
the Humanitarian Leader

**An analytical framework for humanitarian protocol
and policy review exercises: The example of
the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols**

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THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

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Cover image: Aisha*, 13, near her family's home in a displacement camp in the Somali region, Ethiopia. © Maheder Haileselassie Tadese / Save the Children UK

Abstract

This paper presents the main lines of an analytical framework to approach humanitarian policy review exercises, based on the example of the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols. Anchored in sociological paradigms, this framework could be understood as a socio-phenomenological-functionalist one. It revolves around two central steps: i) starting from practice in order to grasp the reality of a protocol or policy, and ii) considering a protocol or policy (as revealed through its practice) as a sui-generis social object whose patterns of realisation are to be identified. The idea is to make this framework available so that it can be used (when and where relevant) for other similar review exercises. Although it doesn't aim to evaluate the quality and relevancy of a protocol or policy in light of a broader environment, this approach appears pertinent to reconstruct a protocol or policy as it manifests in practice, which enables actors to maximise its use and deploy it more efficiently.

Leadership relevance

Based on the example of the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols, a special mechanism for boosting collective emergency response under the leadership of the IASC Emergency Directors Group, the analytical framework presented in this article, while providing insight for researchers, also carries concrete implications for humanitarian leaders. By proposing to reconstruct a policy or a protocol as it manifests in practice, it enables leaders to deploy it more efficiently and maximise its use.

Introduction

In 2023, I conducted a review of the IASC¹ System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols, in collaboration with Glyn Taylor. Entitled *From protocol to reality: lessons for scaling up collective humanitarian responses*, (Gorgeu and Taylor, 2024) the review was commissioned by the Emergency Directors Group (EDG)².

These protocols were initially conceived as a mechanism to enhance the collective mobilisation of the UN-led international humanitarian system³ in the face of a rapid deterioration in the needs of populations affected by a humanitarian crisis.

The repeated activation of these protocols over the years has highlighted a number of issues, limitations and dilemmas which the EDG wanted to examine in greater detail, in order to better understand their deployment and use them more efficiently.

This paper aims to present the main lines of the approach developed for this exercise and discuss some of its implications as an analytical framework.

Anchored in sociological paradigms, this approach could be understood as a socio-phenomenological-functionalist approach. It revolves around two central steps: i) starting from practice in order to grasp the reality of a protocol or policy, and ii) considering a protocol or policy (as revealed through its practice) as a *sui-generis social object* whose patterns of realisation are to be identified.

While tailored to the specific objectives and purposes of this System-Wide Scale-Up review, the idea is to make this framework available so that it can be used (when and where relevant) for other similar review exercises of protocols and mechanisms, but also of humanitarian policies more broadly⁴. Although it doesn't aim to evaluate the quality and relevancy of a protocol or policy in light of a broader environment, this framework appears pertinent to reconstruct a protocol or policy as it manifests in practice, which enables actors to maximise its use and deploy it more efficiently.

¹ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance in response to complex and major crises, created by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 46/182 (1991).

² The EDG, an IASC-created body, is composed of representatives from around 20 IASC organisations. Its mandate is to advise and follow-up on strategic and operational issues requiring urgent collective action, system-wide resource mobilisation and/or targeted field support to sustain or scale-up a given humanitarian response.

³ As established by the UNGA resolution 46/182 of 1991.

⁴ Considering that the application of this analytical framework could be extended to policy reviews, the terms protocol, mechanism and policy are often used interchangeably in this paper. Nevertheless, some rearrangements to this framework might be needed to consider distinctions between those three terms, as mentioned briefly in the conclusion.

