since the Afghanistan appeal, reflects its commitment to learning from aid recipients.

When it comes to feedback mechanisms, it's unsurprising that DEC members' experience mirrors the system. In many contexts, these mechanisms saw low uptake, with affected people expressing confusion about their purpose and sometimes unaware of their existence. For example in Afghanistan, the perception survey revealed a lack of awareness among community members about feedback mechanisms, leading to limited engagement and minimal interaction with the process. The review cautions against over-reliance on and complacency in the use of feedback mechanisms without also being proactive and intentional about also building trust and garnering input from affected people in other ways. Duplication of feedback and complaints mechanisms were found in the Cyclone Idai response also leading to confusion and frustration, and in Pakistan communities were uninformed about their entitlements or programme details and said that their complaints went unheeded.

Similarly, in both the Ukraine and Türkiye/Syria earthquake responses, feedback mechanisms were underutilised. Low engagement in Ukraine was attributed to cultural norms, with affected individuals not accustomed to lodging complaints about aid or lacking familiarity with participation concepts. Despite low engagement in North West Syria, DEC members were responsive to complaints, making adjustments such as going from solid to liquid soap, reducing the salt and fat content of food, and purchasing lice treatment after an outbreak. In these cases, DEC members solicited feedback on the response informally through meetings with community members, local leaders, and local associations.

This experience reflects the misalignment between formal mechanisms and the feedback that DEC members are collecting and responding to as a result of the DEC's flexible model. As one interviewee put it, "you have the fancy box in the corner, but get a sense that member staff have good relationships with communities and they will come tell them and troubleshoot on the spot." This organic problem solving and open dialogue based on trust is what is promoting accountability, not necessarily the complaints boxes which the reviews generally describe as being irrelevant and unhelpful, merely a "tick the box" formality.

Maintaining and promoting the DEC's existing flexible model, clearly articulating it to partners, and encouraging proactive and continuous communication with communities may offer a more efficient way to gather and utilise feedback than relying solely on individual complaints, which often fail to reach the appropriate parties or influence decisions.

4.4 MULTI-PURPOSE CASH ASSISTANCE (MPCA)

Strategic Goal 3.9: Monitor cash commitments to cash programming and integrate them in DEC funded programmes.

Where is the humanitarian system

Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA) is probably the biggest single success story for humanitarian operations over the last 25 years, not least because it is usually what crisis affected communities ask for and it improves overall effectiveness and efficiency. MPCA has thus become a main-streamed response mechanism and will likely continue with improvements as a result of a network dedicated to learning and advocating about cash, CaLP the Cash Learning Partnership.

MPCA also has widespread support in the OECD/DAC donor community; commitments to increase the cash assistance was part of the original Grand Bargain (2016) and signatories remain signed up today. Indeed, the objectives of Grand Bargain 3.0 (2023) are closely aligned with those of MPCA which now accounts for over 21% of international assistance. The aim is to reach 30-50% and this is likely to increase this year given that over $1.2 billion has already been transferred to the Ukraine response.

The Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) however cautions there is still a long way to go to realise the full potential of MPCA. The State of the World's Cash 2023 Report identifies many unresolved issues such as the trade offs between coverage and transfer values; slow progress on the 'commitment to people centred MPCA'; and the need for more understanding on the risks from new digital technologies including improved design to avoid risks linked to exclusion, data and cyber security.

Where is the DEC

An initial calculation based on data from member reports reveals 42% of DEC funds were allocated to MPCA during the last strategic period. This measures up very well to the estimated 30-50% that is thought to be needed if MPCA is to be used 'wherever feasible and appropriate' and in this respect the DEC can be thought of as a market leader.

Overall, MPCA was used effectively in all six appeals including in the form of conditional and unconditional grants, direct cash transfers, cash for work and blended cash/in

kind approaches. In Afghanistan 'MPCA emerged as a highly impactful approach' with marginalised groups being prioritised'; in Cyclone Idai after a generally positive experience it was recommended that 'cash interventions should be prioritised' in the future; in the response in Somaliland to the Covid-19 pandemic cash was seen to have ' fully fulfilled project outcomes' and was 'highly effective in areas such as food, medicine and debt repayment;' in Bangladesh women were seen to be 'empowered by cash grants;' and in the DRC households who had described themselves as 'living without hope' prior to the DEC funded cash intervention now said that they were now 'optimistic about the future.'

DEC evaluations have captured many singular lessons regarding the planning, implementation and impact of MPCA — but the most salient point is about how context was fundamental to doing MPCA well. Context analysis and regular sense checking were crucial in understanding differences and avoiding unintended consequences. For example, MPCA in Zimbabwe's cyclone response was seen to reduce petty crime and gender violence at household level, whilst in nearby Malawi there was an increase in violence against women who received cash. Contrasting experiences were also noted in Somalia during the Covid-19 response where cash injections had a positive, stimulating, effect on markets, whilst in the Cyclone Idai response in Malawi, it had the opposite outcome, leading to inflation and a reduction in purchasing power.

