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Review of 2018 MSNAs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2016, the Grand Bargain identified a lack of comprehensive and cross-sectoral assessments to inform crisis-wide humanitarian strategic decisions. In 2018, in recognition of the impetus from the Grand Bargain, REACH initiated and technically led, in close consultation with OCHA and UNHCR (in refugee contexts), 8 Multi-sector Needs Assessments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Uganda, Ukraine, Somalia and Yemen. This review found that these multi sector needs assessments (MSNAs) are gaining acceptance and increasingly mainstreamed as a tool to bolster the evidence base of consolidated planning and appeal processes such as the Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP). In 8 crises in 2018, MSNAs were implemented to inform the 2019 HNO or in Uganda the Refugee Response Plan (RRP) process. The signatories to the Grand Bargain can be satisfied that progress under work stream 5 has had results. The MSNAs provide a practical and replicable answer to the Grand Bargain commitment to conduct joint and impartial needs assessments to inform humanitarian planning processes.

It would however be wrong to assume that the MSNA process has found its final shape and is deployed consistently across the humanitarian sector. While there is good political support at the highest level and a widespread demand from practitioners in the field, the incentive structure inherent in the different organizations, be they UN agencies, INGOs or among donors still tend to drive assessments back into their silos.

Occasionally there is friendly fire across the trenches as to which assessment is required, how the process should be managed and who should obtain finance and resources. There is also different uptake of the MSNA results in the subsequent stages of the Humanitarian Programming cycle. While discussions about which assessment is needed and who should implement them is a necessary debate, continued questions on the inherent value of a joint multi-sectoral needs assessment hinders the ownership of the process by humanitarian stakeholders.

This means that the further uptake of MSNAs will remain dependent of a continued push from all those actors that perceive a need for a joint multi-sectoral assessment ahead of prioritization and planning processes. Insistence from donors, support from the top echelons of UN agencies, as well as trust among the stakeholders, not least in the field under the leadership of the RC/HCs and HCT Teams is required.

The present Lessons Learned review of MSNAs confirms that there is good will to overcome the hurdles and to improve the techniques, working methods and timely delivery. A number of areas can certainly be improved that are listed in the annex. The good news is that most of these points are already addressed in various processes such as the Joint Inter-Sectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) and the publication of the GPPI methodology to assess coordinated MSNAs.

A few more general recommendations can be made that hopefully help sustain the move towards MSNAs.

First, launching MSNAs. In all frankness this is still a wobbly affair. Ideally the initiative should originate in the field, be in the hands of OCHA and cleared by the IASC. But capacity problems and gentle competition among Agencies has prompted donors to ask REACH, in close collaboration with partners in country, to initiate MSNAs where the need was felt. It should be noted, while initiation may have been prompted by REACH and interested donors, in all cases, MSNAs were not implemented without full endorsement of the MSNA by the HCT or equivalent in-country. Successful MSNAs requires full collaboration with OCHA and UN Agencies on the ground and therefore better ownership up front is essential. In ideal terms OCHA, UN agencies and clusters should be initiating MSNAs, rather than independent third party actors such as REACH. Independent third party actors should be used to implement MSNAs, rather than drive the process.

So the first recommendation would be in all major crisis situations for the field, donors and Agencies to ask: “Why not an MSNA?”

If there is no clear and compelling justification that either existing reliable multi- sectoral data are already available or the crisis does not require more information for prioritization and planning, then the UN agencies should commit to initiate and donors to fund an MSNA process subject to the usual caveats such as timeliness, speed and sectoral needs etc.

Secondly, governance. The MSNA can only be carried out as a collective endeavor in the field. In all 8 countries in which the MSNA was successfully implemented, the HCT and/or Inter-sector working group endorsed the need for a MSNA and a technical working group was formed, chaired by OCHA (or UNHCR in refugee contexts) with a technical actor (such as REACH) co-chairing and typically leading the technical process. This model should be conceived as a best practice and blue-print for future MSNAs. For a successful process support from OCHA, the RC/HC and the members of the HCT is absolutely vital. At the global level, a parallel model should be created. So the IASC and OCHA should embrace the MSNA tool and support its launch whenever deemed necessary by the field, in good collaboration with the donor community that provides finance. This should be combined with a recognition that the UN does not always by itself have the footprint necessary in the field to carry out MSNAs, but rather should rely on the combined expertise in the HCTs. So it’s recommended that under the framework of a joint coordination group, the UN takes the reins, the donors finance and independent third party agencies gets on with the work.

Thirdly, methodology and design of MSNAs. Comparisons across clusters, across regions and demographics and even comparisons between crises around the globe require standardized methods. The inclusion of fragility indicators, NEXUS variables and projected needs must be clarified. So efforts under the JIAG should be supported.

Fourth, timing. The MSNAs must be launched as late as possible to ensure fresh evidence, but delivered in time so as to feed into the annual HNO/HRP cycle. Any slippage is a wasted MSNA.

Fifth, incentives. Nothing happens by good wishes alone. If UN agencies and donors, duly informed by the field, agree that MSNAs are needed for effective joint analysis and

planning, then other assessment tools must adapt or be calibrated to become supportive and complementary exercises. The conditionality that donors attach to financing must reflect this objective. A coordinated steer from the Donor community as well as the IASC is necessary for this to materialize.

Sixth, in the absence of clear global UN leadership of the MSNA process, questions about quality, accountability, impartiality, independence and the like were raised. A case could be made that at the global level MSNAs should be regularly reviewed in order to inform an independent oversight body or working group to be created that could monitor and validate the MSNAs as they are delivered, listen to critiques from stakeholders and provide advice on further progress. Recently published GPPI methodologies could be used as a guidance document to monitor and evaluate the progress and quality of implemented MSNAs.