The initial issues behind a review of the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up protocols⁵

In 2012, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) introduced the Transformative Agenda⁶, a key component of which was the development of the level three (L3) protocols. (IASC, 2012). The aim of these L3 protocols was to improve the collective response and enhance the rapid deployment of additional operational capacities in crises that required an international humanitarian response. Designed as “an exceptional measure [...] for exceptional circumstances” (IASC, 2012), this tool was initially meant to apply to rapid onset crises, but was subsequently used in deteriorating conflicts and protracted crises. This raised questions around the utility of the protocols and created challenges regarding their activation and deactivation. For example, L3 declarations were regularly extended beyond the six months originally envisaged, with extensions becoming the norm. The repeated prolongation of L3 emergency responses has led to a perception that they are indicators of the relative importance and severity of various crises. This contrasts with their original intent as short-term measures designed for rapid, time-sensitive mobilisation. With conflict-related crises continuing well beyond six months, there was a reluctance to deactivate L3 declarations, due to a concern that doing so would indicate that a crisis was no longer critical. This contributed to a build-up of simultaneous active L3 declarations, raising concerns over the system's capacity to allocate additional resources effectively to all crises.

In wishing to preserve the relevance of this system-wide measure but to address the difficulties associated with its deactivation, the EDG developed revised protocols in 2018: namely, the current humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols (IASC, 2018a). Like the previous L3 protocols, the revised protocols purposefully emphasised elements of internal measures for the benefit of the international response architecture, focusing on swift enhancement of operational capacity, strengthened coordination and enhanced leadership at the country level.

The System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols have been in place for six years and have been activated twelve times. During this period, challenges have arisen about deactivation and the increasing number of simultaneous activations, echoing the experiences with the L3 protocols. Extensions beyond six or nine months remain common; while the activation is shorter in duration overall, similar difficulties about deactivation have emerged. In addition, the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols are clear that “the Scale-Up activation does not indicate [...] that the crisis

⁵ The information here comes mainly from the System-Wide Scale-Up review (Gorgeu and Taylor, 2024).

⁶ The IASC Transformative Agenda is a set of concrete actions aimed at transforming the way in which the humanitarian community responds to emergencies. It focuses on improving the timeliness and effectiveness of the collective response through stronger leadership, more effective coordination structures, and improved accountability for performance and to affected people. IASC Transformative Agenda | IASC (interagencystandingcommittee.org)

should, at this stage, be prioritised for funding by the international community” (IASC, 2018a). However, in practice, activation is widely understood to function as a signal to donors that the crisis is a priority in relative terms and that activation brings the expectation or hope of additional funding.

In light of these trends, the EDG commissioned this review in order, as a primary objective, to provide evidence for reflection on improvements to the use and implementation of the System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols.

Ultimately, this review aimed to help the EDG think through these protocols.

Presentation of the analytical framework developed for this review

First step: start from practice to grasp the reality of a policy

A rather classic approach to this kind of review is to start with a protocol, mechanism or humanitarian policy as articulated on paper, and assess its degree of application (or non-application) in practice. On this basis, the aim is then to highlight some of the factors contributing to this gap between policy and practice, and to put forward recommendations for advancing their implementation.

This type of approach is grounded in the following theoretical assumptions:

- Policy and practice must be distinguished: policy would be the way in which a practice should, in theory, be organised. Practice, in reverse, would be the way in which a policy should be applied in reality. In essence, policy resides on paper, whereas practice unfolds in the field.
- Adjusting policy can influence practice: the logic suggests that practice aligns, or should align, with policy.
- In this logic, reducing the gap between “policy and practice” primarily involves working on practice to bring it into line with policy. Alternatively, the aim can be to question and adjust the policy (if/when considered problematic) by making it more relevant and coherent; but ultimately this adjustment should translate into practice.

For the purposes of this System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols review, we could have followed such a method, which would have certainly brought interesting outcomes. However, an alternative approach was considered. This alternative approach reverses these theoretical assumptions by proposing to reveal what a protocol, mechanism or policy is through its practice - therefore abolishing the distinction between policy and practice for the sake of the analysis.

Such a path was considered relevant for this specific exercise as, during the initial phase of the review, a

mismatch quickly emerged between the articulation of these protocols as described on paper and the way in which they were understood and experienced by the actors concerned. Acknowledging this fact, along with the wish for the EDG to better think through the use of this mechanism (and not necessarily to review it), meant that reconstructing these protocols as they appear in reality was considered particularly meaningful for this exercise. It allowed us to seize them for what *they truly are*.

During the initial phase of the review, a mismatch quickly emerged between the articulation of these protocols as described on paper and the way in which they were understood and experienced by the actors concerned.

