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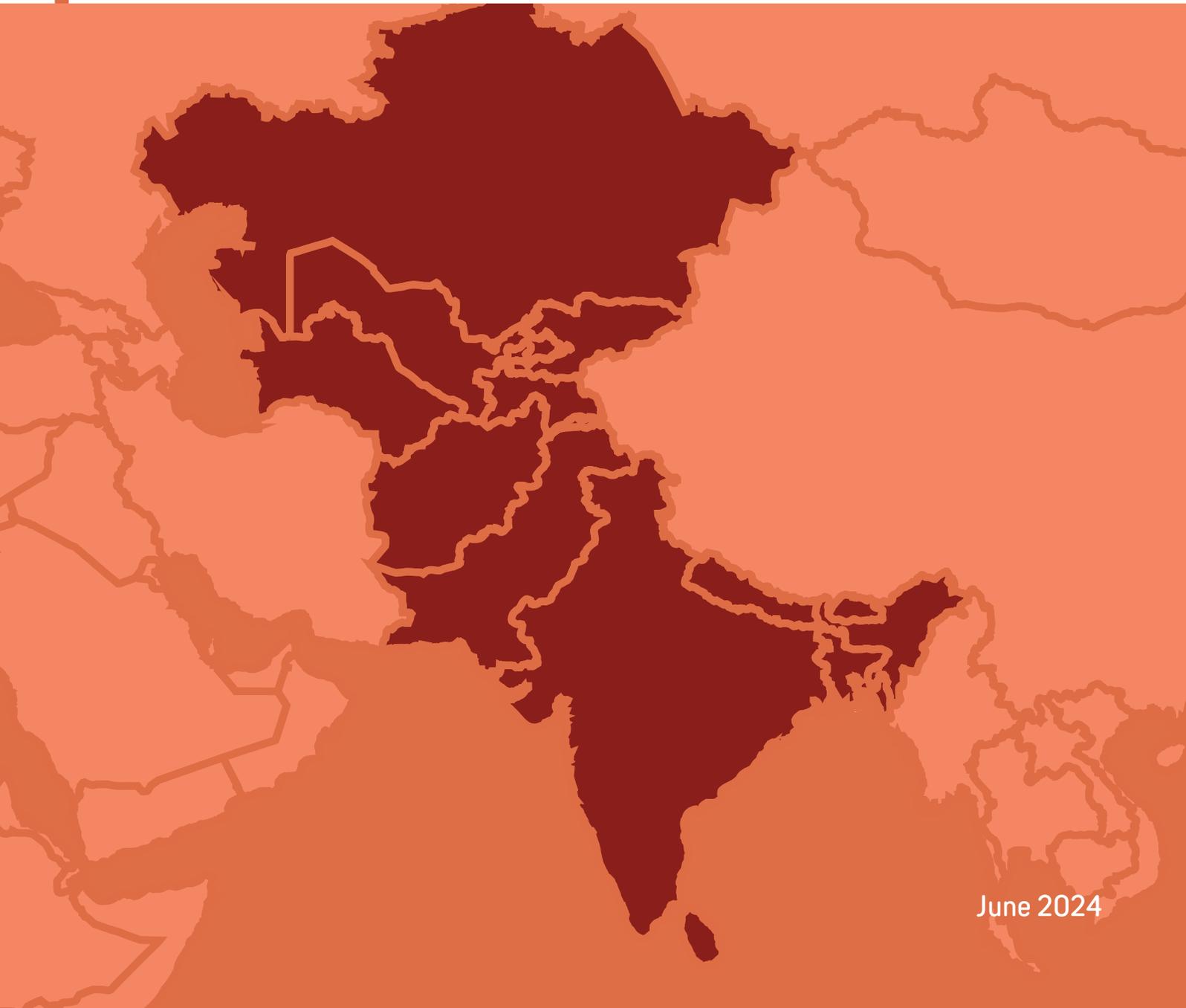
GLOBAL PRIORITISATION EXERCISE (GPE) FOR HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION REGIONAL CONSULTATION:

South and Central Asia

June 2024

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIDMI	All India Disaster Mitigation Institute
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation HVRA
CBDRM	Community-Based Disaster Risk Management
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DM	Disaster Management
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
EWS	Early Warning System
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPE	Global Prioritisation Exercise
GPS	Global Positioning System
HDI	Human Development Index
HRI	Humanitarian Research and Innovation
IFI	International Financial Institution
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IT	Information Technology
KII	Key Informant Interview
NDMA	National Disaster Management Authority
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
R&I	Research and Innovation
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCA	South and Central Asia
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

FOREWORD

In a world with mounting and complex humanitarian challenges, research and innovation (R&I) can play a pivotal role in identifying, prioritising, and addressing humanitarian needs.

The role of R&I at multiple – global, regional, national, and local – levels is crucial to developing culturally and contextually appropriate responses to humanitarian crises.

The region of South and Central Asia (SCA) faces a myriad of humanitarian issues including a vulnerability to natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and droughts; human-made conflicts encompassing political instability, autocracy, civil unrest, and conflicts; and the encroaching implications of climate change. The experience and perspectives of the actors involved in humanitarian action and R&I provide invaluable learning that should drive action in the region but that can also shape the global conversation on how our global humanitarian R&I ecosystem can evolve.

Elrha's Global Prioritisation Exercise (GPE) is a global research and consultation that seeks to improve outcomes for people affected by crises by amplifying the impact of investments into humanitarian R&I. The process aims to build an improved understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the global humanitarian R&I ecosystem and deepen our understanding of priorities at all levels.

As part of the GPE, we have gained invaluable insights through a series of stakeholder interviews conducted across six geographic regions and three national settings. These consultations share the perceptions of regional and national humanitarian actors, and shed light on priority topics and areas that need R&I attention. This exercise extends further, delving into how the R&I ecosystem functions (and occasionally dysfunctions) in complex environments. It also explores how the ecosystem can be improved.

Humanitarian crises are varied and so are the landscapes they unfold in. The scale, type, magnitude, drivers, and impacts of these crises vary within and between geographic regions, and as such, so do the associated areas requiring R&I attention. The views of regional and national actors are, therefore, important to improve the way the humanitarian ecosystem functions and how the system in turn responds. This consultation examines the differing perspectives of those international and national actors engaged within SCA's R&I context.

This work is also fundamental to informing priority-setting processes to optimally guide R&I investment, improving coordination and donor funding allocations. Key recommendations based on the challenges and learning reported, to improve the regional R&I ecosystem are proposed at national, regional, global, and donor levels. By valuing regional voices, these consultations aim to ensure that regional perspectives inform and influence the global, humanitarian R&I agenda.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Central Asia comprises the five sovereign countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and is home to an estimated 78 million people. The region faces several underlying risks including natural hazards, armed conflicts, and water disputes which have had considerable humanitarian implications. Additionally, crises in neighbouring Afghanistan and Russia have had a range of direct and indirect impacts, including disruption to humanitarian supply chains, increasing displacement to Central Asia, and reduction in remittances from expatriates in Russia which have exacerbated economic hardships.

South Asia comprises the eight sovereign countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and is among the most densely populated regions of the world, with a total population of 1.92 billion. The region is prone to frequent natural hazards such as floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and landslides. South Asia has also experienced a number of recent human-made crises including political instability in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover, the recent economic crisis in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh.

Research and innovation (R&I) can help forecast and characterise humanitarian crises, understand the scale, distribution and types of needs arising, develop and scale potential solutions, inform humanitarian action and monitor progress. The ultimate objective of humanitarian R&I is to help improve the ways in which the humanitarian sector mitigates and responds to crises and serves populations in need.

This South and Central Asia (SCA) consultation, one of a series for Elrha's landmark Global Prioritisation Exercise (GPE) for humanitarian R&I, examines perspectives of regional actors engaged with the humanitarian R&I space. It aims to understand how these ecosystems in the SCA region function, how decisions are made, who has a seat at the priority-setting table, and glean perspectives on R&I topics and priority topics requiring attention in the region.

METHODS

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 17 regional stakeholders, all of whom were mid-senior level personnel. Five participants were based in, or had a focus on, Central Asia and 12 work in, or on, South Asia. Participants were affiliated with a range of organisation types, including government / intergovernmental institutions (n=5), international non-governmental

organisations (INGOs) (n=3), academic institutions (n=3), independent research organisations / think tanks (n=2), and one participant each from a UN agency, national / local non-governmental organisation (NGO), network / partnership / consortium and an international financial institution. Most participants reported that their organisation works across both humanitarian research and innovation. Two participants identified as having a donor / funding function.

Interviews were conducted remotely in English (one with the support of a translator), transcribed, and analysed thematically using NVivo software.

KEY FINDINGS

The role of R&I in humanitarian crises

- The majority of participants indicated that R&I have a significant role during crises. **Common reported functions** included to inform preparedness, inform humanitarian action, glean lessons learned, and help improve the ways in which the humanitarian sector operates. A range of roles for R&I were reported across all phases of a humanitarian crisis, from preparedness, through response to recovery.

- Notably, some participants reported that R&I has only a limited role if trying to process and implement innovative approaches during the acute stage of an emergency. Whilst sometimes perceived as a burden, it was also noted that R&I and operational activities are different functions and should occur simultaneously.

- There were mostly positive views on **whether R&I has enabled improved outcomes.** Many participants reported that R&I has led to improved action and ultimately outcomes, providing a range of examples. These included improving humanitarian assistance through the documentation of events and lessons learned, improved targeting of vulnerable populations, guiding the development of new innovations and solutions, and by supporting improved contextual understanding which has allowed for the design of more appropriate interventions. On the other hand, a few participants indicated that R&I has not led to better outcomes, including due to lack of sufficient foresight research and a reactive approach.

- Reported **barriers to the production of R&I** included the geopolitical context resulting in research in some settings not being supported; limited understanding of the role of R&I in informing preparedness and response; R&I not being prioritised by the humanitarian sector and by senior personnel within organisations; and issues of data availability, quality, or access.

- Several **barriers to the uptake and utilisation of R&I** were reported. From Central Asia, these included limited dissemination and data sharing, including due to security concerns. From South Asia, reported barriers were broadly due to poor partnerships and collaboration, systems and governance issues, and limited relevance due to not being contextually appropriate or because of findings being outdated by the time they are available.

- It was reported that **R&I during crises should be** conducted over an extended timeframe; be observational; seek to document lessons learned; use novel techniques; and draw on feedback from, and collaboration with, humanitarian actors and affected populations.

- Several participants provided suggestions for how **R&I can be better used.** These included ensuring that operational actors are familiar with findings before crisis onset; improving collaboration and real-time sharing of results; gleaning lessons learned; ensuring that R&I is contextually relevant; and adopting a long-term and systems lens.

- A number of additional factors were reported as being **required for the R&I ecosystem to function effectively.** These include more funding; improved collaboration and coordination, including cross-border engagement to address transboundary risks; standardised methodologies, so that analyses of the same event or data by different groups reach the same conclusions and recommendations; investment in a strong R&I workforce and capacity building; institutional strengthening; infrastructure developments and access to new technologies; engagement of affected populations; and improved dissemination and outreach.

Topics requiring additional R&I attention

Central Asia

- A range of topics were reported as requiring additional R&I attention in Central Asia, including work on the humanitarian RI system, the humanitarian operational system, regional hazards assessments, establishment of a comprehensive regional early warning system (EWS), improved understanding of humanitarian needs and response, and examination of the drivers and impact of conflict in, and neighbouring, the region.

- R&I needs reportedly differ across Central Asia, attributed largely to different baseline levels of development, with some countries having strong institutional structures while others do not, different drivers of humanitarian crises and different types of humanitarian needs.

South Asia

- For South Asia, R&I topics reported as requiring attention included a range of issues related to humanitarian preparedness, the humanitarian-development nexus, how the humanitarian sector functions, specific hazards and event types, political contexts, populations affected by crises, the humanitarian R&I system, economic analyses of humanitarian interventions, and other topics regarding livelihoods and topics related to innovation.

- Some participants reported that R&I needs differ across the region on the basis of differences in community participation, economic development, geographic and topographic diversity, and differences in cultural practices and religious beliefs.

Views on R&I investments

- There were differing views among participants regarding **whether R&I investments match the topics requiring attention.** While most participants indicated that they could not definitively comment on this issue, some reported that R&I investments are being made and do match the issues requiring attention, but the volume of funding is insufficient. Others reported a misalignment of investment and R&I needs, and this was attributed to a number of factors, including R&I not being prioritised by governments; limited donor interest in funding

R&I and when they do fund, R&I investments being donor driven; outdated thinking on R&I; organisational reluctance to fund, or engage in, R&I which might highlight shortcomings of existing approaches; and limited interest in the region.

- Reported **factors that may improve alignment of investments with R&I needs** include improved engagement and open dialogue with a diverse range of stakeholders, including donors and the private sector; ensuring a sufficient workforce to undertake the work; filling gaps in the regional system and in training by facilitating connections between regional and international organisations and academic institutions; and offering incentives and awards for innovation.

Nature and extent of engagement of regional and national R&I actors

- There were varying perspectives on the **extent to which regional and national actors are engaged with R&I.** In Central Asia, engagement reportedly varies by stakeholder group and by country setting. Engagement varies between countries depending on how open governments are to international collaboration or intervention; and within countries, engagement also varies by ministry / government department, with some more open to engagement than others.

- In Central Asia, it was also reported that NGOs are generally well engaged as most are national arms of international entities, but engagement of researchers is limited due to poorly developed research in the region and the limited pool of research personnel.

- From South Asia, the importance of regional and national actor engagement was well recognised, but it was reported that national stakeholder engagement is generally poor and national actors are not leading in research which instead is often largely driven by international and regional players.

- A suite of **barriers to engagement** of regional and national actors was described. For Central Asia, these include weak relationships between academic institutions and humanitarian organisations; a limited civil society sector in the region; and limited data sharing due to security concerns. From South Asia, reported barriers to the engagement of regional and national actors were largely due to funding constraints; limitations of time, capacity, and interest; and issues with partnerships and visibility.

- **Strategies used to promote engagement** include utilising existing networks; bidirectional outreach and engagement to establish inclusive R&I partnerships; partnerships with national governments; embedding researchers within ministries and governments at all levels; breaking down silos for meaningful engagement with technical institutions and think tanks; and training and capacity development of national actors before crisis onset.

- **Suggested strategies and approaches that could be used to better support regional and national actor engagement** included the sharing of success stories, stakeholder mapping to identify relevant actors, and the establishment of a regional platform that supports and encourages greater national actor engagement.

Priority-setting processes and seats at the decision-making table

- Participants were asked to reflect on how their organisation identifies and prioritises the focus of their R&I activity, with approaches varying by organisation type. A range of **approaches through which organisations identify their R&I focus areas** was reported. These include through engagement with governments; consideration of the scale and frequency of hazard events; extent of alignment with organisational strategies and existing work; through specific organsiational processes or teams; consideration of alignment with government priorities; alignment with donor priorities; and ability of the organisation to deliver, including availability of sufficient technical capacity, amongst other considerations.

- **Types of evidence taken into account when setting priorities** include existing data on needs; evidence and input from stakeholder consultations; organisational intelligence such as foresight analysis and vulnerability and risk assessments; and the organisation's own knowledge and practical experience.

