Ministry of Foreign Affairs

IOB Evaluation

Policy Review of Dutch Humanitarian Assistance, 2009-2014

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Summary

August 2015

Explanatory note regarding this summary report

This report presents the summary of an evaluation on the Netherlands' humanitarian assistance policy from 2009 to 2014, conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

This summary report is based primarily on the final Policy Review as presented to Dutch Parliament on 20 January 2016 by the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.[1] Parts of this summary report also come from the overview study prepared for IOB by Humanitarian Outcomes, *'Review of the Netherlands' Humanitarian Assistance 2009-2014'*. This study has been published separately online.

Three further country studies were conducted by consultants as part of the policy review (Syrian crisis, South Sudan and Ethiopia). These reports are available in English on the IOB website.[2]

[1] *Beleidsdoorlichting van de Nederlandse humanitaire hulp, 2009-2014* – available only in Dutch.
[2] http://www.iob-evaluatie.nl/en/home.

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Evaluation purpose and set-up

The Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands conducted a Policy Review of the Netherlands' humanitarian assistance policy from 2009 to 2014.

IOB evaluations are an instrument for policy development and internal learning as well as a source of accountability to Parliament. Dutch regulations require each policy area to be evaluated periodically.

The purpose of the evaluation was to provide insight into the development of Netherlands' humanitarian policy, its implementation, and whether or not the envisaged results have been achieved. The report also examines lessons learned from the implementation of policy and takes into account the broader effectiveness of the UN-led humanitarian system.

The main research questions were:

a) Was policy implemented as intended and how relevant was policy in light of international standards for humanitarian assistance and the new context in which it is now placed?
b) To what extent has the Netherlands contributed to improving the coordination and efficiency of humanitarian assistance efforts?
c) What results were achieved by the UN agencies that received Dutch funding, in making assistance more efficient and improving coordination?
d) What can we learn from the available literature and evaluation reports about the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance efforts supported by the Netherlands?

The chief research activities performed in this context were:

a) desk study and background interviews on Dutch policy, expenditure, aid accountability and the Dutch input in consultations with the UN humanitarian agencies;
b) a review exploring recent literature and evaluation reports on the coordination and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance efforts and the link between the two;
c) field and literature studies into the reception of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan and assistance to displaced people within Syria. The reason for these studies is the strong focus of Dutch policy on the Syria crisis and the size of the Dutch contribution to the relief effort;
d) field studies in Ethiopia and South Sudan and a literature study into the operation of the UN's pooled funds, carried out in view of the Netherlands' sizeable contributions to these funds.

The evaluation covers the period between 2009 and 2014. Where relevant, information and conclusions have been updated to mid-2015.

2

Netherlands' humanitarian assistance policy

Policy formulation

The overall objective of Dutch humanitarian assistance is to contribute to the relief of life-threatening human needs among the most vulnerable people caused by crisis situations and natural disasters. The Netherlands provides humanitarian assistance throughout the world with a focus on chronic crisis areas in developing countries. The 2011 humanitarian policy document sets out four priority goals:

a) More self-reliance and resilience – this includes commitments to using and strengthening local capacity and structures, devoting more attention to disaster risk reduction, preventing disasters, mitigating the impact of disasters and disasters preparedness.
b) More effectiveness through less duplication and more coordination – this calls for more uniform emergency appeals so that they are mutually comparable and better coordinated and more cooperation in needs assessments which will lead to reductions in duplication and fewer gaps in aid provision.
c) Humanitarian access and neutrality – this commits the Netherlands to upholding and respecting core humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence and calls for the Netherlands to be an active advocate on humanitarian principles.
d) Greater accountability – this calls for a focus on accountability for results and adequate communication with the Dutch public on the results of Dutch humanitarian action.

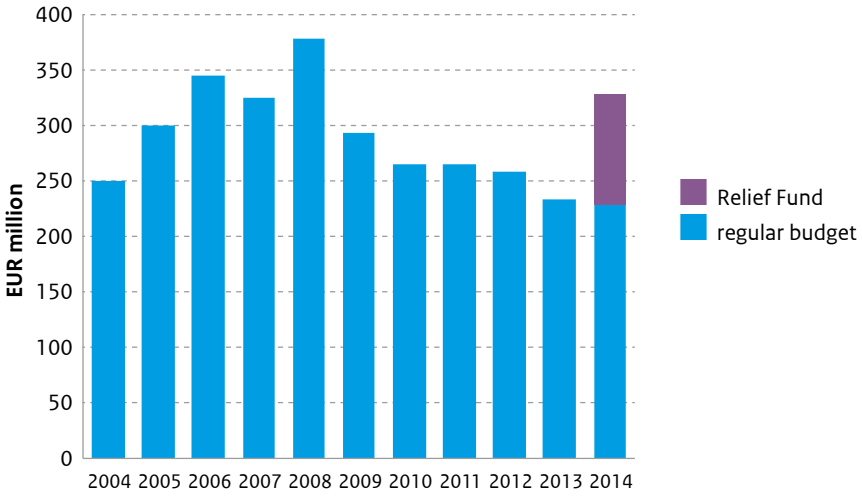
The 2011 humanitarian policy was a clear step forward in that it brought together strategies that were spread across a variety of documents and consolidated them and addressed the call for a clear policy in the 2006 and 2011 DAC peer reviews. There are, however, some clear limitations to the existing policy. The commitments it contains lack specificity and there is no clear process for rolling it out, implementing it or monitoring it beyond an annual letter to parliament.

