



In January 2020, the UN humanitarian chief, Mark Lowcock, visited the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, home to over 76,000 women, children and men. He met with Syrian families and the aid agencies helping them. Credit: OCHA

Foreword

2020 was a year like no other. New and protracted conflicts and a mounting climate crisis had already generated record-high humanitarian needs. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. It upended the entire world, but its secondary impacts hit vulnerable countries hardest.

The pandemic closed schools, strained health systems, disrupted food imports, triggered a surge in gender-based violence and triggered a global economic downturn that sharpened inequality. Poverty rates are rising, and decades of progress are at risk.

In response to the pandemic, OCHA and its partners in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee launched the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19. It called for US\$9.5 billion to boost health, food, protection, livelihoods and education services, and to ensure continued support for existing humanitarian programmes in 63 countries. By the year's end, donors had provided \$3.8 billion.

The Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) and the Central Emergency Response Fund

(CERF) allocated \$490 million to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. This funding enabled the World Food Programme and partners to expand logistics services, including the transportation of supplies and emergency workers.

CERF piloted new ways of working in response to the pandemic. They included providing more flexible funding to UN agencies and more direct funding to NGOs responding on the front lines; earmarking a portion of resources for women-led organizations to respond to gender-based violence; increasing support for cash programming; and allowing for more flexibility to adjust projects in light of so much uncertainty.

Humanitarian organizations adapted their programmes to respect social distancing guidelines. OCHA shifted staff to work remotely wherever possible, and it boosted support to field teams across Central and South America and Southern and Eastern Africa.

The pandemic heightened pre-existing hunger levels, leaving 270 million people facing

starvation by the year's end. At the sharpest end were communities in the Central Sahel, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, north-east Nigeria and Yemen that were just one step away from famine. OCHA raised the alarm in the Security Council of the risk of multiple famines.

The OCHA-coordinated Global Humanitarian Overview for 2020 called for \$38.5 billion, which donors responded to with \$19 billion in funding.

To help humanitarian organizations get ahead of crises, OCHA provided \$140 million from CERF for anticipatory action. This included landmark projects to avert suffering amid imminent food insecurity in Somalia and floods in Bangladesh. In Somalia, for example, anticipatory funding was pivotal to reducing the impact of multiple shocks for over 600,000 Somalis. Importantly, it helped mobilize additional funding to reduce needs amid the triple threat of floods, a locust infestation and COVID-19. Forecasts in October estimated that 2.1 million people would be in crisis by the year's end, but the assistance provided helped reduce that number to 1.6 million.

CERF and CBPFs allocated a record \$1.8 billion to support humanitarian action.

Needs rose in Syria, leaving more than half of the population reliant on emergency assistance. OCHA mobilized resources, negotiated humanitarian access and advocated for civilians to be better protected. Aid through the Humanitarian Response Plan reached 3.9 million people each month.

Yemen remained the world's worst crisis in 2020, with 13 million people unsure where their next meal would come from and 16,000 people starving. Despite these acute needs, donors reduced funding, which meant aid operations had to be downscaled.

The impacts of the climate crisis brought prolonged drought, intense storms and

flooding to many parts of the world, including the Sahel and Horn of Africa regions. The Caribbean experienced its most active hurricane season on record. Millions of people in Central America were affected by Hurricanes Eta and Iota, with El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua hardest hit. OCHA deployed search-and-rescue teams and supported needs assessments and coordination efforts.

OCHA mobilized funding for response to storms in the Philippines and Viet Nam. When Cyclone Harold hit Vanuatu, the OCHA-managed Connecting Business initiative collaborated with the Vanuatu Business Resilience Council to support emergency response by the private sector.

On top of the climate crisis, conflict and violence deepened in the Central Sahel, with Burkina Faso becoming the world's fastest growing displacement crisis. OCHA co-hosted a donor conference, raising \$1.7 billion for humanitarian support to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

In November, violence broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region. OCHA advocated for the protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law so that aid agencies could gain access to protect and assist millions of people in need.

All our efforts were possible only through the generosity and commitment of our donors and partners. Thank you for your contributions to OCHA and to humanitarian action.



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