- **Stakeholders reportedly involved in priority setting** in Central Asia included national government, community and regional INGOs, and in South Asia, they included local and national actors, UN and NGO country-level staff, communities, and donors.

- In Central Asia, some participants reported that communities and national NGOs are **not involved in decision-making.** For South Asia, populations affected by crisis, subnational actors, and grassroots organisations were reported as often being left out of priority-setting processes.

Factors influencing the ability of the R&I ecosystem to respond to emerging crises

- Factors that reportedly **support the timely responsiveness of R&I** to emerging challenges include the availability of funding at the time of an event, capacity, and sufficient human resources to undertake R&I, long project cycles, use of existing technologies, political will, and good governance. A suite of issues related to partnerships was also reported as supporting timely responsiveness, including ensuring engagement of all relevant actors, engaging the private sector and encouraging connections with existing networks.

- Factors that reportedly **impede timely responsiveness** include funding issues such as a lack of sufficient funding and short funding cycles; practical and logistical constraints, including lengthy processes to access available funding or obtain approvals to conduct research; limited data availability or access; limited internet connectivity and access to required technologies; and difficulties accessing humanitarian crisis settings. Other factors include the geopolitical context impacting engagement and data-sharing practices; issues with R&I planning and priority setting, including mismatch between government, community, and humanitarian actor priorities; lack of awareness about research opportunities; failure to adopt an anticipatory approach to emerging risks; and political factors such as limited capacity of some governments to consider R&I priorities, little political will to fund research, and regional geopolitical instability.

Donor perspectives on funding

- Two participants identified as having a donor / funding function. Reported **barriers to investment in R&I** were largely due to funding constraints. **Enablers of investment** include collaboration between donors such as through co-financing mechanisms. It was reported that there are both **formal and informal donor coordination mechanisms** of varying effectiveness in both South and Central Asia, and from the former, in particular, it was reported that this donor engagement and collaboration facilitates investment and can help reduce duplication. Nonetheless, in both South and Central Asia duplication can still occur, resulting in some issues and topics being underfunded and others overfunded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings gleaned from this consultation of R&I stakeholders working in, or on, South and / or Central Asia, the following recommendations are suggested:

Funding

- Need for increased R&I investment, including flexible funding mechanisms.

- Donors must ensure transparent decision-making processes to ensure fair distribution of funds across diverse settings and promote accountability and equality.

- Promoting co-financing methods among donors could amplify financial resources for larger-scale R&I projects.

- Broad and effective dissemination of funding calls to local R&I stakeholders is recommended to raise awareness and encourage broader participation.

Collaboration and coordination

- Formal platforms that facilitate coordination and cooperation, including among donors, are required.

- Encouraging and facilitating partnerships between a range of actors is essential. This includes collaborations between academic and operational stakeholders, those working at national, regional, and international levels, and transboundary partnerships. Additionally, fostering increased collaboration among donors can significantly enhance the regions approach to addressing problems.

- Periodic regional roundtables that convene diverse stakeholders, including representatives of government bodies, donors, humanitarian operational agencies, and academics may serve as a platform for culturally-sensitive dialogue to improve understanding of the role of R&I in the region.

Locally-relevant and actionable R&I

- R&I efforts should be closely connected to the cultural, economic, and environmental realities of the region, to ensure relevance and that initiatives effectively tackle the most pressing challenges.

- R&I must produce accessible outputs that offer actionable solutions that can bring about change while being cost effective, easy to implement, and scalable. There should be focused efforts to ensure that R&I findings and solutions are presented in such a way that they are readily available and understandable for policymakers, practitioners, and local communities.

Identifying R&I priority areas for the region

- Participants in this study reported a range of topics that they believe warrant additional dedicated R&I attention. These included R&I to address a suite of transboundary issues. Further work in the form of a formal R&I priority-setting exercise is required to validate findings of this initial exercise and gauge the views of a larger group of stakeholders, including representation from a diverse range of geographic, sectoral, and organisational settings as well as disciplinary backgrounds.

- Building regional capacity in the R&I priority-setting process itself is also imperative so that this exercise can be periodically repeated, with progress and R&I impact also being monitored. This may require initiatives or workshops to improve understanding and confidence in implementation of formal R&I prioritisation processes.

Humanitarian R&I ecosystem: Strengthening institutions and the workforce

- To improve the R&I ecosystem, scientific approaches, methods, and practices need to be institutionalised. This involves restructuring governance systems to create structures that support and promote a culture of R&I.

- It is important to allocate financial resources to nurture environments that are conducive to R&I. Furthermore, it is essential to establish policies and procedures that govern R&I activities while ensuring alignment with principles and standards. Regular evaluation cycles, along with appropriate feedback mechanisms, can facilitate improvement in this regard.

- Developing a strong regional workforce and building capacity at the individual level requires support to institutions to develop programmes and systems that train the next generation of R&I personnel. This may be achieved through the development of a regional R&I training programme that can be jointly implemented by a range of partners from within and outside the region, with a view to fully transfer programme leadership and delivery to regional institutions. Additionally, mechanisms should be implemented to identify, develop, and retain skilled personnel.

R&I infrastructure

- In order to be relevant and meet contemporary needs, the R&I architecture in Central Asia needs to be updated. Recognising that this requires political will, funding, and a cultural shift, there is a need to modernise the system including investment into new technologies with associated dedicated funding to build capacity and a workforce capable of using such technologies and approaches.

Transboundary EWS

- Funding is required for infrastructure support and capacity building to establish a comprehensive regional EWS to conduct and coordinate hazard, vulnerability, and risk assessments that capture transboundary and cross-border issues and ensure widespread dissemination of warnings issued. The EWS may initially be housed within one of the national disaster management authorities or within one of the region's universities.

- Uniform standardised guidelines should also be developed, so that all systems are speaking the same language and facilitate the interpretation of findings by lay personnel, governments, and other non-research actors.

SECTION 1
BACKGROUND

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND

WHY A GLOBAL PRIORITISATION EXERCISE (GPE) ON HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I)?

In recent years, the number of people affected by humanitarian crises and in need of humanitarian assistance and protection globally reached unprecedented levels. According to the Global Humanitarian Overview[1], almost 300 million people globally will require humanitarian aid in 2024, driven largely by increasing conflicts, impacts of the climate crisis and economic issues. Displacement is at the highest level since the beginning of the century, with 1 in 73 people worldwide being forcibly displaced and this ratio has almost doubled in the last decade. Additionally, around one in five children is living in, or fleeing from, a conflict-affected setting. Notably, the scale, type, magnitude, drivers, and impacts of humanitarian crises vary within and between geographic regions across the globe.

> **Research can help forecast and characterise humanitarian crises, understand the scale, distribution and types of needs arising, inform humanitarian action and monitor progress. Research has a crucial role to play in helping improve the ways in which the humanitarian sector mitigates and responds to crises and serves populations in need.**

Innovation can play a critical role in humanitarian crises by providing new and more effective solutions to the complex problems that arise during such emergencies. Strategic investments in research and innovation and appropriate utilisation and uptake of R&I findings can help improve the way the humanitarian sector uses evidence and identifies and scales solutions, and in turn, contribute to improving the efficiency of humanitarian action.

Despite the importance of R&I in the humanitarian space, the allocation of resources and the focus of humanitarian R&I are not equitable. Preliminary results from the 2021/22 Global Prioritisation Exercise Mapping Report,[2] which captured humanitarian literature published during the period January 2017 to June 2021, indicate that there was a steady increase in the number of humanitarian R&I publications over the five-year period, but there are considerable issues of inequities of attention, with some crises, population subgroups, and geographic areas receiving disproportionately more R&I attention than others. Additionally, R&I actors and institutions remain heavily Global North-based, and institutions in the Global North continue to receive the largest share of R&I funding.

Differential attention matters: What gets researched gets discussed, and what gets discussed gets addressed. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how the humanitarian R&I ecosystem is structured and functions, including understanding where and to whom R&I funding is directed, how R&I priorities are set, who is involved in these decision-making processes and how, if at all, coordination mechanisms operate. Reflecting the variable nature and impact of crises across the globe, understanding how humanitarian R&I priorities and topics requiring attention vary by geographic region is also crucial to better inform investment decisions and ultimately, help improve evidence-driven, and efficient humanitarian action.

ABOUT THE GPE

The GPE for humanitarian R&I is a landmark, multi-pronged initiative that seeks to improve outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by characterising the existing humanitarian R&I landscape (including thematic and crisis focus areas, funding, actor engagement, and impact of investments), and identifying priorities for future investment. Commissioned by Elrha, the GPE comprises two distinct research phases:

Global mapping of R&I outputs and investments: Detailed mapping of humanitarian R&I actors, investments, and thematic and crisis focus areas over the period January 2017 to June 2021,[3] and financial flow analysis tracking humanitarian R&I funding allocations from a range of donor types over this period.[4] This builds upon the previous mapping of research, innovation, and outputs undertaken in 2017 for the period January 2016 to April 2017.[5]

Stakeholder consultations: A series of consultations with diverse stakeholder groups operating at each of the global, regional, national, and community levels exploring a range of issues regarding R&I investments, needs, and priority-setting and decision-making processes.

This report is one of a series for the regional and national consultations. Led by Deakin University (Australia) in collaboration with partners in each region, the regional consultations have explored stakeholder perspectives on the humanitarian R&I ecosystem in six geographic regions, demarcated according to the United Nations (UN) Statistics Division Regional Classifications:[6]

South and Central Asia[7]

West Asia and North Africa

Oceania, East Asia and South-East Asia

Latin America and the Caribbean

West and Central Africa

Southern and Eastern Africa
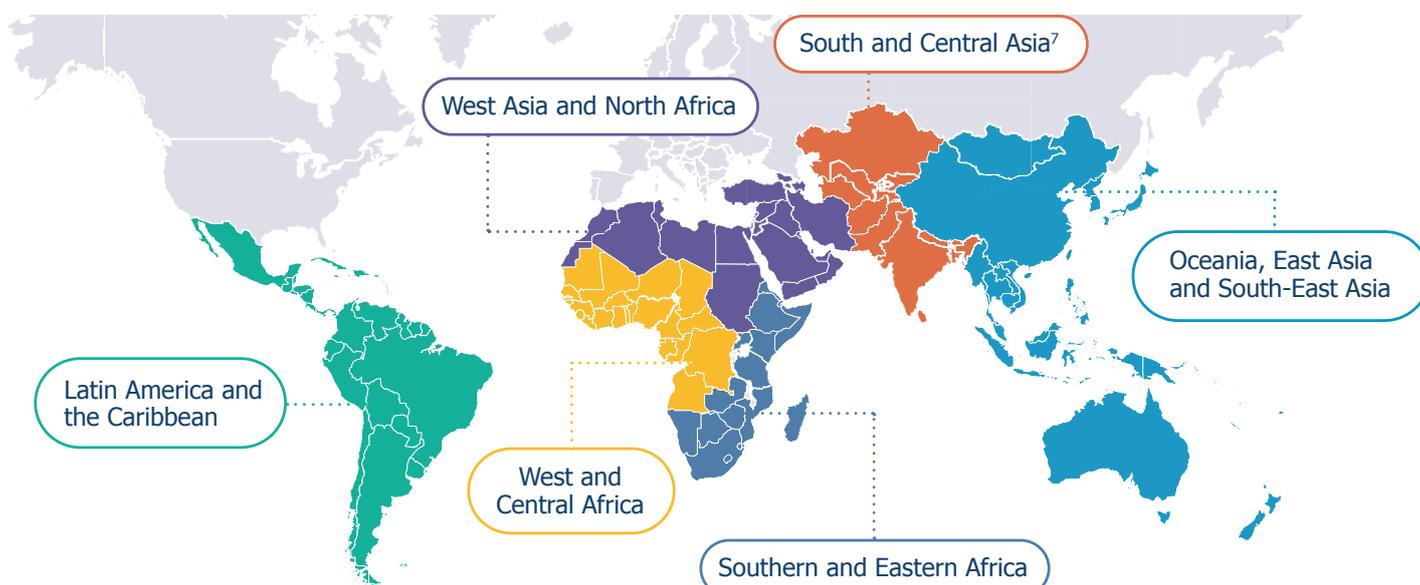
Three national consultations have also been conducted:

Indonesia   Kenya   Lebanon

The overarching aim of the regional and national consultations is to understand how the R&I ecosystem functions, how decisions are made and who has a seat at the priority-setting table, and to gauge perceptions of topics requiring R&I attention in the region.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report presents key findings from consultations in South and Central Asia. This work was undertaken by the All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI) and Deakin University.

THE HUMANITARIAN LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA (SCA)

Geography and demography

The Central Asia region comprises five sovereign countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The region is bound by Russia in the north, China in the east, and Iran and Afghanistan in the south. The region is largely landlocked, but borders the Caspian Sea (the world's largest inland body of water) on its western side (see Figure 1). The South Asia region comprises eight sovereign countries: (see Figure 2).

Fig. 1: Map of Central Asia
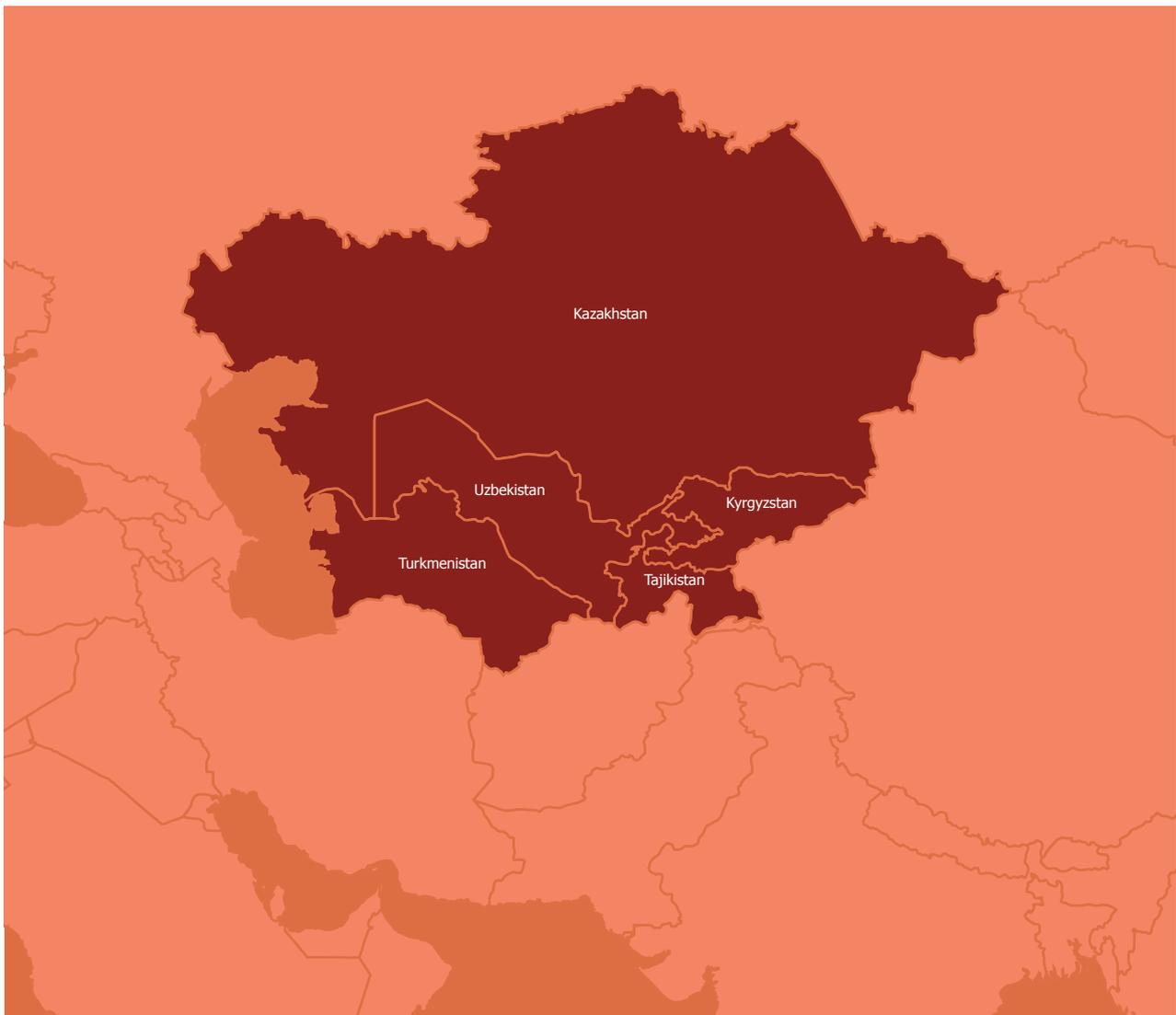
The countries of **Central Asia** became independent following the dissolution of the former Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, they have experienced different levels of economic development and are now classified as upper-middle-income (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) or lower-middle-income countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). Central Asian countries also have variable performance on the human-development index (HDI), a multidimensional metric that captures parameters in three domains – health (life expectancy at birth), education (average years of schooling for those aged over 25 years and expected years of schooling for those of school-entering age), and standard of living (gross national income per capita). Central Asian countries rank as very high (Kazakhstan), high (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), and medium (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) on the HDI.[8]