Similarly, while for the most part MPCA was a popular and versatile modality for crisis affected communities, it wasn't always so. In Afghanistan, for example, communities 'prioritised their own needs including food, hygiene and education,' preferring MPCA to in-kind hand-outs. And ultimately cash was seen to be 'highly impactful.' In other contexts though this was not the case, such as in Pakistan where social complexities had a constraining effect on local women who 'preferred in-kind contributions to cash.'

Experiences from the Ukraine response presented new opportunities around digitalisation but also revealed new risks and challenges. Scams, thefts, and phishing all resulted in money being stolen from recipients and there were also safeguarding issues related to the management of sensitive information about recipients. Local partners in Ukraine complained of technical language and "impenetrable jargon" which were seen to erode the confidence of local actors and ultimately clashed with 'people centred approaches.' One example was the lack of clarity about 'cash hot-lines' which were set up to assist users but led to a significant degree of confusion and wasted time.

The experiences of DEC Member agencies with MPCA mirror the general state of play in the wider humanitarian system, although the DEC is ahead of the game in relation to the percentage of funds allocated to cash. Cash was seen to be the preferred response modality in most of the appeals and again demonstrated that it is both effective, efficient and empowering to local communities.

However, there were also important reminders about being too complacent due to

the positive profile of cash and instead to double-down on applying context analysis to mitigate unintended consequences, and to remain vigilant about the downsides and risks of new digital technologies. The DEC should continue to engage with CaLP to ensure that the rich findings from DEC evaluations are integrated into CaLPs body of knowledge and, given the recent experiences around digital technologies in the Ukraine response, it may be useful to build on this knowledge by using this theme as a focus for further evaluative work.

4.5 COORDINATION

Strategic Goal 3.10: Promote collaborative approaches to increasing accountability, joint information sharing and adapting the response.

Where is the humanitarian system

Coordination of humanitarian action can be defined as 'bringing together humanitarian actors to ensure a coherent and principled response to emergencies.' While the cluster system is used in most humanitarian contexts, there is no universal approach for how to align different specific actions or tasks, or how these stakeholders actually work together.

Reviewing the five iterations of the ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System Report from 2010 to 2021 reveals a gradual improvement in humanitarian coordination during operational responses. The most recent edition from 2022 presents a mixed picture defined by "strong interagency coordination enhanced by multi-agency response consortiums which has led to incremental improvement over time.' The report also acknowledges the limits of sector-based coordination and the negative impacts associated with poor coordination.

Many of the problems arising from multi-stakeholder coordination, for example in the clusters and humanitarian country teams, are about how to provide strategic leadership, maintain and communicate a shared vision, and coordinate the response, when different agencies in the team/network do not always share the same approach, aims and ways of working. In the past , this has created lack of trust and conflict in the team and has negatively affected the potential for effective coordination.

Where is the DEC

At the level of operational response, DEC Member agencies were involved in multiple coordination mechanisms, both formal and informal, operating at national, regional, and local levels with a wide range of stakeholders. These included inter-agency mechanisms like the clusters and national/government bodies, but also in technical groups, such as gender-based violence, nutrition, and security.

However, overall findings reveal a mixed picture on the ground with positive experiences

and good practice alongside a range of shortcomings and challenges. On the positive side, in the Pakistan floods there was 'coordinated and complementary assistance' with the Pakistan Humanitarian Forum (the main coordinating body) and at the provincial level with the Provisional District Management Authority. In Afghanistan, there was 'good collaboration across the response' including at 'national, provincial, district and international levels.' One of the key findings here was that 'personal relationships played a critical role in enabling implementation to move forward' and that coordination strengths were based on 'relationships with local authorities.' Most of these relationships, through individuals and networks, had been created prior to the crisis.

The Türkiye/Syria earthquake response was based upon 'strong communication' and overall was seen to be' coordinated and complementary,' despite needs assessments being somewhat duplicative. In Moldova during the Ukraine response coordination at the national level in the clusters was seen as 'strong' and in Romania coordination with 'sectoral coordination through coordination groups from the UN' was also seen to be effective. Due diligence passporting — where the vetting of partners by DEC Members is transferable - was also welcome and worked well overall.

During the Covid-19 response, coordination was also deemed to be generally very good with 'all DEC Members deeply involved in coordination mechanisms prior to the crisis and continued to be very active during the Covid response.'   This was facilitated by WhatsApp groups which filled gaps created by the disruption of existing mechanisms by the pandemic.

