



# DEFAULT TO DESIGN: Shifting surge post pandemic



## PRACTICE PAPER SERIES



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## About inSights

inSights (the Institute of Innovation for Gender and Humanitarian Transformation) is a Bangladesh-based social enterprise providing insights that challenge the current ways of working in humanitarian aid and gender affairs. inSights aims to transform ideas within the humanitarian, social and businesses sectors, turning them into innovations, knowledge and strategies.

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Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice. As an ethically driven business, we combine humanitarian passion with entrepreneurial agility to think and do things differently.

## About the Humanitarian Horizons program

Humanitarian Horizons 2021–24 is the second iteration of HAG's partnership-based, sector-wide research program. Focusing on Asia and the Pacific, Humanitarian Horizons aims to progress thinking on the role of the humanitarian sector and produce evidence about ways to achieve better outcomes for crisis-affected people. The program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The research program for 2021–24 builds on achievements of the 2018–21 iteration and HAG's experience supporting the sector for almost 10 years. Humanitarian Horizons has three interlocking streams: 1) Power, People and Local Leadership 2) Greening the System and 3) Real-Time Analysis and Influence. It is underpinned by a fourth stream focused on governance, accountability, and monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.

The Real-Time Analysis and Influence Stream aims to provide timely exploration of emerging issues and thematic areas across the humanitarian sector and to produce practice papers. Practice papers are concise and high-level analysis pieces intended to inform humanitarian response practices and support decision-making and discussions about future action.

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# Introduction

“ ‘Gone are the days of surge teams coming in and dictating what is happening. It is about how we support partners to engage and be at the forefront.’ [surge manager]

Surge practices are shifting in both fundamental and subtle ways due to the influence of multiple external drivers. Drivers this paper considers include the role of the pandemic, the localisation agenda, and growing environmental awareness, which have forced organisations to rethink their approaches to surge. However, many humanitarian actors have also proactively designed new practices, helping to drive change. **This practice paper looks to capture both the default and the designed processes involved in creating a new surge landscape for the humanitarian sector.**

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the way humanitarian actors respond to major emergencies. Border closures, isolation, quarantine and social distancing made rapid and in-person deployment of people impossible, difficult or inappropriate. While the restriction of humanitarian access is not a new challenge, the pandemic's global nature deeply challenged a system that continues to rely on international actors to deliver essential goods and services in response to major disasters or other humanitarian crises.

The humanitarian sector has also been evolving to meet key policy commitments. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit committed the sector to supporting and prioritising the role of local leadership, knowledge and resources. Alongside this agenda, the sector has become increasingly aware of its own environmental impact through unsustainable relief supplies and frequent air travel. The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations<sup>1</sup> committed the sector to reducing environmental impact and considering more localised staffing and supply chains. The pandemic forced international

actors to rely more heavily on local leadership and capacities to lead humanitarian responses – in many contexts, localised surge emerged by default rather than by design.

These circumstances have created an opportunity to examine how surge practices are evolving and what lessons can be learned. What constitutes good surge practice, post-pandemic? What kinds of people should deploy, and what skillsets are needed in remote humanitarian roles?

## About this paper

This paper explores the evolution of surge practices through default and designed processes. It seeks to document lessons from the recent rapid changes and suggest a pathway for contemporary humanitarian surge.

This paper explores three questions:

1. What form did humanitarian surge take during the pandemic in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Bangladesh and, more recently, in the Ukraine response?
2. How are humanitarian surge practices evolving to better support local leadership and capacity in these contexts?
3. What skillsets and support mechanisms are needed to ensure humanitarian surge effectively supports localisation in these contexts?

The paper is structured in two sections:

### SECTION 1: Shifting Surge

Provides an overview of recent and ongoing shifts in surge practices, including learnings from five recent and rapid shifts amplified during the pandemic.

### SECTION 2: Improving surge through design

Explores opportunities to support best practices in relation to five shifts and associated learnings.

<sup>1</sup> ICRC & IFRC (2022), [The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations](#).

## **Box 1: Unpacking humanitarian surge**

### **What is humanitarian surge?**

We define humanitarian surge as: the deployment of experts and other specialised humanitarian personnel responding to a humanitarian crisis, whether caused by climate, natural or biological hazards or conflict. The deployment of humanitarian personnel can be remote, in-person or hybrid (involving some time in-country as well as remote support), and sourced locally from the affected country, regionally or internationally. Expertise can come in a wide variety of forms, from medical workers to technical and sectorial experts, such as doctors, logisticians, information management personnel, or water and sanitation experts.

### **Why surge?**

In the event of a humanitarian crisis, local actors and communities are the first responders assisting affected populations. In contexts where humanitarian needs exceed the response capacity of responders in-country, humanitarian surge programs facilitate access to specific expertise and human resources by actors leading the response.

### **How long are people deployed for?**

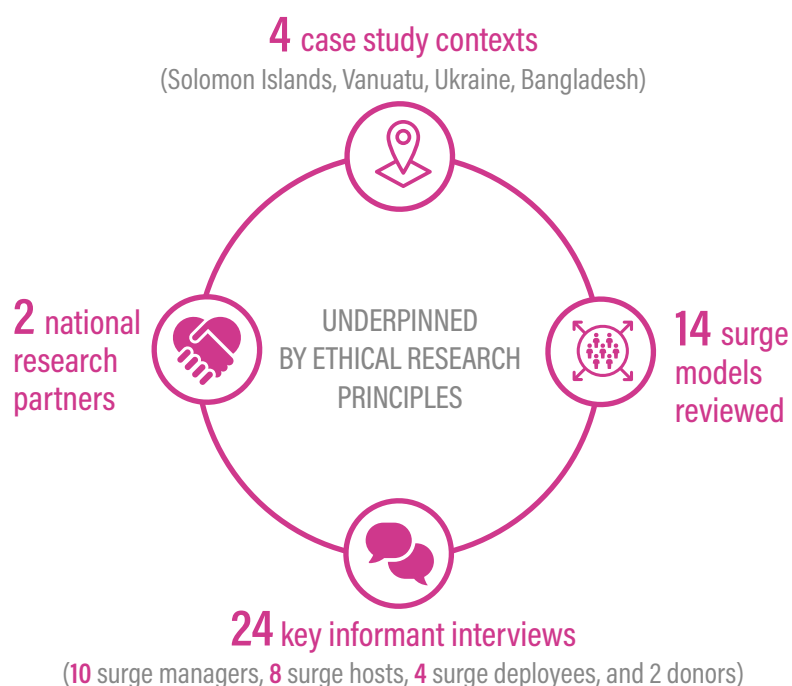
The length of deployment varies between programs and needs. Certain programs have a defined maximum length for deployments, while others are more flexible and allow for extension or one renewal of deployments. From the sample of surge programs reviewed, programs designed to surge within the same organisation or federation tend to be short-term, mostly between 2 weeks and 3 months, while programs in partnership with external organisations demonstrate longer-term surge deployments, usually from 6 months to 2 years.

