

6

COMPOSITION OF THE SYSTEM

In 2017, the total combined field personnel of the humanitarian sector numbered approximately 570,000. This represents an increase of 27% from the last SOHS report (450,000 in 2013). Growing numbers of national humanitarian workers appeared to drive this increase, while the number of international (expatriate) staff remained stable. On average across humanitarian organisations, this growth in personnel did not keep pace with the overall rise in operational expenditure.

Overall trends

The total estimated number of humanitarian workers in the field has grown by 27%, from 450,000 in the last SOHS period to 570,000 (Table 9). Most of this increase was accounted for by national aid workers, while international staff numbers stayed roughly the same (figure 16).

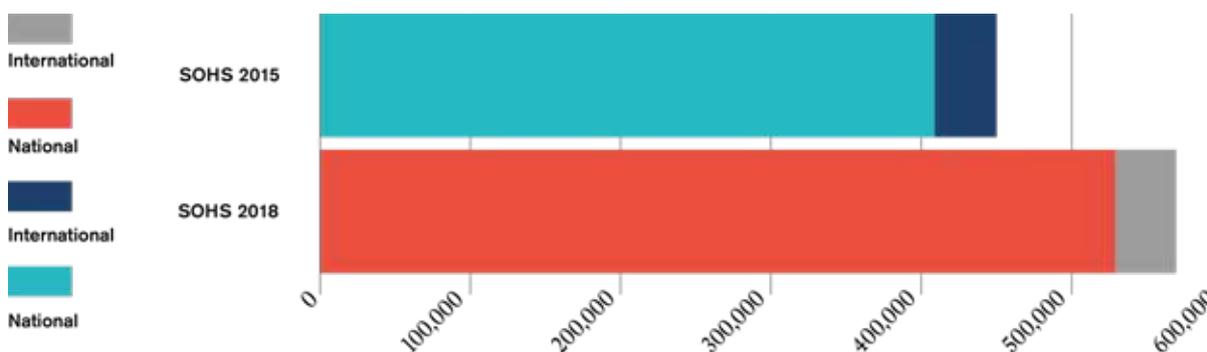
The growth in personnel was not commensurate with the overall growth of operational budgets, which increased by 50% on average across organisations from the previous period. In short, over the period the sector became more capital-intensive in programming and more national in personnel.

Table 9 / Humanitarian personnel by organisation type

	UN agencies	NGOs (estimates)	Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement
SOHS 2018	79,000 field personnel	331,000 field personnel	159,700 field personnel
SOHS 2015	56,000 field personnel	249,000 field personnel	145,000 field personnel

Source: Humanitarian Outcomes (2018).
 Notes: The figures shown are for the calendar years 2013 (SOHS 2015) and 2017 (SOHS 2018).

Figure 16 / National and international humanitarian field personnel



Source: Humanitarian Outcomes (2018).
 Notes: The figures shown are for the calendar years 2013 (SOHS 2015) and 2017 (SOHS 2018).

These trends reflect the types of emergencies that currently comprise the work of the humanitarian sector. While protracted conflicts have for many years accounted for the bulk of international humanitarian response, this was even more marked during the current report period given the absence of very large-scale non-conflict emergencies and the system’s focus on the needs of people trapped and/or displaced by major armed conflict in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and South Sudan.

Responding to conflicts of this nature tends to be more capital-intensive and relies more heavily on nationally recruited staff. Challenges around access also make conflict responses more expensive and less likely to involve expatriates: in South Sudan, reliance on air transport and mobile deliveries has increased the costs of the response without commensurate staffing increases, and in Syria conditions have dictated a greater reliance on national partners and hybrid national/diaspora organisations, with international organisations acting more as intermediary donors than implementers. Aid projects in these contexts tend towards simpler interventions, such as deliveries of food and hygiene items, requiring fewer and less technically skilled personnel (Stoddard, 2017).¹

