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tracking the global humanitarian response to Covid-19

report

Acknowledgements

Development Initiatives (DI) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) have collaborated on this research to provide an independent and up-to-date overview of Covid-19 response – how much funding there has been, and how it has been delivered. Information like this helps donors give more effective support, and unpacks the data to show general funding trends, as well as the quality of funding and reporting.

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Executive summary

This report by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Development Initiatives (DI) analyses humanitarian funding to the Covid-19 pandemic response in 2020. It introduces new analysis by IRC and updates previous analysis provided by DI during 2020.¹

Key findings

Humanitarian funding failed to keep pace with rises in Covid-19 cases and their consequences. The impact of Covid-19 contributed to an increase in humanitarian needs by 40% over 2019's needs, and the gap between needs and funding grew. A total of US\$6.6 billion of humanitarian grants was contributed to the Covid-19 pandemic response, including US\$3.7 billion channelled to the UN's Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP). Just 39% of the GHRP's funding requirements were met.

By gross volume, the three largest recipients of overall humanitarian grant support for response to Covid-19 were Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan. A small number of donors carried a large portion of the Covid-19 humanitarian funding burden, among whom the largest bilateral contributors were the US and Germany, largely mirroring previous trends for humanitarian funding.

A humanitarian system already under strain was unable to mobilise sufficient additional resources when faced with a global shock. Covid-19 funding requirements within the GHRP were consistently less well funded than other UN appeal requirements in 2020. Of 52 countries, just 5 received more than 75% of funding required, while 12 received less than 25%.

Just 16.5% of all humanitarian funding to Covid-19 was provided directly to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (international, national and local), and just 20.5% of funds provided through the GHRP were channelled to NGOs. Critically, the reported data still does not show how much funding is passed down the funding chain to front-line implementers, for example from UN agencies to international and local NGOs.

Data reported to the UN Financial Tracking Service (FTS) and published to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) has significant gaps, creating an incomplete picture of the response. For example, data on when, where and to whom funding is committed and how quickly it is disbursed is incomplete and inconsistent. These gaps inhibit more effective planning and action.

Key recommendations

Donors should provide sufficient timely, multi-year, flexible funding to meet increasing immediate and longer-term needs due to Covid-19.

Donors should prioritise funding to front-line NGO implementers in fragile and conflict-affected contexts to ensure the response meets the needs of the most

vulnerable and those most likely to be left out of the response. In some fragile and conflict-affected states, NGOs provide more than 75% of the health response.²

Donors and aid organisations should normalise increased flexibility provisions introduced in the Covid-19 response and improve the accuracy of their reporting on the duration and earmarking of funding

Introduction

It has long been a challenge to track funding when a humanitarian disaster or crisis hits. After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, year on year people asked '[What happened to the money meant to rebuild Haiti?](#)' In 2014, when Ebola broke out across West Africa, attempts to track the funding meant for the response [only raised more questions](#). Today, nearly five years after the Grand Bargain commitments to improve financial transparency, and despite some progress, the data we need to inform timely decision-making and allow for accountability is still lacking in a number of key areas.

In March 2020, when Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) launched the [Global Humanitarian Response Plan](#) (GHRP) to support the response in low- and middle-income countries. Although the GHRP was not the only vehicle for responding to the pandemic, it accounted for the majority of international humanitarian aid for the crisis. On 31 December 2020, the GHRP officially concluded, marking a moment for stocktaking.

Two key takeaways emerge from the following analysis of the Covid-19 humanitarian financing data. First, the available data indicates a relatively bleak picture: funding for the Covid-19 humanitarian response has not been at the scale, speed or flexibility required to meet increasing needs, nor has enough funding gone directly to NGO implementers with greatest access to hard-to-reach, vulnerable populations. Second, inadequate reporting has obscured a complete understanding of where and which organisations funding is flowing to,

FTS. As our analysis below illustrates, data quality and completeness vary across both platforms. This results in variable utility and reliability for analysis. It remains impossible to create a complete and accurate picture of the response to this crisis. We need rapid improvements in reporting and data quality, for better transparency, accountability and outcomes.

Where were the impacts of Covid

How well did aid track with rising Covid-19 cases?