Seventh, moving to systematic MSNAs is bound to take time. Shared ownership and trust between agencies to implement joint assessments and improvements in quality require sustained investment. To learn the lessons of each MSNA process and continue to improve joint ownership and technical rigour – MSNAs should be seen as an iterative process in which longer term funding and political commitment is necessary from all stakeholders.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	4
1. INTRODUCTIONS	8
1.a. Background and rationale:.....	8
1.b. Methodology of review.....	9
2. FINDINGS.....	10
2. a. To what extent were the MSNAs part of a joint process with shared ownership at the country and global level?	10
2. b. To what extent was the MSNA findings comprehensive?.....	13
2. c. To what extent were the MSNA findings reliable?	15
2. d. To what extent were the MSNA findings timely?	15
2.e. To what extent were the MSNA findings relevant?.....	16
1. f. To what extent should and can the MSNA process be systematized as part of the HPC?	18
2. RECOMMENDATIONS.....	20

1. INTRODUCTIONS

a. Background and rationale:

In May 2016, some of the largest donors and humanitarian organizations came together to make a series of commitments to try and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. The final commitments were called “The Grand Bargain”. In particular, there was an commitment on the need for “*needs assessments that are impartial, unbiased, comprehensive, context-sensitive, timely and up-to-date...*” to provide “*a sound evidence base for humanitarian response plans and prioritized appeals.*”¹ By 2017, according to an ODI evaluation, while most donors felt that this commitment was critical to “*transform the humanitarian sector and secure significant efficiency and effectiveness gains*”, little progress has been made on the shift in culture and operating practice required to implement joint impartial needs assessments followed by joint analysis.

In early 2018, in response to this lack of progress, DG ECHO and in-country partners collaborated with REACH to implement 8 Multi-Sector Needs Assessments (MSNAs) in crisis affected countries (Ukraine, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia and Uganda). These 8 MSNAs (although often called by varying names in country) were designed to provide comprehensive, reliable, timely and relevant information for humanitarian response plans and prioritized appeals, in particular the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs), Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and in the case of Uganda the Refugee Response Plan (RRP). The MSNAs were implemented in multiple forms, with different partnership frameworks, multiple names (Whole of Afghanistan assessment, Multi Cluster Needs Assessment in Iraq etc...) and different stakeholders supporting or leading the process. For example, Map Action deployed to Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq, Translators without Borders supported translation of tools in Bangladesh and Nigeria, and ACAPs supported the process in Nigeria and Bangladesh. However, despite these different models for implementation, REACH, the technical lead agency for the MSNA processes in country, sought to keep certain key characteristics consistent:

- **Shared ownership** – All MSNAs need to be endorsed by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), Inter Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) or equivalent senior leadership bodies **prior to** designing the research or implementing data collection. To ensure the findings are accepted and used the process should be owned by all key decision makers and buy-in should be sustained from the beginning through till the end of the process. In terms of day-to-day oversight and decision making of an MSNA, the MSNA process should be governed through the Assessment and Analysis Working Group, which in nearly all contexts was chaired by OCHA and co-chaired by REACH or in refugee contexts, UNHCR chaired the working group and REACH co-led. The Assessment and Analysis Working Groups are composed of multiple partners with relevant assessment or analysis expertise, such as IOM DTM, WFP VAM, Cluster IM profiles and NGOs. This working group took the key technical decisions on defining the population groups of interest, crisis-affected territories, sampling approach and indicators to be collected.
- **Unbiased and reliable**– MSNAs were designed to be as reliable as possible and produce representative information of the crisis-affected population. In all crises in which the MSNA was implemented, excluding Yemen, randomly sampled household surveys were

¹ The Grand Bargain, IASC, Work stream 5 Improve Joint and Impartial Needs Assessments, 2016. Available at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/improve-joint-and-impartial-needs-assessments>

implemented following best practice social science principles of statistical validity. In Yemen, due to logistical and security challenges, key informant interviews were conducted, however this has been shifted to household surveys in 2019 (the 2019 MSNAs fall outside of the scope of this review).

- **Comprehensive and comparable** across crisis-affected territories and population groups - All MSNAs were designed to provide as representative as possible information across all population groups and territories affected by the crisis. Further, in contexts in which population groups are living in inaccessible areas, efforts were taken to include hard-to-reach territories in the sampling frame. Often this required different methodologies to be used for these locations: Reliability was sacrificed, notably by using key informant interviews rather than household surveys, in order to eliminate assessment and response blind-spots.
- **Relevant** – The 2018 MSNAs were designed to enable multi-sectoral analysis to support prioritization of sectors across population groups and territories. The MSNA specifically aimed to inform the annual humanitarian planning and allocation of resources and therefore were not designed to provide more operational or programmatic types of information. The value of the MSNA is the extent to which it can identify which population is in need of which type of response in which location, to enable longer term planning and resource allocation. With these objectives in mind, they produced multi-sectoral analysis that compared the needs across sectors, population groups and geographic locations. In 2019 the focus has shifted from multi-sectoral to inter-sectoral analysis, in line with the JIAF guidelines.
- **Timely** – All MSNAs were designed to feed into key humanitarian planning milestones, such as the HNO and HRP processes, or equivalent, in country. To ensure the findings are as relevant as possible for the HNO and HRP (or equivalent process), the data collection was implemented as close as possible to the start of the HNO process. However, this also creates challenges for producing findings in time and REACH, in close collaboration with OCHA, UNHCR and the assessment working group partners in country, attempted to identify the “sweet spot” between producing results that were not out-of-date, but also that were ready in time to feed into the HNO. In contexts in which the needs change highly frequently, the MSNA was interpreted as a rigorous baseline, from which more regular humanitarian situation monitoring could occur.

b. Methodology of review

The overall objective of an MSNA is to provide a reliable and rigorous source of data for humanitarian planning, in particular HNOs, HRPs and RRP. To ensure this objective is achieved, it is critical to include a prescriptive set of minimum standards, by which to measure the success of MSNA's against. This evaluation took the following four components as the basis of evaluating the MSNAs:

- **Shared ownership:** The extent to which the MSNA produced information that was part of a joint process with ownership demonstrably evident from all key stakeholders.
- **Reliability:** The extent to which the MSNA produced reliable information to feed into humanitarian planning processes.
- **Comprehensive:** The extent to which the MSNA produced comprehensive information on all crisis-affected population groups and sectors in the country of implementation.

- **Relevance (or use) of findings:** The extent to which the MSNA produced relevant information for humanitarian planning purposes.
- **Timeliness:** The extent to which the MSNA produced timely information to feed into humanitarian planning processes.

