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Humanitarian Assistance Strategy

Iceland's International Development Cooperation

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1. Preface

Iceland's humanitarian assistance is an important part of meeting international commitments to combat poverty and promote global peace. The values of Icelandic society pave the way: respect for democracy, human rights, diversity, tolerance, justice, and solidarity.

Humanitarian assistance is provided in situations of conflict, natural disasters or other disasters which are described as emergencies by international organisations and competent authorities. It is based solely on humanitarian considerations; to assist those in distress wherever needed.

This strategy aims to further define Iceland's humanitarian work, the guidelines on which it is based, its priorities and working methods. The strategy is based on Iceland's international development cooperation policy for 2019-2023¹ which was approved by Althingi in 2019 and is intended to guide the implementation of the policy during its period of validity.

This strategy covers all contributions that are considered humanitarian assistance by the Icelandic government. Action plans, with performance indicators, will be presented every two years to carry out the strategy. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs oversees the implementation of the Icelandic government's humanitarian assistance.

¹Parliamentary resolution No 26/149 on Iceland's policy for international development cooperation for 2019-2023. See: <https://www.althingi.is/altext/149/s/1424.html>

2. Guiding principles

Guiding principles of Iceland's humanitarian assistance

Iceland's humanitarian assistance complies with international law and conventions, as well as building on principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. The emphasis is on rapid response, predictable and flexible funding, efficiency, synergy and transparency.

Respect for human life and human rights is the driving force behind humanitarian assistance. Its aim is to save lives, reduce suffering, protect civilians and their rights, ensure access to basic necessities, and facilitate people's return to a normal way of life.

Iceland's contributions are based on the fundamental view that humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence are the best ways to protect ordinary citizens and ensure their access to assistance. At the same time, special emphasis is placed on vulnerable groups, gender equality, the rights of children, and the fight against all forms of discrimination.

Iceland's humanitarian work takes account of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and is based on international human rights conventions and agreements, international humanitarian law² and international criteria for identifying best practices³.

The following criteria are used as a basis:

Fundamental principles of humanity⁴ based on the view that the purpose of humanitarian assistance is to protect life and health, and to ensure respect for human beings. The work is thus based on neutrality and defined need without discrimination and is independent of political, economic, and security-related emphases and goals.

Predictability and efficiency guaranteed by framework agreements with Iceland's main institutions of emphasis. Agreements are drawn up for several years at a time, contributions are defined, and a time frame is set for payments.

Flexible funding where unearmarked core contributions to Iceland's institutions of emphasis facilitate their prioritisation at any given time and is in line with recognised practices.

²The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. See: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/vwTreaties1949.xsp>

³Commitments from the World Humanitarian Summit. See: <https://agendaforhumanity.org/core-commitments.html>

⁴Humanitarian Principles: https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM_HumPrinciple_English.pdf

Synergy that involves bridging the gap between humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peace activities. The coordination of policy areas ranges from policy formulation to coordination of actions in the field.

The above criteria also contribute to a **rapid response** from Iceland's partners, which is extremely important in the event of an emergency.

3. Emphases

3.1 Issues of emphasis

The issues Iceland emphasises in the field of humanitarian assistance are food safety, access to water, health care and social protection. Human rights, gender equality and the environment are defined as specific and cross-cutting horizontal issues. They are especially important in humanitarian assistance where people are vulnerable and in need of protection. Children and young people are at particular risk.

Humanitarian assistance projects aim to reach disadvantaged groups. In conflict zones special emphasis is placed on gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and the rights of women and girls. Support for the fight against gender-based and sexual violence and discrimination, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, also plays a vital role. The Gender Equality Policy⁵ serves as a guide on gender equality issues.

Iceland's contribution is also intended to promote synergy between humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peace activities.⁶ The scope, duration and cost of humanitarian assistance has increased in recent years due to prolonged emergencies in certain parts of the world that are in most cases due to conflict and war. In many cases, it is necessary to bring development activities into such areas in addition to traditional humanitarian assistance, especially in the case of complex and protracted emergencies. The underlying vision is that humanitarian actions promote development and that development, in turn, promotes peace and prosperity.

3.2 Focus areas

By prioritising and defining focus areas, the aim is to increase the effectiveness and impact of Iceland's support, and to ensure that the support is timely, effective and lifesaving. As part of this approach, low-income countries in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa have been defined as focus areas for humanitarian assistance on behalf of Iceland. When natural disasters occur, and in other special emergencies, decisions may be made to provide support to other countries and regions.