*Photo: Daoudi Aissa on Unsplash*

## METHODOLOGY

Reflections presented in this practice paper are based on a document review of surge project evaluations and existing studies, the review of several organisations' frameworks and surge models, and 24 key informant interviews. Figure 1 provides an overview of the methodology.

**Figure 1: Methodology**



## Limitations

- Scope: this study focuses on humanitarian surge only – it does not consider civil–military surge or longer-term capacity-building postings. However, distinctions between preparedness, response and recovery roles are challenging, as deployees may be involved across multiple stages.
- Defining the parameters of surge: It is not always possible to distinguish between surge in relation to filling gaps in staffing and other types of short-term surge deployment where organisations don't differentiate between the two or where surge is indirectly helping to overcome staffing challenges.

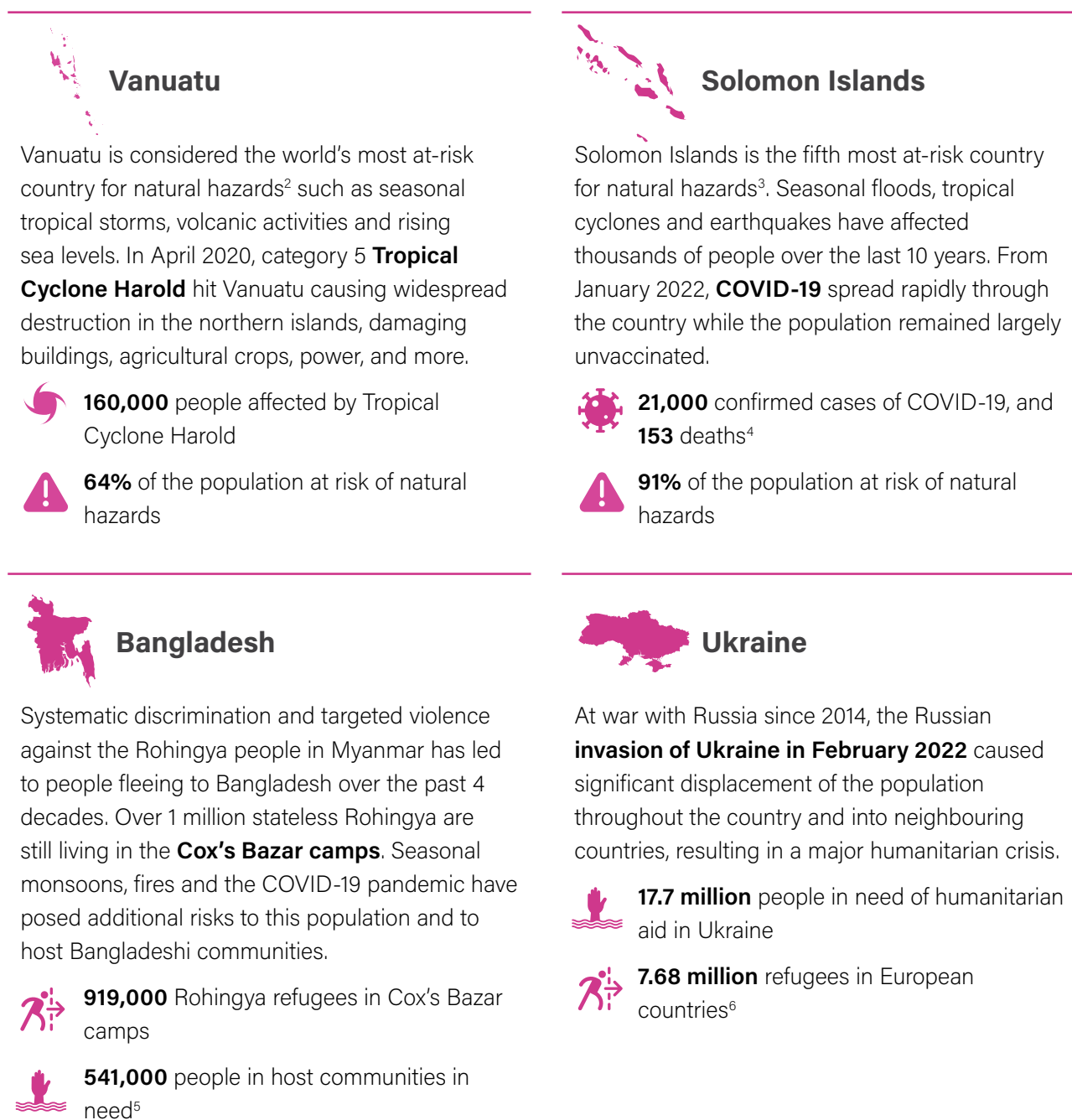
## CASE STUDY CONTEXTS

This paper looks at four different response contexts: two disaster-prone countries in the Pacific, and two protracted conflicts and associated humanitarian responses (in Bangladesh and Ukraine). The dataset and analysis for this paper includes a greater focus on Vanuatu and Bangladesh, where in-country researchers have provided research support, compared to Solomon Islands and Ukraine.