Based on these five criteria, the evaluation conducted interviews with 22 representatives of UN agencies, donors, NGOs at both the global and country level to get an overview of the extent to which the MSNAs achieved the objectives they set out. This exercise aimed at identifying lessons learned and recommendations for the 2019 and 2020 MSNA process in countries. The following findings should be understood as indicative and the view of the reviewer, rather than an exhaustive and rigorous evaluation.

2. FINDINGS

a. To what extent were the MSNAs part of a joint process with shared ownership at the country and global level?

At the country level, nearly all MSNAs followed a very similar process, with few deviations from the standard model:

- **Step 1: Endorsement.** All MSNAs reviewed had full buy-in from the Humanitarian Country Team (or equivalent) and the MSNA was an endorsed process from this group.
- **Step 2: Research design.** The MSNA research design process, in all countries reviewed, was technically led by an assessment and analysis working group (or equivalent), mandated by the inter-cluster or inter-sector working group at country level. In nearly all cases this group was chaired by OCHA (or UNHCR in Uganda) and co-chaired by REACH. Most of the key technical agencies in-country were active participants in the process, although it was notable that where not all technical agencies were actively engaged the overall buy-in for the MSNA was reduced at country level. The activation of relevant working groups such as the Assessment and Analysis working group, were essential in designing process and subsequent acceptance of results.
- **Step 3: Data collection.** MSNA data collection, in nearly all countries, was conducted by multiple partners, under the technical leadership of the Assessment and Analysis Working group. The reviewer would encourage that multiple partners, in recognition of their respective strengths and geographic coverage, should be engaged to ensure that the relevant questions are raised and the data collection process is as inclusive as possible
- **Step 4: Analysis.** In most countries the MSNA technical working group endeavored to present the findings to the Inter-cluster or inter-sector working group and in some cases the HCT for their discussion, interpretation and validation. While this process of validation was quicker and more positively viewed in some contexts, overall this process was critical for shared ownership of the results of the MSNA. It was noted, very few contexts had active processes to provide feedback of the findings to the communities affected. The example of Somalia, where efforts were made to seek to communities' feedback on MSNA findings, are highly commended. This process should be repeated for 2020 MSNAs and should be a critical must, not a "nice to have".

As a result of a perceived highly inclusive and collaborative process of designing, implementing and producing findings from the MSNA – most respondents at country level were positive about the MSNA process and perceived that there was shared ownership of the findings. Variation on perceptions of buy-in was most noticeable between contexts in which there was high level senior strategic OCHA leadership of the MSNA process and contexts in which OCHA didn't have an assessment coordination capacity. In particular, the MSNA benefitted from strong supportive personalities, both within OCHA and the clusters, which often resulted in stronger shared ownership and buy in across all partners. Further, committing time to build buy-in amongst key stake-holders, whether through bi-lateral meetings, joint research design workshops or regular informal updates, was critical for shared ownership.

However, while views were broadly positive – there was varying degrees of meaningful engagement from clusters into the MSNA process. It was noted by multiple respondents that some clusters were abler than others to meaningfully engage and guide the design of the MSNA indicators. This varying levels of engagement was largely driven by gaps in Information Management or assessment capacity within the clusters. In one context, clusters were offered trainings to build their understanding of research design. The reviewer perceives trainings to clusters, to enable meaningful engagement in the design process, as an example of a best practice that should be replicated across contexts. Further, in some contexts there were concerns highlighted that some clusters were more represented in the MSNA than others. While the reviewer recognizes there is a need to prioritize some clusters based on levels of need (if it is a protection crisis, there are likely to be more protection indicators included in the tool), it is important that through the Inter-cluster or inter-sector working group, clusters are holding each other to account to ensure no agency or sector bias occurs in the design, implementation and analysis of an MSNA.

A few interviewees raised the need to make the MSNA process inclusive of sub-national coordination structures, non-traditional stakeholders and government agencies. It is the view of the reviewer that this is more of a concern with regards to the composition of the Assessment and Analysis Working Group at the national level. The stake-holders presented in this group should ensure that they are representing their own constituents and through national clusters and mandated agency representation, all stake-holders, including sub-national coordination for government agencies inputs (when relevant and respecting humanitarian impartiality principles) should be represented. To go down the path of conducting multiple layered consultations before each MSNA, will likely sacrifice time for the sake of increased buy-in. Therefore, it is the recommendation of this reviewer, to ensure MSNAs are agile and timely, the composition of the technical working group leading the process should endeavor to represent all diverse perspectives in-country. Through representation, rather than directly seeking endorsement, the MSNA should remain both inclusive and timely.

While country level buy-in appeared to be high amongst nearly all respondents - at the global level more issues and questions have been raised. OCHA leadership did provide political support for MSNAs, however this support was not demonstrably translated into consistent calls for MSNAs in contexts where no alternative options exist or country level initiative was lacking². Across respondents there was broadly a perception that the MSNA process was inclusive, although limited demonstrable evidence, except from a few clusters, on global partners providing active engagement or inputs into the process. REACH, or other implementing agencies, should seek increased inputs and engagement from external global partners, such as ACAPS, Ground Truth Solutions, Map Action and Translators without Borders, in future MSNA processes.

² While it is the view of this report that such alternatives exist, by nature of this lessons learned evaluation focusing on countries in which MSNAs were deemed necessary and endorsed by the HCT, it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to identify and list alternative options to the MSNA.