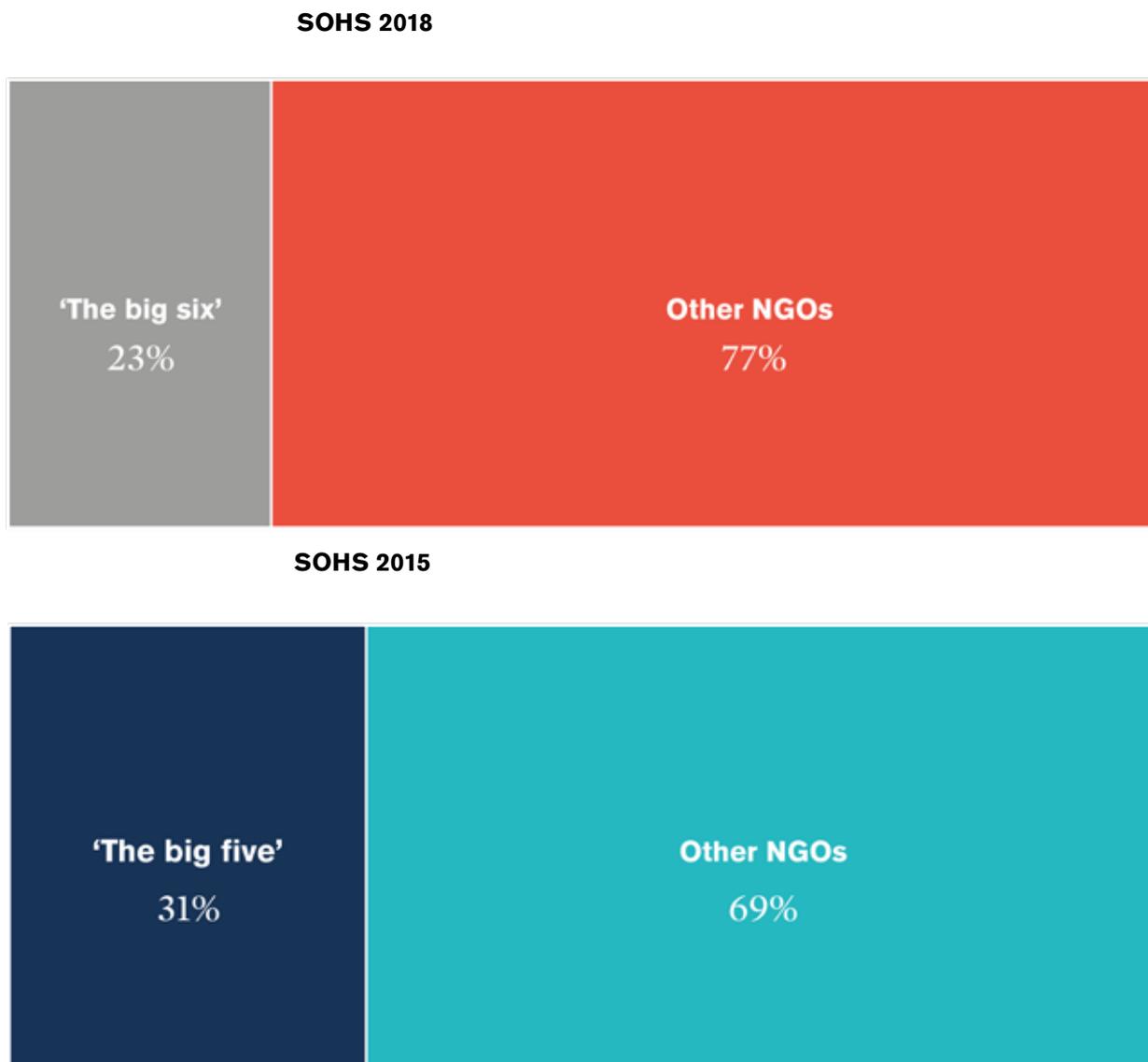
The concentration of humanitarian expenditure in a smaller number of countries (see chapter on needs and funding) may also have affected the number of new staff hires: agencies are likely to have fewer staff in a small number of large programmes than when they are spending the same amount on a larger number of small programmes. Increased activity in middle income countries, with educated populations and governments that expect agencies to hire locally, is also likely to have affected the number of nationally recruited staff.

Agency-specific findings

The bulk of financial resources continues to flow through UN agencies, much of it in grants to NGO implementing partners. However, NGOs' operational budgets grew at a slightly greater rate than UN agencies' (57% versus 51%). Conversely, UN agencies grew more quickly in terms of staff than NGOs (41% versus 33%).

The largest humanitarian actors within the UN system, both in terms of staff and humanitarian expenditure, remain, in descending order, WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF. All three grew, though growth was steepest for UNICEF, a function both of receiving more contributions for humanitarian response and an increase in the proportion of its budget allocated to humanitarian relief work as against development. Once again, the law of small(er) numbers cautions against drawing strong conclusions about these differences.

There was some slight movement among the sector's other dominant actors. MSF remains the largest humanitarian NGO in terms of operational expenditure and is now the largest humanitarian entity of any kind in terms of staff size, outstripping even the largest UN agencies in the number of staff dedicated to humanitarian response.