Iceland's policy on international development cooperation defines partner countries on the one hand and countries of emphasis on the other. Support for these countries is primarily in the form of bilateral and multilateral development cooperation, with the exception of aid to Palestine, where contributions are primarily defined as humanitarian aid.

3.3 Institutions of emphasis

The United Nations' leadership role in responding quickly to emergencies and coordinating action on the ground is unequivocal. Iceland therefore emphasises support and cooperation with the UN Institutions that play a key role in

⁵Gender Equality Policy Iceland's International Development Cooperation

⁶ DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus: <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5019>

humanitarian assistance. This is centred on cooperation with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Emergency Fund (CERF), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations World Food Program (WFP).

OCHA	CERF	UNHCR	WFP
<p>Role: Global coordination of humanitarian assistance. Policy development and needs assessment</p>	<p>Role: To ensure a rapid response, to support underfunded and forgotten emergency areas</p>	<p>Role: To provide protection, shelter, livelihood, and basic services. Safeguards the rights and welfare of refugees</p>	<p>Role: The largest UN organisation working on food safety. Around 80% of WFP projects are emergency and humanitarian assistance</p>
			

3.3.1 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

OCHA plays a key role in the coordination of humanitarian assistance and oversees policymaking and coordination in the field. OCHA's coordinating role promotes targeted action, cost-effective practices, and humanitarian assistance to the most disadvantaged and the hard-to-reach. Iceland supports OCHA through annual core contributions.

OCHA operates Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs), which enable donors to join large, unearmarked basket funds for humanitarian projects in specific countries. The funds are flexible, have a small organisational structure and bring the aid closer to the beneficiaries. Iceland provides annual funding to a few such funds and responds to emergency appeals with special contributions. Foreign and domestic civil society organisations are among those who can apply to the funds.

OCHA also maintains a special United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) response list. The Icelandic government, in collaboration with Slysavarnafélagið Landsbjörg (Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue (ICE-SAR)), is a member of UNDAC. ICE-SAR also manages the Icelandic International Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) unit, which is part of OCHA's International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG).

3.3.2 United Nations Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF)

CERF is situated within OCHA. The fund is intended to promote a rapid response and support to underfunded and neglected emergency areas. CERF provides a safety net for United Nations agencies, with the aim of providing easy and rapid access to funding to respond to emergencies. Funding from CERF is always provided on the basis of urgent need.

Iceland supports CERF with core contributions and uses the fund to respond to international emergency appeals. Through its support to the fund, Iceland is able to support United Nations agencies and countries that are not considered institutions of emphasis or focus areas.

3.3.3 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

UNHCR protects the rights and well-being of refugees, displaced persons, the stateless, asylum seekers and returnees. The role of the Office is to provide protection, shelter, livelihoods and basic services to these groups, and the United Nations Convention on the Status⁷ of Refugees forms the basis of its work. At the same time, the UNHCR leads and coordinates the response of United Nations agencies in this field.

Iceland's support for the UNHCR is based on international commitments that Iceland has accepted on the status and rights of refugees.⁸The UNHCR receives core contributions from Iceland, but funding is also provided as applicable in response to individual emergency appeals.

The UNHCR is also Iceland's main partner when receiving quota refugees into the country, which is overseen by the Ministry of Social Affairs. This work takes into account Iceland's points of emphasis in its cooperation with the UNHCR, and active consultations take place between ministries.

3.3.4 World Food Programme (WFP)

The WFP is the largest United Nations organisation in the field of food aid and food security. About 80% of all WFP projects are emergency and humanitarian assistance and 20% are classified as development cooperation. Due to its diverse projects and global presence, the WFP is well placed to respond to both emergency appeals and provide long-term development assistance.

Iceland cooperates with the WFP both in the field of humanitarian assistance and development cooperation. Core contributions are made to the organisation and individual emergency appeals are also responded to. When it comes to development cooperation, Iceland's emphasis is mainly on working with bilateral partner countries, e.g., on financing projects related to WFP school meals.

3.4 Other institutions and modes of cooperation

In addition to institutions of emphasis in the field of humanitarian assistance, Iceland supports the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), both of which are institutions of emphasis in Iceland's international development cooperation. These organisations are often looked to when they are involved in humanitarian projects, not least in the case of large emergency appeals.

For years, Iceland has supported the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) through both core contributions and seconded experts. The Agency works on behalf of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The Agency runs schools and health services and provides a variety of services to Palestinian refugees, both inside and outside refugee camps. In addition, UNRWA provides humanitarian and emergency assistance, including in Syria and Gaza.