The lack of buy-in appeared to be predicated on a number of concerns, which will be discussed in turn:

- **The MSNAs were perceived as a “one size fits all” approach.** This was a view repeated in several interviews and was the focus of further investigation by the reviewer. While it is certainly true that commonalities ran throughout the MSNA processes in 2018, local buy-in from partners and the inclusive process ensured that each process appeared to have been adjusted to the realities of the context. As examples of the context-specificity of 2018 MSNAs, multiple MSNAs were called by different names (Whole of Afghanistan assessment, the Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment, the Joint Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment) and included different partners and adjusted methodologies according to the context. It is the opinion of this reviewer that this flexibility should be maintained so that future MSNAs can continue to be adapted to the realities of the context and the needs of the response.
- **The MSNAs were perceived as seeking to be the sole or singular source of data for HNOs.** While the MSNA seeks to provide as comprehensive information as possible across territories, population groups and sectors – there are several pieces of information that the MSNA cannot and should not collect, for example human rights violations or verified cases of disease outbreaks. Several sector specific or specialized pieces of information are vital for successful HNOs and given the political and high profile nature of these documents, and the wide-spread implications of HNO analysis, it is critical these processes remain inclusive of all available data sources. MSNAs seeks to *inform* the HNO process, not *replicate* the HNO process.
- **Several interviewees highlighted concerns that by allowing the MSNA process to be implemented by an independent third party, accountability will be lost.** The value of third-parties was clear to most interviewees, they provide a perceived independence and technical capacity, otherwise not available within the humanitarian eco-system. That said, this independence is in contradiction with the highly political nature of the data collected through an MSNA and the large-scale implications of the decisions that could be taken based on this information. Concerns were raised about the accountability and legitimacy of independent actors. This tension between independence and legitimacy was raised in multiple interviews. It is the view of this reviewer that to resolve this tension, while we need to maintain third-party actors as central to the MSNA process to ensure independence, at the same time we need to actively encourage and seek buy-in and ownership by legitimate and mandated bodies to politically guide and oversee the process both at the global and country level. Only through active ownership and engagement from mandated agencies, working in collaboration with and support of third-party agencies implementing MSNAs, can we get the best of this intrinsic tension: Independent results, which are accountable and responsive to the wider international community. To ensure the independence and impartiality of this process, this review would recommend a global working group or body to verify and confirm the validity of the MSNA process and findings.

It is the view of this reviewer that improved collaboration and communication should occur between REACH, the current technical lead in the countries reviewed, and OCHA (or UNHCR for refugee contexts), the organization that should be leading and coordinating these assessments. The global buy-in and engagement in the MSNA process would clearly benefit from more clear OCHA leadership and political support for MSNAs in countries where local level HCTs perceive these as relevant.

b. To what extent was the MSNA findings comprehensive?

First of all, especially at the country level, there was general support amongst nearly all interviewees that MSNA findings should provide a comprehensive picture of crisis-affected territories and populations, including those residing in hard to reach or inaccessible areas. This was perceived as necessary to ensure no vulnerable populations were excluded and any response blind-spots were eliminated. In most countries, respondents perceived that the MSNA had produced comprehensive findings for all population groups and most sectors, including notable efforts to collect data in hard to reach areas. The findings below denote the extent to which this ambition was achieved by population groups, sector and took consideration of the humanitarian-development nexus.

i. To what extent should and did the MSNA cover all population groups?

There was a difference of opinion, amongst some interviewees, on the need for MSNAs to assess all crisis-affected population groups. For most interviewees, especially those at the country level, the importance of ensuring MSNAs produce information to support prioritization and the need to make sure these prioritization decisions are based on a comprehensive assessment of all possible affected population groups, was clear. For this group of interviewees – the risk of accidentally excluding populations of concern, or producing “blind spots” was a key concern and the comprehensive approach to sampling was appreciated. However, for some interviewees – there was a concern of a risk of duplication for ongoing data collection efforts and exacerbating assessment fatigue and therefore held a view that only some population groups should be included. A suggestion, not necessarily shared by the reviewer, was that focusing solely on needs would automatically ensure adequate population coverage. This review however agrees that if rigorous multi-sectoral data already exists on population groups, the MSNA does not need to include these groups within the primary data collection exercise. However, in most countries in which an MSNA occurred, such datasets did not appear readily available, and country clusters and the HCT perceived it was needed to include all affected communities in the exercise.

Most interviewees felt that the MSNA succeeded in covering most of the population groups affected by the crisis in their respective contexts. In particular, efforts to include populations living in inaccessible areas were commended. For two of the MSNAs evaluated, hard-to-reach data collection methodologies were employed and information was successfully collected for otherwise inaccessible populations. In the contexts in which this didn't occur, partners requested that in 2020 efforts are taken to ensure the most vulnerable populations in the most difficult to access areas are included within the data collection exercise, either through remote or direct data collection.

The main limitation on the extent to which MSNAs comprehensively covered all affected population groups, was the criticism that data could not be disaggregated successfully to analyse gender and age. This criticism is intrinsic to the very nature of household surveys. Household surveys, by their design, require one interview with a household representative and the unit of analysis is the household, not individual. Therefore, intra-household dynamics, particularly related to gender and age and the sharing of resources within these groups, is not possible to assess. Interviewees highlighted the efforts made to use proxy indicators, such as the gender of a head of household to analyse gender and its implications on access to resources and services. This review would recommend further exploration of how gender and age analysis could be incorporated more effectively into the research design of MSNAs.

ii. *To what extent should and did the MSNA cover all sectors?*

The overall assessment of responders was that the MSNA should cover all sectors in order to provide a comprehensive inter-sectoral analysis of humanitarian needs for the population groups affected. Several respondents emphasized that a multi-sector assessment is the necessary first step for multi-sector response plans and highlighted how the MSNA in their country had facilitated the process for joint planning and response. Further, donors found the inclusion of all sectors necessary to support an evidence-based approach to prioritization between sectors. Interviewees highlighted that it was important to endeavor to represent all sectors with an equal level of detail in the final outputs, whilst also being cognizant that sectors with the highest level of need are likely to receive the most attention, which varies by context.

However, for some sectors, most notably nutrition and food security, there were some questions raised, especially in contexts with a strong IPC analysis process, on the value of including food security and nutrition outcome indicators within the MSNA. The concern was raised that the MSNA would be either be a duplication of, or could contradict, IPC findings. However, these concerns could be overcome by the understanding that the IPC is not an assessment, rather than an analysis process. The IPC is an inclusive and joint analysis process and not a data collection or assessment process. The IPC analysis is based on multiple data sources, and the outputs from this analysis are often the basis for the food security and nutrition sections of an HNO. Therefore, the IPC is a process that the MSNA should seek to *inform* not *duplicate*. With this in mind, it is the recommendation of the reviewer that, wherever possible, efforts should be made to ensure the MSNA is able to feed into the in-country IPC processes. The reviewer urges technical teams leading MSNAs to engage and collaborate closely with IPC technical working groups and ensure that as far as possible the MSNA timelines are aligned with IPC workshops and the research design is compatible with the IPC analysis framework and methodological protocols.