Policy and expenditure

The Netherlands' policy emphasises the importance of a strong coordinating role for the UN in humanitarian crisis situations and asserts that, for reasons of assumed efficiency, the UN is the preferred channel for humanitarian assistance. The Netherlands sees itself as a partner in the global humanitarian system with a global portfolio – and thus it focuses its attention on improving that global system. The Netherlands provides flexible funding, with the vast majority of its contributions to UN agencies and the ICRC being either wholly or partially unearmarked. It is a timely donor, aiming to commit 75% of the annual humanitarian budget before the end of April each year. In return for these good humanitrian donorship practices, the Netherlands asks the humanitarian system to implement the full range of its planned reforms, including all elements of the

Transformative Agenda.[3] International agreements and principles, especially the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid and the Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles, largely determine Dutch policy choices. As such, UN agencies that receive unearmarked funding from the Netherlands are presumed to define their response activities in any given context in accordance with each respective UN Appeal or strategic response plan (SRP).

Figure 1 *Annual expenditure Dutch humanitairan assistance 2004-2014 (total: EUR 3,2 billion)*



Source: Management Information System of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

Between 2009 and 2014 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spent a total of EUR 1.6 billion on humanitarian assistance. The annual expenditure slowly decreased from EUR 293 million in 2009 to EUR 233 million in 2013. In 2014, due to extra funds that came available under the Relief Fund (see below), the expenditure was increased to EUR 328 million. Furthermore the Netherlands funded EU humanitarian assistance through its ODA contribution to EU institutions. The GHA report estimates this contribution to have been EUR 71 million in 2012 (Global Humanitarian Assistance 2013).

[3] The Transformative Agenda is a series of concrete actions that aim to visibly transform the way in which the humanitarian community responds to a crisis. It focuses on improving the timeliness and effectiveness of the collective response through better leadership and coordination structures and greater accountability to the people receiving assistance (*www.humanitarianresponse.info*).

Table 1 Expenditure Dutch humanitarian assistance, 2009-2014, per financing channel (in EUR million)			
Channel	**Expenditure 2009-2014 (EUR million)**	**Percentage**	**Of which un-earmarked funding**
UN	1,290	78	815
ICRC and Netherlands Red Cross	230	14	166
NGOs	100	6	-
Other	24	1	-
Total	**1,644**	**100**	**980**

Source: Management Information System of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

A large part of the funding, 60% of the total humanitarian budget, was dedicated to un-earmarked funding to UN organisations, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and the ICRC. However, the rest of the funding was fragmented: between 2009 and 2014 around 300 other, earmarked activities were funded. Furthermore, there was a separate fund for migration and development, covering 92 activities for a total of EUR 53 million. The result is a fragmented financing policy with a lot of effort going into approving and processing project financing for relatively small financial contributions.

The majority of humanitarian assistance between 2009 and 2014 from the regular budget was provided through the UN, accounting for 80% of total expenditure. The Red Cross movement received 14% of expenditure and NGOs 4.5%. Humanitarian funding via NGOs is low compared to other donors; by contrast the UK level is 10%, Sweden 12%, Germany 26%, Ireland 30%, Denmark 28% and the DAC average 19% (2012).[4] With the recent announcement of additional humanitarian funding due to creation of the Relief Fund this is likely to change in future years with an anticipated shift from 4% or so direct funding to NGOs to 15 to 20% (see below).

Recent developments: Relief Fund

In September 2014 the Dutch government announced that, in addition to the existing budget for humanitarian assistance, it was setting up a Relief Fund of EUR 570 million for 2014-2017 to provide more acute emergency aid to the victims of conflict and natural disasters, improve the reception of refugees in the region of origin and prevent natural disasters. Most of the contributions from the Fund will start in 2015. In 2014 the government used the Relief Fund to make EUR 100 million extra contributions to emergency assistance in the five most severe current emergencies (Syria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Iraq and the Ebola outbreak).

4 Financial Tracking Service (FTS) / DARA, 2014. *The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid: An NGO Perspective*, VOICE, p. 29.

The Relief Fund will substantially increase Dutch humanitarian assistance. Total expenditure on emergency assistance increased by 44% in 2014 and is expected to increase by an average of 76% annually in 2015-2017. A large part of the Relief Fund will not be fixed at the beginning of the year thus allowing for resources to be allocated strategically throughout the year to those partners that can provide emergency aid where it is most needed.