Coordination and collaboration also took place at the global level where we heard that the smaller DEC agencies particularly welcomed the opportunity to collaborate. In interviews, mid-size organisations emphasised the significance of the DEC's HD cohort, highlighting its value in learning what peers were doing in appeals and through innovations. HDs also appreciated the DEC's convening power, citing an instance early in the pandemic when the DEC facilitated collaboration with Imperial College researchers to share crucial tracking data and preparedness approaches. "The DEC's ongoing ties with leading scientists were particularly beneficial in the initial stages," one interviewee remarked.

On the downside, in Cyclone Idai 'coordination was raised as a significant weakness by all evaluations in the response' with widespread failures to coordinate on needs assessment, delivery, monitoring, and feedback/complaints mechanisms. These coordination failures occurred at all stages of the response. According to the meta synthesis report 'there seems to have been almost no coordination between member agencies at HQ level, except managing the public facing appeal.' Coordination outside of DEC Members was also poor. According to the report, 'it is hard to understand how HQ and field teams went for 6 months without discussing other actors in the response.'

During the Ukraine response, weak coordination in Hungary had a negative impact

on DEC Members and partners around needs assessment and led to confusion for affected people when planning for cash assistance. Coordination failures had a particularly negative effect on local partners as in Ukraine where they were sometimes less engaged and questioned the value of participation given the large amount of time and effort required. For example, in Moldova local staff questioned 'how much effort to put in (to coordination) given what you get out'. Similarly, smaller agencies in Cyclone Idai complained that they had been 'overlooked by coordination structures' and instead set up their own WhatsApp groups

Coordination faces a diverse set of challenges and opportunities but one recurring issue is competing priorities and limited bandwidth during hectic responses, hinder coordination efforts. For example, in Cyclone Idai the demands of 'interagency coordination "took staff away from real work.' In other contexts like Ukraine, however, reviews reflected an untapped potential in the DEC's convening capacity, and requests were made in the Ukraine response to set up a coordination body specifically for DEC Members on the ground. Balancing member agency autonomy and a hands off approach, with the DEC's positive convening ability is a tension that the DEC is aware of.

It is worth mentioning that the DEC Secretariat informed us that it is not DEC policy to convene member agencies in the field as this could be seen as 'interference' whilst at the same time there have been requests from Members to create cross membership opportunities and this possibility may well be gaining credence with DEC Governance.

The DEC reports offer a spectrum of experiences, findings, and issues across various levels of the humanitarian system. While this likely reflects experiences beyond DEC agencies, certainty is challenging due to vast contextual differences and the complexity of coordination itself. Moving forward it will be important for the DEC to continue to promote collaborative approaches but it may also be prudent to revisit the concept of coordination itself and provide a specific, tighter definition linked to DEC priorities. This would help focus the aims of the DECAF evaluations - see Annex 1 - and perhaps help guide DEC Members in their understanding of what types of coordination and collaboration should be prioritised.

4.6 CLIMATE/ENVIRONMENT
No related strategic goal, however a climate and environment workstream was established within the Secretariat over the strategic period

Where is the humanitarian system

Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, worsening needs in areas of greatest vulnerability where humanitarian resources are already strained. The projections are concerning, with the UN estimating the number of people living in 'very high' crisis

risk countries will roughly triple from 580 million to 1.5 billion, with estimated costs to humanitarian response exceeding <u>USD 20 billion per year</u>.

Actions and commitments to step up humanitarians' role in the climate crisis have been specified and laid out in the <u>Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations</u>; the <u>Humanitarian Aid Donors Declaration on Climate and Environment</u>; and a new <u>Declaration on Climate, Relief, Recovery and Peace</u> introduced at COP28. New funding opportunities have also been forthcoming such as the CERF Climate Action Account; and at the operational level where humanitarian agencies are beginning to trial new approaches and tools.

However, agencies have been ill prepared and slow to adjust and respond. According to the <u>Center for Humanitarian Action (CHA)</u> agencies are 'lacking the financial, technical and capacity resources to effectively address the multi-faceted impacts of the climate crises.'

Where is the DEC

The DEC's last 5 year strategy did not explicitly include climate and environment as a priority issue, however, over the strategic period the DEC's thinking and action evolved to be more environmentally focused, as seen through the development of an environment group at the Secretariat, proposal and reporting forms which now include climate change and environmental questions, and capturing funds spent on climate change adaptation. That said, there was not a great deal of activity around climate and the environment captured in the evaluations for the last strategic period. However, most DEC Member agencies have now signed the Climate and Environment Charter and it is sure to be a key issue in the forthcoming strategy period 2024-29.

Most of the practical examples where DEC agencies had taken action came from the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. In Afghanistan during the COVID-19 response, Concern Worldwide found 'a strong commitment to use local and national resources in an environmentally responsible manner' and although detail was somewhat in short supply, it was deemed that 'steps had been taken to minimise negative environmental impacts.' In Bangladesh, the British Red Cross was involved in the design of an 'integrated isolation and treatment centre' for the pandemic which 'contributed to appropriate and safe disposal of medical equipment and waste protecting human health and minimising damage to the environment.'