**Figure 2** provides a snapshot of humanitarian needs in each context.

*Photo: NASA on Unsplash*

Figure 2: Snapshot of case study contexts



2 Aleksandrova et al. (2021), *World Risk Report*.

3 Aleksandrova et al. (2021), *World Risk Report*.

4 World Health Organization (WHO), *Covid 19 situation in Solomon Islands*, consulted in October 2022.

5 Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) (2022), *Bangladesh 2022 Joint Response Plan: Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis*.

6 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2022) *Ukraine Situation Report, 10th August 2022*.

# Shifting surge

Surge plays an important role in the response to humanitarian crises where national capacity is exceeded. Over the past decade there has been a series of reviews that have documented learning and associated changes in surge systems to adapt to the changing landscape. In particular, the Start Network's 2015 *The State of Surge Capacity in the Humanitarian Sector* and 2018 *The Future of Humanitarian Surge* reports provided important lessons.<sup>7</sup>

## 2015 Key trends

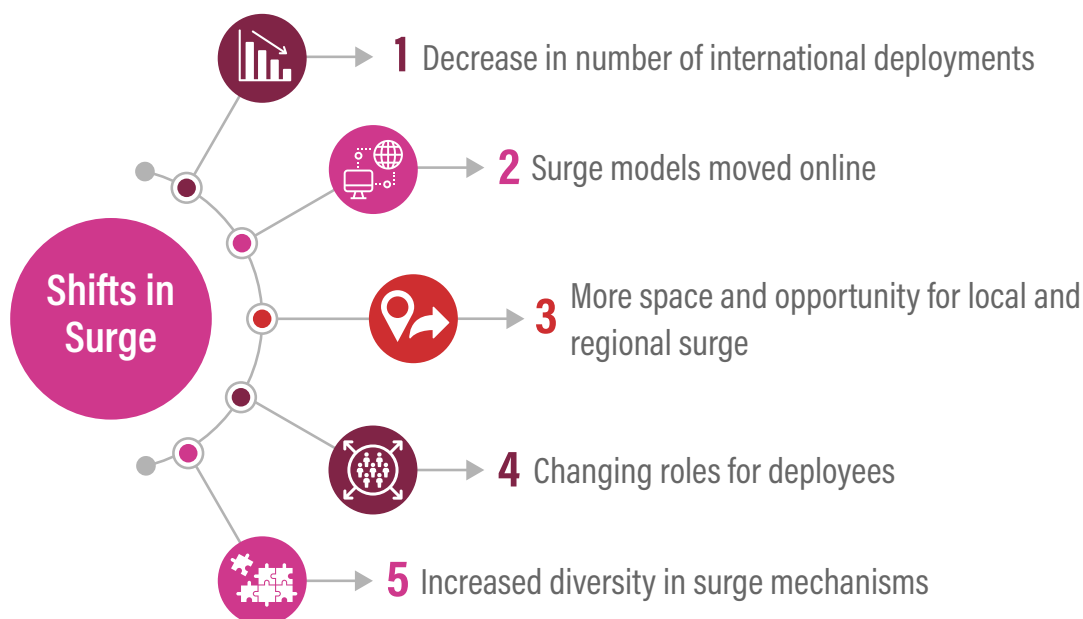
- Emergence of standby teams within large NGOs
- Continued use of rosters including more specialised rosters e.g. the Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap) and the Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap)
- Changing skillsets required included donor relations, information management and civil-military relations
- Emergence of partnering with national and local partners for surge

## 2018 Key trends

- Localised surge models adopted
- Emphasis on collaboration e.g shared surge rosters and learning platforms
- Focus on engaging with academia and private sector
- Focus on training and wellbeing support to surge staff
- Increased in efforts to engage women in surge

Since 2018, there have been significant changes in the surge landscape in relation to the scale, format and composition of surge, particularly shaped by COVID-19 and the localisation and environmental policy agendas. These changes include reduced deployments that are often delivered through online and remote formats with a greater focus on skills transfer and partnership. There is an increased diversity of surge mechanisms that can create coordination and efficiency challenges. The shifts in surge are captured in **Figure 3** and are unpacked in this section .

**Figure 3: Shifts in surge (2019-2022)**



<sup>7</sup> Lois Austin & Glenn O'Neil (2018), *The Future of Humanitarian Surge*, and Lois Austin & Glenn O'Neil (2015), *The State of Surge Capacity in the Humanitarian Sector*.

While many of the changes have been positive, rapid change without intentional design processes or formalised mechanisms for surge collaboration and coordination has led to confusion and duplication of effort. The sector now has an important opportunity to build on this momentum in a more intentional way.

This section of the report explores the five fundamental shifts in surge from 2019 to 2022. The report highlights important learning that can support more intentional action with the following symbol:



## INTERNATIONAL DEPLOYMENTS DECREASED

**International deployments reduced as the pandemic spread globally.** This is partly due to the restriction of movements and compliance requirements associated with the pandemic, but mostly due to a drop in demand and the perception of greater risk associated with travel since the pandemic began.<sup>8</sup> In-country offices and partners understood in-person deployments would either be impossible or significantly delayed and did not necessarily wish to revert to remote support.<sup>9</sup> In Vanuatu and Bangladesh, the idea of in-person surge during the pandemic was met with operational challenges and significant reputational risks given the negative perceptions of travellers potentially spreading COVID-19 to largely unvaccinated and at-risk populations.

When Tropical Cyclone Harold (category 5) hit Vanuatu in April 2020, it caused 3 deaths and affected 160,000 people. At that time, the pandemic was a much greater threat than the cyclone from a fatality viewpoint, and it was clear to the Vanuatu government and humanitarian community that technical expertise needed to be sought from within the country.<sup>10</sup>

“Our government partner in Vanuatu was very clear: “No boots on the ground.” [Donor agency]

Within the four country case studies, the exception to this finding is the Ukraine response. Most international surge managers interviewed reported a resurgence of in-person deployments in 2022, mostly in relation to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. All of them have deployed people to the Ukraine, from a few individuals to hundreds of people, since the Russian invasion in February 2022. Overall, we are witnessing an extraordinary response to extraordinary needs supported by a lot of funding at the onset of the crisis and extensive media coverage.

