

**Flagship  
Initiative**



# **Reimagining Humanitarian Action**

STATUS UPDATE ONE: FEBRUARY 2024



“We want you to recognize us, listen to us, understand us. We want to be equal partners to co-construct interventions.”

**– Community member at a community engagement activity in Colombia, November 2023.**

## Reimagining Humanitarian Action

STATUS UPDATE ONE: FEBRUARY 2024

Humanitarian emergencies are becoming more frequent, complex, and protracted. At the same time, the humanitarian operating environment is becoming more resource-constrained, uncertain, and complex.

Humanitarian coordination currently emphasizes a standardized approach to emergencies. While this model can respond at scale, it often does so at the expense of the empowerment of local actors, systems, and people. As a result, humanitarian response does not always foster long-term resilience among crisis-affected communities nor help communities move beyond dependence on humanitarian assistance. And yet, in times of increased humanitarian need and reduced humanitarian resources, resilient communities, better prepared to overcome crises, will be essential to sustaining humanitarian response in the future.

The Flagship Initiative is a radical shift in humanitarian coordination and response. It aims to deliver solutions and build resilience by ensuring the priorities of crisis-affected communities drive humanitarian assistance. Systematically engaging communities by localizing humanitarian decision-making, empowering local partners, and putting community priorities – and not sectors – at the heart of humanitarian programming, the initiative seeks to create the space for a more holistic, community-driven, and sustainable humanitarian system, one that is ready to face a new reality of increasingly complex challenges.

## The pilot countries

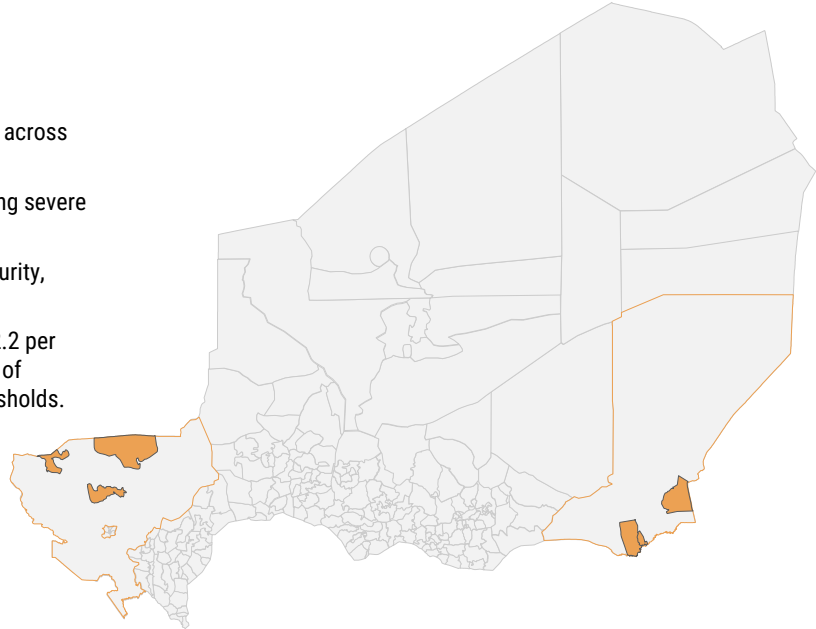


### Colombia

- The initiative is being piloted in five departments.
- Internal armed conflict has affected nearly 10 million people in the country.
- 8.5 million people have been displaced.
- A similar number remain under the influence or control of Non-State Armed Groups.
- Food insecurity affects 15 million Colombians.
- Despite dwindling funding, the country's resilience is evident in its strong social leadership and community initiatives.

## Niger

- The initiative is being piloted in six communes across two vast and sparsely populated regions.
- 17 per cent of Niger's population is experiencing severe humanitarian crises.
- Displacement is being driven by ongoing insecurity, food shortages, epidemics, and flooding.
- Alarming rates of global acute malnutrition: 12.2 per cent. Severe acute malnutrition in 2.4 per cent of children surpasses the WHO's emergency thresholds.