Tearfund's response in Yemen provided training to technicians in solar energy and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Action Aid was guided by its own 'environmentally responsible culture' by reducing travel/petrol consumption/emissions, recycling, and providing support to the local economy.'

A few other evaluations highlighted an absence of progress; for example in Türkiye/Syria where 'except for a limited number of programmes, climate and environment was not a focus, or was limited to minimising negative effects as opposed to actively including climate and environment into wider programming.'

Similarly, in Afghanistan, environmental concerns were seen as a 'low priority' with 'no environmental monitoring' or 'systemised approach.' Ultimately the evaluation found 'a very low long term environmental impact from the response' and concluded that in future there was a need to 'prioritise environmental mainstreaming in all phases of a response, including the earliest phases'.

Given that climate crises will be a leading driver of humanitarian need going forward, it will be important for the DEC to step up its activities in key areas, including disaster risk reduction and resilience (for example financial safety nets and insurance), anticipatory action and a more explicit and stronger nexus approach to programming. The DEC and its members may need to be creative in achieving this, and find partners better equipped to tackle these issues, given the short spending time frames.

4.7 INCLUSION

Strategic Goal 3.7: As part of the commitment to the CHS, support members in strengthening their approach to targeting vulnerable groups and show how DEC funds are enabling members to provide assistance in hard to reach places.

Where is the humanitarian system

The 2022 State of the Humanitarian System report highlights a notable increase in attention towards including socially marginalised populations - such as women, people with disabilities, older individuals, and LGBTQI people - in humanitarian assessment, planning and response. Key initiatives during this period include the 2019 launch of the IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, alongside the development of gender, age, and disability frameworks by individual donors, UN agencies, and INGOs. There has also been greater recognition of the specific vulnerabilities of marginalised groups in humanitarian needs assessments and response planning. Despite this, inclusion has yet to be systematically translated into programme design, with the 2022 SOHS concluding, "a clear gap remains between strong corporate gender and disability policies and operational realities. Across the system, good practice is fragmented and inconsistent."

Reasons cited in the literature for this lag include time pressures during emergencies, a shortage of specialists to provide support, funding constraints and despite the availability of guidance on inclusivity a lack of contextualisation, hindering utilisation. Additionally, the lack of data on people with disabilities is a critical gap that hinders efforts to strengthen inclusion.

Where is the DEC

The DEC membership has broadly followed this pattern, ostensibly prioritising the issue but not allocating the necessary attention, weight, or support to enact substantial change. For instance, during Cyclone Idai, member agencies' approaches to needs assessment and data collection did not adequately facilitate inclusion. The

reviews note that specialised expertise from organisations like Age International was underutilised. Similarly, during Cyclone Idai, vulnerable groups such as older individuals and pregnant or lactating women were identified but faced challenges reaching cash collection points. In Pakistan, women, older individuals, and those with health issues encountered difficulties using complaint mechanisms due to mobility constraints. In Afghanistan, women remained excluded from community decision-making processes, and accessing women and people with disabilities proved challenging for members. Although planning documents and training acknowledge the importance of these practices, many members struggle with implementation and monitoring, as revealed in the Afghanistan review.

That said, there were some examples of good practice. During Cyclone Idai, several agencies adapted delivery models to include marginalised groups: for example the British Red Cross offered to cover transport costs for anyone who found it difficult to access cash transfer locations; Oxfam created roles for people with disabilities who could not otherwise participate in Cash for Work activities; Plan and World Vision prioritised inclusive education and support for Out Of School children in their education programming. Any positive development came down to individual organisations taking it on, and not a common practice across DEC members.

Some of the Covid-19 responses showed inclusive approaches as well. Save the Children's cash distribution process in Afghanistan, for example, had disbursement points allocated specifically for women and persons with disabilities. BRC in Bangladesh conducted a Vulnerability Capacity Assessment at the start of their program, in which vulnerable groups including women, disabled and elderly groups were specifically consulted.

Overall, while members consider DEC "better than other donors" as one interviewee put it, when it comes to inclusion in that "they are having discussions and giving it a push," there's a feeling they could do more. The DEC have recently re-introduced inclusion indicators in their reporting, but will need to examine these to ensure they're not merely checked off as a formality, lacking genuine efforts toward improvement. Other reviews, such as in Afghanistan, recommend building staff capacity on inclusion, identification and outreach of marginalised people.

4.8 SUSTAINABILITY
No related strategic goal

Where is the humanitarian system

Over the strategic period, long-term, complex crises were the norm, with new and ongoing conflicts, climate change-related disasters and the ongoing socioeconomic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic driving up the number of countries in crisis and the number of people in need. The concept of stronger coherence between humanitarian,

development and peace approaches became solidified into policy through the 2019 OECD DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian—Development—Peace (HDP) Nexus, with an ambitious goal to 'reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes'. The nexus recognises that simply addressing short term humanitarian needs is not enough, but that there must be a link with longer term, more sustainable development approaches if communities and states have a chance at building resilience and reducing their dependence on short-term aid.

