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## INTRODUCTION

This fourth edition of *The State of the Humanitarian System* report covers the three years from January 2015 to December 2017. As with previous editions, the report aims to provide answers to three key research questions: What was the humanitarian caseload over the period? What is the current shape and size of the system? How has the system performed over the study period?

## Goals and objectives of *The State of the Humanitarian System* report 2018

This fourth edition of *The State of the Humanitarian System* report covers the three years from January 2015 to December 2017. As with previous editions, the report aims to provide answers to three key research questions:

1. **What was the humanitarian caseload over the period?**
  - How many emergency responses were there in 2015–17, and where did they take place? How does this compare to previous periods?
  - What types of crises did the system respond to in 2015–17? How does this compare to previous periods?
  - Approximately how many people were affected, and how many received aid? How does this compare to previous periods?
  
2. **What is the current size and shape of the humanitarian system, and how did this change over the period?**
  - What were the levels and trends in international funding flows for humanitarian action in the period 2015–17? How does this compare to previous periods?
  - What was the distribution of human and financial resources by source, type of crisis and number/type of agencies? How does this compare to previous periods?
  - How many agencies and humanitarian staff are there? What types of agencies?
  
3. **How has the humanitarian system performed over the study period?**
  - How have humanitarian actors, and the system as a whole, performed on the basis of OECD DAC criteria? How does this compare to previous periods?
  - To what degree does performance differ from one type of crisis to another?

The research is primarily descriptive. It aims to provide an objective and evidence-based picture of the current situation with regard to internationally-funded humanitarian assistance. In doing so, it serves a number of functions:

- **Performance improvement:** it allows humanitarian decision-makers to identify key areas of success and concern, providing information that can be used as the basis for performance improvement.
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- **Accountability:** it provides a single assessment of the overall performance of a system largely funded by taxpayers and individual donors, and which provides services to people in crisis who are often poor and marginalised. In doing so, it provides a tool for these various stakeholders, and their representatives, to hold the system to account.
- **Learning:** it provides an introduction to the main elements of the humanitarian system, and the main issues affecting humanitarian performance.

## Structure of the report

### Scope and analytical structure

#### *What do we mean by 'the humanitarian system'?*

The SOHS report series aims to provide a longitudinal analysis of the size, shape and performance of international humanitarian assistance. To do this, it uses the concept of a 'system' to define its unit of analysis over time.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a system as 'a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole working toward a common set of objectives'. Systems come in a number of different types, depending on the degree to which the elements can make independent choices, and the degree to which they interact with other systems in a wider environment.

Mechanical systems (the simplest form of system) are made up of parts that can only perform predetermined actions – a cog cannot choose what it does. They are also closed: they see relatively little exchange between their parts and the wider environment (the cog's behaviour is very largely controlled by other elements in the system, not by external elements). In contrast, more complex, open systems have parts that can make independent choices, and which interact with the wider environment. Social and ecological systems are generally complex and open.

The humanitarian system is an example of a complex system. It is made up of parts that are at once interrelated and which can also determine their own actions, and which interact with many other elements outside the system. Because it is a complex, open system it behaves in particular ways. It is non-linear: the very large number of interacting elements makes it almost impossible to predict how the system will behave. It is also emergent: as a result of the interactions between the elements, the system itself may develop characteristics which are the result of multiple interactions and are more than the sum of the component parts. Some observers have taken to labelling the humanitarian system as an 'ecosystem' to emphasise its complex, open and adaptive nature. The idea of an ecosystem is useful as a metaphor – ecosystems are another (although different) type of complex adaptive system. But as ecosystems are essentially about biological processes, rather than political, social or economic processes, we have




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preferred to stay with the terminology ‘humanitarian system’: we are looking at organisations, not organisms.

The definition of the ‘humanitarian system’ used for this report is:

The network of inter-connected institutional and operational entities that receive funds, directly or indirectly from public donors and private sources, to enhance, support or substitute for in-country responses in the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection to a population in crisis.

This definition builds on the one used in previous editions of the report,<sup>1</sup> but emphasises that the nature of connection, and a defining characteristic of the system, is that it is based around financial flows. Additionally, it underlines that, while the common objective is to provide humanitarian assistance and protection, humanitarian actors work in a variety of different configurations in a variety of different contexts: the roles of various actors will change from one situation to another.