## The pilot countries



### Philippines

- The initiative is being piloted across three of the most typhoon-exposed regions in the country.
- The Philippines is the world's most disaster-prone country according to the 2023 World Risk Report, with more than 13.7 million people affected by natural disasters and hazards.
- According to the World Bank, climate change could impose substantial economic and human costs, potentially reducing GDP by as much as 13.6 per cent by 2040.
- Economic damages due to climate change could reach 13.6 per cent of GDP by 2040.
- Investing in resilience is cost-effective, with every US\$1 spent saving US\$4-US\$7 in response.
- Since Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, the government has developed significant disaster response capabilities and a new decentralization process that will devolve most national functions to local levels, meaning there is a historic opportunity for greater localization.

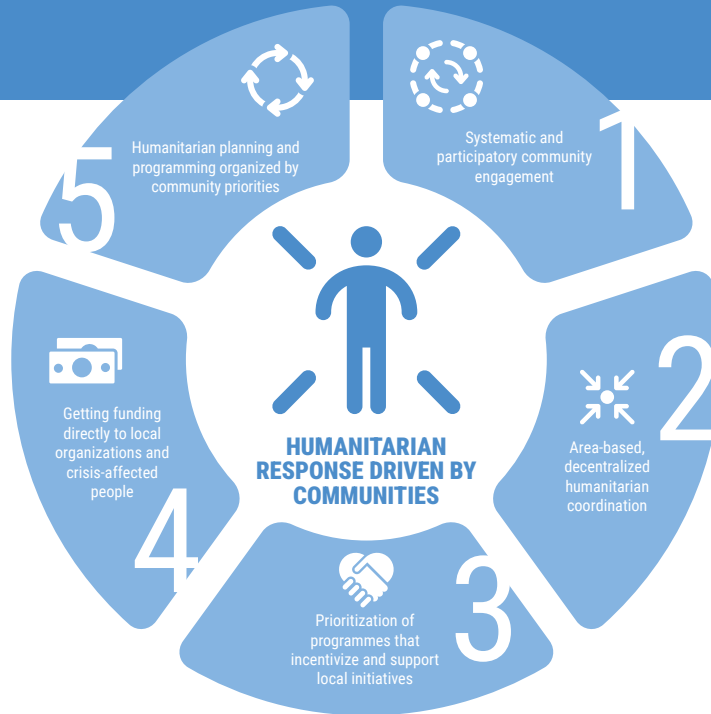


## The pilot countries



### South Sudan

- The initiative is being piloted across four communities in four different states with an aim to graduate approximately 30,000 people from dependence on humanitarian assistance toward self-reliance, with a focus on meeting displacement with durable solutions.
- Twelve years post-independence, South Sudan faces worsening conditions amid ongoing violence and a precarious peace process.
- A roadmap, signed in August 2022, aims for a new constitution and elections by December 2024, but the election period risks aggravating conflicts.
- The country confronts a severe humanitarian crisis, with 9.4 million needing assistance and 7.8 million facing acute food insecurity in 2023.
- Over 2.2 million have been displaced due to conflicts since 2013.
- Humanitarian efforts are substituting basic state functions, highlighting the critical need for peace and development to reduce reliance on aid.



## Humanitarian action reimagined

The four pilot countries spent 2023 reimagining a humanitarian system driven by the priorities of communities and reorientating the humanitarian coordination apparatus accordingly. While learning is being studied so that good practices can be shared and replicated globally, the following five interdependent pillars emerged as central to the efforts of the Flagship Initiative across the four pilot countries.



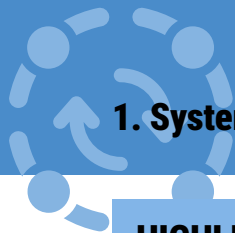
“Livelihood opportunities for the youth and security for people to return home are a top priority.”