As of 31 December 2020, donors had committed or paid a total [of US\\$6.6 billion to the Covid-19 emergency response](#) across 160 countries, including US\$3.7 billion towards the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP). The GHRP alone was funded at just 39%, leaving a shortfall of US\$5.8 billion to meet the increasing and pressing humanitarian needs of populations in the 63 low- and middle-income countries it targeted. For comparison, non-Covid appeals were funded at 52% in 2020.

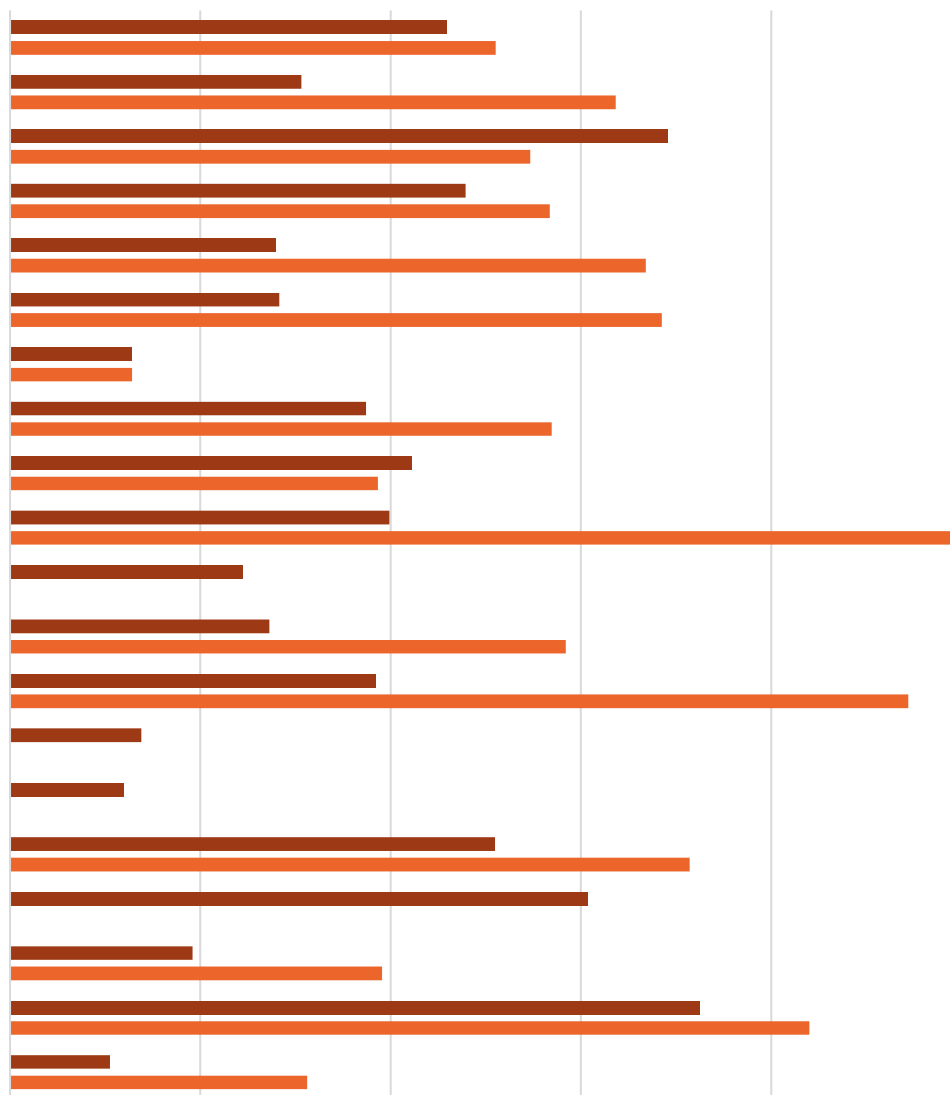
Figure 2: Humanitarian grants have not kept pace with the increasing scale of the Covid-19 crisis

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Source: (above): [Our World in Data](#). Area chart by country in GHRP, (below

Figure 3: Covid-19 appeals consistently received a lower proportion of funding than other humanitarian appeals

20 largest Covid-19 appeal requirements – Covid-19 GHRP requirements met compared to non-Covid requirements



Source: UNOCHA FTS.