A further concern was raised that MSNAs might somehow supersede or replace more in-depth sectoral assessments. This review identified that given the different objectives of MSNAs and in-depth sectoral assessments, there is no reason one should replace the other. Instead, wherever possible, MSNAs can provide a mechanism by which to prioritize the sectors, geographic areas and population groups in-depth sector assessments should assess. However, even with this prioritization process in place, the need for operationally relevant and in-depth sectoral assessments is not in question.

iii. *To what extent should the MSNA consider the humanitarian-development nexus?*

Broad agreement amongst interviewees that the MSNAs, when in a protracted crisis in which development actors are beginning to or are already operating, it would be useful and relevant to ensure the design of the MSNA speaks to the information needs of development actors. In particular frameworks such as the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, Sustainable Development Goals and the World Bank country systemic diagnostic should be taken into consideration. The extent to which the research design of MSNAs takes into account development frameworks is likely to vary by context. Ultimately, even in contexts which are in the process of transitioning from humanitarian to development programming, MSNAs are by nature humanitarian needs assessments and attempts to provide information relevant for development planning should not come at the cost of ensuring that the information provided directly feeds into humanitarian planning. At the point in which information needs for humanitarian planning are no longer relevant, it would be the recommendation of the reviewer to reconsider the value or need to have an MSNA in such contexts.

However, in contexts where humanitarian needs are present, while the need to inform humanitarian planning remains the priority, the MSNAs were noted by several interviewees as potential vehicles to enable more integrated development and humanitarian response plans. Even in acute humanitarian crises, such as Yemen, the need to preserve and maintain local systems is critical. Interviewees noted that the MSNA should incorporate questions and indicators that monitor the presence and functioning of systems or structures, such as health or WASH infrastructure, to enable humanitarian and development partners alike to prioritize which systems are at risk of collapse and where they need to be strengthened. The reviewer recommends MSNA technical working groups to engage, where possible, with development actors in each context and incorporate this thinking into the research design phase of the MSNA. Further, development actors should, where relevant and possible, be included in joint preliminary analysis or dissemination of the findings.

With regards to the peace element of the triple nexus, the MSNAs in 2018 did not attempt to feed into or provide information on this third pillar. However, it was recognized in one interview, that when relevant and not in contradiction with the principles of humanitarian impartiality and independence, incorporating some stability or peace related indicators could be considered. This would be a judgment call of the HCT or equivalent body per context.

c. To what extent were the MSNA findings reliable?

Most respondents were satisfied with the quality of the methodology in terms of the perceived reliability of the findings. It was beyond the scope of this lessons learned exercise to provide a rigorous review of the MSNA methodology.

While most respondents perceived the MSNA findings as reliable, in some cases it was reported that in-country clusters had questioned the veracity of the results in the preliminary analysis workshops. Upon closer inspection, the reviewer found that often such questions were as a result of poor inclusion and engagement of clusters in the original research design stage of the process, rather than linked to the actual quality of the data collected. In many cases more effort to ensure clusters are included and provided with support to meaningfully engage in the research design from the start, would have prevented later concerns on the reliability of the findings. The reviewer urges MSNA technical working groups to follow the best practices of some countries and, when requested by clusters, to provide trainings and capacity building on assessment and information management, to enable and facilitate meaningful engagement in the indicator design process.

d. To what extent were the MSNA findings timely?

All respondents were clear on the need and value of an MSNA feeding into the HNO analysis process and that if and when MSNA findings are not produced in time, this is a missed opportunity to provide rigorous evidence to support and enable a better HNO process. In all contexts evaluated with an HNO process, the MSNA data was available in time to feed into the HNO process. However, in certain contexts, datasets were perceived as insufficient to support cluster or inter-cluster analysis and it is the recommendation of this review that in all contexts MSNA technical working groups discuss with clusters and inter-cluster working groups the type of analysis outputs that would be most useful and relevant to inform the HNO process.

In circumstances in which MSNA data and analysis was perceived as late or unable to meaningfully feed into the HNO and HRP process, according to interviewees this appeared to be due to two reasons: 1) Delays as a result of internal REACH processes or lack of capacity or 2)

cumbersome review processes to build buy-in with partners both before and after MSNA data collection. To prevent avoidable delays, it is important to ensure that the organization implementing MSNAs, in the countries reviewed this was REACH, has the necessary staff and efficient processes in place to produce timely and relevant analysis outputs prior to the HNO process being launched. In addition, the reviewer recommends considering carefully the competing requirements of full institutional buy-in versus timeliness. The reviewer is of the view that sticking to the agreed timelines for the MSNA is of paramount importance to feed adequately or meaningfully into the HNO process. The responsibility for respecting these timelines lies both with independent third party implementer as well as the Assessment and Analysis Working Group and conveners who are leading this process.

e. To what extent were the MSNA findings relevant?

The assessment of the relevance of MSNAs to humanitarian planning at the country and global level, left the reviewer with the impression that while MSNAs informed the HNO process in all countries in which they were implemented, MSNAs are still in the process of incrementally improving. Many respondents agreed that they are crucial to inform the HNOs and HRPs, in particular avoiding blind-spots and provide an evidence base for inter-sectoral prioritization. While questions remained, the value added of a singular exercise, which compares needs across territories, population groups and sectors, was perceived. The extent to which the MSNA achieved this goal, varied from context to context. In contexts where other tools existed, especially the IPC, some actors questioned the extra benefit of having an MSNA (see above). However, probing this issue the reviewer detected a growing acceptance even in those settings, of MSNAs providing an important comprehensive picture, especially if the data for the MSNA was perceived as producing timely and collaborative analysis. The value of MSNAs as an instrument for triangulation was recognized by all.