Figure 17 / INGO shares of humanitarian spend

Source: Humanitarian Outcomes, Global Database of Humanitarian Organisations

Notes: These figures were sourced from annual reports and financial statements, supplemented with website information and direct queries to the organisations.

Six organisations or organisational 'families' (including MSF) accounted for nearly a quarter of the combined humanitarian spend. While the NGO sector is a little less lopsided than it was in 2013, when just five organisations accounted for 31% of expenditure, it is unquestionably still oligopolistic in composition.

Not all NGOs report in detail on the specific amounts spent in different emergency contexts, but a common feature of those organisations that grew the fastest during the period was significant programming in the Middle East, which has seen a surge in funding to meet humanitarian needs created by conflict and mass displacement. One striking example is the Norwegian Refugee Council, whose budget growth (33% in a single year, 2016–17) was

fuelled by expanding programmes in Somalia, Iraq and Syria/ the Syria region. In Syria in particular, the high volume of funding combined with sparse agency presence on the ground has seen greater amounts flowing to fewer agencies, with large individual growth effects. In the case of GOAL, for example, funding for its Syria response made up more than half of its global operational budget in 2017.

Growth was more modest among the Red Cross/Red Crescent organisations than for either UN agencies or NGOs. The Movement's international capstone organisations, IFRC and ICRC, experienced an average increase in expenditure of 46% between 2013 and 2017, and a 21% increase in field staff. Data for National Societies appears to show an overall decrease in expenditure (from \$14.4 billion in 2013 to \$13.8 billion in 2016). This flattens out the overall expenditure figure for the Movement, with combined spending of \$15.7 billion for both periods. Staff numbers for the Movement as a whole grew by 10%.

It is possible that the dip in funding for National Societies is another reflection of the absence of large-scale non-conflict disasters during the period, which would normally swell the budgets of National Societies in affected countries.

Southern INGOs operating regionally or globally tend to be more active in development than in the humanitarian sphere, so the Humanitarian Outcomes model, which focuses on resources dedicated to humanitarian emergencies, is unlikely to capture major trends within this subsector. In terms of humanitarian resources, no Southern INGO stood out as experiencing notable change (i.e. growth far above or below the mean).

Table 10 / Reported humanitarian expenditure, SOHS 2018, 2015

	UN agencies	NGOs	Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement*	IFRC/ICRC only
SOHS 2018	\$16 billion	\$16.8 billion	\$15.7 billion	\$1.9 billion
SOHS 2015	\$10.6 billion	\$10.7 billion	\$15.7 billion	\$1.3 billion
% change	51%	57%	0%	46%

*Red Cross/Red Crescent figures for 2016.

Notes: This chart captures expenditure as reported by agencies themselves. As a result, funding that goes from donors to a UN agency and then on to an NGO will be counted twice – once by the UN agency and once by the NGO. This explains why the total of reported expenditure is much higher than the total for humanitarian funding given in [chapter on needs and funding](#).



Very few national NGOs are represented in the tiers of organisations with budgets over \$2 million, even those that have been in existence for many years.

Very few national NGOs are represented in the tiers of organisations with budgets over \$2 million, even those that have been in existence for many years. The lack of organisational growth across a significant number of these organisations illustrates the continued ‘contractor trap’ most of them find themselves in. This involves chronic dependence on short-term projects, sub-granted through international counterparts, for which they typically must staff up during implementation and cut back again when the contract ends, creating large swings in staff size multiple times a year. With very limited direct access to international funding, and with contracts that provide little or no overhead that would allow for institutional growth, national NGOs are unable to reach the escape velocity that would put them on the same stable growth trajectory enjoyed by Western INGOs. An illustration of this can be seen in Afghanistan, where a humanitarian response has been ongoing for years and where needs are still high, but the number of operational national NGOs has been decreasing² alongside shrinking international funding and operational presence.

One area that has seen significant growth is that of ‘diaspora NGOs’, organisations founded by expatriates (and particularly by Syrian expatriates) to provide humanitarian assistance in their home countries. These organisations are generally registered in Europe or North America, but largely staffed by nationals of crisis-affected countries. International organisations unable or unwilling to operate in Syria have increasingly channelled their resources via these diaspora NGOs, creating significant growth among very young organisations such as the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM) and Hand in Hand for Syria.

Endnotes for this chapter

1. See, for example, www.saveresearch.net; (Stoddard, 2017).
2. Rather than growth in the local NGO sector, OCHA's '3Ws' mapping for Afghanistan shows an average decline of National NGO Common Humanitarian Fund partners between 2013 and 2018 of 8% (<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/3w>).