



LESSONS IN MULTILATERAL EFFECTIVENESS

Rethinking Effective
Humanitarian Organisations
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





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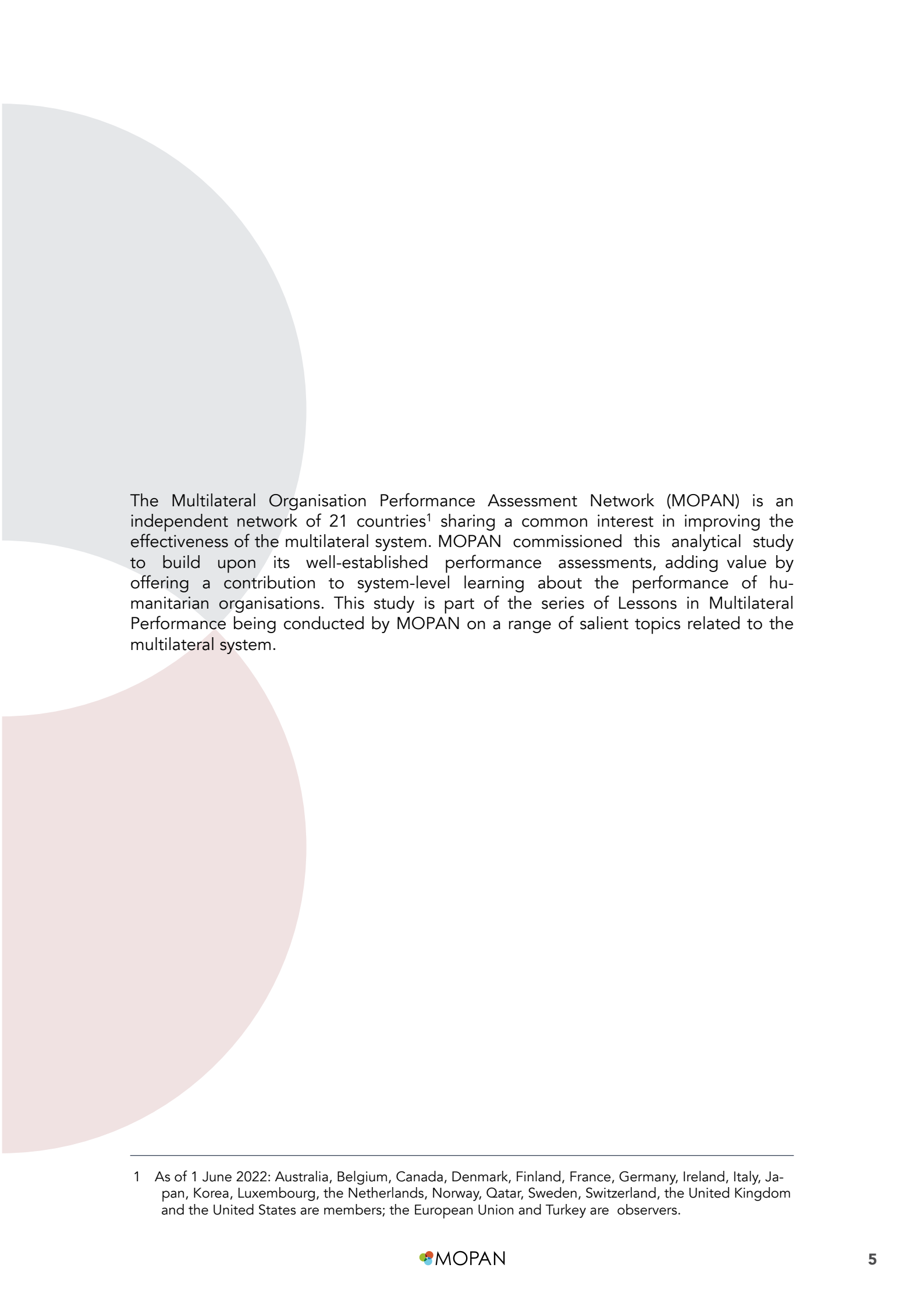
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The Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) is an independent network of 21 countries¹ sharing a common interest in improving the effectiveness of the multilateral system. MOPAN commissioned this analytical study to build upon its well-established performance assessments, adding value by offering a contribution to system-level learning about the performance of humanitarian organisations. This study is part of the series of Lessons in Multilateral Performance being conducted by MOPAN on a range of salient topics related to the multilateral system.

¹ As of 1 June 2022: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Qatar, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States are members; the European Union and Turkey are observers.

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The study was carried out in collaboration with a team from Agulhas Applied Knowledge and Humanitarian Outcomes, led by Marcus Cox, Lauren Pett, and Glyn Taylor, with support from Mazvita Mutambirwa and Meriah-Jo Breckenridge. Christopher Mooney edited the report and Alex Bilodeau provided design and layout.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------|---|
| AAP | Accountability to Affected Populations |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization |
| HDP | Humanitarian-Development-Peace |
| HO | Humanitarian Organisation |
| MOPAN | Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network |
| NGO | Non-government Organisation |
| OCHA | UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| RBM | Results-Based Management |
| UNCHR | United Nations High Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |

A photograph showing the lower legs and feet of people standing in a flooded street. The water is murky brown. In the foreground, a person wears bright orange plastic boots. To their right, another person wears dark brown rain boots and holds a closed red umbrella. The background is blurred, showing other people and a white plastic bag. The text "EXECUTIVE SUMMARY" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font across the middle of the image.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, the international humanitarian system sought USD 46 billion in donor finance, to support 183 million people across 63 countries.¹ Creating effective accountability for humanitarian aid on such a scale is a perennial challenge. External scrutiny of international humanitarian organisations (HOs) has increased over the years, as funders have sought more and better evidence that their resources are being used to best effect.² Organisational assessments by the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) are one such scrutiny process.