From a theoretical perspective, such an approach means considering that *a policy, a protocol or a mechanism is precisely their practice*. It is no longer a question of starting from an aspiration as to what it should be in practice, but rather of grasping what it is through its practice, independently of how it is described on paper. In a way, this means considering that the initial design of a policy as articulated on paper does not say much about what a policy is in reality, and that in order to describe and understand it, we need to grasp its manifestation in practice. Consequently, describing a policy is describing how that policy is understood and practiced by the actors in charge of implementing it, i.e. how it unfolds in reality.

Second step: consider a policy as a sui-generis social object

Based on this initial theoretical grounding, the second step of the approach was to consider this System-Wide Scale-Up mechanism, as revealed through its practice, as a *sui-generis social object*, in order to enhance the understanding of it. This means to consider a policy, a protocol, a mechanism as *an autonomous social object*, as an object of its own, independent of individuals. This social object, though socially constructed, would respond to *patterns of realisation* that extend beyond individual agency, imposing themselves on actors, endowing this social object with a certain degree of autonomy. The aim is then to identify these patterns.

In the context of this review, this approach was an opportunity to highlight some of the patterns of realisation of this *System-Wide Scale-Up social object*. More specifically, it allowed for an understanding of some of the functions, life-cycle modalities and characteristics of these protocols.

The term *function* is to be understood here in its sociological sense, and more precisely in the context of the functionalist movement initiated (among others)

by Robert King Merton. Function is what a social phenomenon contributes to. It's also important to differentiate between *manifest functions* and *latent functions*, the former being voluntarily sought by actors, while the latter are not. The term *life-cycle modalities* refer to how a social object deploys over time. Finally, the term *characteristics* refer to complementary distinctive aspects that shed light on a social object (what it is and what it isn't) and its deployment, that are relevant to the review being carried out.

Four main functions of this System-Wide Scale-Up social object were identified, whose degrees of performance vary according to contexts:

- i) *Function of mobilising operational capacities*: the activation of these protocols usually translates into a surge of personnel and the creation of additional positions, particularly in coordination functions or positions dedicated to serve a collective effort;
- ii) *Function of contributing to instating (or reinstating) the humanitarian nature of the response*: a scale up activation generally triggers a “reset, total or partial, of the approach at country level, and therefore of instating, or reinstating, a humanitarian mindset. This intersects with the increase in operational capacity, in that the mobilisation of specialist emergency teams and support staff should support field teams in adopting a principled humanitarian approach” (Gorgeu and Taylor, 2024, p19).
- iii) *Function of strengthening the collective nature of the response*: a scale up activation also appears to reinforce the sense of collectivity among the IASC humanitarian community, in large part linked to the tools and enhancements prescribed by the protocols (i.e. strengthening of clusters, collective working on a statement of key priorities and rapid/multisector assessments, discussions around collective benchmarks, etc.).
- iv) *Function of signalling the severity of a crisis*: a scale up activation sends a signal with regards to the severity of a particular crisis and implies a relative priority among crises – while one of the objectives of this mechanism was to suppress the tendency under the former L3 protocols for activations to be perceived as a means of ranking crises.

The first and third functions are aligned with the initial intention of the protocols as articulated on paper (*manifest functions*). The second function appears as an additional benefit in what the protocols could contribute to (*positive latent function*), while the last one is in contradiction with the initial objectives of the protocols (*negative latent function*).

Additionally, three essential aspects emerged concerning the characteristics and life-cycle modalities of this System-Wide Scale-Up social object.

The first could be described as the *perimeter of resonance* (or *resonance effect*) of this social object. It became clear during this review that the various UN actors integrated into the humanitarian system are the most concerned and the most impacted by this mechanism. The resonance effect of the System-Wide Scale-Up social object weakens as we move away from the IASC's central core.

The second refers to the *interdependence of functions*. When an activation is decided, the four functions of this social object are deployed simultaneously. It is not possible to only mobilise some without the others.