– Chap Unun Betp, Community High-Level Committee Chairperson in Bentiu IDP camp, South Sudan

## 1 Systematic and participatory community engagement

When communities are empowered to interact with assistance as equal partners, the assistance is more sustainable, leads to greater resilience, and reduces future humanitarian need. All four countries have made systematic participatory community engagement the cornerstone of humanitarian response. In each country, engagement is context-specific and distinct. Rather than seeking to validate response decisions that have already been taken, there is an attempt to systematically understand community priorities, ambitions, and capacities so that communities drive decision-making and funding and programming continuously adapt to their emerging priorities.





## 1. Systematic and participatory community engagement



### HIGHLIGHTS OF PROGRESS THUS FAR

- The four pilot countries have developed systematic and context-specific participatory community engagement approaches. While community engagement is not a new concept, the engagement of communities is being reimagined as a continuous dialogue, with community priorities continually informing humanitarian response. An example in the **Philippines** is the Resilience-Based Participatory Community Appraisal (ReBPCA) tool, which was tested in November 2023 in Tayuman in Binangonan, Rizal. This helped inform how community engagement could be systematically replicated and underscored the indispensable role of community organizing in empowering individuals to engage effectively with humanitarian assistance.
- In **Colombia**, the first-ever community engagement forum was held in which humanitarian agencies met with over 100 community representatives – including but not limited to indigenous, LGBTQIA+, and displaced communities. The representatives articulated a clear demand to align humanitarian assistance with community priorities and the principles of systematic and participatory community engagement in Colombia were developed.
- For **Niger**, community engagement started with a community priority assessment across the six communes. This provided the space for communities to discuss their challenges and precisely specify the assistance they hoped to receive. These findings were then analysed with local humanitarian partners and local authorities from which response plans for each commune emerged. These plans were made operational only when the plans had been confirmed to align with community priorities by the community themselves.
- The **Philippines** has a long history of innovating around community engagement and organization. To capitalize on this experience, in November 2023, the heads of the offices of the four Flagship pilot countries visited Tacloban. The city bore the brunt of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 and experienced significant humanitarian assistance. The teams visited two project sites: one in which communities drove decision-making and another in which they did not. The difference between the two was stark, and a compelling case study in the importance of participatory community engagement.
- Identified communities in the four states in **South Sudan** in which the Flagship Initiative is being piloted were systematically engaged. To date, OCHA has conducted over 50 consultations with communities, approximately every two weeks since the pilot began, as part of a model that supports ongoing dialogue with communities to offer up space for them to identify their priorities, against which OCHA engages to facilitate action.



“The Flagship Initiative comes at the right time because it will not only allow the implementation of projects at the level of our municipalities, but it will also promote consideration of the real needs of the local population”

– Ide Yacouba Abdoul Aziz, Coordinator of the NGO EDHL in Ayorou, Niger

## 2 Area-based, decentralized humanitarian coordination

The architecture of humanitarian coordination typically resides in capitals and is limited to IASC members. While this facilitates coordination among major humanitarian actors and with the central government, it has also positioned humanitarian decision-making far from the communities impacted by it. Across all four pilot countries, OCHA staff have been deployed to sub-national offices closer to communities, local actors, and local authorities. This area-based coordination fosters stronger collaboration between humanitarian, peace, development, climate change/environment, and migration efforts, opens coordination mechanisms to local government and community organizations and ensures that crisis-affected communities are continuously engaged.