“ ‘Extraordinary events need extraordinary response [...] the Ukraine context has dictated what’s needed.’ [Surge manager]

There is evidence that ongoing displacement and military mobilisation of the population meant that many humanitarian organisations found it extremely difficult to hire Ukrainians to support the response, and international surge was much-needed. However, questions are still being raised regarding the volume of international surge deployed and its coordination.<sup>11</sup>



As COVID-19-related restrictions are easing, drivers of localised surge practices need to be maintained and enhanced through intentional design.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews #2,3,6,7,9,4 and data analysis for 3 surge managers.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews 2,3,6.

<sup>10</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group (2020), *No Turning Back: Local Leadership in Vanuatu Response to Tropical Cyclone Harold*.

<sup>11</sup> UKHIH (2022), *Enabling the local response: Emerging Humanitarian Priorities in Ukraine*.

## Box 2: Keeping an eye on deployment length

Deployment lengths have increased as a function of travel restrictions, the shifting role of deployees ('Changing roles for deployees,' below) and the nature of emergencies. Several surge managers reported the need to increase the length of deployments to better support local actors. Extensions sometimes occurred due to the protracted nature of the response in Ukraine and Bangladesh, and successive or overlapping responses to separate emergencies in the Pacific, also known as being in 'constant recovery mode'.

“ ‘Humanitarian crises are changing, with more protracted emergencies and climate change-related disasters; our surge system needs to change too.’ [Surge manager]

This raises interesting questions with respect to the role of surge. The recent independent review of the United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Protection Policy recommends the phasing out of the Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap) and suggests instead a transition to predictable, long-term, specialist protection support.<sup>12</sup> If this recommendation is adopted, it may be a precursor to other surge rosters shifting their focus and transitioning out of short-term traditional surge approaches.

## SURGE MODELS MOVED ONLINE

**Up to 80% of all deployments in the Asia-Pacific shifted to being remote in 2021, according to three agencies.<sup>13</sup>**

Overall, surge actors reported an increase in use of remote support and in the use of hybrid forms of deployment that combined remote and in-person support.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly true for Bangladesh, where several international personnel were brought home and continued to provide support remotely. The remote deployment model was often considered to be successful. Host organisations interviewed identified benefits from remote support, including access to technical advice on how to adapt programming to minimise risks of COVID-19, and peer-to-peer exchange of experiences.<sup>15</sup>

“ ‘There was such a shift to remote deployments during COVID, it was almost forced upon the system.’ [Surge manager]

reverting. Surge managers note that not all roles are suitable for remote support and that not all in-country actors have the capacity to engage remotely. Stakeholders in the Pacific noted a clear preference for in-person deployments compared to remote support due to the strain on human resources when engaging remotely during an emergency, and technology gaps.<sup>16</sup> There was also a sense that emergency contexts can be unpredictable and require humanitarian actors to find solutions to complex and political problems and adapt their approach as they go. Interpersonal relationships and the ability to 'read the room' are central to this adaptation to context.

**NOTE:** INGOs or federations like the Red Cross seemed more inclined to provide remote support given their regular engagements with in-country offices or partner organisations outside of the surge period.

However, there is evidence that the swing to remote deployments is now moderating, if not largely

12 HPG Commissioned Report (2022), [Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy](#).

13 Interviews 3, 4, 13.

14 Interviews 3, 4, 13, 14 and review of data available for 3 surge managers.



15 Interviews 8, 10.

16 Interviews 4, 7, 13.

The shift to remote surge support has provided an excellent opportunity to learn about when remote deployments work and when the system may still

need to consider in-person deployments. **Figure 4** captures the enablers and barriers to an effective remote surge model.

**Figure 4: Remote surge support – Barriers and enablers**

 <b>ENABLERS</b>	 <b>BARRIERS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Strong partnerships and existing relationships are in place</li> <li>■ There is strong buy-in and in-country leadership in the technical area of the surge deployment</li> <li>■ In-country partners/offices have the human capacity to engage remotely (human capacity)</li> <li>■ In-country partners/offices are equipped to engage remotely (IT capacity)</li> <li>■ Time zone alignment, and/or surge role can be completed mostly independently</li> <li>■ Security context does not allow for in-person deployment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Relationships and partnerships are weak or non-existent</li> <li>■ There is little buy-in or in-country leadership in the technical area of the surge deployment</li> <li>■ Surge role involves management of people<sup>17</sup></li> <li>■ Surge role involves management of budget<sup>18</sup></li> <li>■ In-country human resources are insufficient</li> <li>■ In-country IT capacity is insufficient</li> <li>■ Time zones don't align and/or surge role requires strong collaboration with multiple actors</li> </ul>

**ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION:** **hybrid forms of support** gained momentum during the pandemic, offering greater flexibility for deployees to develop in-country experience and relationships as well as the ability to work partly from home. This increased flexibility also meant surge managers reported having access to a greater pool of people, including women with caring duties who might otherwise have been reluctant to leave home for an extended period of time.<sup>19</sup>

There have also been many lessons with respect to how to best support remote deployments. Deployees working from home have sometimes faced isolation, frustration associated with not being able to interact with colleagues, inadequate working conditions, burnout and having to work at night to meet different time zones.<sup>20</sup> Several organisations have wellbeing programs in place, such as psychological support, wellness libraries and the ability to take personal leave. However, there is a need to better understand the effectiveness of these resources, especially when these are elective or don't extend to local staff and partners.



Remote and hybrid surge models can provide excellent support in response operations, but they need to consider the enablers and barriers, and appropriateness to needs.

<sup>17</sup> Australian Red Cross (ARC) & HAG (2020), [Distance Deployments: Australian Red Cross' Experience with Remote Rapid Response](#).

<sup>18</sup> ARC & HAG (2020), [Distance Deployments: Australian Red Cross' Experience with Remote Rapid Response](#).

<sup>19</sup> Interview 6,8.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews 4,3.