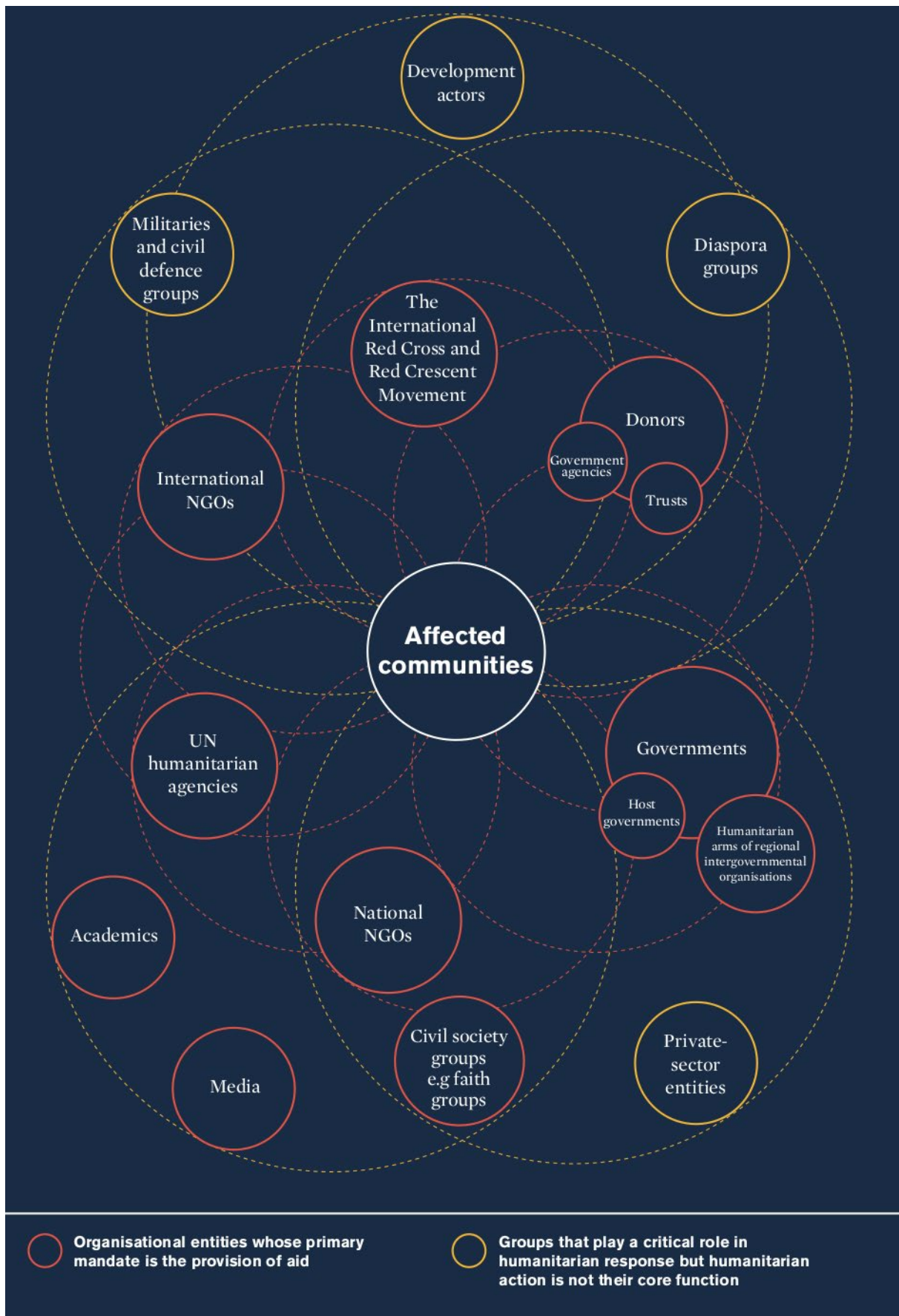
The system as defined here comprises all organisational entities funded specifically to undertake humanitarian action, which constitutes their primary mandate or mission. They are operationally or financially related to each other and share common overarching goals, norms and principles. They include:

- local, national and international NGOs conducting humanitarian activities
- UN humanitarian agencies
- the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
- host government agencies and authorities and regional/ intergovernmental agencies
- donor agencies: primarily government agencies, but also trusts and other donors.