Central Asia's current population is over 75 million people, 60% of whom live in rural areas.[9] Nearly a third of the region's total population depends on agriculture for their livelihoods.[10] Poverty rates vary significantly across Central Asia, with almost 40% of the populations of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan living below the poverty threshold (less than US $1.9 per day).[11]

Fig. 2: Map of the South Asia region
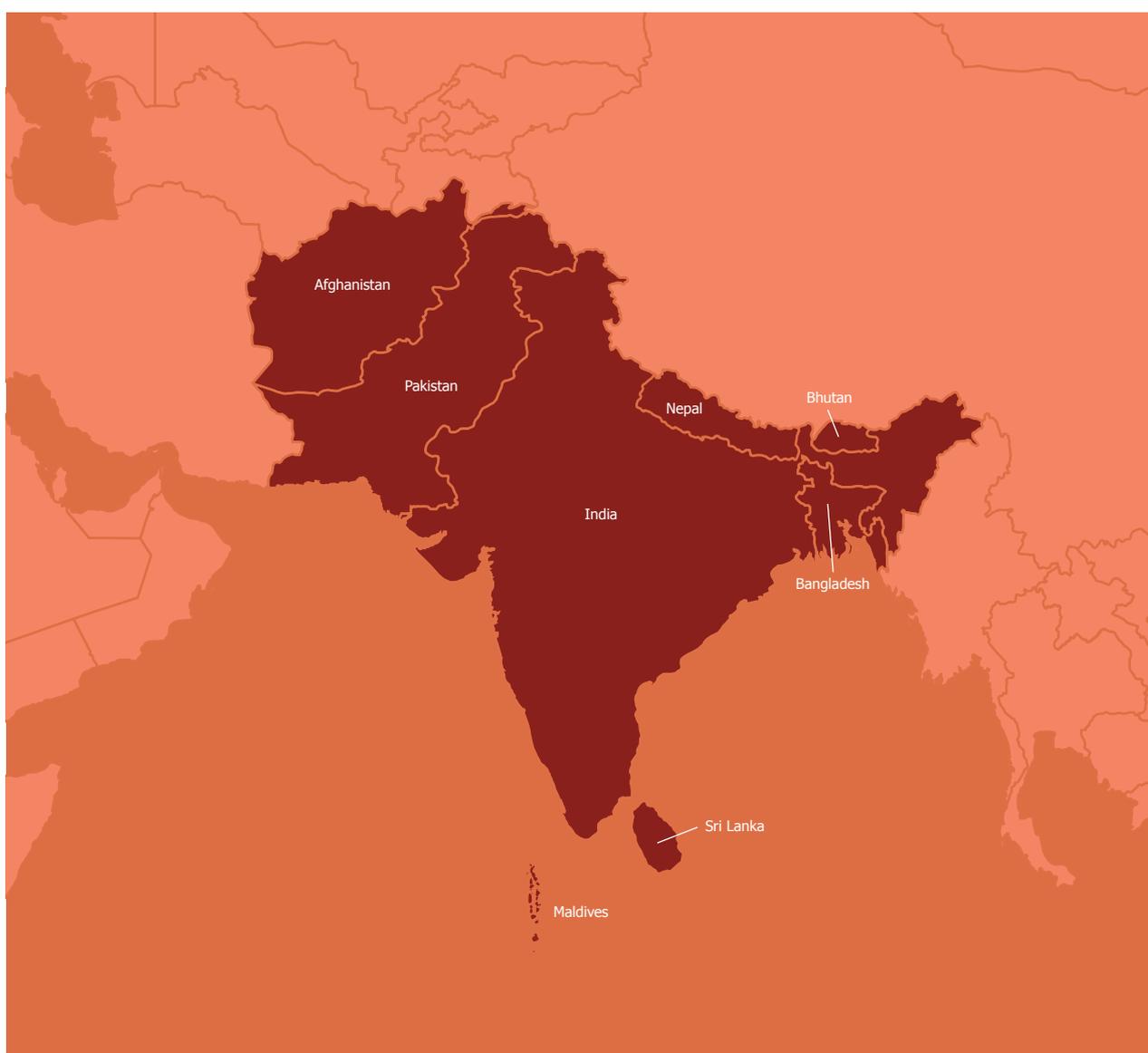
South Asia has a total population of almost 1.92 billion people[12] and an average population density of 395 people per square kilometre.[13] This makes it the world's most populous and most densely-populated region, housing one quarter of the global population on 3.5% of the world's surface area.[14] The region is developmentally diverse: The HDI of South Asia countries span high (Sri Lanka and the Maldives), medium (India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar), and low (Pakistan and Afghanistan) HDI rankings.[15]

Hazards and humanitarian crises

> **Both South and Central Asia are highly vulnerable to natural hazards and various human-made crises, generating considerable humanitarian challenges.**

Central Asia is experiencing increasing frequency and intensity of many natural hazards (including earthquakes, floods, landslides, avalanches, and droughts), in addition to armed conflicts, and water disputes. South Asia too is experiencing an increasing frequency and intensity of disasters, including hydrometeorological hazards such as floods and cyclones which routinely ravage parts of the region. These disasters are precipitated when the region's underlying geographical vulnerability interacts with many risk drivers, such as unplanned urbanisation, environmental degradation, and drastic income inequality.[16]

Climate change has added another layer of vulnerability. In Central Asia, the adverse impacts of climate stressors, such as rising temperatures, melting glaciers, and an increase in extreme weather events such as floods, heatwaves, and cold waves, are being felt across multiple sectors such as agriculture, water resources, energy, health, and biodiversity. Similarly, in the past decade, nearly 700 million people across South Asia have been affected by at least one climate-related disaster.[17]

> **It has been estimated that by 2050, the region could lose up to 13% of its gross domestic product (GDP) due to the detrimental impacts of climate change.[18]**

Estimates show that if there is persistent climate inaction, South Asia will experience chronic droughts, extreme heat waves, and more intense cyclones soon.[19] UNHCR data[20] indicates that globally, from 2008 to 2016, climate-related events displaced an average of 21.5 million people per year.

> **Projections[21] by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) suggest that climate change and natural hazards could displace 1.2 billion people worldwide by 2050.**

South and Central Asia are both particularly vulnerable. Therefore, enhanced global and regional cooperation aimed at more sustainable environments, disaster risk reduction (DRR), and climate change adaptation is crucial to curtail the impending displacement crisis precipitated by climate change.

> **The SCA region also experiences human-made crises including political instability, wars and armed conflicts, and socioeconomic shocks both directly and due to displacement from, and impact of, such events in neighbouring settings.**

For instance, due to the crisis and increased insecurity in Afghanistan, there has been a rise in the number of arrivals and asylum applications from Afghanistan to Central Asian countries. Similarly, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has also directly impacted Central Asia and exacerbated poverty in the region, as economic sanctions on Russia have resulted in reduced remittances from Russia to Central Asia, and a 'cost of living crisis' has ensued.[22] South Asia too is greatly marred by conflict, displacement, and violence. These conflicts have lingered for decades, rendering affected populations dependent on humanitarian assistance and protection. Crises in neighbouring countries also generate a significant humanitarian caseload, including for example, due to the mass exodus of people from Afghanistan following the takeover by the Taliban, and the accommodation of a large refugee population of displaced Rohingyas in Bangladesh.[23] The World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organisation estimate that following an acute state of economic turmoil, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka will become global hunger hotspots.[24]

> **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also reversed development gains made in South Asia in the previous decades, giving rise to newer and more complex challenges.[25] Central Asia too was not immune to the ravages of COVID-19 and witnessed a drastic contraction of its economy following the pandemic, with women bearing a disproportionate burden of the adverse economic impacts.[26]**

Governance and humanitarian infrastructures

Weak governance structures in some countries across SCA further compound existing risk factors. For example, in 2022, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan experienced violent street protests with a heavy-handed response from security forces. The reason for all these internal security issues was the widespread resentment against the lack of accountability as well as weak governance systems and institutions in these countries.[27]

In the SCA region, there is a struggle with autocracy and a decline in the space for civic participation. Authoritarian regimes tend to concentrate power which often comes at the cost of society and democratic values. Authorities in Central Asia are imposing limitations on rights and liberties, citing concerns about maintaining stability. They have implemented legislation and taken actions against civil society organisations that advocate for human rights and the rule of law.[28]

Although the constitution guarantees the right to association, civil society in South Asia has also faced growing challenges due to the legal environment.[29] Governments have imposed regulations that restrict the activities and impact of civil society actors. This hampers their ability to effectively contribute to developmental processes and hold governments accountable.

Legislations, governance, and institutional mechanisms regarding disaster risk mitigation and management vary between settings. In Central Asia, legislation addressing disaster risk and international disaster response laws were ratified in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 and in Turkmenistan in 2020. In South Asia, all countries have existing disaster risk management (DRM) legal frameworks that regulate the inflow and disbursement of international humanitarian assistance. The national disaster management authorities (NDMAs) of all the South Asian countries guide and dictate their trajectory to achieve the resilience outcomes of the Sendai Framework. Moreover, regional cooperation networks like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SAARND)[30] and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)[31] also regulate climate change, disaster, and environment management which are the priority areas of cooperation in the region.

In the face of a rising tide of humanitarian crises, the humanitarian R&I architectures in South and Central Asia need to be examined and optimised to ensure that evidence can best inform humanitarian action and support the delivery of accountable, effective, and dignified humanitarian assistance to populations affected by crisis.

SECTION 2

METHODS

SECTION 2: METHODS

STUDY OVERVIEW

Detailed methodological information is **available online**.
The final interview guide used in this SCA consultation is **available online** in English.

Study participants and recruitment

Briefly, this study sought to include regional actors engaged with the research and innovation (R&I) space in any of the following capacities:

- Researcher, innovator.

- Donor.

- End user of research and innovation findings and outputs (eg, humanitarian operational practitioner, policymaker).

- R&I commissioner / administrator.

Regional actors were defined as those with a portfolio, mandate, or focus spanning two or more countries.

Data collection

A key informant interview (KII) guide was developed for use across regions and modified by regional partners as required to ensure cultural sensitivity and regional relevance. The interview guide covered perceptions of:

- Demographics.
- The role of R&I in humanitarian crises.
- Humanitarian R&I topics requiring attention in South and Central Asia, and priority topics.
- Alignment of investments with R&I topics requiring attention.
- Regional and national stakeholder engagement with R&I.
- Decision-making and coordination processes.
- Responsiveness of the R&I system.
- Barriers to, and enablers of, investment in R&I and donor coordination approaches.

All interviews were conducted online in English (one through a translator) using a secure Zoom platform and audio / video recorded. Interviews were auto-transcribed, manually reviewed, cleaned, and de-identified before analysis.

Data management and analysis

An initial coding framework was developed for use across all regions. Coding was conducted inductively and deductively using NVivo software, and transcripts were analysed thematically. Not all participants answered or responded to all questions addressing the issues they intended to cover. Where participants had referred to issues outside South or Central Asia, referred to the humanitarian operational system / response and not R&I, where responses were not relevant to the humanitarian space, or where the question was not addressed as intended, these excerpts were not used in the current analysis.

Ethics and project oversight

Ethics approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (ref 2022-163).

LIMITATIONS OF THIS WORK

This report presents perspectives of a small, purposively sampled cohort of actors engaged with the humanitarian R&I space. South and Central Asia are demographically, developmentally, topographically, and culturally distinct, and whilst both face some common hazards, shared boundaries and humanitarian challenges, there are also pronounced differences in the humanitarian landscapes, R&I capacities and many of the issues confronting these regions. Participants were selected on the basis of their expertise or experience working on one or other of these regions in order to explore the unique issues in each. Every attempt was made to ensure broad sectoral and disciplinary engagement and representation from diverse organisation types.

The participants provided diverse perspectives and rich insights that provide an important baseline. Future work should seek to validate the findings of this initial exercise.

This study is also subject to the limitations inherent in all qualitative analysis, including that coding is subject to interpretation. This was minimised through an iterative coding process, including re-analysis and recoding as required by team members to resolve any disagreements or review specific excerpts or transcripts.

This study explored participant perspectives regarding how the humanitarian R&I ecosystem functions and humanitarian topics requiring additional R&I attention in the SCA region, and this report presents summaries of key points raised by participants. Not all issues in, or impacting, SCA are necessarily covered in this report if they were not mentioned by participants. The topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention are informative, but not necessarily exhaustive and were not ranked. Further research (including gauging the views of a large and diverse number of stakeholders) is required to validate the findings from this initial work and inform development of an agreed research agenda for each subregion.

CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS

Interviews were conducted remotely using a secure Zoom platform between October and December 2022.

In total, five interviews were focused on the Central Asia region and 12 interviews were conducted for the South Asia consultation. Summary details of participants and organisational information are presented in Table 1. Most participants were senior, with the majority reporting ten or more years of experience in the sector. Two participants reported having a donor / funding function, one from the Central Asia consultation and the other among the participants for the South Asia consultation. Notably, any organisation providing any type or volume of funding could identify as a donor, from those providing high value funding to those issuing small seed grants or subawards.