The new Relief Fund has also involved additions to the policy priorities of Dutch humanitarian assistance. Innovation has been added as a policy priority with a focus on testing and scaling-up innovative products and ideas in the field, and encouraging innovation within UN organisations and stimulating mutual coordination.

Dutch assistance in conflicts and natural disasters

Between 2009 and 2014 the Netherlands supported humanitarian activities in 40 different countries and regions. The majority of this geographically earmarked funding was spent on crises in conflict settings. Over half of the assistance went to five countries: Syria (and refugees in neighbouring countries), the Palestinian Territories, Sudan,[5] Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A large part of Dutch humanitarian assistance in conflict settings, such as in (South-)Sudan, Somalia and DRC, was channelled through country-based humanitarian pooled funds run by OCHA.

Table 2 Geographically earmarked humanitarian assistance for conflicts and natural disasters, per region, 2009-2014 (in EUR million)

1	Syrian crisis	114
2	Palestinian Territories[6]	73
3	Sudan[7]	53
4	Somalia	50
5	Democratic Republic of Congo	46
6	South Sudan	44
7	Ethiopia	39
8	Afghanistan	26
9	Iraq	20
10	Pakistan	19

Source: Management Information System of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

Between 2012 and 2014, the Netherlands provided EUR 114 million for humanitarian assistance in Syria and its neighbouring countries. Aid was further expanded in the

5 Up to 2011, this included assistance to the region that then became the independent state of South Sudan.

6 Includes contribution to UNRWA.

7 Includes assistance to Southern Sudan before independence in 2011.

region in 2015. Next to using UN channels, the Netherlands supported programmes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as well as NGOs engaging in cross-border assistance. On another level, the Netherlands actively engaged in humanitarian diplomacy and participated in attempts to increase access to humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees.

The Netherlands also assisted victims of natural disasters and epidemics. Between 2009 and 2014 the lion's share of this assistance went to victims of the earthquake in Haiti (2010), the food crisis in Ethiopia (2010-2012), the typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013) and the Ebola crisis in West-Africa (2014-2015). In the case of Haiti, the Dutch government contributed EUR 42 million to the public campaign set up by the Dutch Cooperating Aid Agencies (SHO). In Ethiopia, the Netherlands gave support through its un-earmarked contribution to WFP, as well as support to the OCHA-led humanitarian pooled fund. In both the Philippines and for Ebola in West-Africa the Netherlands contributed financially to assistance efforts (through the Netherlands Red Cross, and Netherlands MSF in the case of Ebola), but also by sending humanitarian goods by plane and boat.

3

Main findings on Netherlands' donorship

1 The Netherlands is a 'good donor' in terms of the quality criteria for donors of humanitarian assistance, as set down in international agreements.

In both the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative and the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, donors have agreed principles to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance. These principles relate to matters such as the need for flexible and predictable funding and for coordination of aid efforts. With regard to the Netherlands' compliance with these principles, IOB found that:

a) The Netherlands actively supports efforts to improve the quality and coordination of humanitarian assistance in both international forums and the consultative bodies of the UN humanitarian agencies.
b) Sixty per cent of the funding is non-earmarked support to UN humanitarian agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), allowing for the organisations to spend this money according to their own priorities.
c) The Netherlands actively enforces the humanitarian assistance principles and engages in diplomacy to ensure that victims of conflict have access to assistance.

There are no clearly defined international agreements on the amount that countries should spend on humanitarian assistance. For many years, the Netherlands has been among the fifteen largest donors. However, as the need for humanitarian relief increased worldwide, the Dutch budget fell from EUR 293 million in 2009 to EUR 233 million in 2013. With the increase to EUR 375 million in 2015, the budget's nominal size will almost be restored to its 2008 level. The Netherlands scores relatively well in comparison with other EU countries, but contributes considerably less than the Scandinavian countries.

2 For many years, there was considerable attention for the structural causes of humanitarian disasters and crises in Dutch policy. Financing for structural causes has diminished in recent years. Also, there is too little harmonisation between humanitarian assistance and other relevant policy areas.

Humanitarian assistance is more closely connected with other policy areas than in the past. There is, for example, a relationship between the promotion of international stability and human rights and the influx of asylum seekers. Many conflict-related humanitarian crises persist through lack of political solutions. The distinctions between peace missions, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction and development have blurred in many fragile states. In South Sudan and more recently in Yemen, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction and development efforts are intertwined, and continual changes in the situation call for a flexible deployment of aid. Dutch policy has taken too little account of these developments.

Humanitarian assistance and development cooperation are poorly harmonised due to separate delegation of budget responsibilities and capacity shortfalls at the embassies. The most vulnerable and fragile states are not the recipients of the largest share of development assistance: only three of the ten most vulnerable states listed in the Index for Risk Management are Dutch development cooperation partner countries.

