



# POOLED FUNDING AT A CROSSROADS

A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

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REPORT

MAY 2023



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Pooled funding has become in recent years one of the go-to solutions to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian action and help achieve global policy commitments. The report of the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing in 2016, for example, identified pooled funds led by NGOs and those managed by OCHA as an efficient solution to provide more support to national first responders (High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, 2016). Many donor governments, in line with their Grand Bargain commitments, place an emphasis on OCHA's country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) as an opportunity to channel funds to local partners when direct funding is seen as too difficult. Under the Covid-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan organized through the IASC, pooled funding of all types – both through OCHA and other sources<sup>1</sup> – was also highlighted as part of the solution to channel funds faster to frontline humanitarian responders (UN OCHA, 2020). Consequently, except for a decrease in 2020, contributions to the pooled funds managed by OCHA (Central Emergency Response Fund and CBPFs) have seen a steady growth since their inception in 2011-2012 (Development Initiatives, 2022).

The proliferation of funds and their continued growth as a tool for humanitarian financing has naturally led to increased attention to their impact and potential. While the range of pooled fund options has started to expand, initial reviews, however, point not only to the benefits of pooled funds but also to some of the challenges in their use that need to be addressed. Institutionally, different fora that can address some of the existing challenges are available and ICVA has been closely engaged with them, particularly through its NGO members and by participating in the Pooled Fund Working Group supporting CBPFs.

With the objective of informing the research, advocacy, and policy agendas of ICVA, and building on a significant existing body of knowledge, this literature review presents an analytical summary of what is known about the value and limitations of pooled funds, identifies gaps and future trends.

The review begins with a general overview of existing literature. It then explores the degree to which pooled funds are considered fit for purpose, including in terms of increasing effectiveness of humanitarian response, achieving efficiencies, promoting innovation, learning and knowledge sharing and achieving broader policy objectives. The review concludes with a summary of gaps in the literature which the researchers consider could be further explored by ICVA and its membership, a brief analysis on future trends as relevant to ICVA, and ideas on the way forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, OCHA-managed pooled funds are referred to with their proper name (CBPFs and CERF) in this review, while the use of the general wording "pooled funds" includes all other types of funds.

## Methodology and Limitations

The review has been informed by two main questions:

1. What does the current literature on pooled funds focus on? What are the lessons learnt? Are there any knowledge gaps?
2. What should ICVA focus on in its future work around pooled funds?

While there is not a single official definition of a humanitarian pooled fund mechanism (Thomas, 2022), this review has focused on pooled funds as “vehicles” which are constructed to aggregate funds from multiple donors for an agreed defined purpose to multiple recipients. Financing gets blended, instead of earmarked to a specific organisation, and there is some form of independent allocation process to determine funding recipients.<sup>2</sup>

To answer these questions and in line with the definition of pooled funds adopted, the review has looked at (literature around) funds that are operational in humanitarian contexts, accessible to NGOs and with focus on humanitarian and nexus programmes.

Funds built to finance the Sustainable Development Goals are considered to the degree that they explicitly bridge the nexus between humanitarian, development, and peace building.

Network-limited funds or multi-donor funds structured for a closed group of applicants, such as mechanisms specific to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (i.e., the Disaster Emergency Response Fund or the Funds for National Society Development) were excluded, as were the large family of World Bank Trust Funds, given their development/government funding focus. It is also beyond the scope of this review to cover funding structures which do not fall strictly within the definition of multi-partner humanitarian pooled funds but have been established for similar ambitions of cost effectiveness and quality financing.

As highlighted however the recommendations below in this paper, given the long experience of the World Bank with multi-partner funds, both global and country focused, further review of the World Bank funds and lessons learned would be useful, including the new “umbrella 2.0 funds”, Strengthening Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response: Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (HEPR) and the Climate Support Facility. Likewise, a review of fund-like mechanisms would also be useful in an expanded study, especially as the defining lines between these structures and pooled funds are increasingly blurred (Thomas, 2017b, 2022).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on the different existing definitions of pooled funds, cf. [https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/pooled-funds/nrc\\_pooled-funds\\_the-new-humanitarian-silver-bullet\\_report.pdf](https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/pooled-funds/nrc_pooled-funds_the-new-humanitarian-silver-bullet_report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Examples include:

- Single donor funding vehicles given to one organization in a sub-granting logic as per defined objectives (Thomas, 2017a);
- Single donor fund made available to a coalition of actors such as CHAF (“Canadian Humanitarian Assistance Fund”); DRA (“Dutch Relief Alliance”); DERF (“Danish Emergency Relief Fund”) or the NEAR Change Fund (currently solely funded by Hilton Foundation with the future ambition to morph into a multi-partner fund). (Thomas, 2022)
- A consortium of organisations jointly raising funds against a common statement of need and plan of action as the BRCiS Consortium (Building Resilient Communities in Somalia Consortium hosted by Norwegian Refugee Council) or RESILAC (“Inclusive Economic and Social Recovery around Lake Chad”) (Thomas 2022)

This literature review has focused primarily on the knowledge generated in English in the last seven years, from the lead-up and follow-up to the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain agreement, without excluding key earlier research as relevant. To complement the findings from the literature and to explore different perspectives as to the future of pooled funds, the review of the existing documentation was complemented with seven key stakeholder interviews, including ICVA regional representatives, NGO members and NGO pooled fund representatives.

Given time constraints, this review does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of all available literature on the topics covered, but rather to give a succinct view of the current state of research to draw out major trends and gaps as relevant to ICVA to facilitate further study.

## Overview of the Literature on Pooled Funds

The literature available on pooled funds can be largely broken down into the following categories:

- General reviews on pooled funds as funding vehicles and their potential in terms of advancing key humanitarian policy objectives (both country-based and global).
- Resources produced by the fund administrators, including Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office of UNDP (MPTFO), OCHA, EU Trust Fund, and UNOPS.
- Fund specific resources including funding strategies, background papers and research, guidelines and SOPs, annual reviews, and external evaluations, written or commissioned by the funds.

Among the general reviews focused on humanitarian financing, the majority considers the OCHA CBPFs and the Start Fund and their ability to increase the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian financing, including notably localization (Barbelet et al., 2021; Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020b; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022; Thomas, 2022). For the most part, the literature is positive. Pooled funds have been successful in sourcing financing from a broader group of donors, including smaller donors without country presence, effectively breaking programmatic silos, promoting multi-stakeholder coordination, and providing smaller and more numerous grants to L/NNGOs (Thomas, 2022).

Among the general literature, there are articles which advocate for pooled funds to play a revolutionary role in humanitarian financing, including as specialized vehicles to amass large amounts of predictable funding as opposed to the current financing systems based on competing organisational interests (Saez et al., 2021). As well as reports such as the Norwegian Refugee Council's 2022 review, which explores whether humanitarian pooled funds are really the 'silver bullet', some claim them to be, concluding that these financing vehicles continue to positively evolve and grow and could effectively become a "financing silver bullet in humanitarian response" (Thomas, 2022).

Among the fund administrators, the UN MPTF Office, provides a large number of resources and guidance on fund creation and fund management, in addition to insights generated from the various hosted funds and a large database of fund materials, documents and templates (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, undated). The MPTF publications market the advantages of pooled fund mechanisms and their key role in advancing nexus and SDG priorities (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2022). OCHA CBPF resources<sup>4</sup> focus fully on the CBPFs, including the funding and disbursement dashboards, reviews, reports, and guidelines. The EU Trust Funds<sup>5</sup> and UNOPS<sup>6</sup> provide overviews primarily focused on the funds they manage.

Finally, there is a large quantity of fund-specific resources, notably individual fund strategies, annual reports, evaluations (organisational, thematic, per window of funding), and data/insights research generated through and by the funds published on their websites. In terms of families of funds, the annual reports of the CBPFs notably follow the same structure and report against a common set of principles, enabling comparisons both across years and across the various funds. The Start Fund reports vary from year to year and focus more on learning and innovation and progressing localization and capacity strengthening objectives.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.unocha.org/our-work/humanitarian-financing/country-based-pooled-funds-cbpf>

<sup>5</sup> See [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/funding-instruments/trust-funds\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/funding-instruments/trust-funds_en)

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.unops.org/expertise/financial-management>