Even as the number and duration of protracted crises grew, and the climate crisis urged the sector to work ahead of crises and invest in longer-term resilience, on the ground, nexus concepts did not progress. Two-thirds of SOHS survey respondents felt in 2022 that the system was doing a 'Fair' or 'Poor' job of connectedness and nearly three-quarters rated progress in strengthening the nexus as 'Poor' or 'Fair'. According to an OECD survey, more than half (55%) of DAC donor member respondents either did not believe or were unsure whether their organisation could avoid fragmented, siloed, or inappropriately short-term funding. Responders on the ground felt the impacts of this - saying that short term of short-term funding was by far the largest barrier they saw to realising the nexus.

Where is the DEC

Given the two to three year time frame for DEC grant distributions, the sustainability of responses was inconsistent, with some humanitarian directors questioning the feasibility of this ambition. One noted that it was unrealistic to focus on longer-term efforts, noting "[they] genuinely can't hold us to that intention [when] we have to show how we're spending on life saving aid and dispense it in a 6-month time frame." Indeed, a six-month window for the first phase may not be a practical window for sustainability, but there may be room to build a longer-term approach into program design at the outset.

Across the appeals, findings on sustainability were mixed. In the Ukraine response, local organisations specifically requested longer term programming, and in Afghanistan community feedback was clear that the support is not enough to empower people to live without aid, and communities requested longer-term assistance. During the Covid-19 response, people in Afghanistan reported a need for improved irrigation systems and opportunities for sustainable income. Following the flood response in Pakistan, communities emphasised the need for capacity-building against future floods, with over a third of respondents to a survey as part of the review expressing unpreparedness for future emergencies.

During Phase 1 of the Türkiye/Syria earthquake response, many DEC member agencies found it difficult to consider longer-term needs. In Government of Syria (GoS) areas, needs assessments heavily relied on data from emergency centres, which significantly shaped operational plans. In these areas, members stressed the need for sustainable answers to broader needs rather than for continued earthquake-specific

relief. In NW Syria, this theme resurfaced where affected people noted the need for well-functioning infrastructure, permanent housing and livelihood, sustainable agriculture and high- quality education and health care services. That said, some interventions had more sustainable outcomes. In NW Syria, for example, cash-for-work activities and recovery business grants were provided to support businesses owned by women and PWDs, with a specific focus on the recovery of essential food and non-food shops. In GoS areas as well, some local partners rehabilitated shelters, water lines, and infrastructure, providing tangible long-term support. Moreover, in Türkiye, a consortium of DEC member agencies and local partners cited examples such as providing health services, medical equipment, and health/hygiene education during Phase 1, all contributing to beneficial long-term effects.

Longer-term programming was also found in the Cyclone Idai response, where WASH programming included rehabilitation of community systems and providing maintenance training. Education initiatives in the same context focused on capacity building and addressing emergency needs, resulting in both immediate service provision and long-term benefits for children. During the Covid-19 responses as well, there was some focus on sustainability. For example Plan Somaliland's cash program helped recipients start or revive small businesses which in turn contributed to sustainable livelihoods. In Afghanistan, Save the Children implemented capacity building on young feeding practices and malnutrition measurements to ensure some sustainability. And in Yemen, ACH ensured salary continuation for health centre staff and medical supply provision after their project ended.

Although the DEC does not plan to extend its appeal period from the current 2-3-year timeframe, the Secretariat notes that it has begun to encourage members to incorporate resilience building and DRR elements into their approaches. The DEC also encourages members to leverage DEC funds to attract other resources which can build in longer term elements.

V. SUMMARY AND BROADER CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE DEC

The review uncovered the extent to which many of the thematic areas overlap - for example, flexibility and accountability, or cash and flexible programming. It also revealed ambiguity around the meaning of some themes, and unrealistic expectations of what is achievable given the DEC's model of implementation. Going forward, it will be important to have a clearer understanding across the membership of the definitions and parameters of these areas to move towards a shared recognition of their inherent limitations and possibilities.

That said, the DEC has distinguished itself as a market leader in at least 3 areas: flexibility, accountability and learning.

The DEC has demonstrated remarkable flexibility throughout its appeals, enabling program adaptation and improved accountability. Members have effectively redirected funds to address the evolving needs and priorities of affected communities. This flexibility has facilitated monitoring, needs assessment, and community participation, while strengthening relationships with local partners. Partner agencies have also expressed gratitude for the timely funding injection to initiate response efforts. Members' adherence to the CHS standard as well as implementation of perception surveys from crises affected populations illustrate the contribution the DEC is making to system wide accountability.