## LOCAL AND REGIONAL SURGE CAPACITIES AND MODELS HAVE BEEN GIVEN MORE SPACE AND OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD

“During the pandemic, whenever we encountered difficulties, we attempted to address them promptly by speaking with local specialists rather than seeking assistance from the worldwide surge.” [Bangladesh national organisation]

The pandemic significantly pushed host organisations and surge managers to seek local expertise before reaching out to international surge mechanisms.<sup>21</sup> This was a significant shift for mechanisms that often are not built to maximise local in-country capacity first.

In the Pacific, the benefits of seeking local expertise first have been evident, especially in response to natural or biological hazards. In Vanuatu during the response to Tropical Cyclone Harold in 2020, the stepping back of the international community not only meant that local resources were maximised in the response, but also made coordination easier for both the government and resident international and national organisations. The limited number of international experts and advisers in cluster meetings also provided more space for national personnel to share their inputs, bolstering local ownership and confidence. Overall, the response was considered a success, including having more appropriate and relevant assistance compared to previous responses.<sup>22</sup>

In Solomon Islands, international surge was deployed for the COVID-19 response, but only to a limited extent. Instead, there was a significant reliance on regional and peer support, including from the Pacific region. For example, the ministries of health from

Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea were all in regular contact regarding the response.<sup>23</sup>

The concept of thinking local first for surge is more complex in protracted and conflict contexts. In Bangladesh, the pandemic has also transferred significant responsibility to deliver humanitarian aid onto national actors and communities in the refugee camps. The restrictions of access and movements to and from the camps meant that humanitarian aid was largely distributed by Rohingya volunteers in the camps. However, the outcomes of this are less clear, given the Rohingya people's refugee status limited their opportunities to organise and truly influence the response.<sup>24</sup> The shift for the Rohingya response to online coordination also implied that international staff who had left the country continued to participate in clusters and lead from afar with little impact on local leadership. The fact that remote support does not necessarily contribute to localisation objectives is further explored in an Australian Red Cross study on remote rapid response.<sup>25</sup>

Alongside the external factors driving the localisation of surge, organisations also made significant efforts to better identify deployees from affected countries or regions. These efforts increasingly valued local knowledge such as language, contextual understanding, existing relationships and the ability to navigate national legislation. Importantly, these examples also demonstrated the importance of preparedness for surge.

Examples of design shifts include:

- relocating or increasing **training locations** from a focus on Western countries to Asia, the Pacific or the Middle East<sup>26</sup>

21 Interviews 3,16.

22 ARC (2020), *Local Response in a Global Pandemic*. And HAG (2020), *No Turning Back: Local Leadership in Vanuatu Response to Tropical Cyclone Harold*.

23 Interview 14, 15.

24 ACAPS (2022), *Needs and Priorities of Rohingya Refugees and Host Communities in Cox's Bazar Since 2017: What Has Changed?*.

25 ARC & HAG (2020), *Distance Deployments: Australian Red Cross' Experience with Remote Rapid Response*.

26 Interviews 2,7,21.

- developing **parallel recruitment processes and expedited enrolment** for new members<sup>27</sup>
- increasing regional and peer-to-peer support to encourage knowledge-sharing
- introducing surge optimisation processes where **requests for surge are first shared locally** or regionally before extending internationally<sup>28</sup>
- revising **contracts and remuneration policies** to allow and facilitate deployments of nationals.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the growing interest in and shifts of practices to better utilise local capacity and support the localisation of responses, several practical and political barriers remain. Progress to increase the diversity of surge deployees, including gender balance and equitable access for people in the Global South to deploy to other emergency contexts remain a challenge. Barriers include practical issues such as securing visas for different nationalities at short notice, insurance for more-senior people, and attracting women with caring duties. Other barriers include discrimination in selection processes, and continuous inequities in access to opportunities and benefits for people from the Global South.<sup>30</sup> In the Pacific, there is also a sense of scarce human resources. Organisations that are presenting opportunities for Pacific people to attend training and deploy overseas are also being criticised for taking local resources out of the countries where they are most needed.

In addition to some of the design shifts being undertaken by international surge rosters, there are also some promising regional and national examples

of overcoming some of these barriers. **Figure 6** details an emerging mechanism in the Pacific that serves to support local leadership in surge.

### Box 3: Maximising national and regional resources and shifting power: example of the Start Network's Pacific regional hub, 'FALE Pacifika'

The Start Network in the Pacific facilitates regional support between humanitarian organisations, governments and academia in the Pacific region. It also serves as an umbrella organisation for national hubs or National Liaison Units that bring together NGOs in each Pacific country. The Pacific regional hub, also called FALE Pacifika, is hosted by the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations and aims to support **"a rapid, quality, efficient, and inclusive humanitarian response that meets the needs of affected people through innovative, locally led coordination"**.<sup>31</sup>

In the event of a disaster, any national hub, for example FALE Vanuatu, can request support from the regional hub, FALE Pacifika, which can mobilise resources from within the region.



There is an opportunity to share learning across surge mechanisms on how to overcome the systemic barriers that are delaying broader localised surge practices.

27 Interviews 2,9,14.

28 Interviews 4,8.

29 Interviews 4,9.

30 Interviews 3,8,11.

31 Start Network Website, <https://startnetwork.org/pacific-hub> last accessed 28th October 2022.




## CHANGING ROLES FOR EMPLOYEES

International surge actors increasingly consider their role as supporting and facilitating the response, rather than leading it. The pandemic has emphasised the role that interpersonal or soft skills play in successfully providing surge support to in-country

actors leading the response. Interpersonal skills are as important, if not more important, than the technical skills for which people are selected.