### What are the gaps in the literature?

- **Focused on a few funds:** the literature is heavily focused on the CBPFs and to a lesser extent the Start Fund. There is little analysis of country-based funds built specifically for national actors, including basket funds<sup>7</sup> and quick response funds<sup>8</sup>. There is little nuanced analysis of what type of funds work best for the various recipients and in the different contexts.
- **Perspective of local and national non-governmental organizations:** there is little written from the perspective of local and national non-governmental organizations (L/NNGOs). The few reports that capture these actors' feedback on funding have limited mention of pooled funds. Notably, during this review, the overall positive picture generated from the literature on advancing localization objectives, was contrasted by the feedback received from some informants, who highlighted both issues of quality of funding and limited effective voice.
- **Comparative analysis:** though potentially challenging given the diversity of funds, there are only few comparisons among the pooled funds and/or their relative performance against common defined criteria or indicators, including from an NGO perspective. Funds for the most part self-report against self-defined targets which differ from fund to fund. External evaluations remain limited. Likewise, the relative efficiency or effectiveness of funds is not compared to other alternative funding mechanisms in country, including bilateral donors.

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<sup>7</sup> A basket fund is a pooled fund, typically from government, donors and private sector, that is channeled into a specific sector, for example, localisation.

<sup>8</sup> Quick-response funds are rapid response funds that help support humanitarian activities in the initial stages of a sudden-onset crisis or for slow-onset crises.



## Are Pooled Funds Fit for Purpose?

To understand what the literature says about whether pooled funds are fit for purpose and why, it is important to take a step back and briefly explore general expectations about humanitarian financing. An indication is to be found in the mandate of the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing appointed by the UN Secretary-General ahead of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. In an effort to address the growing gap between humanitarian needs and resources made available to tackle them, a group of experts from the international community, government, the private sector and civil society was tasked with finding solutions to: “how to mobilise greater funding, how to make that funding more predictable, and how to ensure those resources are managed most efficiently” (High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, 2016).

To be fit for purpose, humanitarian funding should not only increase in volume but also be more predictable and efficient. Likewise, an OECD review published in 2015 identified the need to increase “quality money – money that arrives in the right place, in the right way, and at the right time” to make humanitarian finance fit for the future (Scott, 2015). Improving the predictability of funding is one of the solutions, as is expanding the financing pool for protracted crises by encouraging the use of development finance in middle-income countries, and making the money go further by increasing its efficiency (e.g. shifting donor funding towards results rather than activities, challenging the trend towards fewer and larger grants, and streamlining reporting requirements) (Scott, 2015). The Grand Bargain between major donors and aid organisations was born out of the World Humanitarian Summit exactly with these aims in mind. Among the 51 commitments, donors committed to providing more flexible and longer-term funding, and aid organisations to lower management costs (Derzsi-Horvath et al., 2017).

OCHA is one of the signatories to the Grand Bargain, and as the manager of the CBPFs has provided an analysis of how they not only align with the commitments made under the Grand Bargain but are also a critical tool in delivering the Grand Bargain. As highlighted in OCHA’s documentation, CBPFs are unearmarked and fully flexible in-country, they empower national and local responders, their data is transparently reported on a dedicated website and efforts have been made to adhere to other commitments on the reporting requirements, the participation revolution, cash-based responses and reduction in management costs (UN OCHA, 2017c). What is the available knowledge about pooled funds generally, beyond CBPFs? Can good practices and lessons from OCHA CBPFs be applied to all pooled funds? Beyond cataloguing existing pooled funds, this review seeks to understand whether they can be considered fit for purpose. To answer that question and in line with the broader considerations about humanitarian financing, this literature review focused on: whether pooled funds are a vehicle for effective humanitarian financing; whether they contribute to achieving efficiencies; their ability to promote innovation and knowledge exchange and advance global policy objectives.

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## 1. A Vehicle for Effective Humanitarian Financing

The question of whether pooled funds are a vehicle for effective humanitarian financing can be looked at in two ways: whether they successfully contribute to the effectiveness of a humanitarian response and whether they are themselves an effective instrument. The two aspects are distinct but closely interconnected. In terms of being effective financing instruments, the 2019 OCHA Evaluation of Country-Based Pooled Funds looks at two aspects, (1) meeting newly emerging needs in a timely and flexible manner, and (2) identifying and adapting to future changes (Featherstone et al., 2019a). The evaluation of the CBPFs found that they are “fit for purpose to respond to the humanitarian crises of today” (Featherstone et al., 2019g), in terms of providing life-saving assistance and funding neglected aspects of the response.