As the humanitarian system is open to other influences, these organisations will often interact with and be influenced by entities involved in crisis contexts, which are not related to the same funding mechanisms as the humanitarian system and/or whose main objectives are not the provision of humanitarian aid and protection. These entities include:

- national militaries and civil defence groups
  - development actors
  - the private sector
  - diaspora groups
  - civil society groups (such as faith groups) that do not have an explicitly humanitarian function
  - the media
  - academia.
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**Figure 1 / Organisational entities in the humanitarian system**



These organisations also play critical roles related to humanitarian responses, and may work in parallel to, and at times in coordination with, actors from the system. This report focuses on the ‘formal system’ as it is a construct which is more amenable to quantification and analysis than ‘all individuals and organisations involved in crises’. However, it does not seek to obscure the importance of these actors, and wherever possible their contribution and relationship to the response is captured in the report.

### *What do we mean by ‘performance’?*

As in previous editions, this report uses the OECD DAC criteria<sup>2</sup> to assess humanitarian performance. However, following a review of the criteria ALNAP has made two important revisions.

The first concerns accountability and participation. In past editions, these issues have been examined under ‘Relevance/appropriateness’, because accountability and participation have been considered as an important means for achieving relevant assistance. After discussions with the SOHS Methods Group,<sup>3</sup> ALNAP has amended the criteria to include ‘Accountability and participation’ as a separate criterion for measuring performance. This reflects the group’s view that accountability and participation are not just tools to achieve relevance, but are also ends in themselves. As such, it is not possible to say that the system has performed satisfactorily unless aid is provided in a way that is accountable to those who receive it, and allows them some measure of influence in decisions over the aid they receive.<sup>4</sup>

The second revision concerns the relationship between international humanitarian action, affected states and civil society and agendas such as risk reduction, recovery, development and peacebuilding. These issues have all been addressed in previous SOHS editions under the DAC criterion of ‘Connectedness’. However, this has meant that the Connectedness criterion has considered both how the international humanitarian system connects with development and peacebuilding activities, and how it connects with national actors, including the state. Although there is significant overlap between these two areas, they are distinct: it is possible for international actors to work on humanitarian response in close coordination with the state, and not engage in development work, for example.











Two of the major policy directions during the study period have been on the ‘nexus’ between development and humanitarian action and (separately) on localisation – moving responsibility to the affected state and civil society. In the 2018 edition, ALNAP aims to provide a more focused picture of how the humanitarian system engages with activities related to risk reduction, resilience, development and peacebuilding, and allows for a more specific assessment of the relationships between international agencies and local and national actors. To do this, the criterion of Connectedness focuses on links between humanitarian action and other activities such as development and peacebuilding, while the recently proposed criterion of ‘Complementarity’ (Bourns and Alexander, 2016) looks at the relationship between international humanitarian action and national and



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local capacities. ALNAP will also use a honed approach to the criterion of ‘Coherence’ to focus specifically on the degree to which humanitarian activities are aligned around humanitarian principles, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Refugee Law.<sup>5</sup>

Following these changes, the criteria used to judge the performance of the humanitarian system in this report are:

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**Sufficiency:** the degree to which the resources available to the international humanitarian system are sufficient to cover humanitarian needs.
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**Coverage:** the degree to which action by the international humanitarian system reaches all people in need.
- 
**Relevance & appropriateness:** the degree to which the assistance and protection that the international humanitarian system provides addresses the most important needs of recipients (as judged both by humanitarian professionals and by crisis-affected people themselves).
- 
**Accountability & participation:** the degree to which actors within the international humanitarian system can be held to account by crisis-affected people, and the degree to which crisis-affected people are able to influence decisions related to assistance and protection.
- 
**Effectiveness:** the degree to which humanitarian operations meet their stated objectives, in a timely manner and at an acceptable level of quality.
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**Efficiency:** the degree to which humanitarian outputs are produced for the lowest possible amount of inputs.
- 
**Coherence:** the degree to which actors in the international humanitarian system act in compliance with humanitarian principles and IHL, and the degree to which they are able to influence states and non-state armed groups to respect humanitarian principles and conform to IHL.
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**Complementarity:** the degree to which the international humanitarian system recognises and supports the capacities of national and local actors, in particular governments and civil society organisations.
- 
**Connectedness:** the degree to which the international humanitarian system articulates with development, resilience, risk reduction and peacebuilding.
- 
**Impact:** the degree to which humanitarian action produces (intentionally or unintentionally) positive longer-term outcomes for the people and societies receiving support.