In terms of learning, the DECAF can be viewed as a gold standard learning system providing comprehensive reporting at regular predefined intervals over the course of an appeal. It consistently provides an abundance of data, information and knowledge from the responses and is building a strong knowledge base to be used for learning and adaptation in operational response. With some modifications, the DECAF has the potential to further increase its utility.

Interviews with Humanitarian Directors (HD's) from DEC member agencies reveal universal appreciation of the support provided. Many said they were proud to be part of the DEC, as well as other laudable feedback:

- 'The DEC is a phenomenal thing.'
- 'The DEC has become a household name - and

this is an extraordinary achievement.'
- 'The way the DEC raises money is spectacular.'
- 'The DEC is deeply valued by its members.'
- 'The DEC has untapped potential to be a great leader.'

That being said, some critical issues were raised, which are not new to the DEC, but still remain active and are of concern.   Although immediate solutions are not apparent - some of the issues do seem intractable - it is still important to reflect back the views and opinions that were voiced by DEC members. These reflect issues around underfunded crises and a risk-averse culture.

5.1 UNDERFUNDED CRISES

During the last strategic period, funding for the overall humanitarian system was subject to political preferences of donor states, geopolitical dynamics, the global economy, and media attention. There were massive disparities in funding from one disaster to another, not related to the scale or intensity of needs. According to Development Initiatives' 2023 Global Humanitarian Assistance report, in 2022, there were 46-UN coordinated humanitarian responses, and 10 received nearly two thirds of all international humanitarian assistance. The two best funded coordinated appeals that year were the Ukraine Flash Appeal (US$3.7 billion, 87%), the Afghanistan HRP (US$3.2 billion, 73%), where the DEC also launched appeals. Ukraine accounted for 7.8% of all ODA in 2022. The South Sudan regional appeal was the least well-funded, with requirements of over US$1.0 billion and only US$361.6 million or 30% received.

DEC appeals have largely mirrored this global trend, directing funding towards some of the most well-funded contexts. Graph 2 depicts this pattern, with countries on the left—representing significant humanitarian crises during the 2019-2023 period—often remaining underfunded. Conversely, the bars on the right illustrate the overall funding levels for the crises that the DEC did fund, all of which received generous support, with some exceeding 100%.

Graph 2. Funding levels for UN coordinated humanitarian appeals
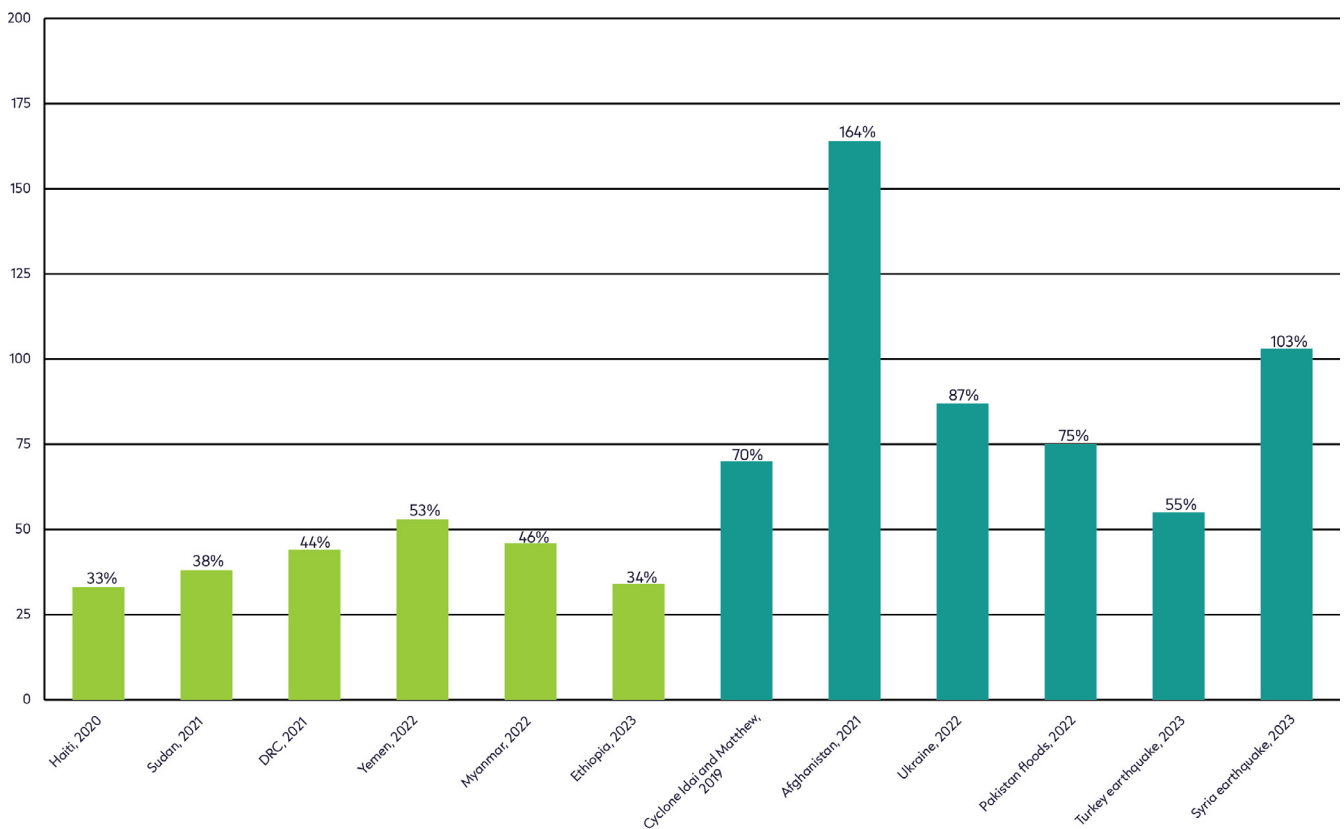
Source: UN Financial Tracking Service