Table 1: Summary of participant and organisational characteristics

Participant and organisational characteristics	Number of participants
Organisational type*:	
Academic institution	3
Government / intergovernmental agency	1
Independent research organisation / thinktank	1
International financial institution	3
International NGO	5
National / local NGO	1
Network / partnership / consortium	1
UN agency	2
Participant country base^:	
Afghanistan	1
Bangladesh	2
India	4
Kazakhstan	1
Kyrgyz Republic	1
Nepal	1
Pakistan	1
Sri Lanka	1
Tajikistan	1
South Asia region	1
Outside Central and South Asia	3

Participant years of experience in the sector:	
Less than five years	1
Between five and ten years	5
More than ten years	11
Participant years of experience in current role:	
Less than five years	2
Between five and ten years	6
More than ten years	9
Organisational involvement with R&I:	
Humanitarian research only	5
Humanitarian innovation only	0
Both humanitarian research and innovation	12

^ This does not necessarily reflect the country where the organisation is based or headquartered, nor the focus of the individual's or organisation's work.

SECTION 3

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I) IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

SECTION 3: THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I) IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

KEY MESSAGES

Most participants indicated that **there is a role for R&I during a humanitarian crisis**. However, some participants reported that R&I has only a limited role if trying to process and implement innovative approaches during the acute stage of an emergency. Whilst sometimes perceived as a burden, it was also noted that R&I and operational activities are different functions and should occur simultaneously.

Among participants who indicated **that R&I has a role during crises,** common reported functions included to inform preparedness, inform humanitarian action, glean lessons learned, and help improve the ways in which the humanitarian sector operates. Roles for R&I were reported across all phases of a humanitarian crisis.

There **were mostly positive views on whether R&I has enabled improved outcomes.** The majority of participants reported that R&I has led to improved action and ultimately outcomes. These participants provided a range of examples of how R&I have supported improved outcomes, including improving humanitarian assistance through the documentation of events and lessons learned, improved targeting of vulnerable populations, guiding the development of new innovations and solutions, and by supporting improved contextual understanding which has allowed for design of more appropriate interventions. On the other hand, a few participants indicated that R&I has not sufficiently led to better outcomes, including due to lack of sufficient foresight research and a reactive approach.

Reported barriers to the production of R&I included the geopolitical context resulting in research in some settings not being supported; limited understanding of the role of R&I in informing preparedness and response; R&I not being prioritised by the humanitarian sector and by senior personnel within organisations; and issues of data availability, quality or access.

Several barriers to the uptake and utilisation of R&I were reported. From Central Asia, these included limited dissemination and data sharing, including due to security concerns. From South Asia, reported barriers were broadly due to poor partnerships and collaboration; systems and governance issues; and limited relevance due to not being contextually appropriate and findings being outdated by the time they are available.

Suggestions for how R&I should be conducted during crises included over an extended timeframe; be observational; seek to document lessons learned; use novel techniques; and draw on feedback from and collaboration with humanitarian actors and affected populations.

It was reported that **R&I can be better used** if operational actors are familiar with findings before crisis onset; by improving collaboration and real-time sharing of results; by gleaning lessons learned; by ensuring R&I is contextually relevant; and by adopting a long-term and systems lens.

A number of **additional factors required for the humanitarian R&I ecosystem to function effectively** were described. These include more funding; improved collaboration and coordination, including cross-border engagement to address transboundary risks; standardised methodologies, so that analyses of the same event or data by different groups reach the same conclusions and recommendations; investment in a strong R&I workforce and capacity building; institutional strengthening; infrastructure developments and access to new technologies; engagement of affected populations; and improved dissemination and outreach.

IS THERE A ROLE FOR R&I DURING HUMANITARIAN CRISES?

All participants in the Central Asia consultation indicated that there is a role for R&I during a humanitarian crisis. However, some also cautioned that while R&I is important, it can be a distraction, in particular, if trying to process and implement innovative approaches during the acute stage of an emergency when stressors and emotions are high and there are many new issues to consider. This can be minimised, and R&I better used, if operational actors are familiar with R&I findings before crisis onset.

Whilst sometimes perceived as a burden, it was also noted that R&I and operational activities are different functions and should occur simultaneously.

Participants in the South Asia consultation had varying views on the role and appropriateness of R&I in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, with a few participants reporting that there is no or a limited role for a number of reasons, including because:

- Piloting new technologies or innovations that have not previously been field tested is problematic as they may not work or may yield information that is discrepant from existing systems that were being used even immediately before crisis onset or roll out of the new tool.

- Research can be distracting during the immediate aftermath of a crisis. To mitigate this, the focus should instead be on building a body of evidence during non-crisis periods so that techniques and interventions that can be deployed in an acute event are readily available and known, and time is not wasted on trying to understand what does and does not work.

- Successful research initiatives require multiple iterations which are not feasible in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and can become a distraction. However, it was noted that R&I should be a continuous process and whilst some activities are not possible in the acute phase of an emergency, other aspects of R&I could potentially be conducted without impacting populations affected by crisis or the humanitarian response.

- In the immediate aftermath of a crisis, provision of lifesaving assistance is the priority and it is not appropriate to have researchers on the ground engaging with the community. However, action research, such as operational actors recording their observations which then feeds into larger research projects, is a way to position research and ensure that learnings and experiences are captured.

Participants from both the South and Central Asia consultations described a range of roles of R&I during humanitarian crises. These functions included to:

- Inform preparedness and planning:
  - ◇ help predict / forecast events and inform preventive or mitigating actions
  - ◇ inform community-based risk reduction.

- Inform programmatic action:
  - ◇ support targeting
  - ◇ inform an improved and culturally-appropriate response
  - ◇ help in understanding the context including informing understanding of unique aspects of the crisis context
  - ◇ provide evidence to facilitate decision-making and inform programmatic action.

- Support improved protection of populations affected by crisis.

- Inform learning and glean lessons:
  - ◇ help improve the humanitarian response and action across all phases of an emergency, from preparedness to recovery and post-recovery (including lessons from the response phase can inform preparedness and resilience-building among communities). This is facilitated because research is a longer-term effort and so can examine and inform both immediate recovery, but also recovery years down the track
  - ◇ learn lessons from crises elsewhere that can be applied to the current context
  - ◇ learn lessons from different sectors
  - ◇ help inform understanding of the impact of humanitarian interventions.

- Improve the way the sector functions:
  - ◊ help identify any gaps or weaknesses in the humanitarian architecture including around coordination and ensuring roles of various actors are decided and understood
  - ◊ improve humanitarian action through technology, forecasting, delivery, and record-keeping innovations
  - ◊ inform understanding of the type of data that should be collected.

WHAT ROLE R&I PLAYS THROUGHOUT THE DIFFERENT PHASES OF A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

From both South Asia and Central Asia, a range of roles for R&I during specific phases of a humanitarian crisis were reported. Notably, both research and innovation were considered key.

"To get prepared and do response and have a solid recovery you really need to have solid research."

"For me innovation is a synonym [for creative thinking, thinking outside the box]. So, innovation...is not just about a different way of doing things, a different kind of programme that you might want to deliver. But innovation is also about a different way of thinking and I think that innovation has to be a part of crisis management from the entire cycle from preparedness to recovery. It has to be part of the whole process."

PREPAREDNESS PHASE

Reported roles of R&I in the preparedness phase were predominantly focused on informing anticipatory action and mitigation, including through hazard monitoring, foresight analysis, and EWSs; identifying lessons to embed, including from past crises in the same setting to inform knowledge of what works in the context; and informing investments and development action that can support preparedness (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Reported Roles of R&I in the Preparedness Phase

Role of R&I in the Preparedness Phase	Key Points Reported and Examples
Anticipatory action and inform mitigation efforts	Innovation and technologies can support EWSs, both improving the lead time and action on early warnings, and also improving dissemination of early warning messages. Innovations such as use of satellite imagery allows the rapid monitoring of hazards across large areas. Can support governments to understand what mitigation actions can help reduce a disaster's adverse impacts. R&I and foresight analysis can contribute to improving predictive capacities for better preparedness against disasters.
Inform preparedness and support contextually-appropriate action	Inform hazard vulnerability risk assessments and action. Help identify and document successful examples from previous emergencies of what works for communities, so that these policies or interventions can be rapidly deployed as required in the event of crisis onset. Embed greater community perspectives into emergency preparedness.
Inform development action	Hazard risk assessments inform where to invest limited funds, and inform planning and development (for example, where to build schools and houses).

RESPONSE PHASE

For both South and Central Asia, the main reported roles of R&I in the response phase include informing better ways of working and better programming, improving systems, informing contextual understanding, and understanding of community needs (see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Reported Roles of R&I in the Response Phase

Role of R&I	Key Points Reported and Examples
Better understand context to help inform action	R&I and technologies can inform understanding of events (eg, satellite imagery and GPS can help understand events in remote locations) and inform action (eg, drone technology can support search and rescue operations). Research has improved the capacities of government agencies to respond to different kinds of crises.
Support better programming	Innovation can both inform development of humanitarian activities and programming and improve the logistics, security, and coordination required to enable programme delivery. Research informs programming, targeting, timing of programme design, and interventions. Innovations have helped the humanitarian sector improve outreach to marginalised communities. R&I can help humanitarian actors determine the extent to which innovative technologies can be used in a specific context. Situational analysis can help in identifying priority areas of intervention and support programme design.
Improve ways of working and systems	Innovative approaches to targeting can help stem corruption and use of innovative feedback loops can improve safeguarding. Innovation helps adapt standard operating procedures and standard elements of crisis response to the unique aspects of the specific crisis situation. By predicting events, R&I facilitates having mechanisms in place for a timely response.

Improve ways of working and systems (continued)	R&I can improve management of response systems, including through improved IT and communications systems. Innovation can help improve response financing to be more reliable, robust, and transparent.
Understanding community needs to inform the response	R&I gives responders prior knowledge to provide life-saving aid and inform response through credible evidence.

RECOVERY PHASE

The main reported roles of R&I in the recovery phase of a humanitarian crisis were to support recovery planning, recovery action, and recovery financing (see Table 4 below).

Table 4: Reported Roles of R&I in the Recovery Phase

Role of R&I	Key Points Reported and Examples
Provide evidence to plan effective recovery	R&I can inform recovery planning to best support those most in need and ensure they are supported through both response and recovery phases. R&I can help inform recovery planning by identifying gaps, needs, and weaknesses; and innovations in big data can support planning of sustainable recovery.
Support action	R&I can support reintegration and resettlement.
Provide evidence to support investments	R&I can support recovery financing.

IS R&I ENABLING BETTER OUTCOMES, AND IF SO, HOW?

Perspectives on whether R&I is enabling improved humanitarian outcomes differed among participants reflecting on South and Central Asia.

Most participants focused on Central Asia indicated that R&I is enabling better outcomes and this is achieved in a range of ways, including:

- Research helps in **understanding the nature of vulnerability and risk:** Research tools such as hazard, vulnerability, and risk assessment support humanitarian operational actors to understand the level and intensity of risk, and enables them to improve preparedness and response activities, leading to better outcomes. Holistic and multidisciplinary research has helped identify the types of hazards that may strike an area, red zones within an area and any potential impacts (for example, where specific hazards may occur and if they are likely to wipe out entire villages), and understanding of population behaviours such as whether people will leave or not. This also informs development of village disaster management plans (for example, so local volunteers in red zones can be trained in all aspects of what to do in an emergency, including search and rescue, incident command, or providing first aid).

- R&I **improves anticipatory action:** Hazard-forecasting capabilities have helped predict events such as avalanches, thus allowing evacuation, relocation, and saving lives.

- Forecasting supports **improved decision-making by governments:** R&I and EWSs forecast events such as earthquakes and flooding, with this information helping to inform decision-making around, for example, resettlement – mobilising those who will work with the local population during an acute event and other such actions.

- Adaptive innovation supports **improved understanding of context** and **adapting management plans** to the specific crisis context.

- Modern technologies and innovations help **improve targeting,** including through linkage with social protection systems and availing this data to humanitarians during a response.

- R&I supports **improved understanding of needs and optimal modes of delivering humanitarian assistance.** For example, R&I can help understand the level of market disruption in the aftermath of a crisis to inform whether to adopt cash-based interventions or traditional relief measures.

There were mixed views on whether R&I has enabled improved outcomes for South Asia. For example, it was reported that whilst progress is being made and recent decades have seen a paradigm shift including increased focus on preparedness and a move from reactive to proactive action, this remains insufficient and R&I is still not leading to better outcomes. This was ascribed to a lack of sufficient foresight research and appropriate action, and the approach remaining heavily reactive. For example, it was reported that lessons were not learned and there was a lack of foresight both with the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and 16 years later with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also suggested that lack of foresight analysis and a reactive approach also means that slow-onset crises such as climate change and food and water security receive insufficient attention and action.

It was also reported that (although not the participant's own view) some might feel that R&I does not enable improved outcomes because of the time and processes required to conduct research and to generate findings, and for these findings to then be translated into policy action.

Another participant indicated that in one crisis context, the same R&I has enabled improved action by operational and non-state actors, but some governments have not been able to utilise these same innovations and information to inform their programming or response to other crises, due to their own constraints such as longstanding laws and governance issues.

Several participants reported that R&I has enabled better outcomes in South Asia in a range of ways, including:

- **_Through documenting events and lessons learned:_** For example, it was reported that since the 1991 Uttarkashi earthquake, considerable progress has been made in India, where such research has repeatedly been undertaken by the government or civil society organisations and has directly informed their learnings and action.

- **_By informing programming and helping improve humanitarian action:_**

  ◇ innovations have supported and enhanced humanitarian action across a spectrum of activity, including outreach and targeting, and reduced wastage and improved efficiency. For example, in parts of India, IT has supported and improved a range of operational activities, from early warning to food distribution
  ◇ improved targeting, for example, in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh
  ◇ R&I provides evidence and informs understanding of needs and the situation on the ground that help humanitarian actors respond more effectively and efficiently with the finite resources available.

- **_Through use of better forecasting tools_** that have helped improve anticipatory action. For example, research has helped inform an improved EWS in one setting, resulting in reduced crisis impacts.

- **_By informing contextually-appropriate action:_**

  ◇ research helps inform contextual understanding (eg, dynamics such as gender, culture, sect, or caste system within a community) that helps inform more appropriate and culturally-sensitive humanitarian action. This also helps to avoid potential conflict both within the community and with responders that may arise if such issues are overlooked
  ◇ 'on-the-ground' engagement with local communities and stakeholders helps improve the efficacy and relevance of humanitarian innovations at the grassroots level.

- **_Through identification of best practices:_** Including gleaning lessons from past humanitarian crises and response, and widely disseminating the learnings to all relevant stakeholder groups, identifying lessons and cross-learnings from recurrent disasters, and applying these lessons to create a resilient infrastructure that helps communities to respond better both in the short and long term.

- *By supporting the development of innovative, contextually-specific products and interventions:* For example, research has been leveraged to develop innovations such as raised, tubular systems for drinking water.

- *By helping inform policy and decision-making.*

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO THE PRODUCTION, UPTAKE, AND UTILISATION OF R&I?

BARRIERS TO THE PRODUCTION OF R&I

For Central Asia, reported barriers to the production of R&I largely reflect the region's political context and perceptions that there is a limited understanding of, and value placed on, R&I. These barriers included:

- *Political constraints:* Research in the region is not supported due to sanctions.

- *Limited understanding of the value of R&I* in informing preparedness and response.