**Figure 5** outlines the changing face of surge skills.

**Figure 5: The changing face of surge skills**

 <b>SOFT SKILLS ON THE RISE</b>	 <b>KNOWLEDGE ON THE RISE</b>	 <b>TECHNICAL SKILLS ON THE RISE</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Ability to work with and empower others, with an inclusive approach and self-awareness</b></li> <li>■ Communication skills</li> <li>■ Ability to manage stress</li> <li>■ Independence and resourcefulness</li> <li>■ Cultural awareness</li> <li>■ Gender awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Knowledge of technology</b></li> <li>■ Language capabilities</li> <li>■ Experience and knowledge of local systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Team lead/management skills</b></li> <li>■ Coordination skills</li> <li>■ Cash and voucher assistance skills</li> <li>■ Health skills</li> <li>■ Information management system skills</li> <li>■ Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment and other compliance skills</li> </ul>
<p><b>OVERALL:</b> Host organisations value the capacity of employees to navigate both the international humanitarian system and the specificities of the local system and context. The combination of local and international experience is of particular value to the sector, as well as the mastery of soft skills to support the communication and uptake of technical inputs by partners.</p>		

Host organisations are also beginning to play a larger role in defining their needs, which is contributing to the change in the types of skills being deployed. Host organisations often make initial requests, lead on the terms of reference, and take part in the recruitment process. While there is still space for the role of host organisations to influence further – for example, many do not have direct management of employees or the opportunity to give feedback on the performance of employees<sup>32</sup> – they are shaping the requests for specific employee skillsets. In

particular, there has been an increase in roles that centre relationships, interpersonal skills, partnership management and coordination.<sup>33</sup>

“ ‘We need less experts and more generalists – people who can adapt and switch gear to support what is most needed rather than stick to their own area of work and ignore other needs.’  
[International host organisation]

<sup>32</sup> Interviews 16,17,18, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews 1,3,11,14.

Alongside consulting with host organisations, it is also important to be aware of the needs of all people within an affected context and not just rely on the perspective of the host organisation. This may require drawing on a diversity of voices to inform what skills and expertise are required. For example, in conflict and disaster contexts, gender-based violence expertise is often required. However, this need is not necessarily

best captured via rapid need assessments or in consultation with national governments or other host organisations for surge deployees.<sup>34</sup>



identifying the right roles and skillsets for deployees is a complex task that needs to involve local actors, host organisations and a diverse range of community representatives (see **Figure 6**).

**Figure 6: Best practice: Defining surge needs with local actors**



## INCREASED DIVERSITY IN SURGE MECHANISMS

There has been a significant increase in the number and diversity of models and mechanisms through which humanitarian surge can be mobilised. These have been reviewed as part of the present study. This increase was already underway before the pandemic,

but the need to mobilise different deployees and different profiles has led to innovations and modifications within models, as well as the development of completely new models. A summary of this diversity is provided in **Figure 7**.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews 9,10.

Figure 7: Diversity of surge models in a snapshot

### Internal standing surge teams

Dedicated surge staff within an organisation hired specifically to deploy to emergencies upon request

- Example: Save the Children's Emergency Health Unit has four rapid response teams combining health and operational specialists such as doctors, nurses, midwives, team leaders, logisticians and water and sanitation experts. Teams can be deployed within 24 hours and operational within 72 hours

### Internal secondment

Drawing on staff from other offices or headquarters within an organisation for deployments

- Example: ActionAid can mobilise staff from different country offices where staff can be released from their main work duties to support an emergency in another country

### Internal rosters

Database of staff within an organisation or federation interested in being deployed

- The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' (IFRC) GO platform facilitates surge for emergencies and preparedness between its members globally

### Mixed internal/external rosters

A database of both staff and external consultants pre-approved within one organisation for deployments.

- Example: CARE International's roster for emergency deployments (CI RED) includes CARE staff interested in being deployed as well as external humanitarian consultants pre-approved for deployment to CARE's emergency responses. In FY2020-21, the CI RED covered 22% of CARE's surge needs.

### External rosters

Database of humanitarian workers (often consultants) who meet certain requirements or have passed a pre-approval process and/or training requirements.

- Example: the Norwegian Refugee Council's NORCAP roster includes over 1,200 experts across the humanitarian, peace and development sectors. All NORCAP experts are preselected in line with NORCAP recruitment processes.

### Partnership-based surge

Partnerships between organisations facilitating surge deployment from one organisation to another

- Example: the Standby Partnership facilitates surge support to different United Nations (UN) agencies and from external partners, such as international non-government organisations (INGOs), private sector agencies, government donor agencies, and third-party agencies

### Third-party bodies

Recruitment and surge management by a specialised third-party body that can source a diversity of experts via external roster and/or targeted recruitment capacity

- Example: The Australian Government-funded program Australia Assists deploys a diversity of specialists to support governments' and multilateral agencies' efforts in disaster and conflict preparedness, response, and recovery

### Area-specific surge programs

Surge programs that specialise in identifying and deploying specific area-based expertise.

- The National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre facilitates the deployment of Australian Medical Assistance Teams to national and international emergencies. Similarly, the NRC's Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap), Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap), and CashCap are specific surge programs respectively deploying gender, protection and cash assistance experts.

### Regional or local surge programs

Surge programs that focus on sourcing and deploying surge capacity within a given geographic area.

- Example: the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Emergency Response and Assessment Team facilitates rapid assessments following a disaster in the ASEAN region. This includes support between governments' National Disaster Management Offices.

Most surge actors agreed that the multitude of surge mechanisms can undermine efficiency and duplicate effort. Few mechanisms are actively coordinating by, for example, sharing registered personnel across regions or adopting coordinated processes that might be useful in areas such as compliance or performance management. Deployees often register to multiple rosters, and rosters often deploy internationals within their own networks instead of accessing local or regional rosters that may be available.

“ ‘We have many gender experts because of the focus of our programs on gender. Other organisations could benefit from this expertise.’  
[International NGO]

Greater coordination of surge has a long way to go, with heavy bureaucratic barriers for surge managers to overcome, such as the question of duty of care if deployees were to be sourced from outside a given organisation. There are also significant political barriers in an environment where competition for funding and competition over who leads the response continues to dictate practices. Organisations tend to trust their own systems first

and understand the reputational and partnership advantages they might gain from managing expertise.

There are several promising regional and local initiatives to learn from and support to ensure greater optimisation of local resources and coordination among multiple local and international actors.