From 2007, acting on the notion that social and economic development combined with efforts to build governance capacity could contribute to stabilisation and crisis management, policy started to seriously address the problems of fragile states. The cutbacks of the past few years, including in bilateral development assistance, and the priority given to aid and trade have lessened attention for risk management for poor people. The budget for rule of law and good governance, from which many reconstruction and peacebuilding programmes in fragile states were funded, was reduced from EUR 293 million in 2012 to EUR 189 million in 2015.

3 Humanitarian assistance has become a high priority since 2013, and many new initiatives have been launched to adapt policy to the new circumstances.

New challenges confront humanitarian assistance. They include the growing scale of humanitarian crises in conflict areas such as Syria, the urbanisation of the refugee problem, the duration and cyclical nature of crises (e.g. in South Sudan) and the bleak prospects for long-term refugees and displaced persons. These developments demand that donors change their traditional approach to humanitarian assistance.

In letters sent to the House of Representatives from 2013, serious attempts have been made to update policy and many new initiatives have been launched to adapt policy to the new circumstances. The budget has been raised to enable financial contributions to aid innovation and programmes seeking solutions for long-term refugees. Partnerships with NGOs are now sought more actively than in previous years.

However, there is a risk that adjustments will primarily be made ad hoc, when what is really needed is a coherent vision and strategy on these developments and their consequences for the humanitarian assistance system.

4 Neither the organisation of nor the capacity for policy implementation is in line with the policy ambitions.

The ambitions for improving the coordination and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance are high. Previous recommendations on aligning the quality and size of the staff at the ministry and the embassies more closely with these ambitions have so far met with little response. What is lacking, are both the knowledge and field experience needed for more

meaningful relations with the UN agencies and the ICRC, and for keeping closer track of developments impacting on humanitarian assistance in countries in crisis.

Approaches and working methods are still strongly geared to managing projects and there is too little time for more focused action on key themes and priorities. Though much of the budget goes to the UN as non-earmarked funding, a large number of individual activities are also financially supported – 300, in fact, between 2009 and 2014, with a total disbursement of EUR 829 million. The work involved in managing this relatively large flow of project funding is considerable. The decision to raise the budget from 2014 will further increase this workload.

There have been some positive changes in recent years. They include increased scope for the ministry and the embassies to make extra commitments in the regions where much humanitarian assistance is needed. The ministry's response to the Ebola crisis, for which both internal and interministerial task groups were formed, is a good recent example of how humanitarian assistance can be organised with input from external experts and contributions from various departments both within and outside the ministry.

5 Decision-making on the choice of channels and modalities requires a more solid basis, while funding could be more efficient. The equilibrium between on the one hand critically monitoring implementing partners and on the other hand trusting them, is out of balance.

The reasons underpinning decision-making on funding and choice of channels and the assumptions behind the high priority given to funding of UN agencies have not been set out explicitly enough. The ministry is not well informed on what happens at operational level and in the field, and relies to a considerable extent on the UN to account for spending. However, the quality of UN accountability leaves much to be desired.

For example, though the Netherlands is a major donor to the UN humanitarian pooled funds, it makes little effort to monitor expenditure (see 4.3). Dutch and international instruments for monitoring UN agencies display shortcomings and provide too weak a basis for critical monitoring of the agencies receiving support.

As a result of this 'hands-off approach', the Netherlands has failed to adopt a more critical attitude towards the functioning of the agencies receiving its support and the results they achieve. However, the Netherlands and other donors have persistently called on UN agencies to improve their evaluation systems. This has had positive results, for example in the case of WFP, although the quality of decentralised evaluations still remains weak.

6 Dutch funding has enabled UN agencies and the ICRC to provide flexible emergency assistance and to act according to their own priorities.

Nearly 80% of funding is channelled through the UN. Dutch humanitarian assistance is greatly appreciated by the UN aid agencies, given its predictability and continuity and the extent to which it is non-earmarked. Non-earmarked aid is of particular significance, since unlike earmarked aid, it enables the agencies in question to plan aid operations at an early stage and to respond flexibly to unexpected events and changes.

Between 2009 and 2014, the Netherlands donated 26% of its total humanitarian assistance budget to the UN's Country-based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) and the (CERF). The funds provided by the Netherlands were non-earmarked. The UN instituted these funds to enable rapid, predictable funding of humanitarian assistance operations and promote coordination.

Non-earmarked funding enables the ICRC to maintain a long-term presence in high-risk countries, to plan activities more effectively and to finance activities for which it has no other sources of funding. Although there are indications that ICRC lives up to its good reputation, the Netherlands and other donors have made little effort to validate this through independent evaluations.

Thanks to the ministry's financing of an emergency aid fund, the Netherlands Red Cross Society can rapidly transfer money in the event of a disaster or urgent crisis.

The Netherlands Red Cross Society brings significant added value since it has access to a widespread network of national societies and volunteers, which can provide rapid onsite assistance. At the same time, however, national societies differ widely in terms of implementation capacity, and not all of them are equipped to manage larger programmes.

Ministry funding for the Netherlands Red Cross Society is currently fragmented and could be organised more efficiently.