The third underlines different functions' *lifespans* (periods during which a function is active, productive). The lifespan of the first three functions seems to extend from three to six months after an activation, with these functions switching off by themselves after this period (with no need for a formal deactivation of the protocols for these functions to cease to have an effect). Contrarywise, the last function (signalling the severity of a crisis) remains active after six months, and can only be stopped with a formal deactivation of the protocols.

This approach made it possible to shed light on what these protocols are not in practice, especially the fact that they do not trigger additional external funding for a response and that they cannot address systemic and contextual challenges (such as humanitarian access).

Finally, this approach made it possible to shed light on what these protocols are not in practice, especially the fact that they do not trigger additional external funding for a response and that they cannot address systemic and contextual challenges (such as humanitarian access). More generally, while the System-Wide Scale-Up is a “tool used by the international response system, it is also a tool which is part of that same system. Therefore, it embodies the strengths of that system, but it has inherent weaknesses. As such, these protocols cannot automatically address limitations of the system, such as the capacity to increase operational footprint in hard-to-reach locations, to enhance collective accountability, or to reduce bureaucracy” (Gorgeu and Taylor, 2024, p31).

From a methodological perspective, two elements are particularly important to the approach mobilised.

Firstly, reconstructing these protocols as they manifest in practice primarily relied on material collected through semi-structured interviews. While literature review and quantitative analysis complemented this material, they couldn't replace it or become central to the approach. Furthermore, these interviews didn't seek to collect opinions of the various actors regarding these protocols. Instead, a *phenomenological approach* was embraced: interviewees were encouraged to expose their understanding of this mechanism, how they experience it, and how they engage with it in their practice. This method enables the identification of trends, similarities and differences in the way a policy or protocol is understood, interpreted and used.

Secondly, such an approach assumes the autonomy in the researcher(s)' interpretation when reconstructing a social object and articulating its patterns of realisation. Translating the analysis of the collected material into a social object to be described, while seeking to reveal some of its properties, is nothing more than an artificial intellectual reconstruction. It is about artificially modelling a reality that is inherently unattainable (from an ontological standpoint), in order to make it intelligible and fit for analysis.

Hence, the construction of this social object and the categorisation of its patterns of realisation (such as its functions, life-cycle modalities and characteristics) are intrinsically reliant on how the researcher(s) articulates the results of the analysis conducted.

This does not imply that an infinite number of interpretations of the collected material are possible (a rigorous scientific approach can mitigate this to some extent), but rather that the articulation of the results of the analysis (and not the interpretation of the results) with the aim of constructing an intelligible model will inevitably vary according to the researcher(s).

In practical terms, this means, for example, that this System-Wide Scale-Up social object could have been defined around five functions rather than four, and three characteristics rather than four, without losing the overall meaning of this exercise or betraying the results of the analysis.⁷ It doesn't matter how many (non-infinite) possibilities there are for constructing and articulating models, as long as they remain faithful to the results of the analysis and create meaning and coherence: meaning and coherence to better understand a necessarily

⁷ This example is consciously used here, precisely because in the final phase of the System-Wide Scale-Up review, the question arose of how to articulate and categorise the results, with several meaningful options possible.

unattainable reality, meaning and coherence to better grasp the social phenomenon under study, meaning and coherence useful to the recipients of the review in question. And in the context of a review of a humanitarian policy (or of a mechanism or protocol), this last point is certainly crucial. In this respect, it was with the objective of helping the EDG to think through this System-Wide Scale-Up mechanism in mind that a choice was also made regarding its articulation.

Framework implications: A pragmatic approach to policy use, the judgement over the value of a policy and the issue of change management

Applying such an approach for a review of a humanitarian policy, mechanism or protocol entails a number of implications that need to be highlighted. Indeed, considering a humanitarian policy in its manifestation in practice as an autonomous social object, with its own discernible patterns of realisation, is not just a research method. It also carries concrete implications for the developers and users of humanitarian policies.

More specifically, three issues stem from this approach:

- The logic of adopting a pragmatic approach to the use of humanitarian policies, mechanisms or protocols;
- The value of the policy, protocol or mechanism (as initially intended or as manifested in practice);
- The limited degree of control that actors possess over the development and change of humanitarian policies, mechanisms and protocols.