Of all types of respondents interviewed, donors were the most vocal and appreciative of the relevance of the MSNA findings and this was also true for those respondents responsible for the over-all coordination and prioritization processes at country level. Interviewees who were faced with making tough choices over allocation of resources and had to defend their decisions in front of budgetary authorities and parliaments, appreciated having strong and reputable evidence upon which to defend these decisions. There was a perception that the HNO and HRP was likely to have been improved through the presence of an MSNA process occurring before.

However, while country level buy-in was evident through the creation of, and active participation in, Assessment and Analysis Working Groups, UN agency representatives at the global level expressed the most scepticism of the relevance of the MSNAs to decision making processes. The mixed perceptions of the relevance of MSNAs to decision making processes during interviews demonstrate that MSNAs are still in the process of improving and are not yet informing strategic decision making in all contexts in which they occur. See below negative factors affecting relevance of MSNAs:

- Contexts in which other processes are occurring, such as the IPC, which have intuitive and easy to read results, the need for an MSNA and the uptake of the finding is perceived as lessened. This was especially true in contexts with acute food insecurity and caseloads in higher IPC Phases (Phase 4+). The reviewer thinks this will continue, as the severity of the food security situation and related outcomes (nutrition and mortality) requires the IPC analysis to be central to the response planning process. In contexts in which there is a high prevalence of acute food insecurity, this review would emphasize the need to ensure the data from MSNAs are feeding into all analysis processes in country, not only

HNO process. In contexts in which IPC analysis processes are occurring, MSNA technical teams should see the IPC as a stake-holder to inform and the data should be shared to enable usage of the findings.

- Some donors highlighted that the provision of cross-crisis comparable information through MSNAs would be of value to inform internal resource allocations. However, the reviewer found that in 2018 the MSNA suffered from an absence of global guidelines on inter-sectoral analysis. In the absence of global guidelines in 2018, MSNA technical teams produce “relative” measures of inter-sectoral severity at the country level. The extent to which these inter-sectoral measures were accepted or understood in terms of their programmatic implications, varied by context. This had two implications: 1) In several contexts, especially those in which 2018 was the first time an MSNA had been conducted, country decision makers struggled to translate the findings of the MSNA into meaningful programmatic decisions without active support from REACH; 2) Further, the absence of global guidelines on inter-sectoral severity meant that the 2018 MSNAs missed the opportunity to provide cross-crisis comparable information. The recent progress on the Joint Inter-Sectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) and the inclusion of the JIAF into the HNO Template for 2019 is welcomed by the reviewer. Once the JIAF severity scale is finalised and understood, if the MSNAs are aligned with this methodology the findings can be compared between crisis and likely there will be an increased uptake and impact of the MSNAs in subsequent years.
- The reviewer found evidence that the MSNA informed the HPC process in all countries in which they occurred. When compared to the time and resources put into MSNAs, it is however still a question if they are sufficiently utilised. In general, HNO processes were well informed by an MSNA. But there were comparatively fewer HRPs that used MSNA findings extensively. This appeared to be partially due to the timelines of the HNO and HRP processes, with several countries running the two processes almost in parallel rather than sequentially. It was also due to the difficulties to translate MSNAs outputs into actionable interventions. While one would encourage the HNO process sequentially to inform the HRP process, in the absence of appropriate sequencing, the reviewer would encourage MSNA teams to make sure the outcomes are at the disposal of the HRP simultaneously with the HNO.

While the above negative factors were noted, see below some positive factors that appeared to improve the uptake and usage of MSNA findings in 2018:

- Settings in which the MSNA findings were perceived as highly relevant, were also settings in which the research design process had high level strategic buy in from UN agencies and a perceived inclusive and collaborative process in the inception phase of the MSNA. Positive case studies of countries, in which there was strong buy in from clusters and coordination at the outset, showed that when the institutional process is strong, the relevance and uptake of findings is increased. The reviewer commends contexts in which senior UN profiles took ownership and leadership of the MSNA process, these were often the contexts in which MSNAs were perceived as most relevant.
- Many of the countries in which the findings of the MSNA were most used and valued for strategic planning, were also countries in which the MSNA had occurred previously. The reviewer noted that the repeated process of an MSNA, increased buy in, improved the design of the methodology and ultimately improved the incremental impact of the MSNA in country.

Ultimately, while the relevance of MSNA findings is important to measure, it is also necessary to note that there were questions on what the MSNA was trying to achieve.

In particular, given the centrality of MSNA data to inter-sectoral prioritization processes – at times there was question on where prioritisation should sit and who should lead on such questions. It is the view of this reviewer that while the MSNA should seek to *inform* prioritization processes, it is not *in and of itself* a prioritization process. This is why the leadership of OCHA in-country and the active engagement of clusters, representing operational partners is critical. Not only is OCHA leadership and cluster engagement critical for a successful process, but also taking MSNA findings and translating these into the official prioritization processes, such as the HNO and HRP. See section 2.a. for further details on this.

f. To what extent should and can the MSNA process be systematized as part of the HPC?

i. To what extent should the MSNA process be systematized as part of the HPC?

This review found a common belief that the MSNA either has the potential to, or succeeds in, improving trust in official humanitarian planning processes, such as the HNO and HRP. Without a singular rigorous data collection exercise that enables a strong evidence base for inter-sectoral analysis, concerns were raised during interviews that when multiple data sources are available, “cherry picking” data becomes common, in which the data source representing the highest level of need is selected for representation and analysis. Inflation of need, an issue raised in several interviews, appears to be common practice in multiple planning and appeal processes and subsequently has reduced donor trust in HNO and HRPs. Donors perceived the presence of an MSNA as an attempt by the system to produce one agreed upon assessment of inter-sectoral needs, which had consensus amongst partners, that could be used to improve the reliability and perceived accuracy of HNOs and HRPs. In the absence of MSNAs, HNOs and HRPs continue with an inherent reputational risk that most agencies, donors and implementing partners, don’t actually trust that they accurately reflect the needs in country.

