OPERATIONAL PEER REVIEW
RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS IN SOUTH SUDAN
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Background

In response to the escalating humanitarian crisis in South Sudan following events in mid-December 2013, the IASC Principals activated an IASC system-wide level 3 (L3) response on 11 February 2014. The declaration resulted in a series of measures to strengthen capacity, resourcing and leadership. As part of the L3 activation, an operational peer review is conducted to review progress in the areas of leadership, coordination, the humanitarian programme cycle and accountability to affected people. The review – designed to be a light, brief, and collaborative process – was carried out by six United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives from 18 – 28 June 2014. It consisted of self-assessments exercises of key groups; a secondary data review of about 250 documents; a half-day Humanitarian Coordination Team (HCT) retreat; site visits in Juba, Mingkaman, Akobo, and Bor; and interviews of about 400 aid workers, donors, national/local authorities, and affected people, among others. A summary of the findings is presented below.

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Findings

Response Operations

From the onset of the crisis, the humanitarian community worked tirelessly to provide aid to those most affected, at times under great stress. The Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and HCT commendably set a clear vision and prioritization for the humanitarian response, but insufficient and delayed funding as well as logistics, human resource, security and political constraints have limited delivery in line with that vision. South Sudan's sheer size, poor infrastructure and general insecurity make it extremely costly to operate there. Interference with humanitarian access by parties to the conflict has significantly impeded operations by road and river, although (more costly) air operations have been able to reach many locations in both government and opposition-held areas.

Shifting frontlines - with some cities changing hands twelve times – have forced the displaced population to be highly mobile. As a result the humanitarian community is forced to 'chase the population' in order to provide aid. The establishment of coordination hubs or catchment areas based on displacement trends would likely ensure a more sustained operation. The response also would benefit from several adjustments, including a greater field presence; more analytical information on new emergencies and displacements; better contextual, risk and security analysis, particularly to inform preparedness and initial response actions to seasonal hazards; and the inclusion of more 'beyond emergency life-saving' humanitarian programming. Improved coordination among the various rapid response mechanisms is also needed along with measures to ensure the adequacy or appropriateness of aid.

Protection

More than 1.5 million people have been displaced inside South Sudan or have sought refuge in neighboring countries as of the end of July 2014. Almost ten percent of internally displaced people (IDPs) fled to the bases of the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) for safety and continue to seek shelter and protection there. UNMISS saved the lives of these people, for which they should be commended. This has resulted in an unprecedented situation with unique challenges. The encampment of these IDPs on UNMISS bases makes them vulnerable to attack. Thus, while only representing a fraction of the displaced population, they are a significant focus of the response due to their vulnerability. There are ongoing discussions to find interim solutions for these IDPs residing on UNMISS bases but insecurity, the implications of moving people and creating further polarization, location preferences, and other protection risks have limited efforts.

The conflict has been marked by widespread sexual and gender-based violence, mass killings, ethnic targeting, torture and the use of child soldiers. Concern exists about the use of rape as a weapon of war. The complex protection dimensions of the crisis, with abuses and violations committed by both parties to the conflict, require an overarching protection framework to guide the collective humanitarian response, going beyond the strategy prepared by the protection cluster. Protection and gender need to be mainstreamed into agency and cluster programming and the adequacy of response to the needs of women and girls must be prioritized as they are reported to be most affected by the crisis. Sufficient funding, technical expertise, and monitoring and referral systems are urgently needed to respond to protection and gender-based violence issues. A scale-up of protection monitoring would support better analysis to inform advocacy and programming, particularly in hard-to-reach areas, and increase the visibility of protection concerns through better reporting.

Leadership

The HC has been commended for his commitment to advocate in support of protection of civilians, mobilization of resources and action, and humanitarian access, and is considered strategically decisive and a strong leader. As part of the accompanying measures following the L3 declaration, a part-time Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator (DHC) was appointed to support the HC on contingency and operational planning and response scale-up. The appointment of the DHC has been broadly appreciated, but the division of labor between the HC and the DHC needs to be clarified through a finalization of the terms of reference for the DHC function. Due to the protracted nature of the crisis, it may be necessary to create a full-time, dedicated DHC post until the end of 2015, focusing exclusively on operations and with extensive travel to the field.

Representatives of the HCT and the inter-cluster working group demonstrate a strong commitment to engage in the respective group and to work towards common response priorities, although inter-linkages and roles and responsibilities among the various coordination bodies and actors need to be strengthened or clarified. This includes reinforcing the HCT's role as a strategic decision-making body and the inter-cluster coordination group's focus on operations. Discussions in the HCT should allow for different views and approaches to be considered and the chairing of the inter-cluster working group needs to be reviewed. A joint retreat of these two bodies would support strengthening their inter-linkages.