#### Box 4: Sharing rosters and training resources

The Transforming Surge Capacity Project launched by the Start Network in 2015 aimed at fostering better integration and collaboration between humanitarian actors on the delivery of surge. The project created ‘shared rosters’ that drew on skills and resources from several INGOs and national NGOs. It also promoted joint training and capacity-building activities. However, a 2018 project evaluation recommended further work to be done in building collaboration into project design and implementation.<sup>35</sup>



Surge mechanisms need to better coordinate to reduce duplication, promote efficiencies and best practice, and minimise the burden on in-country host partners.

35 HAG (2018), Transforming Surge Capacity Project Evaluation.

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# IMPROVING SURGE THROUGH DESIGN

The shifts in surge over the past five years have largely been a default response to external events. Surge mechanisms have had to adapt quickly to keep up with donor requests to meet localisation and environmental commitments or, more dramatically, in response to the global shutdown that occurred to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have delivered both positive and negative outcomes, but most importantly a great deal of learning.

The surge story is now at a crossroads. As the world emerges from lockdowns and travel resumes, there is an opportunity to make shifts by design – to

intentionally embrace learnings from the past five years and design a surge response that builds on positive outcomes and actively mitigates negative outcomes.

This section considers the shifts that have occurred in the past five years and the associated learnings to suggest intentional design features that could support a strengthened surge system. It also builds on previous learnings from relevant research on humanitarian surge conducted over the past seven years.



## **Shift: Decrease in international deployments**



**Learning: As COVID-19-related restrictions are easing, drivers of localised surge practices need to be maintained and enhanced through intentional design.**

## **Intentional design ideas to incorporate learning:**

- Establish or strengthen networks and partnerships nationally and/or regionally to help identify locally available, relevant skills as the default when surge requests are received.

Previous findings: *The Future of Humanitarian Surge* report also recommended surge actors engage more closely with in-country actors, fostering strong and lasting relationships with wider stakeholders (such as government, the UN, the private sector and academia) outside of crises and to facilitate surge response. It also recommended UN agencies be more open to local and national NGOs, proactively positioning

and facilitating local and national NGOs as the link between UN-led responses and the community level.

- Require surge managers to document how they have looked locally first when identifying potential surge deployees and have explored in-country networks (e.g. via national universities or national job advertisement platforms).
- Calculate the cost (financial and environmental) routinely for each deployee and share this information in the final assessment of suitable candidates.



## Shift: Surge models moved online



**Learning: Remote and hybrid surge models can provide excellent support in response operations, but they need to consider the enablers and barriers, and appropriateness to needs**

### Intentional design ideas to incorporate learning:

- Develop frameworks to guide decisions on whether remote, hybrid or in-person deployments are most appropriate.

Previous learning: A review of the Australian Red Cross remote deployment models summarised factors that should be considered in assessing the suitability of remote support, including scope and role, context, logistics, and need and capacity of civil society.<sup>36</sup>

- Consider what additional or different support will be provided for deployees and host organisations depending on the type of deployment, such as technological support for host organisations, support for expectation-setting for both parties, wellbeing, and working-from-home equipment support for remote deployees.

Previous learning: *The Future of Humanitarian Surge* report identified the lack of dedicated

wellbeing policies within agencies, combined with a lack of funding, as particularly detrimental to the mental wellbeing of aid workers. It also calls for well-defined, proactive training and care responses from agencies before, during and after deployment.<sup>37</sup>

### Key considerations for remote deployments

- **Scope and role of the deployee** e.g. technical and targeted support versus managerial support
- **Context** e.g. fast-changing environments, security for in-person deployment
- **Needs and capacity of the host organisations** e.g. IT and human resources to engage online, pre-existing relationship
- **Logistics** e.g. time differences
- **Costs** e.g. financial and environmental costs



## Shift: More space and opportunity for local and regional surge



**Learning: There is an opportunity to share learning across surge mechanisms on how to overcome the systemic barriers that are delaying broader localised surge practices**

### Intentional design ideas to incorporate learning:

- Strengthen and invest in the capacity of local responders<sup>38</sup> as part of preparedness activities, building humanitarian leadership and understanding of the humanitarian sector.

Previous learning: *The Future of Humanitarian Surge* report provided specific recommendations in relation to this area that are still relevant:

36 See example of decision-making framework in Annex 1 of ARC & HAG (2020), *Distance Deployments: Australian Red Cross' Experience with Remote Rapid Response*.

37 Lois Austin & Glenn O'Neil (2018), *The Future of Humanitarian Surge*, p54.

38 Interviews 10, 7, 12, 14, 17, 18 and HAG (2020), *No Turning Back: Local Leadership in Vanuatu Response to Tropical Cyclone Harold*.

- Build the capacity of local and national NGOs to lead surge responses
- Donors should provide access to direct funding to local and national NGOs to build their surge capacity and preparedness activities.<sup>39</sup>
- Strengthen links between preparedness and response activities, developing greater opportunities locally to retain investments in capacity-building, as well as ensuring strong ownership of preparedness activities by local actors.
- Establish long-term in-country partnerships<sup>40</sup> that can support rapid deployments and facilitate delivery of material and funding support.