- *Focus on operational activity and operational funding, and R&I not being prioritised.* Notably, this is not always the case, and it was also reported that some donors supporting work in some settings do regularly and actively fund research, in addition to operational investments. For example, in one country where funding agencies are present, there has been research investment and this was perceived to be due to the hazardous terrain and associated risks, with avalanches and flooding common in the region.

- *Differing organisational priorities:* The importance that senior management within an organisation give to monitoring and evaluation / research functions impacts whether conducting R&I is a priority or not.

Very few participants reflecting on South Asia commented on the barriers to the production of research. The main theme reported was around *data availability, quality, or access.*

BARRIERS TO THE UPTAKE AND UTILISATION OF R&I

For Central Asia, the only specifically reported barrier to the uptake and utilisation of R&I findings again reflects the region's political and security context. It was reported that there is *limited data sharing and dissemination* due to a lack of trust and security considerations. In particular, dissemination may be limited due to concerns about sharing and the potential weaponisation and misuse of critical data such as GPS coordinates of villages, essential infrastructure, or other public facilities.

In the South Asia consultation, a range of barriers to the uptake and utilisation of R&I were reported. These included barriers related to partnerships and collaboration, governance, time, and relevance:

Barriers due to partnership and poor collaboration

- Disconnect between researchers and policymakers, including policymakers not being engaged with research from the outset and contributing to its co-creation, resulting in no sense of ownership or engagement and failure to utilise research; and no communication between those doing the research and potential end-users.

- Disconnect between researchers and operational actors:

  ◇ no sharing of research results with humanitarian actors at the operational level who often are engaged to support data collection, but then do not see the research outputs
  ◇ siloed thinking and failure to recognise that research and response are interconnected and inform each other
  ◇ lack of critical thinking and action, so research does not progress to pilot projects that can then be scaled up
  ◇ perceptions of research as time-consuming and not compatible with humanitarian action during a crisis, and lack of co-ownership and co-creation.

- Lack of trust between partners, such that R&I outputs often do not translate into institutional arrangements or legal frameworks.

Barriers due to systems and governance

- Limited implementation of research findings due to poor governance, poor development status, and inadequate infrastructure.

Barriers due to limited relevance or applicability

- Time-consuming nature of research and knowledge production meaning that findings may be less relevant by the time they are available.

- R&I recommendations not being contextually appropriate.

- Research recommendations are sometimes very general with research being undertaken only because funding is available.

HOW SHOULD R&I BE CONDUCTED DURING ACUTE CRISES?

There were several suggestions for how R&I should be conducted during acute humanitarian crises. In both South and Central Asia, it was suggested that *research be through observation.* Humanitarian researchers should be present in the acute phase, but the role should be observational, without getting directly involved or trying unproven approaches in the middle of a disaster or emergency and, therefore, without disrupting operational response.

Other suggestions included that R&I should be *conducted over an extended timeframe*, not only during the acute phase, but also prior to crisis onset so that it can predict and anticipate vulnerability and risk, and inform planning by already having mechanisms in place for a response; *document observations and lessons learned* while developing proposals for action based on these learnings (these should be subject to peer review and simulation exercises to identify strengths, any negative consequences or if an innovation does not work).

Other suggestions included *the use of novel techniques* such as feedback mechanisms and action research to enable better responses to humanitarian crises with *sensitivity;* and *be based on feedback from, and collaboration with, humanitarian actors and affected populations* to help inform the development of practical innovations.

HOW R&I CAN BE BETTER USED

Several suggestions were provided for how R&I can be better used, these included:

- *Ensuring information dissemination and knowledge translation before crisis onset:* Operational actors should be familiar with R&I findings and consider their implementation before crisis onset, so that R&I does not become an emotional or cognitive distraction and that R&I findings are already available to them and can be applied.

- *Plot the timeline of the response* so that post-crisis, when a review and lessons learned exercise is conducted, having both a response timeline and the data collected during response will clearly demonstrate what was done, what impact each action had, and if this was the desired impact, and what could be done better next time.

- *Improved collaboration and real-time sharing of results* with the following being seen as necessary:

  - engage all relevant stakeholders early in the process and ensure timely dissemination and sharing of findings, including regularly sharing preliminary results in real time throughout the research process
  - recognition by policy and operational actors of the role and potential contributions that research stakeholders can make will help ensure that the research is better used
  - inclusive engagement of operational actors by researchers, not limiting the practitioner role just to data collection

◇   improved collaboration between researchers and policymakers with regular engagement and a feedback loop that allows researchers to make suggestions for action based on findings and an iterative, collaborative process of developing a system or set of guidelines that can inform policy as the situation evolves.

- By *gleaning lessons learned.*

- By ensuring that R&I are *contextually relevant.*

- *By adopting a longer-term approach* and systems change, including efforts to address recurrent disasters and issues at the nexus with development.

WHAT ELSE THE HUMANITARIAN R&I ECOSYSTEM NEEDS TO FUNCTION PROPERLY

From both South and Central Asia there were a suite of recommendations for additional factors required to improve the R&I ecosystem. Broadly, these comprised:

- *Greater funding* for R&I.

- *Improved collaboration and coordination.* For example, it was reported that Central Asia requires improved cross-border collaboration and engagement to address transboundary risks, with recognition that preparedness and response plans should not be country specific as hazard events do not respect borders and the same weather events can impact multiple countries. This includes a need for improved interconnectivity between national disaster management authorities and measures to improve communication platforms. From South Asia, the need for greater coordination in humanitarian research was reported, with a need to break away from siloed thinking to adopt more holistic approaches.

- *Standardised methodologies:* Need to harmonise all the disparate methodologies and approaches to humanitarian research through a unified approach to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination. This is required both within organisations and within and between countries, so that data and findings are usable, reproducible, and can be easily interpreted. This includes, for example, consistent definitions and applications of hazard classifications, both to enhance usability, but also so that assessments of the same area or issue are classified in the same way and generate the same level of hazard assessment and recommended interventions.

- *R&I workforce development and capacity strengthening of a range of actors:* Including researchers who are able to conduct work to understand the impact of interventions; capacity building of early career R&I personnel so that they can use new technologies, systems, and equipment; R&I capacity strengthening of humanitarian actors; capacity strengthening of private sector agencies who conduct research including at the community level; capacity strengthening in the development of innovations; strengthening capacity in knowledge translation and applying the results of research.

- *Institutional strengthening* including:

  ◇ integration of humanitarian research into university curricula. This may include the pairing of national academic institutions with regional entities so that any gaps at the national level can be filled through these regional linkages

  ◇ greater focus on capacity development at the ministerial level, including having a dedicated humanitarian research department or research personnel within ministries

  ◇ support institutional mechanisms to nurture and promote talent.

- *Infrastructure developments and access to new technologies and tools,* including:

  ◇ data-sharing platforms: To encourage transparency and make existing data available, potentially incentivised with visibility, recognition, and acknowledgement for organisations and countries that share data

  ◇ in Central Asia, access to new technologies and tools, such as remote sensing and high-resolution satellite images, so that required infrastructure such as regional EWSs can be developed and to replace outdated approaches in order to ensure programming is evidence-based while improving accuracy and precision

  ◇ improved use of information and communication technologies including mobile internet and social media.

- *Engagement of marginalised populations:* Engagement of such populations in decision-making needs to be a regional priority.

- Improved *dissemination and feedback* on R&I outputs.

SPOTLIGHT ON: CENTRAL ASIA

Participants described a range of factors that influence how the R&I ecosystem in Central Asia is structured and operates.

Politics and geopolitics:

- Differences in bilateral relationships between countries influence working relationships. For example, border disputes impact cross-border collaborations; changes in dynamics between post-Soviet countries influence who they want and are able to work with.

- Crises in surrounding countries and changes in government relations (eg, with Afghanistan) have impacted cross-border operational work; the interactions between academia and humanitarian actors; and strained bilateral relations have also had an impact on the use and scaling of some innovations.

Funding and support:

- Investment in the region reportedly tends to prioritise high-visibility initiatives, and the 'hard' operational side of humanitarian work rather than the 'soft' components such as R&I, without considering that investment into the soft elements can improve operational work.

- In general, there is reportedly limited institutional support for R&I, with a focus on visibility and subjective value judgements from senior management. Some participants suggested that R&I activities such as serial hazard risk vulnerability assessments are perceived as a waste of money and there is a failure to recognise that such work helps identify impact on preparedness and response.

Legacy and an outdated system:

- The R&I architecture has been inherited from the past and has not been updated or incorporated evolutions in research and technology.

Limited humanitarian R&I workforce:

- The R&I workforce is reportedly poorly developed, with a paucity of researchers, including those who can conduct impact assessments and measure the right parameters.

HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I) TOPICS AND PRIORITY TOPICS NEEDING ATTENTION

SECTION 4: HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I) TOPICS AND PRIORITY TOPICS NEEDING ATTENTION

KEY MESSAGES

Central Asia

A range of **topics were reported as requiring additional R&I attention in Central Asia,** including work on the humanitarian R&I system; the humanitarian operational system; regional hazards assessments; establishment of a comprehensive regional early warning system (EWS); improved understanding of humanitarian needs and response; and an examination of the drivers and impact of conflict in, and neighbouring, the region.

R&I needs reportedly differ across the region, attributed largely to different baseline levels of development with some countries having strong institutional structures while others do not, different drivers of humanitarian crises and different types of humanitarian needs.

South Asia

Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention for South Asia included issues related to humanitarian preparedness; the humanitarian-development nexus; how the humanitarian sector functions; specific hazards and event types; political contexts; populations affected by crisis; the humanitarian research system; economic analyses of humanitarian interventions; and other topics regarding livelihoods and innovation.

It was also reported that R&I needs differ across South Asia on the basis of differing community participation; economic development; geographic and topographic diversity; and differences in cultural practices and religious beliefs.

As participants generally reflected on either South or Central Asia, topics reported as requiring R&I attention are presented separately for each. Additionally, some participants commented that topics requiring R&I attention differ between South and Central Asia, including due to differences in the level of community participation in designing and leading humanitarian interventions with community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) approaches being very robust in South Asia, but still in their nascent stages in Central Asia.

CENTRAL ASIA

A number of topics requiring R&I attention in Central Asia were reported (see Table 5 below).

Table 5: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in Central Asia

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
The R&I ecosystem	
Innovation on how to obtain humanitarian data, including size, demographics, and needs of vulnerable populations*	• Effective programming and response require accurate understanding of humanitarian needs and this requires data.
The humanitarian system	
Research on how to adapt and integrate existing innovations into the traditional systems that exist in Central Asia*	• Conservative, traditional operating procedures and ways of working in the region (reflecting the post-Soviet context) have their strengths, but are also very outdated in many instances. • Timely to conduct such work now due to a generational shift, with many of the Soviet era personnel retiring and a younger generation assuming key roles.
Research on how the humanitarian sector can improve data sharing and exchange of experiences and best utilise expertise*	• Data sharing and engagement that occurred in the past mainly to address natural hazards worked well, but has now stopped due to geopolitics and surrounding human-made crises, and changes in government relations such as with Afghanistan.
Research to understand the impact of humanitarian and development interventions	• Mindset shift required and a focus on impact rather than outputs.
Regional-level hazard assessments and systems	
Regional hazards assessment*	• Country-level hazard assessments are fragmented.

Regional EWSs*	• Not all countries have a national EWS for all types of hazards. • Many transboundary hazards and risks (eg, due to transboundary rivers), so regional EWSs required. • Regional EWSs exist for some types of hazards but not others; also required for human-made events.
Political instability and conflict	
The nature of conflict and competition	• Need to better understand the drivers and the fundamental nature of crisis and conflict.
Humanitarian needs and response	
Humanitarian needs and population vulnerability to different types of risks arising from political instability, violence, and conflict	• Humanitarian needs due to violence and conflict have been longstanding in some settings which has long-term implications on the population.
Innovation on how host communities and refugees from conflict-related emergencies can be supported in parallel	

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for Central Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

It was reported that R&I on some of these issues could help address humanitarian issues in the region in a number of ways, including:

• Provide evidence for action: Improve the evidence base and improve evidence-informed programming, thus removing subjectivity.

• Improve accuracy and precision of action, including through the use of more contemporary rather than outdated tools.

• Improve preparedness and response through improved understanding of risk.

• Improve understanding of how the humanitarian community can best engage, beyond just the cluster approach, and how best to manage a response.

• Improve technology and the use of data to improve how emergency operations are set up.

Participants were also asked to reflect on whether the topics requiring R&I attention differ across the region. Two participants reported that R&I needs differ across Central Asia, due to differences between countries, including:

- Different drivers of humanitarian need and different nature of crises (some related to natural hazards, others related to long-term population movements).

- Different types of humanitarian needs.

- Some countries having explicit humanitarian crises and programmes and others being more a development context.

- Different baseline levels of development with some countries having strong institutional structures while others do not.

- Geographical differences, such as being landlocked vs. having access to ports.

SOUTH ASIA

Thematic areas reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia are summarised below in Tables 6-14. These covered a range of issues broadly related to humanitarian preparedness; the humanitarian-development nexus; how the humanitarian sector functions; specific hazards and event types; political contexts; populations affected by crisis; the humanitarian R&I system; economic analyses of humanitarian interventions; and other topics regarding livelihoods and innovation.

Table 6: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: Humanitarian preparedness

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
Multi-hazard EWSs*	
Strengthening EWSs*	• EWSs in many South Asian countries are weak.
Anticipatory action*	
Business continuity planning*	• Based on the COVID-19 experience, important to have business continuity, community management, and planning for all hazards. This is important not only for businesses and the economy, but also for the poor and marginalised who need efficient service delivery in times of crisis without discrimination.
Public health*	• Important to identify areas for any future public health emergencies.

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Table 7: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: The humanitarian-development nexus

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
Humanitarian action, livelihoods, and sustainability*	
Risk-informed development*	• Resilience building should be integrated with the ongoing development process to address the underlying vulnerabilities of at-risk communities.
Development of a holistic package of social protection	• Response-based humanitarian interventions ignore social protection as an area of inquiry in the region.
Vulnerabilities and inequalities created during recovery stage	• Lack of a 'building back better' approach in recovery has resulted in underlying vulnerabilities and inequalities being perpetuated and maintained through humanitarian interventions.

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Table 8: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: How the humanitarian sector functions

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
Unified methodologies, approaches, and interpretation*	
Using technology*	• Use of technology that might not be the latest, but is available and easy to use in humanitarian response would improve the engagement of partners and donors with local governments.
Regional cooperation	• There are political barriers to regional cooperation in South Asia.
Localisation*	• Local governments and communities are often the first responders during emergencies, but receive little research attention.
Review of operations and extract lessons learned	• Review of government operations to capture lessons learned is important for sharing of experiences.

