

EMERGENCY GAP BRIEFING



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WHY THE EMERGENCY GAP WORK

The humanitarian sector is increasingly challenged in its ability to reach and assist the victims of acute conflict. This conviction and the belief that the sector's current inability to ensure sufficient presence and to provide timely and adequate assistance must be addressed and overcome are the driving forces behind the Emergency Gap work. MSF Operational Centre Barcelona (OCBA) initiated the project in early 2016 with the aim **to bring attention to the fact that humanitarian actors are struggling to remain on the ground and deliver meaningful emergency response in hard-to-reach places when a major conflict erupts or when there is an escalation of violence in a protracted crisis.** This absence of sufficient humanitarian coverage and delivery is what we have called the *emergency gap*, and we believe it to be a key obstacle for preventing the avoidable loss of life and suffering in conflicts around the world.

WHAT IS THE EMERGENCY GAP PROJECT

The project has been designed in three consecutive steps. **First, the analytical phase has served to consolidate and articulate the diagnosis and conceptualisation of the issue,** based on our extensive operational experience in conflict settings. During this period we have produced a series of **policy papers** that address what we believe are the main drivers of the *emergency gap* and also identify key enablers and disablers for effective response in acute conflict. In parallel to the conceptual papers, we have examined the unfolding of the *emergency gap* in a number of **context-based case studies.** In the **second stage we hope to engage in a collegial and candid exchange with key humanitarian stakeholders,** including leading donors; emergency-minded NGOs; Red Cross and Red Crescent organisations; and relevant UN agencies and offices. Our aim is to **share our analysis and to gather reactions and alternative readings of the *emergency gap*.** These confidential

discussions will help us deepen our understanding of the subject and re-assess our analysis as necessary. It will also allow us to analyse the humanitarian sector's commitment to enhancing emergency response over the coming years so that we can incorporate this knowledge in our forthcoming global Emergency Gap analysis. Finally, the **third** step will be to use these findings to inform **MSF's strategic choices for the coming years** and to consider the necessary operational investments to continue to meet the growing needs of people living in insecurity and violence.

OUR AIM

The *emergency gap* will only grow bigger if the humanitarian community does not recognise the need to strengthen its focus, investments and capacity to deliver timely and quality emergency response in acute conflicts. This should not detract from the sectors' impressive strides in areas of disaster risk reduction, vulnerability, chronic needs and poverty, natural and man-made risks mitigation, migration and displacement, and building resilience in natural disasters and protracted crises contexts. **However, in the face of escalation of conflicts and mounting human suffering around the world, the need for an effective emergency response capacity remains as relevant as ever.** Our objective is to draw attention to the problem and to present lessons learnt and good practices that can sharpen the focus so there can be a meaningful improvement in the system's real capacity to address critical needs even when they occur in highly insecure and hard-to-reach places. The proposed approach is complementary to the prevalent focus on collective outcomes to address global challenges and the underlying causes of crises.



WHY IS THE EMERGENCY GAP HAPPENING

We have identified three internal factors of the current humanitarian system that have created a vicious circle leading to the *emergency gap*: conceptual mindset and structural.

Conceptually, the humanitarian imperative has become integrated within an ever-widening agenda where chronic poverty, climate vulnerability, political insecurity, terrorism and recurrent shocks intersect, and so humanitarian action has to be aligned with development and political goals. **Critical needs become relativized and this opens the door for the instrumentalisation of humanitarian action for long-term gains.** Furthermore, by mixing approaches from acute and protracted crises, and from natural disasters and armed conflict, and putting them all into the same concept of humanitarian assistance, the sector is no longer able to have meaningful discussions on humanitarian practice. **The operational reality of working in conflict, and its implications for humanitarian policy, has all but disappeared from the discussions.** If humanitarian action is to be another transformative power for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals then it will be perceived as more impactful when addressing the underlying causes of suffering than the suffering itself, and thus emergency response will not be considered a priority.

And when the principle of humanity is no longer the driving force of action, but just one of a number of other considerations and pulls –as loadable as they might be– this has a dramatic impact on the **mindset** of the humanitarian community. For one, **saving lives now becomes an operational choice and not a moral imperative, and can be swapped for more strategic gains.** By switching the focus away from emergency response, international humanitarian actors do not invest in core competencies, such as security management and negotiated access, and robust and responsive organisational systems in logistics, operations and human resources. On the other hand, the physical, organisational and financial risks that are particularly acute in highly insecure environments become an unsurmountable obstacle and not an operational challenge that must be overcome.

The humanitarian mindset has become conservative, risk-averse and cost-obsessed. Security and logistical challenges make working in acute conflict or in remote locations costly and operationally complex, which often is at odds with the push for cost-efficiency and longer-term gains.

Structurally, the humanitarian sector is not capitalising upon its diversity of actors, approaches and operational models. Instead coordination, planning, and funding streams are articulated around a UN-led architecture and processes, which often favours coherence of action over flexibility and timeliness. Moreover, **there is a mismatch between the core recipients of funding –UN agencies– and the frontline deliverers of aid:** international and national NGOs, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This is not only a major technical challenge for the rapid and cost-efficient transfer of money, but it is also a fundamental design flaw for supporting the necessary structural and operational investments that are critical for the ability to stay in deliver in acute crisis. Risk-aversion is favoured by the current structural set-up and is often driven by donors' stringent monitoring and reporting policies; unwillingness to accept uncertainty; to fund failure, loss or diversion of assets; and to accept that meeting critical needs in hard-to-reach places scores unfavourably under value for money criteria.

Humanitarian action is at a critical juncture, but far from being challenged by a funding gap or by an insufficiently integral strategic vision it **is failing at its core.** The resulting *emergency gap* is leaving people who are trapped in armed conflicts destitute of assistance and protection. Until the international community can effectively prevent conflicts and recurrent shocks, **we have the obligation to invest in a humanitarian system that is able to save the lives of people living in conflicts today.**