The logic of adopting a pragmatic approach to the use of humanitarian policies, mechanisms or protocols

Acknowledging the ways in which a policy works in reality allows users to mobilise it for what it is, not for what it should or could be.

Reconstructing a policy or protocol as it is, and as it manifests in practice, enables actors to use and deploy it more efficiently. Acknowledging the ways in which a policy works in reality allows users to mobilise it for what it is, not for what it should or could be. This means adopting a pragmatic approach to its use, particularly by reformulating the questions that could help decide upon a possible activation of a policy, mechanism or protocol.

By this logic, the System-Wide Scale-Up review argues "that an acknowledgement of what System-Wide Scale-Ups are in practice, and revising expectations and objectives accordingly, would be a more logical and

pragmatic approach to support changes in practice. When considering an activation, three essential questions must be answered:

- Is it acceptable that the activation will invoke all four initially interdependent functions, and considering their characteristics and limitations, does the activation of a System-Wide Scale-Up remain appropriate in the context under consideration?
- If yes, what precisely does an activation seek to achieve in this context? Considering the functions and characteristics of the protocols, is an activation the right answer to the needs of the crisis?
- What else must be done and by whom to address identified issues that the activation, in its current form, will be unable to address?

Ultimately, when using the system-wide activation, it is important to recognise and accept the protocols and their limits in order to maximise their positive effects” (Gorgeu and Taylor, 2024, p32).

The value of a policy or protocol (as initially intended or as manifested in practice)

To consider a policy or protocol for what it is in reality, through this mainly descriptive and pragmatic approach, might lead one to believe that it would not be necessary to question its relevance, as much in its translation in practice as in the way it was initially designed on paper.

Admittedly, the approach presented here does not seek to address this aspect. Complementary work is therefore needed to evaluate the value and limitations of a policy or protocol within a broader environment, to address the question of “gap between theory and practice”, or to unpack lines of accountability in the way a protocol or policy is designed or applied. Nevertheless, reconstructing a protocol or policy as it manifests in practice can be an interesting foundation to further explore those issues.

The degree of control that actors possess over the development and change of humanitarian policies, mechanisms and protocols

Finally, to question the value and relevance of a policy is to question the possibilities of change; or how to improve or increase the effectiveness of a humanitarian policy, mechanism or protocol. Such an aspiration is legitimate, especially when considering the gap between the initial aspirations of a policy and how it manifests in practice, as well as the intrinsic limitations of a policy as initially envisioned or as translated in practice.

Yet, the analytical framework proposed in this paper adds nuance to the ability of actors to control the evolution of a policy, mechanism or protocol. Indeed,

acknowledging the autonomous nature of a social object implies acknowledging that the social construction of a social phenomenon (and its evolution) is partly beyond the control of the actors who generate it. A social object develops, functions and evolves through its own dynamics. In this sense, there will always be a gap between the design by a collective of a social object and its actual translation in reality. But if the aim is to make a policy or protocol evolve and change, its specific modalities of change (which are to be differentiated from its patterns of realisation) need to be identified. And for this, a specific complementary approach would be required.

There will always be a gap between the design by a collective of a social object and its actual translation in reality.

Conclusion

Developed specifically for this review of the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols, the analytical framework presented above may hopefully prove relevant for other similar exercises. Its main orientations would then necessarily be translated into certain arrangements according to the research under consideration, but without losing its overall coherence.

For instance, while based on this example of the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols, this paper extends the possibility of using this approach on humanitarian policies. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the distinctions between policy, protocol and mechanism (a policy being often broader and more flexible) – distinctions deliberately left aside here – in order to adapt this approach somewhat to the object under study.

After all, such a framework should be grasped as a tool that can be useful for analysis. Indeed, the relevance of an analytical framework lies not only in its coherence but is intrinsically linked to the issues at stake in the research envisaged. It's not about using “the” right analytical grid, but “a” right analytical grid that is coherent and in line with the pursued research objectives.

Finally, and more broadly, at the heart of this approach lies the conviction that greater utilisation of social science paradigms is particularly enlightening when it comes to studying in greater depth the various dimensions of humanitarian aid.

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