Beyond benefits of improving the perceived accuracy and trust of humanitarian planning processes, this review found an additional conceptual benefit of the MSNA, namely an opportunity to produce comparable information, from a reliable source, across multiple crisis – to enable not only intra-crisis prioritization, but to give donors and agencies a reliable data source for inter - crisis comparability. This reviewer recommends that MSNAs in spite of them being designed for different contexts would include core similarities, which would enable some degree of inter - crisis comparability analysis. Ultimately, the hope of this review is that in the longer term, it would be possible to pick up a MSNA conducted in Cameroon as compared to an MSNA conducted in Afghanistan and have a general sense of where the money is most urgently needed.

Finally, in several contexts, beyond the actual use of MSNA findings, several respondents highlighted that having the process of the MSNA in-country had secondary positive effects. For example, through active inter-cluster participation in the design phase of the assessment, it became easier to conduct a similar process in the design phase of response plans. Several participants highlighted that an MSNA process enabled or facilitated integrated response planning. While this benefit is beyond the scope of this review, the benefits of increasing collaboration between sectors and agencies is to be encouraged. Further, through training of large local enumerator teams, field officers and analysts in the process of the MSNA, the process itself can be said to contribute, in a small way, to building local capacity to run similar surveys independently.

However, while the positive benefits of the MSNA are clear, some interviewees raised concerns about the implications of systematizing MSNAs across all humanitarian planning cycles:

- **Risk of duplication of efforts** – Some interviewees highlighted that the global roll out of MSNAs could prevent or “smother” other efforts to collect data or, in some cases, simply duplicate work that is already occurring at the country level. While such country specific examples weren’t highlighted during interviews and so it is not possible to comment on specific cases, as a general rule, MSNAs should not occur in circumstances in which other rigorous and inclusive multi-sector assessment have occurred or are occurring. It is critical that Assessment and Analysis Working Groups in countries ensure the coordination of assessments and prevent duplication between agencies. Further, donors have a role to play in preventing double financing of the same or similar assessments. That being said, for an MSNA to not occur because of the existence of other data sources, the technical working groups must be confident of the quality and rigour of the alternative source of data, including the inclusivity of the process. This review welcomes progress on the production of global review guidelines on the quality of assessments in terms of process and outcomes. Such guidelines will be useful to determine when and where MSNAs would be most needed and when and where MSNA have achieved their aims.
- **Frequency of changing needs in crisis** – Some interviewees highlighted that in contexts where needs change more frequently than on an annual basis, the MSNA will not be able to capture the dynamism of the crisis and is not the most appropriate tool for data collection. The necessity to have dynamic tools to monitor needs more frequently than an annual basis is recognized by the reviewer. Therefore, this review further probed interviewees on the utility of an MSNA in highly volatile contexts. While all interviewees agreed MSNAs were unable and should not track needs on a frequent basis, most respondents working in dynamic crises emphasized that, even in changing crisis, it is useful to have a once a year rigorous baseline of the level of needs. MSNAs in highly dynamics contexts should be treated as annual baselines to inform annual planning, from which to track needs against and provide real-time prioritization accordingly. It is worth emphasizing here that MSNAs should not come at the expense of or be perceived as replacing more dynamic monitoring systems, which are critical in such contexts. Instead, the MSNA and humanitarian monitoring systems are encouraged by this review to speak to each other and ensure there is a degree of compatibility in their methodologies to enable tracking against the MSNA as a rigorous annual baseline.
- **Sudden onset disasters** – Several interviewees questioned the use of an MSNA at the outset of a sudden onset disaster. Without further detailed examination of MSNAs that have occurred in sudden onset disasters, it would be the view of this reviewer that existing tools, such as the MIRA, should be the framework for multi-sector needs assessments at the outset of a disaster and if an MSNA is deemed relevant by on-the-ground responders, an adaptation would be required to make the process more agile and timely in line with rapid response timelines.

ii. To what extent can the MSNA process be systematized as part of the HPC?

The 8 MSNAs implemented in 2018, in highly varied contexts, demonstrated that MSNAs are a model that can be globally replicated. However, some challenges remain on the implications of replicating the MSNA in multiple contexts over time. The below aims to discuss some of the concerns raised during interviews on to what extent can the MSNA be brought to scale.

- **Tension between the need for global guidelines for inter-sectoral severity and the necessity to adjust analysis per context.** In several interviews, respondents requested that the methodology between annual MSNAs remain stable, both to improve the efficiency of the process (adjustments of methodology require full re-endorsement of the research design) and to enable trend analysis across years. Such comments highlighted

the need for global guidelines to provide an inter-sectoral severity scale that is readable and intuitive for decision makers. The review therefore commends the progress on the Joint Inter-Sectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) and its inclusion in the HNO for 2019. However, while this progress is commended, the introduction of global guidelines is also raising intrinsic tensions at the heart of global processes: The extent to which at the country level, global best practices can be adjusted to take into account local realities. While the need to adjust analysis and methodologies per reality is well understood and does not need repeating here, it is the view of this reviewer that too much adjustment risks diluting the replicability and confidence in the MSNA process. Therefore, the reviewer recommends that in the introduction of the JIAF and MSNAs at country level, the core elements and protocols are kept constant, but guidelines should be provided on how certain aspects can be adjusted or tailored to the needs of the country. Maintaining a global technical body of experts to guide countries in this process, both in terms of implementation of the MSNA and subsequent JIAF analysis, would be critical to ensure this process is a success.

- **Stability of financing.** MSNAs are highly human resource intensive processes, with a large number of technical skills required, that require the mobilization and involvement of multiple people with multiple skills. For example, different skills are required to lead on external engagement, designing sampling, coding tools, producing feasible and real-time data cleaning processes, drafting coding scripts for analysis and producing readable and usable reports. Given the financial costs have already been raised as a concern, this review is not recommending giving more money to MSNAs, rather to request to donors to provide more “stable” financing, so that agencies implementing the MSNAs can have more predictable resources to ensure they retain qualified and experienced staff to conduct what is a highly technical process. Similarly, to enable “gap filling” where in-country staff don’t have the capacity (or time), global financing is highly useful to give actors such as REACH the predictable means to provide support to country offices conducting MSNA processes.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

a. Overall buy-in

Broadly, this review has found wide support on the need to conduct MSNAs in locations with large-scale humanitarian caseloads.