7 The new grant programme for NGOs enables funding of emergency assistance by NGOs to be more extensive, more rapidly available and more predictable. There is insufficient reason to limit eligibility for grants exclusively to Dutch NGOs.

Up to 2013, the percentage of direct funding to NGOs for humanitarian assistance activities was very low (4%) when compared to the average 19% scored by other northern European donors. From that year, the government responded to Dutch NGOs' calls for more, more predictable and more rapid funding.

The award of a three-year non-earmarked grant to the Dutch branch of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) can be regarded as recognition of the assistance this organisation provides for people receiving little or no assistance from other organisations.

The government has also set aside EUR 120 million for a new multi-year grant programme (2015-2017) which allows Dutch NGOs to make rapid decisions on expenditure whenever a crisis occurs. The programme shows there is recognition of the added value NGOs can bring to humanitarian assistance efforts in terms of reach, lobbying, innovation and specific expertise. NGOs can play a broader role than merely implementing UN assistance.

In deploying the financial instruments for NGO funding, grants have been awarded on the basis of the Netherlands' considerations rather than those of the country in need and the added value these particular NGOs could provide there. The case study of South Sudan found that insufficient explanation had been given of the added value of Dutch NGOs and their partnerships vis-à-vis that of other organisations acting in the same field and existing partnerships in the region itself. It must be said, however, that many Dutch NGOs are closely involved in international networks or are branches of international organisations. Since the new grant programme is restricted to Dutch NGOs, it does not contribute to the policy aim of strengthening local organisations.

4

Main findings on effectiveness and efficiency of international humanitarian assistance supported by the Netherlands

The Netherlands is a strong supporter of the UN-led humanitarian system and seeks to strengthen the coordination function of the UN. IOB therefore looked into evidence on the efficiency and effectiveness of this system, as well as progress regarding the coordination of international humanitarian assistance.

1 Findings on the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance funded or co-funded by the Netherlands are positive. In conflict settings, UN aid agencies have difficulty responding quickly to sudden outbreaks of armed conflict, and it takes time for them to achieve results.

The country study on Ethiopia concluded that food aid reached the people most in need and enabled them to survive the period in which food shortages were most acute. The Productive Safety Net Programme, of which the Netherlands was a donor, is helping to tackle the structural causes of food shortages so that food aid can be phased out.

Assistance to the Philippines was prompt and relieved the most urgent needs. There were also positive findings on the improvement achieved by national governments and regional organisations in Southeast Asia and Latin America in disaster preparedness and prevention.

The findings on the UN's approach to the Ebola crisis are very critical, particularly in relation to the tardiness of the response and the organisation of assistance. Large-scale relief was not provided until it became evident that the situation was serious. The crisis was then brought under control relatively quickly.

When armed conflicts suddenly flared up – for example in South Sudan and the Central African Republic – the UN agencies had difficulty providing rapid, adequate assistance to refugees. The same applied to the influx of refugees into Ethiopia, where the majority initially received no assistance at all. In all these cases, both the reach and quality of aid improved at a later stage.

2 The Dutch support for humanitarian pooled funds contributed amongst others to funding crucial humanitarian services and in some cases increased coordination between aid agencies, but there are concerns regarding timeliness, efficiency and lack of monitoring of results.

The Netherlands is a strong supporter of humanitarian pooled funds, including the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Country-based Pooled Funds (CBPFs). Between 2009 and 2014 the Netherlands contributed EUR 421 million to pooled funds, attributing to 26 percent of total spending on humanitarian assistance.

The Netherlands played a crucial role in the establishment of the humanitarian pooled fund in Ethiopia and was one its main donors. However, the Netherlands ended its contribution after 2013 because it reasoned that the emergency situation was over. OCHA has expressed its concern that this will have consequences for the continuation of current activities and the stability of the multi-donor fund.

The Netherlands was also one of the largest donors to the Country-Based Pooled Fund in South-Sudan. Dutch financial contributions to the crisis overall were responsive to changing needs, but the lack of timeliness of the contributions significantly impacted on overall effectiveness and efficiency of investments.

The Netherlands involvement in monitoring the funds and actively advocating for external reviewing has been limited. The Netherlands' embassies priorities lie mainly with development programmes and the embassies do not have the capacity to be actively engaged due to a decline in staffing. Also the fact that the humanitarian assistance is managed centrally, in The Hague, and that the embassies' role regarding monitoring the funds is unclear, means that embassies are less inclined to get engaged.

Findings on the results achieved by the UN pooled funds are largely positive, though delays in delivery are a problem and the smaller funds have little added value. Both the CERF and the CBPFs have helped fund crucial services and support to bring assistance where it is needed, such as deployment of freight aircraft and other means of transport and communications. The country studies on South Sudan and Ethiopia and other evaluation studies also show that, under certain conditions (such as good OCHA structure and donor support), the pooled funds have contributed to coordination and closer cooperation between UN agencies and NGOs.