While funding is stretched for the entire humanitarian system, it's more so for some countries. Aside from the Covid-19 appeals, during this strategic period, the DEC has put resources towards some of the already best funded crises with the most media attention. Internally, the DEC recognises and regularly wrestles with this problem, with one interviewee calling it "painful". Although Goal 4 of the DEC Strategy addresses this, DEC members noted the organisation could go further in educating the UK public about this disparity, capitalising on its very strong brand recognition and pointing out the disparities of aid globally.

5.2 BALANCING RISKS

Alongside concerns about the appeals, some HD's felt that over time, DEC internal culture had become increasingly conservative and bureaucratic with complaints about the high level of questioning and back-and-forth when agencies submitted project proposals. This was felt by some to be disrespectful given the competencies and experience in Member agencies. However, procedures are likely to become even more rigorous because of the scale and very high levels of funding for the Ukraine crisis which have created higher expectations for accountable donorship and an increased need for scrutiny. As a result, the DEC has had to hire additional staff in the Secretariat to cope with rising demand.

Concerns about risk-aversion centred on perceived reluctance for the DEC to experiment with new ideas and innovation for fear of failure - although the new Ambidextrous Strategy may be a significant first step in raising the risk-threshold.

Note: This section also reviewed learning and feedback from across the DEC in relation to the balancing of risks between launching and not launching particular appeals across the strategic period within the unabridged version of this report for internal use. The Ambidextrous strategy, which specifically focuses on forwarding innovative programming, in particular across larger appeals in Ukraine and Turkey-Syria, has not been covered in depth within this review as it was covered in parallel by an Ambidextrous Strategy Review undertaken by The Research People. More information about this programming can also be found in the stakeholder reports for the relevant appeals.

5.3 LOOKING AHEAD

The humanitarian system frequently finds itself grappling with the challenge of doing more with less and the current global financial situation only exacerbates this predicament. Further economic downturns, austerity measures, and political factors threaten to worsen the situation in the DEC's next strategic period. The DEC's role, as well as other private funding sources, is likely to become more pronounced and critical due to their capacity to sustain support - thanks to brand recognition and public trust - in a landscape where institutional funds are dwindling.

This will have significant implications for the DEC and other non-traditional funding sources. Humanitarian organisations are likely to increasingly rely on them to bridge gaps left by retreating traditional donors. There will likely be pressure to expand into areas that have previously not received due attention - such as climate and environment and more sustainable models. Given the DEC's stronger influencing power since Ukraine, there is a heightened responsibility to maintain and cultivate relationships with the general public, educating them about aid's impact, and potentially the need to support neglected crises, so that private giving can be sustained and put to use in places that will struggle to garner other sources of funding.

ANNEX I. LEARNING WITHIN THE DEC: THE DEC ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK (DECAF)

Note: the DEC Accountability Framework (DECAF) documents the programme quality, accountability, and learning initiatives that come together to promote accountability, learning, and improvement, both within and across appeals. In preparation for the new strategic period, the DECAF was revised , including recommendations contained below.

Almost all definitions of organisational learning describe it as a process that works to generate, share, consolidate and retain knowledge across individuals, groups, departments, whole organisations and, in some cases, entire sectors. The DEC has made learning and accountability a priority and as part of this the DECAF provides a comprehensive reporting system at regular pre-defined intervals over the course of an appeal. It has been used in all the appeals to over the last strategic period to assist DEC Members to learn and improve their systems, structures and practices.

The DECAF generates a significant amount of learning and sets a high standard - especially when compared with the wider humanitarian system which has recently been described as being in a '[vicious cycle of underinvestment in learning](#)' - and in this light, the DECAF can be rightly seen as a 'market leader' in learning. It is worth noting the challenge that the DEC faces in holding individual members to account for quality/safe programming whilst at the same time allowing them appropriate agency to make their own decisions.