Topic	Reason
Reciprocity in humanitarian assistance*	• There is very little work on understanding reciprocity in humanitarian assistance. The role of reciprocity is enormous in countries where states are weak and people have little relationship with the state.
How to improve communication and coordination*	• In South Asia, interstate exchange of information and coordination for transboundary hazards such as floods is quite weak.
Logistics: Timely delivery of humanitarian aid	
Cyber security*	• Cyber security is an emerging threat because of increasing dependence on electronic delivery.
Resilience building: How to ensure sustainability and continuity of humanitarian operations after humanitarian organisations exit*	

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Table 9: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: Specific hazard and event types

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
Climate change: New models or tools to better forecast*	
How humanitarian activity can best be delivered in different types of natural hazard contexts, especially: • floods* • cyclones and hurricanes in coastal areas* • earthquakes • forest fires	• The region experiences an array of natural hazards hazards, some of which cause widespread loss and damage to lives and livelihoods, and the humanitarian response and logistic considerations in each differ (eg, roads may be disrupted / damaged in earthquakes, whereas in drought, accessibility is not usually a problem). • Floods and cyclones in the coastal areas of South Asia cause widespread loss and damage to the lives and livelihoods of fisher communities.

R&I on smaller and less visible crises*	• In South Asia, only major cataclysmic events attract donor attention. There is a need to focus R&I attention on minor disasters as well.
Humanitarian action for landslide preparedness and response*	• Landslides are a complex hazard which cause widespread destruction in the Himalayan region covering India and Nepal.
Understanding the nature of poly-crises	• Poly-crises are by nature complicated, rapidly evolving, and can lead to large-scale implications for the humanitarian sector.

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Table 10: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: Understanding context

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
International and inter-state cooperation*	• International cooperation in humanitarian assistance is weak in South Asia.
Political and cultural trends & analysis*	• Humanitarian action and political will requires more research to develop effective humanitarian innovations. • • Political trends often dictate what can be researched and investigated in the country or region (for example, the needs of refugees in the host country as well as in the region).

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Table 11: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: Populations affected by crisis

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
Humanitarian needs	
Political instability and vulnerability of the population*	• Need to understand the political dimensions of any humanitarian crisis.
Understanding populations affected by crisis*	
Social research to shift from aid dependency to a rights-based approach*	• Colonialism has impacted governance structures in South Asia to such an extent that people remain largely dependent on humanitarian aid as a form of charity instead of accessing it as their right.
Understanding characteristics, knowledge, and awareness of vulnerable populations*	• Need to understand capacities of vulnerable populations in order to provide appropriate humanitarian assistance.
Understanding change in attitudes among displaced people	

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Table 12: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: The humanitarian R&I ecosystem

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
Leveraging research for policy change*	• At present, research is not being packaged in a way that is amenable to informing policy change in the region.
Need for action and implementation research to identify solutions	• Focus on quantitative research on public health topics has led to many actual needs not being addressed.

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Table 13: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: Economic analyses of humanitarian interventions

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
Strategy and funding*	• Economic analysis of different humanitarian interventions is needed to inform efficient resource allocation.
Analysis of host community needs for balancing aid and support between refugees and host communities	• Shrinking of resources available for humanitarian action has necessitated the efficient allocation of such resources.

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Table 14: Topics reported as requiring additional R&I attention in South Asia: Other topics

Topic	Reason for listing it as requiring attention
Livelihoods	
How to make the agricultural sector more resilient, particularly for women	• Normative agricultural practices give little agency to women in important aspects such as asset ownership, division of labour, and decision-making. This invariably leads to the exclusion of women.
Innovation*	
Financial and social innovations*	• Developing innovative models or solutions to challenges such as inadequate funding, asset-linked financing (which exclude women and other marginalised groups such as landless farmers).

Participants were asked to identify topics requiring R&I attention for South Asia, and then to name the top three R&I priority topics. Topics marked with an asterisk denote that they were reported as a priority by at least one participant.

Some participants reflected on whether topics requiring R&I attention vary across South Asia, with differing perspectives. These included:

- **Similarities in needs:** Underlying risk drivers are quite similar across South Asia. Hazards may vary by location, but the categories of vulnerable groups are similar.

- **Differences in R&I topics requiring attention due to:**

  ◇ geographic and topographic diversity within and between countries
  ◇ differences in cultural practices and religious beliefs were reported as reasons for diverse iverse R&I needs in the region, in addition to other issues, such as governance, economic fragility, and discrimination
  ◇ different types of crisis – needs differ according to the nature of the crisis. For example, the needs of populations and R&I needs in conflict would vary from those in natural hazard contexts.

SECTION 5

(MIS)ALIGNMENT OF HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I) INVESTMENTS AND NEEDS

SECTION 5: (MIS)ALIGNMENT OF HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I) INVESTMENTS AND NEEDS

KEY MESSAGES

There were differing views among participants regarding **whether research and innovation (R&I) investments match the topics requiring attention**. While most participants indicated that they could not definitively comment, some reported that R&I investments are being made and do match the topics requiring additional R&I attention, but the volume of funding is insufficient. Others reported a misalignment of investments and R&I needs and this was attributed to a number of factors, including R&I not being prioritised by government; limited donor interest in funding R&I and when they do fund, R&I investments being donor driven; outdated thinking on R&I; organisational reluctance to fund or engage in R&I which might highlight the shortcomings of existing approaches; and limited interest in the region.

Reported factors that may improve alignment of investments with R&I needs include improved engagement and open dialogue with a diverse range of stakeholders, including donors and the private sector; ensuring a sufficient workforce to undertake the work; filling gaps in the regional system and in training by facilitating connections between regional / international organisations and academic institutions; and offering incentives and awards for innovation.

ARE INVESTMENTS INTO R&I ALIGNED WITH THEMATIC FOCUS AREAS REQUIRING ATTENTION?

Participants were asked whether investments into R&I match the topics requiring additional R&I attention, and views varied. Among participants reflecting on Central Asia, some indicated that investments are being made and do match in some instances, but the volume of funding is insufficient, while others indicated that investments and R&I needs are not aligned or could not definitively comment. Among participants in the South Asia consultation, only one indicated that investments into R&I are aligned with the R&I topics needing attention and the majority who addressed this issue were unable to definitively comment.

A number of reasons for misalignment of investments with topics needing attention, or insufficient funding, were reported (see Table 15 below).

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Table 15: Reported reasons for misalignment of R&I funding with topics requiring R&I attention

Reported reason	Central Asia	South Asia
Government priorities	• R&I not prioritised by governments. • Challenges of innovating in a traditional society and where traditional approaches are the norm, with government tendency to do what they are familiar with. • Political interests mean insufficient attention from governments. • Government focus on lifesaving work and immediate responses with very limited investment into mitigation or preventive measures and infrastructure.	Government focus on: • short-term issues rather than a long-term approach or consideration of recurrent issues • economic growth rather than social development • national rather than local level: because of the centralised ways of working in many South Asian countries, local R&I priorities are often overlooked and national priorities attract greater resources.
Limited donor interest in R&I	• Humanitarian funding is primarily in operational and programmatic activity and very little in R&I. • Appeals for funding from large operational agencies are more likely to be heard than calls for funding from researchers / academic institutions. • Insufficient attention from donors, potentially driven by interests and politics.	• Humanitarian donors focus on relief-centric approaches to investment in the humanitarian sector such as setting up grain banks, seeds banks, and structures like toilets. However, resilience building is a much larger field and requires diversified investments across a range of humanitarian R&I topics.

R&I investments are donor driven		• Donors who support R&I in South Asia have identified specific locations and topics that are of R&I interest to them and tend to fund these. • The region comprises developing economies and national governments can invest little into R&I, generating a dependency on bilateral sources and external donor agencies. Consequently, issues that local researchers perceive as warranting attention do not necessarily receive sufficient funding.
Organisational reluctance	• Reluctance to fund / support research at an organisational level because R&I may present new and improved ways of doing things which may highlight existing shortcomings that might be criticised, and new ways of doing things that may generate additional workload.	
Outdated thinking on what constitutes research	• Conceptualisation of research limited to monitoring and evaluation without interest in, or consideration of, broader research activities and innovation in proposals and budgets.	
Limited interest	• Limited international interest in the region: The region is not considered a 'sexy hotspot' and does not attract a large volume of grants and interest from international researchers.	• Less visible topics are ignored, even if they require R&I attention. • Reluctance to fund innovations as these may not succeed and may not generate tangible outputs.

HOW CAN ALIGNMENT BE IMPROVED?

Some participants suggested ways in which R&I investments may be better aligned with topics and priority topics requiring attention. These included:

- *Improved engagement and open dialogue:*

    ◇ between donors and key stakeholders at the national level including ministries, to clearly convey the needs and topics requiring funding

    ◇ engaging the private sector – dialogue with all parties including academia, government, private sector, and donors to identify gaps and needs and discuss the feasibility of R&I on these topics (with donors present at the table so that feasible proposals may be funded).

- *Incentives such as creating an award for innovation.*

- *Bridge national academic institutions with international / global entities ensuring a practical component and that students are able to understand research and how to apply it locally.*

- *Human resources with sufficient expertise, so that R&I can be funded and undertaken.*

SECTION 6

REGIONAL AND NATIONAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

SECTION 6: REGIONAL AND NATIONAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

KEY MESSAGES

- There were varying perspectives on the **extent to which regional and national actors are engaged with research and innovation (R&I).** In Central Asia, engagement reportedly varies by stakeholder group and by country setting. Engagement varies between countries depending on how open governments are to international collaboration or intervention; and within countries, engagement also varies by ministry / government department, with some more open to engagement than others.

- In Central Asia, it was also reported that NGOs are generally well engaged as most are national arms of international entities, but engagement of researchers is limited due to poorly-developed research in the region and the limited pool of research personnel.

- From South Asia, **the importance of regional and national actor engagement was well recognised,** but it was reported that national stakeholder engagement is generally poor and national actors are not leading in research, which instead, is often driven by international and regional players.

- A suite of **barriers to the engagement** of regional and national actors was described. For Central Asia, these include weak relationships between academic institutions and humanitarian organisations; a limited civil society sector in the region; limited data sharing due to security concerns and inability to share data across countries; and lack of government interest. From South Asia, reported barriers to engagement of regional and national actors were largely due to funding constraints; limited time, capacity, and interest; and issues with partnerships and visibility.

- **Strategies used to promote engagement** include utilising existing networks; bidirectional outreach and engagement to establish inclusive R&I partnerships; partnerships with national governments; embedding researchers within ministries and governments at all levels; the breaking down of silos for meaningful engagement with technical institutions and think tanks; and training and capacity development of national actors before crisis onset.

- **Suggested strategies and approaches that could be used to better support regional and national actor engagement** included the sharing of success stories; stakeholder mapping to identify relevant actors; and the establishment of a regional platform that supports and encourages national actor engagement.

HOW WELL ARE REGIONAL AND NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGED IN R&I?

CENTRAL ASIA

There were varying perspectives on the extent to which regional and national actors are engaged with R&I in Central Asia, with different levels of engagement reported by stakeholder group and by country setting.

GOVERNMENT: Government openness influences the extent of regional / national R&I engagement.

- Differences between countries: In some countries in Central Asia, there is reportedly less regional / national actor engagement than in others, largely attributed to reduced government openness to international collaboration or intervention. In more open settings, there is good local stakeholder engagement including in shaping the research agenda, and there is also an increasing effort to include local population input. Some national governments are well engaged with international academic organisations and humanitarian actors, and national government actors themselves also routinely reach out to international bodies and other national organisations to build partnerships.

- Differences between ministries: At the national level, there are reportedly variable levels of openness and engagement among ministries. Some government actors will engage with R&I on selected issues that are their core functions, but there are institutional barriers to change, research, and engagement on other topics. Other ministries are more open to engagement because of greater dependency on international support and input.

NGOs: National arms of international entities are well engaged: Most NGOs in Central Asia are a national arm of an international NGO (INGO) or international entity, and so, NGOs were reported to be much more exposed to innovation and attempt to implement innovations within the constraints of the hosting government and local context.

RESEARCHERS: Research in the region is not well established and researcher engagement is poor. It was reported that there are too few players and humanitarian research in the region is not established or sufficiently networked, engagement is superficial, and there are limited national-level platforms.

SOUTH ASIA

A few participants commented on the extent of engagement of regional and national actors with R&I in South Asia. The importance of such engagement was well recognised and considered essential at all stages of R&I, including during the design phase to ensure input into, and co-production of, research design, processes, and tools to ensure a sense of co-ownership and that the R&I will have sustainable impact and uptake of findings given the cross-border and transboundary nature of many issues impacting the region. This would enable an understanding of local needs and if the local context requires modification of widely-used approaches (for

example, if the topography of an area renders some technologies less useful or appropriate, such as radio wave signals that may work in desert environments, but less so in densely mountainous terrain).

However, some participants indicated that national actors are not leading in research. It was reported that international and regional actors are more involved than national actors and a multi-stakeholder approach, although recognised as important, is often not operationalised. This may result in national actors feeling excluded, disengaged, or reluctant to engage with research findings, and this generates a sense of conflict with those undertaking the research.

Some national actors are well engaged in some platforms, but not others. For example, in India, engagement is reportedly good at the national level due to national level institutes and entities that both fund research and facilitate engagement of local, state, and national actors. However, the engagement of such actors at the international level is reportedly lacking, largely attributable to poor organisation.

BARRIERS TO THE ENGAGEMENT OF REGIONAL AND NATIONAL R&I STAKEHOLDERS

CENTRAL ASIA

The reported barriers to the engagement of regional and national actors in Central Asia were largely due to *lack or limitations of partnerships and collaboration constraints.* These included:

- Weak relationships between academic institutions and humanitarian organisations, including national academic organisations and limited engagement with humanitarian research actors due to this sector being poorly developed in the region.

- Absence of a vibrant civil society and limited presence of local and national-level NGOs.

- Limited national platforms and security concerns about sharing data on any such platforms, including concerns that data might be misused in military and war operations.

- Limited data sharing: Institutes and initiatives intended to facilitate research and collaboration are constrained due to the inability of countries to freely share data.

- Lack of government interest in some areas, power structures, and the militaristic nature of the humanitarian sector in Central Asia, with the military open to innovation, but only in those areas that directly impact their core functions.

SOUTH ASIA

From South Asia, reported barriers to engagement of regional and national actors were largely due to funding constraints; limited time, capacity, and interest; and issues with partnerships and visibility.

- *Funding constraints:*

  ◇ inadequate resources for relevant regional networks of organisations to conduct research
  ◇ long timelines for money to move through the funding pipeline and become available
  ◇ limited funding and competing priorities precluding engagement of humanitarian actors with R&I and dedicated R&I funding currently tends to sit with academics or technocrats whose remit is largely R&I and not with operational actors who, therefore, have limited opportunity to engage with R&I.

- *Limited time, capacity, and interest:*

  ◇ time constraints precluding engagement of relevant regional and national actors by governments
  ◇ brain drain resulting in the availability of fewer senior personnel and rising stars locally
  ◇ different values – engagement in R&I is often not prioritised by some stakeholders, including, in some cases, as it is not a billable activity.

- *Issues with partnerships:*

  ◇ bias towards, and tendency to, engage existing partners and known entities, or those of similar political stance. In particular, governments may tend to engage those who have a close connection to government, are of similar background, or hold shared political ideologies rather than those who hold the expertise, but may 'rock the boat'
  ◇ lack of awareness among decision-makers on the benefits of a multistakeholder approach and how to operationalise it
  ◇ strained or poorly-developed partnerships due to remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic, generated an over-reliance on technology which works well, but is not a substitute for in-person interaction
  ◇ weak relationships and modes of engagement between relevant stakeholder groups. For example, it was reported that researchers often approach government actors to obtain initial consent letters from the local authorities as a requirement of funding bodies. Once this documentation is provided and their funding secured, some researchers fail to engage with the government and local authorities at all. This detracts from the research process as critical perspectives are missed, adversely impacts the utilisation and uptake of the research findings, and also means that the local government and other stakeholders are reluctant to engage with such researchers.