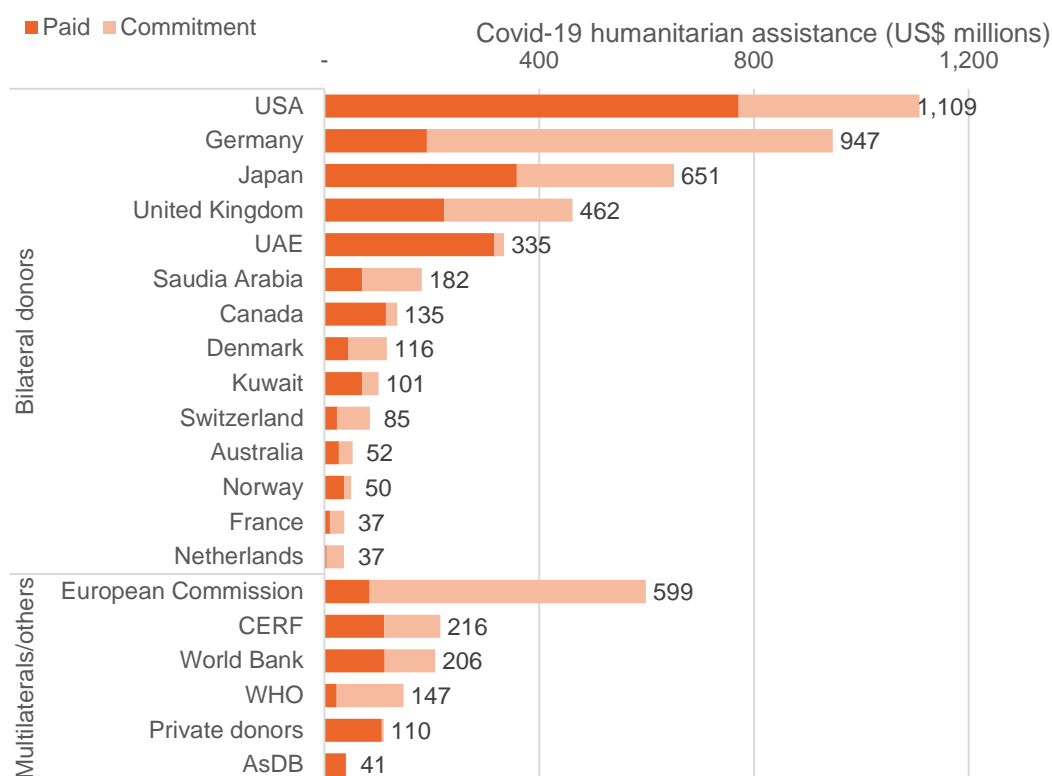
Notes: Countries are ranked by Covid-19 requirements as reported under the Covid-19 GHRP. Data is in current prices and was downloaded on 11 February 2020. Country data excludes regional plan requirements and funding except for Bangladesh RRP. DRC: Democratic Republic of the Congo; CAR: Central African Republic. Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Pakistan did not have a non-Covid appeal.

Who were the largest donors of humanitarian grants to the Covid-19 emergency response?

Funding patterns from bilateral donors for Covid-19 humanitarian needs largely mirror [previous trends for humanitarian funding](#). The largest volumes of humanitarian grants to the Covid-19 emergency response in 2020 were provided by the US (US\$1.1bn) and Germany (US\$945.9m), who have been the two largest donors of humanitarian grants since 2016. Together these two donors accounted for 47% of total humanitarian grant funding from governments for the Covid-19 emergency response, a slightly higher proportion than the 44% of grant funding they provided to all humanitarian needs in 2019.

Figure 6: Donor funding patterns for Covid-19 largely mirror those for other humanitarian grants

20 largest donors of humanitarian grants to Covid-19 response



Source: UNOCHA FTS. Notes: Only first-level funding shown. UAE: United Arab Emirates; CERF: Central Emergency Response Fund; AsDB: Asian Development Bank.

Can we see how much aid actually entered the humanitarian system and how quickly?