These studies also show that delivery by CERF is prompt, except where funds for UN agencies are passed on to NGOs. Allocations from the Country-based Pooled Funds tend to be slow. What is more, many of these funds constitute such a small part of overall assistance that they have no significant impact on coordination.

3 Dutch support for humanitarian assistance in the Syria crisis contributed to reaching vulnerable groups in Syria and neighboring countries, but the Dutch contribution to efforts for more structural solutions in the region were limited.

By supporting the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IFRC and ICRC), the Netherlands reached many population groups within Syria. The UN humanitarian agencies have only limited access within Syria, due mainly to restrictions imposed on them by IS and the Syrian government. In Syria, aid workers face serious security threats, and international humanitarian law is flagrantly violated, forming a serious obstacle to provision of assistance. The Netherlands responded adequately to the limited scope for the UN agencies to operate in Syria by enabling NGOs to provide cross-border assistance.

The effectiveness of the aid provided by UNHCR and other agencies to refugees in neighbouring countries was assessed as positive. The aid agencies succeeded in reaching the poorest and most vulnerable families and relieving their most urgent basic needs. The Netherlands made the right choice, up to 2014, in channeling a large percentage of its aid through UNHCR to benefit refugees in neighbouring countries. Why it decided to reduce its contribution to UNHCR after 2014 is unclear.

However, as the crisis continues, the influence of the assistance is becoming more and more limited: needs are growing as refugees exhaust their own reserves and funding is inadequate to help the growing numbers of vulnerable people. From 2014 onwards, aid agencies in both Lebanon and Jordan have had insufficient funds for providing refugees with humanitarian assistance and basic services. In mid-2015, the cash-for-food payments to the most vulnerable refugees in Lebanon were reduced to USD 13.50 a person a month. The situation of refugees in the neighbouring countries has deteriorated since 2014, and prospects of a political solution to the crisis are extremely bleak. This has led many of the refugees who still have sufficient resources at their disposal to seek refuge in Europe.

Since 2013, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres has asked countries several times to swiftly increase their refugee resettlement quotas. Unlike in Germany and Sweden, there was little political will to respond to these calls in the Netherlands. Since then, the number of Syrian refugees fleeing to the Netherlands has risen sharply.

Dutch asylum policy accords a high priority to hosting refugees in the region, and there was a separate fund for this purpose. However, its size was limited to a few million euros a year and funding was disbursed over many small projects, leading to fragmentation. The Dutch contribution to structural, sustainable reception in Syria's neighbouring countries is limited. No money can be released from the development budget, nor is extra funding available which could be channelled through multilateral development organisations. Achieving the objective of hosting more refugees in the region came under considerable pressure in 2015, since assumptions about the opportunities for this have proved far too optimistic.

4 Within the current frameworks for humanitarian assistance, structural improvement in the situation of long-term refugees and displaced persons is unlikely.

A rising percentage of expenditure on humanitarian assistance is going to long-term crises. The failure to reach political solutions is leading to calls for a sharper focus on sustainable solutions. However, this is proving increasingly difficult to achieve within the frameworks of humanitarian assistance.

Integration in neighbouring countries calls for a more structural approach to social and economic services for refugees, which can only be achieved in close cooperation with the host governments. This task is beyond the remit of the humanitarian agencies. Moreover,

it may well be asked how far they should go, given the fact that they have insufficient capacity to satisfactorily implement even their core task of providing immediate relief. Actual opportunities to achieve sustainable solutions for refugees in neighbouring countries fall short of expectations.

With regard to support for the governments of countries where many refugees seek shelter, fingers often point in the direction of multilateral and financial institutions and the role they should play. The Netherlands and other donors are reluctant to make any kind of sizeable contribution from their development cooperation or reconstruction budgets.

5

Main conclusions and lessons learned

Main conclusions

The Netherlands is a major and predictable donor of non-earmarked funding to the UN and the ICRC, thus contributing to flexible, rapid funding of emergency aid. The assumptions about economies of scale and specialisation underpinning the preference for funding of UN humanitarian agencies can be confirmed, albeit with some reservation. Systematic evidence to back the assumption that the UN-led coordination leads to more effective assistance is, however, more difficult to find.

General conclusions about the effectiveness of UN agencies cannot be made on the basis of the main findings, since the information is incomplete and relates to only part of the assistance they provide.

The findings of this review do however confirm the assumptions underpinning Dutch humanitarian assistance policy about the economies of scale and specialisation of agencies such as UNHCR and the WFP.

In the cases investigated, the WFP lived up to its reputation as a rapid provider of food assistance to the most vulnerable populations. Its logistic support capacity in South Sudan, for example, proved to be crucial. However, it is difficult for the agency to find its place in the transition from food aid to food security.

