

Where is everyone? MSF points the finger at failings of UN, NGOs in crises

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“Humanitarian responses are slow and cumbersome, and lack impact.”

“UN agencies and INGOs are increasingly absent from field locations, especially when there are any kind of significant security or logistical issues.”

“...the current UN system inhibits good decision-making.”

These quotes aren't from the latest critique of aid by Easterly, Moyo or any of the usual skeptics. They actually appear in the introduction to a [new report](#) from Medecins sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders or MSF).

The *Where is everyone? Responding to emergencies in the most difficult places* report (PDF [here](#), interactive version [here](#)) levels a blunt critique at UN agencies, NGOs and the “failing” humanitarian system, which MSF asserts is denying some of the most vulnerable people the assistance that they need.

The report is based on three case studies of displacement emergencies: the refugee emergency in Upper Nile, South Sudan; the emergencies related to the M23 mutiny in DRC; and the influx of Syrian refugees into Jordan.

In the introduction, MSF writes that “we feel it is important to be honest within the sector about the reality of work on the ground in areas and with populations who are difficult to reach but who are in great need.”

The deficiencies of NGO and UN responses are laid bare. The UN is slammed for its “lack of flexibility and effectiveness” and for lying “at the heart of the dysfunction in each of the cases reviewed”. Particular agencies are singled out for criticism, such as UNHCR, which took on a triple role of coordinator, implementer and donor in the crises studied, leading to a “significant conflict of interest” and making it difficult for subcontracting NGOs to share their problems.

NGOs themselves do not escape lightly. Substantial problems with technical capacity are highlighted, as are the high levels of risk aversion (i.e. “Populations received assistance in large part based on how easy they were to target and reach”; “there appeared to be a shortage of agencies willing and able to do the ‘difficult things’”). The inability for NGOs to shift long-term programs towards addressing emergency needs was another area of weakness.

MSF also turns a critical eye on itself, highlighting its own challenges in responding to difficult crises and areas for improvement.

Overall, the report concludes that the current humanitarian system can be effective, but only in the following circumstances:



In summary, it struggles in the most difficult environments. The report recommends better leadership, greater investment in systems to respond to crises and reorienting assistance in displacement emergencies “to be more based on need and vulnerability than status and location”.

In a rare accomplishment for a report, this one is a real page-turner. While UN-bashing is hardly a new genre (just read any humanitarian memoir), this report carries a real punch having come from an organisation with such an established track record of working in extremely difficult contexts. As a result, it has been getting a fair bit of attention (see [here](#) and [here](#) for examples). But the report is not merely a side-swipe at other organisations struggling to perform well in difficult contexts; it is also measured and reflective. Hopefully it can lead to some changes for the better.