Executive summary

2012 was the "year of recurring disasters",[1] which repeatedly hit places characterised by the intersection of chronic poverty, conflict and exposure to regular shocks and stresses. There were none of the 'mega-disasters', in terms of fatalities, on the scale of previous years, such as the Japanese tsunami in 2011 or the Haiti earthquake in 2010.

In 2012, 76 million people were targeted by the UN as needing humanitarian assistance – compared with 93 million people in 2011 – and many more will have been affected by smaller-scale disasters.

The international humanitarian response fell by 8% from US$19.4 billion in 2011 to US$17.9 billion in 2012, with assistance provided by governments falling by 6% from US$13.8 billion to US$12.9 billion. The reduction in humanitarian assistance was most marked for members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), with a fall of 11% from 2011.

Despite fewer people targeted as needing humanitarian assistance in 2012, the requirements for the United Nations (UN) Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) remained similar to the 2011 level. Only 62.7% of these needs were funded, making 2012 the year when the smallest proportion of needs were met for over a decade. However, the difference between the best-funded and worst-funded CAP appeals remains wide – from 86% to 38%.

Humanitarian assistance from most donors fell and from some it fell dramatically: Spain reduced its humanitarian assistance by half, Japan by 38% and the United States by 11%. Because the United States is such a large donor, this translated to a fall of US$483 million. However, the United States remained the largest donor of humanitarian assistance by volume, providing US$3.8 billion in 2012 – 29% of all humanitarian assistance from governments. Luxemburg and Sweden were the most generous DAC donors as a proportion of their gross national income (GNI), providing 0.16% and 0.14% respectively. Turkey was the fourth largest government donor of humanitarian assistance in 2012, contributing over US$1 billion – 0.13% of its national wealth.

Official development assistance (ODA) and ODA-like flows from non-DAC donors continued to rise, and their contribution to humanitarian assistance increased to US$1.4 billion, thanks mainly to Turkey's contribution. In 2011 (the most recent year for which data are available) private giving fell by 10% but, at US$5.7 billion, it remained significantly higher than in 2009, the year before the large 2010 peak.

In addition to the resources allocated to international humanitarian assistance, many countries contributed by hosting refugees, among them some of the world's poorest economies. For example, Pakistan hosted over 1.7 million refugees in 2011, Iran 886,468, Syria 755,454 and Kenya 566,487.

Domestic governments appeared to be taking a much stronger role in response to crises, especially natural disasters, within their own borders. China and India were home to a reported 78% of all people affected by disasters between 2002 and 2011, but received very little international humanitarian assistance.

Pakistan, Somalia, and West Bank and Gaza Strip received the largest amount of international humanitarian assistance in 2011, the most recent year for which comprehensive data are available.

For the past five years, just over half of all humanitarian assistance has been channelled through multilateral organisations and funds, and nearly a quarter through NGOs. In 2012 4.9% of humanitarian assistance was channelled via pooled funds: 2.4% via the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and, at country level, 2.1% via common humanitarian funds (CHFs) and 0.5% through emergency response funds (ERFs).

This year, the true impact of the 2010–2012 period of severe food insecurity and famine in Somalia was finally and devastatingly revealed, with the UN and FEWS NET estimating that 257,500 people died as a result between October 2010 and March 2012. A reflection on the failure of the international community to respond in a timely and effective way to the crisis in Somalia has informed much of the recent evolution of humanitarian thinking.

The response to the Haiti earthquake in 2010 was swift from both government and private donors. However, this year's report shows how formerly high profile crises such as Haiti can quickly slip down the priority list with acute need remaining unfunded.

Although response can be slow when ongoing vulnerability tips into emergency in countries facing long-term chronic problems, it is still the case that these countries receive the bulk of the world's humanitarian assistance. GHA has been publishing data since 2009 that show how humanitarian assistance is 'long term'. In 2011 55% of official humanitarian assistance went to countries categorised as 'long-term recipients' – countries that regularly receive humanitarian assistance year on year – with 33% going to those classed as 'medium-term recipients' (see 'Data and Guides' section for classifications).

In the main, this assistance still tends to be planned over short-term projects but in 2013 the Somalia consolidated appeal presented a three-year planning horizon for 2013–2015: a major advance in the quest for more predictable financing for chronic crises. The amount of money spent on disaster prevention and preparation, although increasing, is still small – just under 5% in 2011.

The incidence of violent conflict also went up in 2011 (the most recent year for which data are available) and was concentrated in Sudan, Nigeria, Pakistan and Mexico; Syria will add to that list in 2012/13. At the time of writing the human impact of civil war in Syria was rising relentlessly. There were 1.6 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and 4.25 million internally displaced persons. On 7 June 2013 the UN launched a US$5.2 billion humanitarian appeal for the Syria crisis, the largest in history.

The interconnected nature of risks associated with natural disasters, conflict and insecurity, and extreme poverty is increasingly recognised. Finance and response, however, are still often conceptualised and organised in silos that classify activities and situations into components like emergency relief, post-conflict, recovery, early recovery, instability, fragility and transition.

Resilience is high on the policy agendas of many government donors who increasingly see the importance of tackling fragility, poverty, and vulnerability to conflict and disaster by enhancing the resilience of communities and livelihoods. The move towards resilience thinking and programming marks a collective recognition of the need to deal with complexity and work with longer timeframes. Research suggests that over a 20-year period in Kenya, every US$1 spent on disaster resilience resulted in US$2.90 saved in the form of reduced humanitarian spend, avoided losses and development gains.[2]

A growing number of donors are implementing cash transfer programmes, believing that they enable people to make choices about their own needs, can boost local markets, are quick to deliver and are cost effective. The European Union (EU) has made cash and voucher programmes a priority and all European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) food assistance programmes in Haiti and Pakistan now contain a cash or voucher element.

Several actors are striving to increase access to information as a tool for improving humanitarian response and improved accountability. Investments are being made in transparency, especially on resources. New technologies are now being applied, not just talked about, for early warning, crisis mapping and advice. The UN's Transformative Agenda has been designed to improve leadership, coordination and accountability.

The Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2013 is split into three sections. The first section (chapters 1–5) analyses recent trends in humanitarian assistance. The second section (chapter 6) provides a snapshot of recent emergencies and their human impact. The final section (chapter 7) explores a number of efforts to strengthen the response to people in crises. These include principles, standards and accountability frameworks guiding response; efforts to increase transparency; the use of technology to empower beneficiaries; and a focus on resilience.