The expertise and capacity of UNHCR to provide large-scale relief in major refugee crises such as the crisis occurring in Syria's neighbouring countries were also assessed as positive. UNHCR plays a crucial role as advocate of refugee protection, and actively engages in consultations with host governments on this issue. However, due to restrictions imposed by governments and armed groups on the UN agencies' relief work, many people in crisis countries receive little or no assistance. UNHCR has no answer to the increasingly problematic and complex situation of long-term refugees and displaced persons. Though the agency works to make refugees more independent and self-reliant, the sheer scale and complexity of the operation needed to bring this about are beyond its capacity. This calls for a broader, political approach in which development organisations and national governments in particular should play a greater role.

Dutch policy is based on the assumption that the current approach to coordination through the UN leads to greater effectiveness. Though there are some indications to confirm this, there is little hard evidence. There is some doubt about the limitations of reforms that are based on a top-down approach. The question is whether it is possible to introduce gradual changes to an entrenched system without discussing the system itself. The need for local governments and organisations to play a larger role in future humanitarian assistance has not yet been taken on board in the proposed changes.

Lessons learned

Future Dutch humanitarian assistance policy will need to take account of the changing global context:

a) Crises are increasing in both number and diversity; many crises are already – or are becoming – protracted.
b) The number of actors involved in humanitarian assistance is increasing, as is the involvement of national governments. This makes the traditional coordination of aid efforts as developed by the UN more challenging.
c) New donors and emerging powers have a different view of the principles and values underlying international assistance than the Netherlands and the EU.
d) In mega crises such as in Syria, violations of international humanitarian law make it impossible to reach large segments of the population through the UN.
e) The scale and frequency of chronic crises are making it extremely difficult to seek structural solutions for refugees and displaced persons within existing humanitarian frameworks.

Against this background, the following lessons learned were formulated for future policy.

1 The increasing complexity of crises and the rapidly changing context call for adjustments to the Netherlands' humanitarian assistance policy.

The challenges posed by the new context are too large for humanitarian assistance to continue on the same footing. The new policy initiatives launched since 2013 are a good basis on which to build, but extra efforts are needed to identify the consequences for the Netherlands' donorship in a more holistic way. The discussions on the main themes to be addressed at the UN Humanitarian Summit in 2016 are a good starting point.

Although the Netherlands was the world's tenth largest donor of humanitarian assistance in 2014, its share was only 2.8% of the total. This calls for a more realistic policy, the most clear aims of which should be stronger direction in policy, a long-term focus on specific themes to which the Netherlands can bring added value, and closer cooperation with likeminded donors to influence policy.

2 Humanitarian assistance should not exist in isolation.

Increasing overlap between humanitarian policy and other areas of government policy, such as development cooperation, migration, stabilisation and peace missions, calls for a more integrated vision and strategy without losing sight of humanitarian principles. Decisions on humanitarian assistance should be made against the wider backdrop of development, peacebuilding and conflict management. There is also a continued need to help mitigate the risk of armed conflict in fragile states.

3 Invest in more staffing capacity in the humanitarian department, both in absolute numbers and in skills, training and expertise, to ensure that policy ambitions are ultimately matched by implementation capacity.

Expansion of the humanitarian assistance budget calls not only for adjustment of the staff complement, but also for investment in the expertise and specialist knowledge needed to achieve policy aims. This requires more emergency aid specialists and people with field experience. Embassies could play a greater role in humanitarian assistance in the event of major conflicts, especially in the Middle East.

4 Much could be achieved by closer coordination of Dutch humanitarian assistance in the EU framework.

Fragmented decision-making on earmarked humanitarian funding by a great number of separate EU member states contributes to the fragmentation of aid and has a negative impact on the rapid availability of more flexible funding. Closer coordination of humanitarian assistance within the EU framework could lead to greater efficiency, given the EU's extensive network of delegations and field offices, with specialist emergency aid staff. Smaller donors with little presence in the field could benefit from this. The Netherlands could work to remove the political and administrative barriers that still stand in the way of closer integration.

Given the increasing influence of emerging powers, such as Turkey, closer joint action at European level could prove significant for continued influence in international forums and on decision-making on humanitarian assistance.

5 Better results could also be achieved within the current working methods by reducing the number of activities and concentrating on multiannual contributions to humanitarian agencies.

The following considerations and suggestions are of relevance:

a) Earmarked funding for major crises could be divided into a small number of larger contributions.
b) With the recent increase in funding for CERF, it has become less urgent for the Netherlands to award funds to smaller programmes and in the event of less serious disasters.
c) The more aid capacity in the region itself, the less urgent the need to make small contributions to disaster relief. With the growth in the number of middle-income countries, the need for external funding of relief operations there will decline.
d) Since many conflict-related crises are long-term, it is no longer necessary to determine funding on an annual basis only.

6 The Netherlands is a major donor of non-earmarked funding to the UN. More use could be made of this leverage to influence policy.

The dialogue with and policy influencing of UN humanitarian agencies should acquire more substance, and could be more strongly based on knowledge of what is happening in the field. Interventions could be made more effective by:

a) strengthening embassies' expertise and systematically using it in decision-making on funding and in monitoring the situation and the programmes receiving funding;
b) making better use of external knowledge and expertise both in the Netherlands and abroad; and,
c) formulating more specific, operational objectives and monitoring procedures, preferably with other like-minded donors.