Coordination

Cluster functioning varied significantly, with some highly regarded and others suffering from continuous staff turnover. Insufficient cluster capacity – particularly in the areas of information management and monitoring – was reported across the board as a weakness, although considerable surge support was deployed with the L3 declaration. The establishment of NGO co-chairs has strengthened participation and engagement of NGOs in the cluster

Self-assessment exercise in Mingkaman.
Credit: operational peer review team (2014).

approach and increased cluster capacity/technical expertise. Both the cluster lead agencies and cluster coordinators (including NGO co-leads) recognized that more systematic engagement and two-way information flow are needed between them. Transition planning for coordination arrangements is also required given that surge deployments are ending.

Sub-national coordination was reported as weak due to delays in staff deployments due to evacuations, difficulty in attracting experienced and sufficiently senior staff to serve in difficult places, destruction of field offices and equipment, poor living conditions, and high staff turnover. Those in the field reported a centralization of decision-making and information in Juba, resulting in delayed implementation of activities and a feeling of disempowerment at the field level. Operational presence and communications equipment in the field need to be enhanced in order to increase the speed by which critical humanitarian issues are identified and resolved. Measures to improve living conditions in the field must be accelerated to allow for minimal staff welfare as well as the expansion of humanitarian presence.

Partnership between UN agencies and international NGOs was observed as strong. However, the relationship between national NGOs and international NGOs/UN needs further attention. Prioritization processes, pooled funding, and rapid response mechanisms need to be applied in a manner that further strengthens national NGO capacity and their operational role. Relations with the government have been inconsistent and at times strained. Government restrictions on clearances of travel and distribution of supplies have limited delivery to opposition areas, particularly by NGOs, although the recent establishment of an 'airport desk' by the government has resulted in improved travel and transport of goods by air.

Accountability to Affected People

The HCT recognized that not enough was being done to advance collective accountability to affected people and expressed a general desire to improve in this area. There are individual agency initiatives but these are not joined-up under a collective or coordinated approach to be able to measure performance in this critical area. A collective framework or plan on accountability to affected people

would support more systematic action. Engaging national NGOs to advance work on this area would help ensure a 'bottom-up', indigenous approach.

Humanitarian Programme Cycle

The HCT opted to follow its own approach instead of applying the timeline and deliverables of the humanitarian programme cycle for a L3 emergency. This included the development of a Crisis Response Plan, which served a useful purpose in mobilizing resources but played less of a role in serving as a tool for the HC and HCT to manage the response. Stakeholders noted that the frequent revisions of the plan, often under tight timeframes, and the limited involvement of the sub-national level need to be improved. .
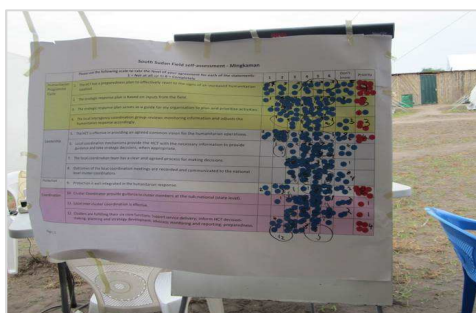
Although the HCT benefited from data from two pre-existing needs assessment/analysis tools, namely the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) and the Initial Rapid Needs Assessment (IRNA), there is a need for a broader consolidation and analysis of sectoral assessment information to better inform decision-making. The HCT would also benefit from the establishment of a joint monitoring and reporting framework to track progress against the indicators included in the Crisis Response Plan, and an information strategy on data collection and use, which took into account user/stakeholder feedback. The latter would support coherence among OCHA and cluster information products. Standardization of formats among clusters and with OCHA, particularly the 'who does what where' (3W) database, is also required, as well as verification mechanisms for checking the accuracy of reporting on presence/activities included in the 3W database.

Various advocacy initiatives and the resources mobilized through a pledging conference and other outreach activities are praiseworthy. This has been a significant benefit to the operation and the people in need. As of 30 July 2014, $902 million or 50 percent has been secured against the revised requirement of $1.8 billion requested in the last version of the Crisis Response Plan. Despite these efforts, funding remains insufficient and is uneven across clusters. "Unlocking" development financing for humanitarian programmes is crucial in this regard.

The Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF) has been used flexibly to resource response activities in line with the shifting pattern of needs and evolving priorities and the Central Emergency Response Fund has played a complementary role in financing critical gaps in the response. Together, these two pooled funds allocated $93 million to critical activities in South Sudan or ten percent of the funding received against the Crisis Response Plan to date. Additional allocations from both funds are underway. The strengthening of cluster monitoring capacity to revitalize a CHF monitoring and reporting framework is noteworthy.

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Finally, given the magnitude and scope of the crisis, the response requires measures above and beyond what is currently in place, and what humanitarian actors in South Sudan have capacity to delivery with current funding and resources. The international humanitarian system – particularly the IASC Principals, Emergency Directors, and donors at the capital level – must take the necessary measures to support the scale-up of the response to deliver beyond the current levels in South Sudan. Efforts to reach a political solution to this crisis also need to be redoubled.