Support for the MSNA tool in some instances was qualified by various concerns such as ownership, assessment design, context specificity, sector detail, target population, periodicity, resources and competence required, etc. The cumulative effect of such concerns amounts to an uphill struggle for organizations such as REACH, seeking to implement MSNAs in multiple contexts. Seen from the outside the conduct of MSNAs cannot yet be considered part of the standard humanitarian DNA by stakeholders be they donors, agencies or field operators.

Time has most probably come to consider a reversal of proof by preceding every assessment by the question:

“Why not an MSNA?”

If we are to seriously implement the Grand Bargain call for coordinated, comprehensive and reliable assessments, that reduce the need for multiple overlapping processes and encourage shared ownership and use of results, this question needs to be answered by all levels and all actors. In each crisis with large humanitarian caseloads a collective and satisfactory answer to this question needs to be reached.

b. The checklist

To answer “Why not MSNAs” the following checklists should be used and an MSNAs should be given a go ahead whenever a number of boxes have been ticked in the affirmative:

- ✓ No other reliable and comprehensive information across sectors, population groups and territories is available.
- ✓ There is a need for a more reliable unified baseline for planned HNOs and HRPs.
- ✓ There is a risk of possible blind spots, such as regions, population groups, or specific sector needs.
- ✓ There is a wish to underpin cash operations, non-earmarked or multiyear funding better by a more rigorous cross sector needs overview and prioritization.

c. The MSNA product

The MSNA label is generic and not owned by any Agency or INGO in particular. It’s a tool. As the tool is evolving over time it is recommended that the following objectives are borne in mind:

- i) MSNAs must be preceded by an inventory of relevant existing data and analysis.
- ii) The MSNA relies on primary data collected as close to the beneficiary as possible.
- iii) To the extent they meet the methodology and timeline constraints, data from other sources should align with or be considered within the design of the MSNAs and duplication avoided.
- iv) MSNAs must be rolled out to produce timely information for the HNO or similar processes, respecting the absolute requirement that the result is made available prior to the HNO.
- v) The MSNA should provide comprehensive information across all sectors and not aim to provide granular specialized information for programming which can better be performed by other processes.
- vi) The methodology must be better standardized and include severity measures as they are developed globally, most notably the MSNA should be aligned with the JIAF and IPC processes.
- vii) The methodology must be stable over years to allow multi year comparisons of needs and outcomes.
- viii) MSNA must maintain core analytical similarities to allow comparison between humanitarian needs in different parts of the world.
- ix) The MSNAs should incorporate coping and response capacity as well as relevant NEXUS indicators e.g. primary health services or water supply, where they are relevant for humanitarian response and recovery.
- x) Gradually the MSNA must improve the presentation of data so as to make them more user-friendly for decision makers.
- xi) Joint multi-cluster analysis is the task of the HNOs and HRPs. However, a quality MSNA should involve an element of preliminary joint analysis through an assessment working group or equivalent to ensure sector and operational expertise and fed into the interpretation and analysis of findings.
- xii) Periodicity: the MSNAs are linked to and should be synchronized with the annual HPC. However, a stable situation could indicate that a bi- or pluriannual cycle is sufficient, supplementing the MSNAs with more targeted updates in between.

xiii) Transparency: As a rule, MSNAs are public documents that serve the humanitarian community as a whole. Sensitive information may be shared through protected channels.

d. The MSNA process

- i) When MSNAs have become standard practice the ask for an MSNA should ideally come from the HCT validated by the HC/RC, OCHA and/or UNHCR.
- ii) Pending buy in by all actors the MSNA will be launched by donors seeking the fullest support of OCHA HQ and the RC/HC and the HCT in the field.
- iii) Donors would be encouraged to finance MSNAs and to commit to multi-year funding where needed.
- iv) In all countries reviewed, the implementation of the MSNAs would be out-sourced to independent third parties to ensure the correct specialist skills were available to implement the process successfully.
- v) OCHA is by default the best placed Agency is providing the political umbrella and acts as a convener.
- vi) The third party actor (such as REACH in the countries reviewed), is responsible, in close collaboration with OCHA, for collecting the views from all clusters, the ICCT, the Assessment working group, and the HCT. Based on this the research design is proposed and data collection initiated.
- vii) The Assessment working group, chaired by either OCHA or UNHCR, co-chaired by a third party specialized agency and supported by an assessment coordinator, is a strong framework through which to jointly design and implement the MSNAs and is necessary to ensure shared ownership throughout the process. Such a group should be mirrored at the global level to enable shared global ownership as well as country ownership of the MSNA process.
- viii) The MSNA should seek to be complementary to other sector assessments, either providing an interim point of light-touch monitoring between larger scale in-depth sector assessments or to support in prioritizing where sector assessments should be focused.
- ix) Preliminary analysis should be conducted with all key stakeholders through a joint analysis workshop, prior to the publication or dissemination of results.
- x) Speed is of essence so as to ensure that data is transformed into analysis in due course before the HNO/HRP or similar planning processes gets underway.

e. Incentivizing MSNAs (donors, agencies, operators)

- i) OCHA, Agencies, INGOs and donors should strive to expect and demand comprehensive and reliable evidence prior to the initiation of annual humanitarian planning processes in the spirit of: "Why not a MSNA?"
- ii) Donors provide consistent political support to the IASC, OCHA and independent third party actors to implement MSNAs wherever relevant.
- iii) Donors instruct their members of the Boards and Support Groups of Humanitarian Agencies to mainstream the use of the MSNA tool in all UN Agencies.
- iv) Donors, whenever relevant, condition financing of major humanitarian response operations, including individual financing of specialized Agencies and NGOs on the existence of a comprehensive, crisis-wide evidence base, and their reflection in the HNOs and Humanitarian Response Plans.
- v) Donors provide multi-year funding commitments to enable predictable and regular MSNA implementation in line with the annual humanitarian planning cycle.
- vi) Donors verify that alternative assessments are only initiated and financed in complement to MSNAs and where real value added is ensured.
- vii) When financing by result donors make appropriate use of MSNAs as a baseline and as a monitoring tool.
- viii) Donors give adequate support to data and assessment coordination in OCHA or best placed UN agencies and NGOs.