7 More attention is needed for the role of national actors in humanitarian assistance efforts.

The majority of natural disasters take place in Southeast Asia, and it is precisely in this region that capacity for disaster relief and prevention has increased sharply. In the Philippines, humanitarian organisations failed to respect the government's leading role. Where national governments possess sufficient disaster relief capacity, creation of parallel structures should be avoided. In these countries, international emergency aid should complement national efforts.

With regard to more permanent shelter for long-term refugees and displaced persons, it is necessary to work more closely with the host governments of the countries in which they have taken refuge. It is not always easy to draw the line between humanitarian assistance and structural support for the government.

We also recommend exploring scope for increased support to local organisations and NGOs. Attention must be devoted to the obstacles now confronting local organisations in gaining access to donor funding and UN funds.

8 Existing cooperation with Dutch and international knowledge institutions could be extended, with a sharper focus on applied research in support of policy and monitoring.

The Netherlands supports a number of international knowledge institutions. While it is important that this continues, research should be steered towards a more functional role in the implementation of policy. This could partly compensate for the shortages of implementation capacity.

Funding organisations that work on quality standards and guidelines for humanitarian assistance is useful in improving accountability. Given the current shortfalls in knowledge of the results and impact of aid efforts, we would recommend promoting studies of these results from the viewpoint of the recipients.

Annex

Annex 1 About IOB

Objectives

The Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) aims to contribute to knowledge of the implementation and impact of Dutch foreign policy. IOB meets the need for independent evaluation of policy and operations in all the policy fields of the Homogenous Budget for International Cooperation (HGIS). IOB also advises on the planning and implementation of evaluations falling under the responsibility of the policy departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and its embassies.

IOB's evaluations enable the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation to *give account* to Parliament for their policies and for resources spent. In addition, the evaluations aim to contribute to *learning* by formulating lessons and options for policy improvements that can be incorporated into the ministry's policy cycle. Insight into the outcomes of implemented policies allows policymakers to devise new policy interventions that are both more effective and better targeted.

Organisation and quality assurance

IOB has a staff of experienced evaluators and its own budget. When carrying out evaluations, IOB calls on specialist knowledge from external experts with knowledge of the topic under investigation. By way of quality control, IOB appoints an external reference group for each evaluation, which includes not only external experts, but also relevant policy-makers from the ministry and other experts. Moreover, for each evaluation IOB appoints several of its own evaluators to act as peer reviewers. IOB's *Evaluation policy and guidelines for evaluation* are available on the website www.iob-evaluatie.nl, hard copies can be requested through the IOB secretariat.

Evaluation programming

IOB consults with the policy departments to draw up a ministry-wide evaluation programme. This rolling multi-annual programme is adjusted annually and included in the Explanatory Memorandum to the ministry's budget. IOB bears final responsibility for the programming of evaluations in development cooperation and advises on the programming of foreign policy evaluations. The themes selected for evaluation respond to requests from the ministry and Parliament and/or are considered relevant to society. IOB actively coordinates its evaluation programming with that of other donors and development organisations.

Approach and methodology

IOB aspires to relevance, high quality and methodological innovation. Whenever possible, the research applies both quantitative and qualitative methods leading to robust impact evaluations. IOB also undertakes systematic reviews based on empirical results relating to priority policy areas. IOB has extended its partnerships with evaluation departments in other countries, for instance through joint evaluations and evaluative knowledge exchanges, undertaken under the auspices of the OECD-Development Assistance Committee Network on Development Evaluation.

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Photo cover:
Stanley Greene / NOOR, *Za'atari: Tears in the Sand*: The Za'atari refugee camp on the northern Jordan border with Syria.

Photo chapter 1:
UN Photo / J. C. McIlwaine: A displaced woman holds a voucher for grain during a food distribution by the IOM,Tomping camp in Juba, South Sudan.

Photo chapter 2:
UN Photo / WFP: Afghan men load bags of wheat distributed by the WFP, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Photo chapter 3:
UN Photo / Fred Noy: A WFP aircraft drops food aid in Upper Nile State, Sudan.

Photo chapter 4:
Andrea Bruce / NOOR, *Syrian Red Crescent:* Aid workers from the Syrian-Arab Red Crescent help victims of a suicide attack in Damascus, Syria.

Photo chapter 5:
Stanley Greene / NOOR, *Za'atari: Tears in the Sand:* A man and woman arrive at the refugee camp Za'atari, Jordan, after a long walk through the desert.

Photo Annex:
UN Photo / Mark Garten: Aerial photo of the refugee camp Za'atari, Jordan.

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The overall objective for Dutch humanitarian assistance is to contribute to the relief of life-threatening human needs among the most vulnerable people caused by crisis situations and natural disasters.

Between 2009 and 2014, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spent a total of EUR 1.6 billion on humanitarian assistance.

This report presents the summary of an evaluation on the Netherlands' humanitarian assistance policy.

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