## 2. Area-based, decentralized humanitarian coordination

# Flagship Initiative



### HIGHLIGHTS OF PROGRESS THUS FAR

- The **Colombia** team deployed area-based coordinators in October 2023 to three regions in which the Flagship Initiative is operating. This has resulted in closer engagement with communities as well local partners, local government and the private sector in generating a common diagnosis with the aim of developing integrated response plans that sustainably tackle the root causes of humanitarian need.
- In **Niger**, OCHA has for the first time integrated humanitarian response considerations in the coordination committees of mayors in each commune in which the Flagship Initiative is being piloted. Since each mayor has a statutory obligation to manage a communal development plan, the aim is to facilitate the coordination of humanitarian and development initiatives by local authorities. In N'Guigmi commune, in Diffa region, the mayor has signed an order (arrêté) establishing a new coordination mechanism to “oversee the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of humanitarian action, development, and stabilization activities at the commune level”. This committee includes local government; civil society; religious and traditional leaders; women, youth, and representatives of people with disabilities; representatives of refugees, IDPs, and host populations. OCHA is aiming to establish such committees in all six communes. Thus far, mayors in the communes in which the Flagship Initiative is being piloted have facilitated engagement sessions with communities and local humanitarian actors to discuss priorities and the response to them. Coordination teams have been decentralized to N'guigmi in Diffa region and Ouallam in Tillabery
- Coordination teams and mechanisms have been decentralized to 23 barangays (villages) across three regions in the **Philippines** in which the Flagship Initiative is being implemented. Such decentralization aims to serve as a point of convergence for humanitarian actors, local government units, local NGOs, and communities.
- Area-based leadership has been reinforced in three areas in **South Sudan** in which the initiative is being implemented to decentralize community engagement and decision-making. OCHA encouraged area-based planning among its partners to ensure the response is driven by context and results in assistance that meets community priorities and builds resilience.



“It is important that the communities solve their problems by themselves. Communities should sit together to discuss their issues. This is how we can resolve them. Through sharing ideas from all sides.”

– Community member in Malakal, South Sudan

## 3 **Prioritization of programmes that incentivize and support local initiatives**

Bureaucratic and centralized processes may help manage the complexity of humanitarian response, but they can also lock local and national actors out of decision-making. Local partners often possess deep contextual knowledge about the regions in which they operate, formidable local capacities and strong relationships with the communities they assist. In the four pilot countries, local and non-traditional humanitarian partners, including local and national governments, have been familiarized with and prioritized in the new decentralized humanitarian coordination architecture. Their unique understanding of the context and culture of local communities makes them key allies in the delivery of community priorities in the future.



### 3. Prioritization of programmes that incentivize and support local initiatives

## Flagship Initiative

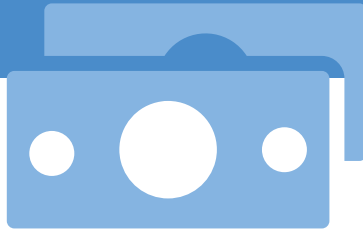


#### HIGHLIGHTS OF PROGRESS THUS FAR

- In **Colombia**, the Humanitarian Country Team has initiated a process of mapping all local NGOs and partners and is conducting an assessment that will guide partner capacity-building. The HCT is also developing a localization strategy that will empower local actors, increase their participation in humanitarian decision-making fora, capacitate them on a range of humanitarian-related issues, and support their fundraising efforts.
- In **Niger**, the team is mapping and liaising with communities, community associations, and community leaders to better understand the best way to scale-up community engagement in sparsely populated regions riven by insecurity. They have identified a local organization in each of the six communes in which the Flagship Initiative operates as a community engagement partner. A workshop in November 2023 involving local government representatives and local partners resulted

in updated collaboration frameworks to better define the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian actors at the local level.

- In the **Philippines**, strides have been made to open humanitarian coordination mechanisms to non-traditional humanitarian actors to ensure the participation of civil society organizations and the private sector.
- In **South Sudan**, the OCHA team has made significant efforts to raise awareness of the modality. Sensitization sessions with all levels of the government and international and national humanitarian actors have aimed to build consensus around the need for a more local and context-specific approach to humanitarian response. Efforts have been made to support the engagement of South Sudanese civil society in humanitarian decision-making. A review of the tools used to support the humanitarian response to assess how to adapt using a Flagship Initiative lens to support identified priorities may help enable adaptive planning.