Accountability for humanitarian finance should rest on a shared understanding of what constitutes good organisational performance for HOs. However, past MOPAN assessments reveal that HOs often score poorly in key performance areas, raising a question as to whether the right performance measures are being used. Furthermore, ambitious international agreements on humanitarian system reform – and the difficulties of translating many of those commitments into practical action – opens the possibility that the performance expectations placed on individual HOs may not be fully consistent with evolving expectations for the performance of the system as a whole.

This study was therefore undertaken to explore what ‘good’ looks like in the organisational effectiveness of HOs. It explores two main research questions.

1. How can HOs best reflect agreed objectives on reform of the international humanitarian system in their own organisations? The study looks in particular at the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus, accountability to affected populations (AAP) and localisation.
2. What is good practice on managing for results in HOs, given the specific nature of humanitarian assistance and the challenging environments in which it is delivered?

The study methodology involved analysis of findings from past MOPAN reviews, a literature review, key stakeholder interviews and brief case studies of four multilateral organisations – UNHCR and OCHA, which are primarily humanitarian, and UNICEF and FAO, which have mixed humanitarian and development mandates.

The headline findings of the study are as follows:

1

First, for HOs, simply signing up to humanitarian reform commitments is not enough, unless they also hardwire the commitments into their organisational structures and business models. The study revealed an extensive list of factors that work against the implementation of agreed reforms.

For the **HDP Nexus**, implementation is held back by:

- tensions with humanitarian principles
- cost and time trade-offs
- the limited presence of development actors in crisis settings
- incompatible modes of working
- restrictions on the ability of HOs to work with governments
- and the persistence of political obstacles that hamper moving towards more sustainable forms of support.

1 OCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2021, 2021, p.66, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GHO2021_EN.pdf.

2 Global Public Policy Institute, Independent Review of Individual Donor Assessments in Humanitarian Operations, November 2020, https://www.gppi.net/media/GPPI_2020_Independent-Review-of-Donor-Assessments.pdf.

For **localisation**, the study identified challenges around the predominant subcontracting model for working with national and local actors, which entrenches the dominance of international HOs. Other factors include capacity limitations among national and local responders, concerns about preserving humanitarian neutrality, and increasingly stringent donor due diligence and reporting requirements that local Non-government organisations (NGOs) struggle to meet.

For **accountability to affected populations**, there are challenges around designing meaningful consultation mechanisms in crisis situations, the tendency of HOs to set up parallel, *ad hoc* consultation processes, and a lack of financial and human resources.

Given these practical challenges, high-level commitments to humanitarian reform at headquarters level do not translate into meaningful change at the operation level unless they are built into corporate business models, systems and processes. The experiences of the case study organisations suggest that the following may be useful:

- Clear organisational commitments and mandates to humanitarian reform, backed by corporate champions and dedicated resources
- Clear guidance for staff on when and how to progress humanitarian reforms, and how to manage trade-offs with humanitarian principles and other corporate objectives
- Structured investment in contextual analysis and country-specific reform strategies and plans
- More structured investment in building capacity among national and local responders
- Investment and skills training in conflict sensitivity and more comprehensive risk awareness
- Shared initiatives to develop meaningful mechanisms for community participation and accountability.

2

Second, implementation of humanitarian reform commitments also requires changes in humanitarian funding practice. Study participants stressed that following through on Grand Bargain commitments to improve funding practices would help to create more space for humanitarian reform. Possible measures include:

- More funding for crisis prevention and resilience-building
- Greater flexibility to reallocate funding between humanitarian and development interventions in crisis-affected areas
- Greater flexibility in the terms and conditions of humanitarian finance, to support working with national partners and to allow for more adaptability
- Dedicated resources for longer-term investments in capacity building and community consultation mechanisms.

3

Third, delivering humanitarian support in high-risk, complex and fast-evolving situations calls for a different approach to managing for results. HOs have different information needs. They require a regular flow of data on evolving humanitarian needs and whether populations in crisis are being reached but, due to their mandates, are less interested in demonstrating ‘what works’ in the pursuit of longer-term results. The value of aggregating humanitarian results up to the corporate or global level, through comprehensive results-based management (RBM) systems, is not as evident for HOs. Aggregate result data tells us more about the extent of humanitarian needs and the availability of humanitarian finance in any given year, than about the performance of individual HOs. As a result, HOs as a group have struggled to implement corporate RBM systems in a meaningful way, often receiving poor ratings from MOPAN for their early efforts.

More recently, however, some of the case study organisations have made important progress towards meaningful RBM systems. For the two dual-mandate organisations, in particular, efforts to better integrate humanitarian results into their RBM systems has helped drive greater coherence between their humanitarian and development operations. For example, in its corporate strategy, UNICEF now defines a set of global results for children – for example, ensuring nutritious diets – that can be pursued either through development or humanitarian interventions, as the need arises. Similarly, FAO’s corporate objective ‘increase the resilience of livelihoods to threats and crises’ can be pursued both through long-term development initiatives and emergency response to food crises. Effort to integrate humanitarian and development results into a common RBM system is helping the organisations see the humanitarian-development interface as a continuum of options for responding to need, rather than as siloed operational areas. This is helpful in embedding the HDP Nexus into the corporate culture.

4

Finally, for MOPAN itself, the study suggests that the organisational assessment framework needs to be adapted for HOs, to better reflect the nature of humanitarian operations and the practical requirements of working in crisis situations.



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