The SOHS takes the view that humanitarian performance should be judged against all of these criteria – and that, ideally, it would perform at least satisfactorily against all of the criteria at the same time. However, experience suggests that there can often be tensions between the criteria – that performing well against one makes it harder to perform well against others – and so in practice it is difficult for any operation or organisation, or for the system as a whole, to perform well under all criteria simultaneously. Different actors – while generally agreeing on the importance of all the criteria – will also prioritise them differently (Dunantist<sup>6</sup> operational agencies may give more emphasis to coherence; multi-mandate agencies more emphasis to connectedness; donors more emphasis to efficiency). For this reason, the report does not give an overall statement or score for performance over the period 2015–17, concentrating instead on assessing each criterion separately.

### Contexts considered in the report

The international humanitarian system engages in many different ways in many different crises. Every crisis involves a specific set of needs in a specific social, political and economic context. This context will, obviously, affect how humanitarians work (although perhaps not as much as it should – the system has been regularly criticised for its failure to adapt to context), and the success of humanitarian operations.

The individual and specific nature of each crisis can make it hard to provide an overall view of system performance. Effectiveness, or coverage, or coherence will likely be very different when working in partnership with a government to address the consequences of drought than when working in a violent conflict in an area controlled by armed militia. And because every crisis is unique, it is difficult to extrapolate a general assessment from very diverse situations. To (partially) address the problem of creating a common assessment for very different responses, this edition of the SOHS considered three different ‘types’ of humanitarian response separately, in order to compare sets of information that are more internally coherent. The three types were:

- humanitarian response to complex emergencies
- humanitarian response to disasters connected to natural phenomena and to health crises in non-conflict settings
- humanitarian response to refugee and migration situations.

With regard to the first crisis type, complex emergencies, this report uses the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) definition:



a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing United Nations country program (IASC, 1994).

The second crisis type, disasters connected to natural phenomena and to health crises in non-conflict settings, includes all crises in which natural processes (geological, hydrological, meteorological or biological) play a significant part in increasing mortality, disease morbidity and damage to livelihoods, and where these effects are not compounded by war or widespread armed violence.<sup>7</sup>

The third crisis type covers all situations in which there has been large-scale movement across national borders, and where people – refugees, asylum-seekers or other categories of international migrant – are in need of international humanitarian assistance and protection.

These three broad contexts were chosen because they are commonly recognised and understood, and because each demonstrates certain characteristics that are not generally found in the other two types, and which we would assume a priori to have significant effects on how humanitarian action might take place.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, they differ in terms of the legal framework within which humanitarian activities take place, the degree to which the state is likely to be able and willing to provide assistance and the nature and possible duration of activities.

The three contexts are useful but imperfect models. They are based on criteria which are not fixed or agreed. Many ‘stable’ countries suffer from high levels of internal violence and some degree of breakdown of authority: determining whether a crisis is ‘complex’ becomes a matter of degree, and can depend on the judgement of the researcher or the specific part of the country they are looking at. Similarly, ‘natural’ disasters are not always categorically clear: there is, for example, no universal definition of drought. As a result, and as demonstrated in chapter 5 on needs and funding, it is common to find all three contexts in different parts of the same country. To the degree possible, research for this report avoided the assumption that any specific country represented only one of the three types of crisis. In many cases, researchers allocated interviews or evaluations related to one country into different crisis types (as some interviewees in Colombia, for example, might be talking about displacement caused by conflict, while others were talking about the effects of natural disasters). Respondents to the practitioner and recipient surveys were asked to identify the specific context that best applied to them – and in many cases respondents to the recipient survey in ‘natural’ disaster countries (such as Kenya and Ethiopia) said that their needs were predominantly a result of local violence, while those in countries more commonly associated with conflict (such as DRC or Afghanistan) responded that their needs were a result of natural disasters.