STRATEGIES PROMOTING GREATER REGIONAL AND NATIONAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Participants reported that a range of strategies and approaches are used to promote and facilitate the engagement of regional and national actors with R&I. These include:

- **Utilising existing networks:** For example, in South Asia, there are existing regional and sectoral platforms and intergovernmental entities (for example, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)) that promote cross-border engagement of diverse stakeholders and existing networks of grassroots organisations where local stakeholders are already organised and connected with institutional mechanisms and support already exists. In Central Asia, a regional network exists to share data on seismic and other risks, and this has worked well in promoting engagement and information exchange.

- **Breaking down silos:** Ensuring engagement not only of national and regional humanitarian actors alongside international counterparts, but also partnerships with research and technical institutions and think tanks.

- **Engagement with national governments** to communicate priorities and to secure government funding which can be used for priority work that supports national stakeholder involvement.

- **Embedding researchers within ministries and government** at all levels. This has reportedly worked exceptionally well in some settings, allowing continuous engagement, input, and ownership by local researchers who are embedded as part of the team rather than just engaged through periodic consultations.

- **Bidirectional outreach and engagement to establish inclusive R&I partnerships:** Engagement and communication is initiated and maintained by stakeholders at all levels (national, regional, and international) and not just one type of actor reaching out to another to build partnerships.

- **Use of universities, research institutes, or NGOs as intermediaries** between community groups and government to bridge communication gaps and provide feedback (for example, if governments implement schemes and programmes during a crisis, feedback loops from communities to government are channeled through NGOs). This has reportedly worked well in some crisis settings where trusted groups are able to obtain feedback from communities and package it in such a way that it is actionable by, and useful to, governments.

- **Training and building capacity:** Delivering training on new tools, techniques, or technologies and ensuring that the timing is such that people can use and become familiar with the new tools in an exercise format before having to apply them in a real-life operational context. Also, having trainers and adopting a 'train-the-trainer' model helps ensure that capacity is built and retained locally without the need for external stakeholders to come from elsewhere to deliver training.

Several *strategies and approaches that could be used* to better support regional and national actor engagement were suggested, including:

- **Sharing examples of success stories:** For example, sharing details of instances where multi-stakeholder engagement has worked, how it was implemented, and the value-add.

- **Mapping** of multiple stakeholders across the humanitarian landscape.

- **The establishment of an impartial regional platform** that has the support of national governments is well organised and can serve as a linkage point. Learning from past efforts to establish such a platform is important and adopting a new model is required.
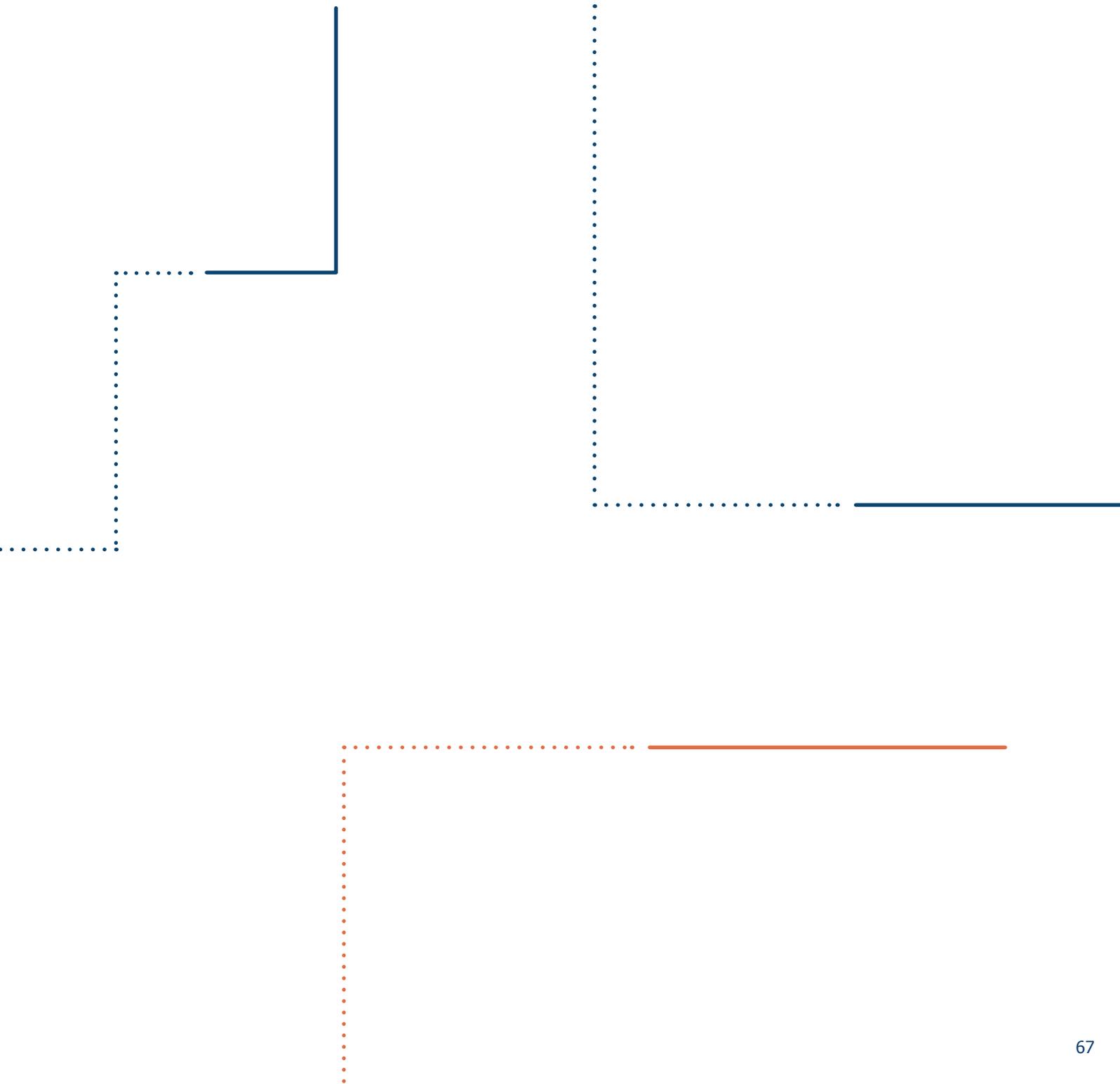
SECTION 7

PRIORITY-SETTING AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

SECTION 7: PRIORITY-SETTING AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

KEY MESSAGES

Participants were asked to reflect on processes through which research and innovation (R&I) priorities are identified in their own organisations and the types of evidence taken into account.

A range of **approaches through which organisations identify their R&I focus areas** was reported. These include through engagement with governments, consideration of the scale and frequency of events, the extent of alignment with organisational strategies and existing work through specific organsiational processes or teams, consideration of alignment with government priorities, alignment with donor priorities, and the ability of the organisation to deliver, including the availability of sufficient technical capacity, amongst other considerations.

Types of evidence taken into account when setting priorities include existing data on needs, evidence and input from stakeholder consultations, foresight analysis, vulnerability and risk assessments, and the organisation's own knowledge and practical experience.

Stakeholders reportedly involved in priority setting in Central Asia included national government, community, and regional INGOs, while in South Asia, stakeholder groups involved included local and national actors, UN and NGO country-level staff, communities, and donors.

In Central Asia, some participants reported that communities and national NGOs are not involved in decision-making. For South Asia, populations affected by crisis, subnational actors, and grassroots organisations were reported as having been **left out of the decision-making process** on determining R&I needs and priorities.

FACTORS AND APPROACHES USED TO DETERMINE R&I FOCUS AREAS

Participants were asked to reflect on processes through which R&I priorities are identified in their own organisations, and the types of evidence taken into account. Some reported that there is no formal process within their institution; while another reported that there is no visible prioritisation process at the national level, and instead, funding is dependent on political will. Others described a range of considerations and approaches, including:

- **Through engagement and collaboration with national government actors:** Notably, this was also described by some participants as being problematic because some governments have limited appetite for innovation. From Central Asia, there were concerns that some national government actors may have too much influence in priority setting due to the lack of a strong academic sector and limited national NGO presence in the region, so such perspectives are not accounted for.

- **Based on scale and frequency of natural hazard events.**

- Based on **alignment with organisational goals, strategy, existing work,** and experience with conducting similar research.

- Based on own knowledge and **organisational experience** of R&I needs.

- Based on **priorities of international / foreign universities and collaborators** who come with their own existing funding and seek collaboration.

- Based on **alignment with national government priorities** and government demand / need for the work.

- Based on **donor interests** and priorities, and the focus of funding calls.

- Based on **alignment with global research priorities** rather than national- or ground-level priorities.

- Based on whether the work **meets a gap or need**, including assessment of what is most required by populations affected by disasters; hazard and vulnerability assessments; and other evidence generated from communities.

- Based on whether the organisation has the **technical capacity** to deliver in a particular area.

- Based on **consultations**, including through meetings to consider findings of consultative workshops with local-level actors and other stakeholders about future risk and focus areas.

- Based on **country level of development** with less developed countries given greater priority than more developed settings.

Considering processes by organisation type, factors reported as influencing priority setting in some academic and research entities included donor interests and the focus of donor calls for funding, alignment with the organisation's strategy, goals, existing portfolio of work or existing research agenda, and assessment of the organisation's capacity to deliver.

Among some NGOs, priority setting reportedly includes engagement with government and researchers, consideration of their own organisational strategies, and the organisation's own risk and needs assessments.

WHAT EVIDENCE IS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT?

Some participants described the types of evidence that their organisation takes into account when determining R&I priorities. These included:

Existing data and evidence regarding needs:
  ◊ existing data that demonstrate where needs are greatest
  ◊ evidence about priority issues gathered from own research and from engagement with organisations who work closely with populations affected by crisis and can, therefore, convey their perspectives
  ◊ evidence collected from field visits
  ◊ qualitative and quantitative data including community oral narratives and visual narratives
  ◊ evidence of proven effectiveness, as identified through an established research process in the form of lifecycle approach (assessments, gap analysis, feedback, and evaluation)
  ◊ beliefs and perceptions of needs rather than evidence and data.

Consultations and stakeholder input:
  ◊ including from communities, service providers, and local actors delivering humanitarian services or working in the same area as the research focus
  ◊ consultations with stakeholders at local and national levels.

Organisational assessment:
  ◊ foresight analysis and vulnerability and risk assessments to determine likely future risks, with inputs including data collected through field visits and geospatial information
  ◊ based on own knowledge and practical experience.

WHO IS INVOLVED IN DETERMINING PRIORITIES?

A number of stakeholder groups were reported as being involved in determining priorities, including through processes that support multi-stakeholder engagement and input, while others were said to be noticeably absent from the decision-making table (see Table 16 below). As participants were reflecting on processes and engagement across a range of different organisation types, the same stakeholder group could be reported as being present by some participants, but reported as being absent from the priority-setting table by others. For example, the perception of community engagement differed, with populations affected by crisis reported by different participants as being both engaged, but also insufficiently represented in priority-setting processes.

> **Several groups were reported as not having a say in priority-setting processes, and in particular, it was reported that consultations tend to focus on perspectives of those involved with service delivery and with suppliers of R&I and much less with those who will benefit from the application of R&I.**

It was also reported that in South Asia, the subnational focus is also missing, as there are incorrect assumptions that national policy will always trickle down to the subnational level and that local policy cannot be scaled up. The subnational actors, who could serve as the link and drive change in both directions, are reportedly often overlooked.

Table 16: Stakeholder groups reported as being involved with the priority-setting process

Who is involved in determining priorities?	Who is missing from the priority-setting table?
Central Asia • National government • Communities • Regional INGOs **South Asia** • Local and national actors • UN and NGO country-level staff • Communities • Donors	**Central Asia** • Communities • National NGOs **South Asia** • Representatives of populations affected by crisis, including refugee populations and host communities • Grassroots organisations • Subnational actors

RESPONSIVENESS OF THE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I) SYSTEM TO EMERGING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

SECTION 8: RESPONSIVENESS OF THE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&I) SYSTEM TO EMERGING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

KEY MESSAGES

- **Factors that reportedly support the timely responsiveness of R&I** to emerging challenges include the availability of funding at the time of an event; capacity and sufficient human resources to undertake R&I; long project cycles that enable a comprehensive approach; use of existing technologies; and political will and good governance. A suite of issues related to partnerships was also reported as supporting timely responsiveness, including ensuring the engagement of all relevant actors; engaging the private sector; and encouraging connections with existing networks.

- **Factors that reportedly impede timely responsiveness** include funding issues such as lack of, or insufficient, funding and short funding cycles; practical and logistical constraints, including lengthy processes to access available funding or obtain approvals to conduct research; limited data availability or access; limited internet connectivity and access to required technologies; and difficulties accessing humanitarian crisis settings. Other factors include the geopolitical context impacting engagement and data-sharing practices; issues with R&I planning and priority setting including mismatch between government, community and humanitarian actor priorities; lack of awareness about research opportunities; failure to adopt an anticipatory approach to emerging risks; and political factors such as limited capacity of some governments to consider R&I priorities, political will to fund research, and regional geopolitical instability.

Participants were asked to consider factors that may support and those that may impede the timely responsiveness of the R&I system to emerging humanitarian issues.[i]

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i.   Notably, the question stem provided some examples in order to clearly illustrate what was meant by the question. *Many factors may impact the ability of the research and innovation sector to respond to priorities as they emerge (for example, these may include national capacity, funding availability, and short project cycles etc.). What factors support and what factors impede timely responsiveness to emerging priorities in the region?*

FACTORS THAT SUPPORT TIMELY R&I RESPONSIVENESS TO NEW ISSUES

A number of factors that support the timely responsiveness of the R&I system to emerging issues were reported. These included:

- Availability of **funding** to undertake R&I at the time of a crisis event.

- **Capacity** and sufficient human resources available to undertake the work.

- **Need for R&I** including due to the occurrence of new natural hazards: For example, it was reported that in Central Asia, glacier degradation in one Central Asia setting triggered increased commitment to climate change research which previously was not the focus of attention.

- Appropriate **priority setting**.

- **Long project cycles** that allow a range of issues to be addressed across the full course of a crisis, including into the recovery phase with longer-term needs and issues straddling the humanitarian-development nexus.

- **Partnerships:**

  ◇ in Central Asia, it was reported that the presence of the international community and international organisations can facilitate and support R&I responsiveness

  ◇ in South Asia, it was reported that timely R&I is enabled through the engagement of all relevant entities, including for example, ensuring both government and community perspectives in project design, through connecting with existing networks and groups at national and regional levels, and through promoting the connection of humanitarian actors with academics and any existing networks of universities; and through engagement of the private sector. As one such example, it was reported that researchers are embedded within a disaster risk reduction (DRR) unit of a private sector organisation and advise about the types of R&I that are required and that the private sector also provides incentives and awards for startups to develop innovations.

