

Solutions from the Start

Maintaining humanitarian action on solutions to displacement after the funding crisis

Context

The magnitude of the current funding cuts has forced the humanitarian system to make painful decisions about how to prioritize our responses within and across crises. Being guided by the principle of impartiality¹, it was agreed that the new “hyper-prioritized” response plans would only target people in areas with the most severe, life-threatening needs (level 4 or 5 on a five-point scale, facing extreme or catastrophic conditions). But while we may have to reduce the breadth of our operations, NRC believes that in the locations where humanitarians do remain present, we can and must work in a manner that is sustainable and lays a foundation for solutions to displacement. Doing so is essential: with over 122 million people displaced globally and the numbers steadily growing, we cannot afford to ignore solutions at the outset of responses. Adopting a solutions-oriented approach is also more cost-effective: providing repeated cycles of short-term emergency assistance, often for years or even decades, is expensive, ineffective, and fails to build (and sometimes, inadvertently undermines) local capacities that are critical for recovery. The following note outlines how humanitarians can promote solutions from the start, even in our newly constrained resource environment and “hyper-prioritized” responses.

What does “solutions from the start” mean?

“Solutions from the start” is about adopting a solutions orientation from day one of a crisis by not only responding to immediate needs, but doing so in a manner that embeds a trajectory towards durable solutions to displacement² and sustainable recovery. It involves progressively reducing displacement-related vulnerabilities, removing barriers to inclusion in national and local systems that offer sustainable access to services, rights and livelihood opportunities, and enabling displaced people to make informed and voluntary choices about their futures. This can be achieved by working with and through local actors, institutions, and systems wherever possible, proactively addressing protection issues and other systemic barriers to inclusion, and pivoting away from direct service provision as a default humanitarian response modality. A solutions orientation should shape choices about programme modalities, partnerships, and exit strategies, ensuring that assistance does not entrench dependency but instead lays the foundation for long-term recovery.

How this approach can be operationalized

The following section gives some practical examples of how a solutions orientation can be embedded into programme design and response modalities from the outset of a crisis, even in the most severe (severity 4/5) locations and in response to life-threatening needs, and flags steps that may be required to create an enabling environment for this to happen.

A. Elements of solutions-oriented programme design

- Link responses to existing government emergency/recovery/solutions/development plans wherever possible, while ensuring impartiality and attention to protection concerns;

¹ Humanitarian action must be guided solely on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress, without discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. ICRC, The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Publication Ref. 0513, Geneva, 1996, p. 4.

² A durable solution is achieved when a displaced person no longer has specific assistance or protection needs linked to their displacement and can access rights and services without displacement-related discrimination.

- Map and address barriers affecting different displaced groups by conducting early multi-sectoral analysis (legal, policy, protection, context);
- Rehabilitate or support existing infrastructure and local systems instead of creating parallel ones;
- Design interventions with clear exit strategies from the outset, considering the capacity and willingness of local actors;
- Collect disaggregated data (gender, age, disability, legal status) and monitor the response to ensure marginalised groups are not excluded from assistance or recovery;
- Integrate protection across all aspects of the response and recovery efforts, including by advocating with authorities to assume their responsibilities for meeting the rights and needs of displaced persons;
- Incorporate climate-sensitivity, climate impact and environmental risk assessments as standard, to safeguard sustainability and prevent solutions from being undermined.

B. Solutions-oriented programme examples

- Repair water infrastructure or engage other actors to address acute water shortages, avoiding reliance on water trucking;
- Restore access to basic education for displaced children by facilitating integration into national systems and repairing facilities where needed;
- Provide displaced persons access to civil documentation to enable them to regain access to state support systems;
- Strengthen housing solutions with owner-driven upgrades and locally-led planning, focusing on eviction prevention rather than temporary shelter distribution;
- Re-establish local markets and livelihoods by identifying and removing policy/practical barriers to economic activity.

C. What is needed to make it happen:

- IASC and OCHA leadership should consistently reaffirm that solutions-oriented approaches can be included in Humanitarian Response Plans, even where they are “hyper-prioritized.”
- Humanitarian leaders and coordinators should be supported and made accountable for embedding solutions in their work, including by engaging other relevant actors and aligning with national systems.
- Local actors and communities should be meaningfully engaged in the design, implementation, and monitoring of responses to ensure they are contextually appropriate and sustainable.
- Donors should promote solutions-oriented approaches in their investments, providing flexible and longer-term funding wherever possible.

What (or more importantly, who) are we missing beyond solutions from the start?

The focus of this note is how we can continue to promote solutions within humanitarian responses *where they remain present*. However, due to the funding cuts, 182 million people in need of assistance and protection will not be targeted by humanitarian responses. Many of those people are displaced, have remaining needs, and will require support to progress towards a solution. While the primary responsibility for providing that support lies with the States, some displaced persons may face persecution or exclusion and, even where this is not the case, many national and local authorities may themselves require support to effectively assist their displaced citizens and residents. As such, it is vital that States, other development actors, the humanitarian system, and the private sector urgently explore how to advance solutions for displaced populations that can no longer be served through humanitarian funding.