Iceland also supports the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), an independent and impartial humanitarian organisation based in Geneva. The ICRC

⁷UN Refugee Convention. See: <https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>

⁸Global Compact on Refugees. See: <https://www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>

focuses on the legal protection and assistance of victims of armed conflict on the basis of humanitarian law and promotes the dissemination and respect of the Geneva Conventions and humanitarian law⁹, which are the cornerstone of humanitarian aid.

Civil society organisations also play an important role in emergency and humanitarian assistance. In many cases, they are advocates for marginalised groups and support for them is thus in the interest of democracy. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs accepts applications for grants to Icelandic civil society organisations for humanitarian assistance annually in accordance with special procedures.¹⁰

Iceland has a Standby Partnership arrangement in place with several UN agencies engaged in humanitarian action on seconding experts from Iceland for temporary work in the field, with deployments ranging from three months up to one year. The number of deployments and types of assignments, as well as their location, depend on the needs of the partner institutions and Iceland's priorities. The selection of the seconded experts is administered by the relevant institutions.

⁹ International Humanitarian Law: https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/what_is_ihl.pdf

¹⁰Cooperation with Icelandic civil society organisations. See: www.utn.is/felagasamtok

4. Working practices

4.1 Emphasis on international cooperation

Active participation in international cooperation on humanitarian issues plays a role in ensuring follow-up on humanitarian contributions. In this way, Iceland can influence the working methods of partners and monitor trends in the policy area. Examples include the following:

- Icelandic humanitarian assistance is based on the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative. Since 2012, Iceland has been a member of this network, which creates a common forum for donor countries to improve practices in humanitarian actions.
- Iceland is a member of the OCHA Donor Support Group (ODSG). The group monitors the work carried out by OCHA, and advises on policy, management, and budgets. Iceland is also a member of the OCHA Pooled Fund Working Group.
- Iceland is a member of the Executive Committee of UNHCR. The Committee acts in an advisory capacity and evaluates UNHCR's programmes and approves the agency's budget.
- Iceland also attends WFP Executive Board meetings where it actively cooperates with the other Nordic countries.

4.2 Cooperation and integration

Iceland's policy for international development cooperation emphasises the strengthening of the link between humanitarian assistance and Iceland's development cooperation, and this is reflected in the policy objectives for the respective policy areas. The aim is also to increase coordination and overlap between the roles of staff within the various departments of the ministry, embassies, and permanent missions. Cooperation and consultation with other ministries and civil society organisations is also important.

4.3 Accountability, monitoring and performance

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs oversees humanitarian contributions and is responsible for ensuring that they are in accordance with the goals and emphases of Iceland in this policy area. The activities are accounted for in the Minister's annual report to Althingi.

Monitoring, control, and evaluation are important aspects of all humanitarian assistance. Contributions to humanitarian assistance are in accordance with internationally recognised practices and Iceland's support is primarily in the form of unearmarked core contributions to United Nations organisations. The organisations are monitored by the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN)¹¹ that carries out independent audits of their performance. Reports by MOPAN as well as reports and audits of individual

¹¹ Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN). See: <http://www.mopanonline.org/>

projects and institutions are reviewed and evaluated at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Iceland also participates in peer reviews by OECD-DAC.

Active participation in international consultations is also an important part of follow-up. Iceland participates in monitoring visits organised by partner institutions and visits the institutions themselves for information gathering and to participate in consultations. Independent monitoring visits by representatives of Iceland can on the other hand be difficult due to the situation on the ground, especially due to war and conflict.

Monitoring of humanitarian assistance contributions is part of holistic performance management in Iceland's international development cooperation. The performance management aims to monitor performance and analyse the added value of Iceland's contribution¹². Information on performance should also be made available to the legislature and the public each year in order to increase transparency and efficiency, and to promote increased knowledge of the policy area.

Iceland disseminates information on its humanitarian contributions to international databases, in particular those of OECD-DAC and the Financial Tracking Service of OCHA.¹³ Information is also shared with the public and the media through various channels.

Evaluations are a critical tool for learning, informed decision making and enhanced accountability in development cooperation. Iceland follows its evaluation policy and applies OECD-DAC principles and standards for evaluation of its development cooperation. All humanitarian assistance efforts will be subject to evaluations and reflected in Iceland's evaluation plans.

¹²Monitoring and inspection policy. See: <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/03-Verkefni/Utanrikismal/Throunarsamvinna/uttekta-og-ryniskyrslur/Evaluation%20policy%202020-2023.pdf>

¹³ Financial Tracking Service. See: <https://fts.unocha.org/>