- **Political will and policymaker support** for R&I, including a willingness to engage with work that may be critical of some aspects of a response, but inform useful lessons learned.

- **Good governance** and an enabling environment and buy-in from all relevant stakeholder groups including donors, government, R&I producers, and end-users with a commitment to undertake and support the R&I that is required and not just the work which is comfortable, safe, and will not disturb the status quo.

- **Use of existing technologies** that are already available on the open market and can be used and scaled.

FACTORS THAT IMPEDE TIMELY R&I RESPONSIVENESS TO NEW ISSUES

Reported factors that may *impede timely responsiveness* to emerging R&I needs include:

Funding issues:

- Lack of funding.

- Short project and funding cycles that do not allow sufficient time to conduct meaningful R&I.

Practical and logistical issues:

- Lengthy and bureaucratic processes at the national level to access available funds.

- Corruption and the absence of good governance.

- Time required to obtain approvals to conduct research, such that by the time the approval is granted, the issue is no longer a priority.

- Limited access to technology and connectivity.

- Limited availability of data and issues of access to data, including limited knowledge of, and coordination by, the data custodian.

- Transport and limited physical access, including due to political instability disrupting access to sites of humanitarian crises.

Impact of geopolitical context:

- From Central Asia, it was reported that surrounding geopolitical instability due to the crises in Afghanistan and Russia-Ukraine have led to considerable disruption in humanitarian R&I activities and disrupted joint assessments and sharing of data. The geopolitical context is also impacting engagement between academic and humanitarian actors.

Issues with appropriate or timely planning and priority setting:

- **Lack of awareness** among operational practitioners about the need and opportunities for research during humanitarian crises, including the use and potential application of the large volumes of data that are routinely collected during operational activities.

- **Failure to adopt an anticipatory approach**, including lack of consideration of emerging risk when conducting development research and failure to adequately address any existing risk.

- **Mismatch between government priorities and those of communities or humanitarian actors**. For example, from South Asia, there were reports of poor alignment of national agendas and political interests with actual research needs, with sudden policy shifts regarding humanitarian issues creating a barrier to responsiveness.

- **Limited capacity for defining R&I priorities**. In Central Asia, it was reported that an atmosphere of uncertainty and vulnerability exists in many states as they try to define their own post-Soviet identities and are, therefore, in a weak position to set humanitarian R&I priorities. This is compounded by the instability surrounding the region and fear of neighbouring larger powers meaning that defining R&I priorities has reportedly been relegated to the periphery.

SECTION 9

DONORS AND DECISION-MAKING

SECTION 9: DONORS AND DECISION-MAKING

KEY MESSAGES

Reported **barriers to investment in research and innovation (R&I)** were largely due to funding constraints. **Enablers of investment** include collaboration between donors including co-financing mechanisms. It was reported that there are **donor coordination mechanisms** of varying effectiveness in both Central and South Asia, but duplication can still occur.

Two participants (with one focused on each of South and Central Asia) identified as having a donor / funding function and answered this module of questions. These participants were asked to consider barriers and enablers to investing in R&I and to reflect on coordination approaches between donors and ways of working.

The main reported **barriers to investment in R&I** were funding constraints. These include:

- Funding mechanisms that do not support research.

- Insufficient funding: Although it was recognised that research will generate high return on investment in the long term, there is a limited amount of funding available overall and the priority must be towards the immediate humanitarian response rather than research. It was reported that the need to prioritise the immediate response also makes it preferable to support and utilise existing R&I work and modify it to current requirements rather than support new initiatives from scratch.

Enablers to investment in R&I include collaboration and co-financing with other donors so that a large body of work can be conducted and linked to programmatic activity and action research; and a single donor funding multiple organisations, so that a diverse array of expertise can be engaged. Notably, it was reported that, in some instances, where multiple parties are funded undertake designated components of a large body of work, these teams still work on their own with limited integration and collaboration.

Coordination among donors

For Central Asia, it was reported that there are platforms engaging multiple organisation types for sharing of information, but most information sharing happens during a disaster, with limited interaction outside of that period. Coordination among donors who invest in the region is reportedly poor and duplication occurs, resulting in some issues and topics being underfunded.

It was reported that once donors have committed to a project, it becomes very difficult to shift focus, even if there is duplication.

For South Asia, it was reported that donors supporting R&I in the region do collaborate and share information about what they are funding and information relevant to project requirements and success including local partner capacity and strengths, and any particular technological or other requirements specific to the setting. Such informal discussions, including engagement to consider co-financing or other ways to finance R&I so that all needs are met, can **enable investment** and are also an avenue through which duplication of funding can be minimised. Different funding cycles between different donors can generate **barriers to coordination** and can also result in disruptions to funding if planning has been insufficient.

It was reported that there are donor coordination mechanisms of varying effectiveness in both Central and South Asia, but duplication can still occur.

SECTION 10

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

SECTION 10: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This consultation has explored the perspectives of a range of stakeholders working in, and on, South and Central Asia (SCA) regarding how the research and innovation (R&I) system is structured and functions, and explored participant perspectives on R&I topics requiring additional attention.

Overall, the findings from Central Asia suggest that the current R&I ecosystem remains a remnant of the past, shaped and heavily influenced by the history of the region, its geopolitical context, and relations between countries. Additionally, contemporary events in neighbouring Russia and Afghanistan have also had profound impacts on the way the R&I system in Central Asia functions. The R&I infrastructure is reportedly poorly developed. The research workforce is very limited and research training opportunities within the region are scant. Innovation is also lacking and there is limited access to modern technologies, constrained by lack of funding, lack of a sufficiently skilled workforce to implement and operate such technologies, and lack of political will to adopt innovations.

The system is reportedly fragmented both within, and between, countries with communication and collaboration being reportedly poor. Within countries, there are weak relationships between academic and humanitarian operational organisations, and security concerns often hinder data sharing between R&I stakeholders. Between countries, there is also a fragmented approach, with separate infrastructures and separate funding since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Consequently, although the region is subject to numerous transborder hazards, collaboration between countries is poor and there are insufficient regional-level platforms, hazards assessments, and warning systems. Additionally, a culture of limited transparency reportedly precludes data access and sharing, and open discussion of R&I needs.

It was also reported that politics and political interests have a profound impact on the R&I system in Central Asia. At the national level, there are variable levels of appetite for R&I by governments, with some of the more traditional state actors resistant to change, whereas others are more open to collaboration and engagement. Governments also have considerable influence on the priority-setting agenda, and this perspective is reportedly not sufficiently balanced by views of civil society, which is said to be poor across the region. There is a weak academic and research infrastructure and a paucity of true local and national-level NGOs. R&I is believed to not be prioritised by donors and the region is also not a major area of interest or focus of the international research community.

Similarly, the findings from South Asia highlight how the R&I ecosystem in the region is still in its nascent stage and is heavily influenced by the priorities of national governments. The region is characterised by heavy relief-centric funding which is woefully inadequate to fund R&I requirements. The evolution of the R&I ecosystem in the region is dictated by the region's enhanced vulnerability to multiple natural hazards. More recently, the region has also experienced

a number of human-made crises including political instability in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover, the recent economic crises in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh.

The R&I ecosystem in South Asia is also marred marred by structural issues related to partnerships and collaboration, governance, time, aand relevance that impede the uptake and utilisation of R&I in the region. For instance, there is reportedly a disconnect between researchers and policymakers, wherein some policymakers have little to no sense of co-creation or co-ownership of R&I outputs. Similarly, a siloed approach to humanitarian response and research means that there is little collaboration among researchers and operational actors. Most countries of the region have to cope with the challenges of poor governance which often translates into non-implementation of research findings. Furthermore, there are few, if any, R&I institutional arrangements or legal frameworks in the region due to a lack of trust between R&I partners and stakeholders. Most importantly, humanitarian stakeholders lack the risk appetite to fund and support R&I initiatives because donors want tangible outputs and results.

In South Asia, the barriers to engagement of regional and national actors with R&I were largely due to funding constraints; limited time, capacity, and interest; and issues with partnerships and visibility. While the importance of regional and national actor engagement was well recognised, it was reported that national stakeholder engagement is generally poor and national actors are not leading in research, which instead is often (but not always) driven by international and regional players.

Notwithstanding these limitations and systems challenges, from both South and Central Asia, there were numerous examples of initiatives that work and have saved lives. These include hazard warning systems for some natural hazards such as avalanches, flooding, and earthquakes which have informed crisis-management plans, preparedness, and early action. The formation of national disaster management authorities across South Asian countries represents major progress in disaster risk management and aligns with the goals of the Sendai Framework for resilience. Additionally, regional collaborations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SAARND) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) underscore a joint commitment to tackle climate change and disaster risks for the collective safety and well-being of the region. These efforts showcase a commitment to using technology and enhanced governmental collaboration to bolster resilience against natural hazards.

There are also many systemic strengths. For instance, among the most significant findings from South Asia, there were reports of coordination among R&I funders in South Asia, which is influenced by their ability to share information among themselves on what their funding priorities are, local partner strengths, and other requirements of success. It was reported that this level of coordination among donors along with the co-financing of projects has enabled greater investment in the R&I sector in South Asia. This synergy creates a more robust financial infrastructure, enabling larger-scale and more impactful R&I projects to be undertaken.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings from this consultation, the following recommendations are proposed:

Funding

The findings of this consultation underscore the need for enhanced R&I funding to tackle national and regional humanitarian challenges and drive innovation. Across both South Asia and Central Asia, there is an urgent need for increased investment into humanitarian R&I, and this needs to include flexible funding mechanisms to support contextualisation and creativity. Donors need to ensure transparent decision-making to ensure fair distribution of funds across diverse settings and promote accountability and equity. Additionally, promoting co-financing methods among donors could amplify financial resources available for larger-scale R&I projects. Broad and effective dissemination of funding calls to local R&I stakeholders is also recommended to raise awareness and encourage broader participation. To shift the power and reduce the reliance on external funding and external R&I actors, governments in the region must embed R&I funding for disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation within their national budgets to provide consistent support for R&I and developing effective response strategies.

Collaboration and coordination

Promoting R&I relies heavily on collaboration and coordination. Thus, it is crucial to establish formal platforms that facilitate these elements, including among donors. Encouraging partnerships at multiple levels and between a range of stakeholder groups is essential, including collaborations between academic and operational stakeholders and those operating at national, regional, and international levels. Considering the cross-border nature of many hazards that require attention, it is also imperative to establish and support transboundary partnerships. Additionally, fostering increased collaboration among donors in emerging areas like loss and damage research can significantly enhance the regions approach to addressing problems.

Building strong linkages, improving collaboration, and breaking down silos between stakeholder groups and between countries is required to help improve the efficiency and usefulness of the R&I system and improve the production, utilisation, and uptake of R&I to inform action. Periodic regional roundtables that convene diverse stakeholders, including representatives of government bodies, donors, humanitarian operational agencies, and academics may serve as a platform for culturally-sensitive dialogue to improve understanding of the role of R&I in the region.

Locally-relevant and actionable R&I

It is crucial for R&I efforts to be closely connected to the cultural, economic, and environmental realities of each specific area. This ensures that initiatives effectively tackle the most pressing challenges. Additionally, it is essential that R&I produces accessible outputs that are both readily available and presented in a succinct format that is understandable for policymakers, practitioners, and local communities. These should present actionable solutions that may bring about change while being cost effective, easy to implement, and sufficiently scalable to drive actual improvements.

Identifying R&I priority areas for the region

Participants in this study reported a wide range of topics that they believe warrant additional dedicated R&I attention. The R&I topics identified for additional attention are based on participant insights from the consultation, serving as examples rather than a definitive or ranked list. Further work is required to build on this initial exercise and gauge the views of a much larger group of stakeholders, including representation from a diverse range of geographic, sectoral and organisational settings, and disciplinary backgrounds to gather a wide range of perspectives and ensure inclusivity. Amongst others, these stakeholders may include community representatives, academics, government entities, NGOs, and private sector and industry representatives. The goal is to encourage a dialogue that fosters diverse inputs – priority topics should be identified through a formal regional priority-setting exercise to develop a consensus list of topics and an agreed regional R&I agenda. Notably, whilst there are some similarities between South Asia and Central Asia, there are also profound differences, including in the types of issues requiring additional attention. As such, any R&I priority-setting exercise for SCA should also include consideration of priorities and topics specific to either subregion.

It is also crucial to enhance regional capacity in the R&I priority-setting process itself, so that this exercise can be periodically repeated, led by actors in the region, and progress and R&I impact monitored. This may require initiatives or workshops to improve understanding and confidence in the implementation of formal R&I prioritisation processes.

Humanitarian R&I ecosystem: Strengthening institutions and the workforce

To improve the R&I ecosystem, it is crucial to institutionalise scientific approaches, methods, and practices. This involves restructuring governance systems to create structures that support R&I. The governance systems should promote a culture of R&I by integrating them into decision-making processes.

It is important to allocate financial resources to nurture environments that are conducive to R&I. Furthermore, it is essential to establish policies and procedures that govern R&I activities while ensuring alignment with principles and standards. Regular evaluation cycles along with feedback mechanisms can facilitate improvement in this regard.

Building a strong R&I workforce and strengthening institutions is integral to ensuring development of a sustainable and locally-led R&I system. Developing a strong regional workforce and building capacity at the individual level requires support (including technical and financial support) to institutions to develop programmes and systems that train the next generation of R&I personnel. This may be achieved through the development of a regional R&I training programme that can be jointly implemented by a range of partners from within, and outside, the region, with a view to a full transfer of programme leadership and delivery to regional institutions. Additionally, mechanisms should be implemented to identify, develop, and retain skilled R&I personnel.

Humanitarian R&I infrastructures

The findings of this consultation suggest that focused efforts and funding are required to improve and modernise the humanitarian R&I infrastructure, in particular, in Central Asia where current systems are reportedly a remnant of the Soviet-era past. In order to be relevant and meet contemporary needs, the R&I architecture in Central Asia needs to be updated. Recognising that this requires political will, funding, and a cultural shift, there is a need to modernise the system, including generating investment streams into new technologies with associated dedicated funding to build capacity and a workforce capable of using such technologies and approaches.

Transboundary early warning systems (EWSs)

From both South and Central Asia, there were clear expressions of the need for transboundary systems to address transboundary hazards and risks. Funding is required for infrastructure support and capacity building to establish a comprehensive regional EWS to conduct and coordinate hazard, vulnerability, and risk assessments that capture transboundary and cross-border issues and ensure the widespread dissemination of any warnings issued. This EWS may initially be housed within one of the national disaster management authorities or within one of the regions universities. Uniform, standardised guidelines should also be developed, so that all systems are speaking the same language and to facilitate the interpretation of findings by lay personnel, governments, and other non-research actors.

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ABOUT ELRHA

We are Elrha. A global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators, and the private sector to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world.

Through our globally recognised programmes, we have supported more than 200 world-class research studies and innovation projects, championing new ideas and different approaches to evidence what works in humanitarian response.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL PRIORITISATION EXERCISE (GPE)

The GPE for humanitarian research and innovation aims to improve outcomes for people affected by crisis by amplifying the impact of investments in research and innovation through understanding the priorities at all levels. It will provide an overview of the progress and performance of the humanitarian research and innovation ecosystem with a clear set of priorities for research and innovation funding and attention.

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