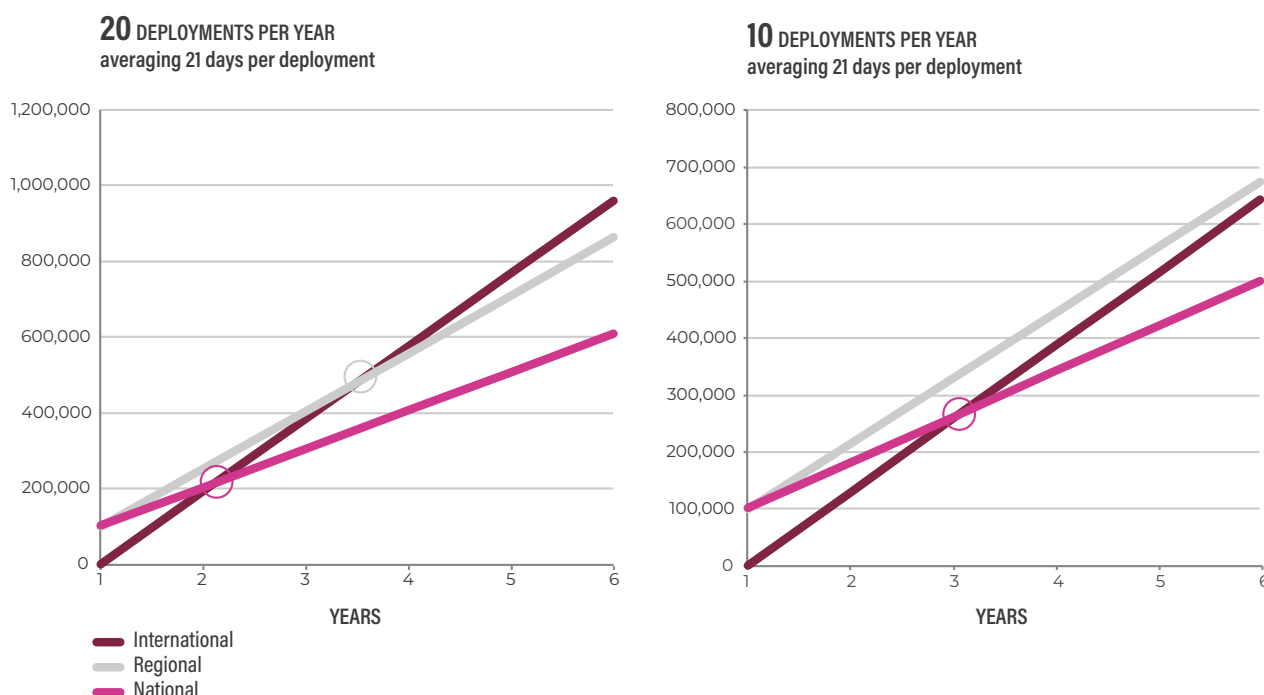
Previous learning: This is in line with the *State of Humanitarian Surge* report, which identified a need for organisations to recognise that most collaboration will occur at the national/local

level and reorientate their support and resources accordingly.

- Support the role of national and regional surge mechanisms that include peer-to-peer mechanisms and more contextually appropriate support.
- Support equity and transparency on contract coverage, benefits and remuneration of deployees from different countries.

Previous learning: The *Transforming Surge Capacity Project Evaluation* (2018) demonstrated the clear value for money associated with investing in national and regional surge mechanisms. It found that the initial upfront investment in surge rosters begins to pay dividends within two to three years of operation (see **Figure 8**).

**Figure 8: Costs of deployment models and points at which national and regional rosters become most cost effective**



39 Lois Austin & Glenn O'Neil (2018), *The Future of Humanitarian Surge*, p8.

40 Interviews 1,4,6,7,9,11.



## Shift: Changing roles for deployees



**Learning: Identifying the right role and set of skills for deployees is a complex task that needs to involve local actors, host organisations and a diverse range of community representatives.**

### Intentional design ideas to incorporate learning:

- Ensure strong involvement of host organisations in defining skills, developing terms of reference, recruitment, and performance management processes.
  - Access a diverse range of perspectives on what skills are required in context, including consultations with marginalised groups or voices such as women's and youth organisations, organisations for people with disabilities, or representatives of ethnic or racial minorities.
  - Include processes to assess and support soft skills in recruitment and deployment.
- Previous learning: The *State of Humanitarian Surge* report identified the need for greater training on appropriate behaviour skills and stress management. It also called for greater collaboration between agencies on surge training.<sup>41</sup>

#### Box 5: Examples of strategies used by surge managers to identify and nurture soft skills:

- Clearly set out the technical skills, knowledge and soft skills desired for the role.
- Ask potential deployees to undertake a **psychological test** or readiness test run by professional psychological services
- Ask future deployees to undertake **pre-deployment training**, including scenarios and sharing of experiences
- **Brief deployees on their arrival** in-country about local cultural awareness and their role in-country
- **Include specific questions** as part of the recruitment process asking applicants to either to share their experience on a particular point and/or respond to a scenario
- **Conduct reference checks** in person or on the phone rather than in written form – a few actors have noted that having a direct conversation increases their ability to collect honest feedback on personalities.



## Shift: Increased diversity in surge mechanisms



**Learning: Surge mechanisms need to better coordinate to reduce duplication, promote efficiencies and best practice, and minimise the burden on in-country host partners**

### Intentional design ideas to incorporate learning:

- Seek opportunities to collaborate on surge through roster training, personnel compliance approaches, shared resources, local and national contacts or joint research.
  - of surge results in significant benefits for organisations, including:<sup>42</sup>
    - greater cost-effectiveness and efficiency through the sharing of resources
    - more reach and influence in the activities carried out
- Previous learning: According to the *Future of Humanitarian Surge* report, greater coordination

41 Lois Austin & Glenn O'Neil (2018), *The Future of Humanitarian Surge*, P41.

42 Lois Austin & Glenn O'Neil (2018), *The Future of Humanitarian Surge*, p33.

- increased access to a larger pool of surge expertise, which was seen in the shared rosters created
- greater learning and knowledge exchange, which was a benefit highlighted by agencies.
- Establish shared coordination and learning platforms where surge mechanisms and managers can engage and support each other. Facilitate the participation of local and national surge partners for learning exchange.
- Reward and fund coordination efforts between surge actors.

Previous learning: The *Future of Humanitarian Surge* report provided specific recommendations in relation to this area that are still relevant:<sup>43</sup>

- Donors should support collaboration by considering the funding needs of specific collaborative mechanisms, such as coordination mechanisms, shared rosters and other shared services.
- Donors should prioritise collaborative proposals in surge funding over ad hoc consortiums and alliances.
- Increase transparency on requests for support by joining coordination platforms where available in-country, regionally or globally.

43 Lois Austin & Glenn O'Neil (2018), *The Future of Humanitarian Surge*, p8.

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