“There should be a combination of strict rules and established procedures with the rich insights and active engagement of local communities. This balanced approach is vital in constructing resilient infrastructure frameworks for disaster management.”

– Jessar Adornado, Deputy Head, Office of Civil Defense in Region 5, Philippines

## 4 Getting funding directly to local organizations and crisis-affected people

Despite local and national humanitarian actors being the first to respond to emergencies, they received a tiny fraction of humanitarian funding. This does little to represent the value of these actors to the humanitarian system. To ensure local actors retain the capabilities to respond and local communities have the resilience to withstand crises, OCHA is promoting innovative ways to adapt funding processes and mechanisms to more efficiently channel funding to local and national humanitarian actors and communities to reinforce local capacity, community engagement, and resilience.

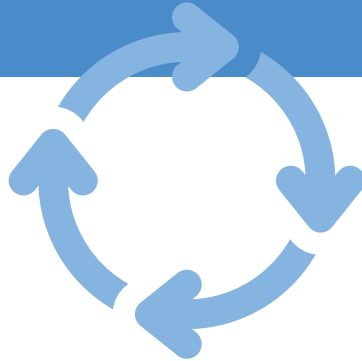
## 4. Getting funding directly to local organizations and crisis-affected people

# Flagship Initiative



### HIGHLIGHTS OF PROGRESS THUS FAR

- OCHA is exploring opportunities for establishing Regional Humanitarian Funds for Asia and the Pacific, including a window for the **Philippines**, and for Latin America and the Caribbean, with a window for Colombia, to specifically fund local humanitarian actors and contribute to the localization of humanitarian response.
- In **South Sudan**, as of 2024, OCHA is exploring ways to embed the modality that the Flagship Initiative enables to inform country-based pooled funds' allocation strategies. In addition, donors continue to consider increasing funding to enable localization.
- The OCHA team in **Niger** has added a requirement for partners to conduct community engagement to access CERF funding in the country, in addition to exploring how pooled funding can be used to support the continuous engagement of communities by local NGOs.



“We cannot depend on humanitarian assistance any more. Humanitarian assistance is for emergencies.”

– **Community member in Bentiu IDP camp, South Sudan**

## **5 Humanitarian planning and programming organized by community priorities**

To respond to the priorities of communities in fast-evolving crises, humanitarian actors need to be able to react to the changing situation. And yet the increasingly bureaucratic burden of humanitarian planning can disenfranchise the people these processes aim to serve. This needs to be reversed, and the four pilot countries, through area-based coordination and systematic participatory community engagement, are looking at ways to make response plans more concise and community priority-focused.



## 5. Humanitarian planning and programming organized by community priorities

# Flagship Initiative



### HIGHLIGHTS OF PROGRESS THUS FAR

- The team in **Colombia** sought to streamline humanitarian planning process in two ways. Firstly, by merging the 2024-5 humanitarian needs overview and humanitarian response plan with a community priority response plan, developed with the broad participation of local communities, leaders, and organizations, which gives greater emphasis to community priorities and perspectives. Secondly, the initiative is consolidating a number of separate cross-cutting humanitarian standards into a cohesive people-centered approach that will be piloted shortly.
- In the **Philippines**, the OCHA team is consolidating community priorities into the first Philippines Peoples' Plan, which is due to be launched in 2024. The plan will articulate preparedness, response, and recovery from the perspective of communities.
- In **South Sudan**, humanitarian needs assessment and response plans, which consumed over 60 per cent of country office staff time in 2022 and totaled 330 pages, were for the first time merged and made more concise. However, the shorter document does not reflect reduced goals: the strategic outcomes remain the same. The 2024 South Sudan Humanitarian Need Overview and Response Plan is 25 pages. OCHA and FAO signed a partnership agreement on 15 January 2024 to collaborate on the engagement with communities to promote food security and livelihoods through localization.
- In **Niger**, within the framework of the humanitarian response plan, communitarian engagement assessments have been conducted in the six communes in which the Flagship is being implemented. The outcomes of these assessments have resulted in projects being orientated to respond directly to the priorities of communities.