When reviewing the findings from evaluations, we also looked briefly at how effective the DECAF model has been in capturing and using learning, especially from evaluations. We have 4 main observations and suggestions.

Firstly, the body of learning produced by the DECAF has great breadth - but has less depth. Collectively, the reports produce an abundance of singular learning points from very different contexts which help to create a rich evidence base. However, this can also have at least 2 limiting effects: firstly, it can have an over-loading effect leading to what specialist call 'analysis paralysis,' and it can limit the scope to confidently extrapolate lessons across contexts.

Second, the quantity and breadth of data is further increased by the many criteria used in the evaluations which, not only use the 9 CHS standards, but also additional criteria including OECD/DAC criteria, IFRC evaluation criteria, and BOND evaluation principles.

Third, although interesting to read, the real time reviews appeared to lack speed and flexibility and use a relatively rigid methodology based on CHS standards, more

suited to ex-post evaluations. Current, real time reviews seem unable to generate course corrections in phase 1 as well as phase 2.

Fourth, the term 'learning' tended to be used in a generalised way without disaggregating different types of learning and what they are used for. This contributes to the already high volume of learning points but without a clear focus about how they can be used and by whom. There is a fairly substantial amount of literature on types of learning, including types of 'loop learning' presented in the table below.

Three types of humanitarian learning
(Adapted from Ramalingam, B. and Mitchell, J. (2022) Learning to change: The case for systemic learning strategies in the humanitarian sector. London: ALNAP)
Single loop learning: asks the question 'are we doing things right'. It focuses on what happened in the response, focusing on deviancies and variations from standards. It makes recommendations to improve the same intervention better next time. It does not question intended outcomes. Ex-post evaluations are often used for this.
Double loop learning: asks the question 'are we doing the right thing.' This addresses the basic aspects of an organisation and focuses on improving flexibility in response to changing contexts. Real Time Reviews are an example providing a 'formative' rather than 'summative' approach.
Triple loop learning: asks the question, 'are we doing the right things for the right reasons.' This involves questioning the entire rationale of an organisation and can potentially lead to radical transformations in internal structure, culture, practices and outcomes. Developmental evaluations can be used to learn from transformational processes.

To make learning as precise and as useful as possible, DEC evaluation methodologies can perhaps be better aligned with the learning objectives and types of learning required.

Tentative suggestions for consideration.

The first suggestion is to commission fewer single agency evaluations and replace them with one joint ex-post evaluation with a thematic focus. In a joint evaluation, specific DEC agencies could lead in their speciality area and provide more focused in-depth analysis. This approach can be especially relevant in new emergencies

which bring a high level of attention to a particular issue - for example the need for a new response model for the Covid Pandemic, or a focus on innovations in the war in Ukraine. Such emergencies can be thought of as 'focusing events' that bring a high level of attention to particular issues that the crisis illuminates or magnifies. The phenomena of 'crisis spotlights' can create a unique opportunity for learning, change and improvements.

The second suggestion is to reduce the amount of criteria used to match the aims and objectives of the evaluation and take a more focussed approach.

The third is to reassess the methods and purpose of DEC Real Time Reviews with the intention of making them more dynamic and flexible, in order to have the capacity to make not only to make changes in phase 1, but also further downstream in phase 2. Properly conducted, Real Time Reviews have three key advantages:

Advantages of Real Time Reviews
(adapted from Buchanan-Smith, M. and Morrison-Métois, S. (2021) <u>From Real-Time Evaluation to Real-Time Learning: Exploring new approaches from the COVID-19 response</u>. ALNAP paper. London: ALNAP)
Timeliness: an evaluation that takes place in the early stages of an operation, when key operational decisions are being taken.
Interactivity: engagement in sustained dialogue with staff who are the intended users of the RTR, both in the field and an HQ
Perspective: approach the crisis and response from a range of different angels and vantage points (e.g., head office, regional, country and sub-national levels, and bringing learning from past crises to be incorporated in the process and outputs.

It is also worth noting that RTR's also have the potential to contribute to something which is being developed, and/or new concepts, ideas and ways of working - much in line with the aims of a developmental evaluation.

The final suggestion is about how to best address what one evaluation referred to as the absence of '*purposeful learning*.' The basic issue is about becoming more intentional about what the learning is for example, is it for improving current practices or testing new practices; or is it for improving flexibility within what is already done, or radically changing the way things are done?

A good starting point for this is to realise that even though learning does not always lead to change, successes are almost always underpinned by learning. However, learning and changes are not linear processes but emerge as a result of the alignment of interactions at different levels in a system. Using a theory of change can provide a conceptual underpinning of how different kinds of learning are best suited to different kinds of change. Importantly, it can also provide a framework for understanding the softer (but crucial) social processes that are often at the heart of the most successful change processes.

DISASTERS
EMERGENCY
COMMITTEE