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Nevertheless, the three context types do help us to better understand the performance of the system across very diverse environments. For some criteria, there are marked similarities between performance from – say – one complex emergency to another, and differences between performance in complex emergencies and the other two contexts. However, this is not true of all criteria – for some there does not appear to be a great deal of difference between complex emergencies, ‘natural’ disasters and refugee situations. As a result, this final report was structured according to the criteria, and not according to the contexts – and where results differed by context, this is addressed by providing specific sub-sections for each context.

### A note on terminology

The humanitarian sector is closely entwined with the broader global situation. Political and economic decisions are the causes of many crises, and political and economic inequalities have a strong influence on who is affected. Humanitarian action itself is an exercise of a type of power: the ability of those with means – governments, organisations or individuals – to support those in need. In this context, vocabulary matters. The words used to describe a situation can obscure injustices and inequalities, deny the dignity and agency of people in crisis and (perhaps more helpfully) betray biases and assumptions.

Throughout this report, the authors have been mindful of these realities, while also preserving readability and consistency with previous reports. This has meant that the term ‘disasters connected to natural phenomena and health crises in non-conflict settings’ has generally been shortened to ‘natural’ disaster. The reader should, however, be aware that the human effects of these natural phenomena are a result of human and political factors, as well as the natural phenomenon itself. In describing the people that the humanitarian system serves, the authors have used the phrase ‘people receiving humanitarian assistance and protection’ – shortened in some cases to ‘recipient’ – in preference to ‘beneficiary’. The term ‘people affected by crisis’ has been used when talking more generally about all people in a crisis situation, including those who do not receive assistance or protection.

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The study period saw a notable rise in the number of irregular migrants, including asylum-seekers, entering Europe, and increasing politicisation of these population movements. This has been widely referred to as the ‘European Refugee Crisis’ or ‘European Migration Crisis’. While the idea of a crisis captures attention, and may accurately refer both to the situation of some migrants and to popular perceptions of and political responses to the situation, it is also a loaded term, suggesting that the fact of migration leads to a crisis for Europe, rather than, say, an opportunity. For this reason this report refers to the Migration ‘Crisis’, placing the ‘crisis’ in apostrophes.

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## Endnotes for this chapter

1. ‘The network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian assistance is provided when local and national resources are insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis’ (ALNAP, 2015: 18).
  2. Using the criteria as laid out in Beck, 2006.
  3. This review was based on ALNAP’s experience in producing the briefing papers for the 2015 Global Forum for Improving Humanitarian Action. Similar issues with the DAC criteria are also addressed in OCHA’s study on humanitarian effectiveness (Bourns and Alexander, 2016).
  4. Similarly, the OCHA report proposes ‘Accountability’ as one of the 12 elements of humanitarian effectiveness (Bourns and Alexander, 2016).
  5. The assessment of coherence in Beck (2006) entails a ‘focus on the extent to which policies of different actors were complementary or contradictory’. This requires consideration of whether humanitarian actors are working to similar policies; whether humanitarians and other actors (such as the military and the private sector) are working to similar/complementary policies; and whether these policies ‘take into account humanitarian and human-rights considerations’. The definition requires an assessment of all policies – including security, developmental, trade and military policies. In this edition of the SOHS we have significantly narrowed the focus to look only at the degree to which the actions of humanitarian and other actors align with humanitarian and human rights considerations. In practice, this means that, while we look at how the policies of ‘other’ actors (particularly states) align with ‘humanitarian’ law and policy, we do not examine how the policies of humanitarians align with, for example, the trade policies of affected states. Alignment with developmental policy is addressed separately under the criterion of connectedness.
  6. ‘Dunantist’ humanitarianism refers to Red Cross founder Henry Dunant. These organisations generally seek to position themselves outside of state interests, and are strong supporters of humanitarian principles.
  7. This – or a similarly defined category of emergencies – is widely used, by bodies including the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), the IFRC and the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR).
  8. International humanitarian law – at least in its customary provisions – is generally applicable in armed conflicts. International refugee law is applicable in refugee situations.
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