## How responses are changing because of the Flagship Initiative

The Flagship Initiative envisages a humanitarian system that responds to the realities of a situation and to the priorities of crisis-affected communities. Emergency contexts are fluid and ever-changing, and a response should be too. The four pilot countries are contextualizing the five pillars in ways that ensure communities are continuously engaged in response decisions so that when circumstances change and priorities evolve, the humanitarian response remains relevant and effective. Here are some examples of the way in which community priorities inform humanitarian response:

- As a result of deliberating with communities about proposed work plans in **Colombia**, several UN agencies have been revising their planned activities to focus on community priorities, which included a greater focus on women’s reproductive health and the economic resilience of displaced populations through livelihoods support. Engagement efforts in La Mojana in northern Colombia resulted in the community requesting that humanitarian assistance cease and rather the root causes of problems be addressed. To facilitate this, the community organized itself into an association and requested support from OCHA to advocate for the addressing of root causes with the local and national government. A CERF-funded intervention in Colombia is also being used to pilot ways in which community engagement can guide integrated responses around common objectives.
- As a result of the recording of community priorities during community engagement activities in **Niger**, these priorities are being integrated into commune-level development plans.
- In Surigao City in the **Philippines**, the Badjao people, a coastal indigenous community, were due to be relocated inland to protect them from typhoons. Yet, once engaged, it became apparent that these seafaring people wanted reinforced shelter able to withstand the impacts of climate change so that they retained access to the ocean from which many derived their livelihoods. One example of the many adaptations made to the humanitarian response in the country.
- In **South Sudan** the Flagship Initiative helped to understand the priorities of internally displaced people in Masha settlement and Naivasha camp in Wau (Warrap State) province. As a result, in January 2024, a voluntary return process was initiated to assist displaced people to return to their places of origin. Priorities expressed included cash assistance for transportation and a return package. In Malakal (Upper Nile), as a result of rigorous community engagement, over 800 displaced households were provided land by the government, and the tools and seeds by which to cultivate this land. In Bentiu (Unity State) and Bor (Jonglei/GPAA), community engagement with IDPs in the Bilnyang and Taragok is ongoing.



## What we learned in 2023

The Flagship Initiative is an exploratory process: some approaches will work, others will not. The aim is to understand why and, where desirable, how approaches can be replicated and brought to scale. To do so, we have engaged an external rigorous learning and evaluation function to support pilot countries learn from setbacks, identify promising new approaches, and develop them for replication in other contexts. The first evaluation report will be published in March 2024.

At the 2023 Global Humanitarian Policy Forum in New York in December, in the session Rethinking Humanitarian Coordination, humanitarian practitioners discussed the Flagship Initiative's aims and progress thus far. One panellist noted that the Flagship Initiative is providing "another opportunity to rethink, reshape, reinvent" the humanitarian system, "but this time it is happening from the bottom up... This is an important change." Find the recording of the session and the forum report here: <https://www.unocha.org/events/2023-global-humanitarian-policy-forum>

“The Flagship is not just a path but a two-way street. Local governments contribute their direct, on-the-ground insights, and in exchange, they can gain access to qualitative data and community feedback. And in the process, it is important for different organizations to work together and share resources.”

– Dr. Cedric Daep, Chief of APSEMO, Philippines

“For international humanitarian assistance to have the greatest impact for the greatest number of people in the years ahead, the priorities of affected communities must drive response efforts, and local actors must be supported and empowered to deliver the response wherever possible. To achieve this, a bold new way to coordinate, deliver and finance humanitarian action is needed.”

– **Martin Griffiths, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator**



Find out more about the Flagship Initiative: [www.unocha.org/flagship-initiative](http://www.unocha.org/flagship-initiative)

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