Not only is the entire emergency response several billion dollars short of meeting needs, there also appears to be a wide gap between paid and unpaid financial commitments, according to available data.⁴ If this data reflects reality, it would indicate that funding is not reaching those in need fast enough to stem the impacts of Covid-19 effectively and efficiently.

At face value, the data from the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) and International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) suggests that there may be a significant volume of funding committed that has not been disbursed, or that has been disbursed very slowly.

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The United States, the largest contributor to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) at over US\$1 billion committed and paid, fares better than most donors in how much of its aid is reported to have been paid: of its 582 reported contributions, 340 are marked as completed payments – including 116 updated from commitment to paid after initial reporting. On average, it has taken roughly one week (9 days) for a US contribution to be updated from commitment to payment, while the longest duration from commitment to payment was over a month (41 days).

In some cases, the slow release of committed funding may be appropriate – such as for aid committed towards important future initiatives, such as vaccine distribution. However, if the picture painted by the reported data is accurate, with just US\$2.8 billion disbursed out of a total of US\$6.6 billion committed, it would suggest that funding is not flowing fast enough to meet existing and rising needs. While some larger implementing organisations may be able to start programmes once a commitment is made, and before receiving funds, relying on reserved funding, this practice can cause significant challenges for smaller and especially local organisations that need money in hand to begin activities.

Unfortunately, we cannot have full confidence in what the data tells us about the timeliness with which funding has been disbursed. In part, the data appears to be a product of poor-quality and untimely reporting and publishing. For instance, European

Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) has reported that just 36 of 400 flows (US\$31.5 million of US\$410.3 million) are reported as paid. This is a significant gap between commitment and payment, suggesting that funding is not flowing fast enough to meet existing and rising needs.

What does the data miss?

It has been difficult to analyse fully the humanitarian funding to the Covid-19 emergency response. This is partly because the data-reporting infrastructure is inadequate, and partly because of inconsistent and incomplete reporting and publishing (including late reporting). For instance, current platforms do not capture whether donor funding is new or repurposed – meaning we cannot say how much new funding entered the system to respond to Covid-19, and how much existing funding was repurposed from one sector or country to another.

In addition, different properties of funding – duration (multi-year or short-term), degree of earmarking, extent of flexibility in grant agreements – can also be critical to ensure that a crisis response is efficient and effective. (International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Development Initiatives (DI) jointly explored this in a 2020 [report](#)).

In IRC's experience, a number of donors were ready to be flexible with existing

Recommendations

There are hints of the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, with vaccines reaching some low-income countries. However, fragile contexts – and especially marginalised populations within them, such as refugees – will likely receive vaccines long after distribution efforts in wealthier countries. Without changes to the delivery of and accountability for international aid, Covid-19 cases will not decline in these fragile states, with the risk of variants emerging that are resistant to vaccines.

Donors and UN agencies are uniquely positioned to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of aid through greater transparency and timely and accurate reporting of humanitarian financial data. Donors and aid organisations should fulfil their existing commitments to greater transparency within the Grand Bargain and ensure transparency remains central to future aid-reform efforts within the Grand Bargain and beyond.

More transparency is needed to: ensure assistance is targeted to where needs are highest, minimise gaps in the global humanitarian response, facilitate coordination between humanitarian actors, and enable accountability.

Notes

¹ Development initiatives, 2020. Chapter 3, Crisis financing to the Covid-19 pandemic response. Global Humanitarian Assistance report 2020. Available at: <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/crisis-financing-covid-19-pandemic-response>. Development initiatives, 2020. Financing humanitarian needs amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Available at: <https://devinit.org/resources/financing-humanitarian-needs-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

² UN News, 2019. Central Africans 'need our help now': UN's deputy relief chief. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1045662>

³ This excludes 11 countries in GHRP covered by only Regional Refugee and Migrant Response plans.

⁴ Funding flows are divided into three categories: pledged (which indicates a non-binding intended contribution), committed (which indicates a contractual agreement), and paid (which indicates actual disbursement).

⁵ According to FTS, NGOs received 20% of direct funding under the GHRP to date at the time of writing.

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We deliver trusted and actionable insights for decision-makers and partners based on what available data can tell us. We increase data use by growing people's skills, expertise and confidence in data and showing how data can drive better outcomes. And we improve what data is available by helping others to collect, share, manage