The element of timeliness appears to be a critical one. While timeliness is more often associated with the concept of efficiency, it plays an important role in informing the effectiveness (or the impact) of the funds (UN OCHA, 2017b). Evaluations of pooled funds often question: are the funds promoting a timely response? Do allocations reflect an appropriate duration vis-à-vis the objectives of the allocation? Are pledging and payment of contributions to pooled funds timely and predictable? Timeliness can therefore become a specific goal in the set-up of a pooled fund driving its organisational processes, as in the case of the Start Fund. The financing component of a network of NGOs, the Start Fund, was specifically designed to move faster than traditional funding mechanisms in situations of crisis (Stoddard et al., 2017). The Start Fund’s average decision-making time between when an alert is raised and the projects to be funded are selected is 67 hours (Start Network, 2022) enabling operational humanitarian actors to respond immediately. CBPFs were also found to be often faster than many other donors and feedback from affected communities suggested their satisfaction with the timeliness and relevance of CBPF-funded assistance (Featherstone et al., 2019g). Farmers in the Occupied Palestinian Territory who received support through the CBPFs-funded projects, for example, acknowledged that the assistance was provided in good time for the planting season (Featherstone et al., 2019d).

More generally, the literature highlights a number of criteria that contribute to making pooled funds an effective financing instrument (FAO et al., 2020; Thomas, 2017a; UN Development Group, 2016; UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2017; Weinlich et al., 2020). The elements that define pooled funds constitute their comparative advantages and include flexibility, predictability, stronger risk management (as risks are pooled), cost effectiveness (reducing duplication and ensuring lower transaction costs); promote strategic decision-making; transparency (e.g., with public access data of contributions and allocations).

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They largely reflect the five principles behind the OCHA CBPFs: inclusiveness, flexibility, timeliness, efficiency and risk management (UN OCHA, 2017b). On flexibility, in particular, to be effective, pooled funds are expected to allow implementers to move funding between budget lines, geographical borders or years with ease and speed (Els, 2019). The discussion on flexibility is closely linked to those encouraging reductions in the earmarking of financial contributions (Bosch et al., 2020; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022), not only as part of the Grand Bargain commitments but as a general understanding that earmarking risks steering away from collective strategic priorities and undermines broad-based governance. Contributions to pooled funds are seen as an effective way to reduce earmarking and promote greater strategic decision-making. Flexibility allows pooled funds to reassess in-country needs and fill gaps for neglected emergencies within larger crises (Featherstone et al., 2019g, 2019b; Stoddard et al., 2017). Whether CBPFs are however flexible enough has been questioned. CBPFs have been found to be “too tightly circumscribed in their role to act nimbly and flexibly” to respond to changing needs as and where they occur (Carter, 2018; Stoddard et al., 2017). “The desired flexibility of pooled funds can be overshadowed by accountability and risk mitigation demands, which can often be driven by donor requirements” (Thomas, 2022).

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Two additional indirect elements contributing to the effectiveness of pooled funds surface in the literature: the ability to use funds coherently and in complementarity with others, and the ability to mobilise a broad partnership base. On the first, the expectation is that the role the OCHA-managed CBPFs play in support of the system-wide leadership functions (Emergency Relief Coordinator globally and Humanitarian Coordinators in country) will contribute to increased coordination and coherence in the response (Saez et al., 2021). Pooled funds are inherently seen to promote coherence by de facto reducing the fragmentation of donor contributions and unifying disparate interventions (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2017). Beyond that, however, is the question of coherence with other in-country funds and contributions. While coherence may be generally ascribed to good practice in donor coordination, in reality it rarely happens, with the coordination between EU Bêkou Fund and the CAR Humanitarian Fund being a notable exception (Thomas, 2017a, 2022). The 2022 note on OCHA Pooled Funds Complementarity stresses the importance of leveraging differential uses of the available financing instruments for greater impact (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2022; UN OCHA, 2022c). On the latter, the literature explores partnerships not only in terms of broadening the donor base (UN Development Group, 2016) but also of aligning different stakeholders towards the change needed (Mårtendal, 2022; UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2017).

Overall, however, pooled funds are only as effective an instrument as their relative size and as the quality and effectiveness of the overall system (of crisis response) in which they operate (Featherstone et al., 2019g; Saez et al., 2021; Stoddard et al., 2017; Thomas, 2022). To be able to truly break mandate-driven responses, pooled funds should reach a volume that would effectively balance bilateral and other ODA contributions (Saez et al., 2021). Despite their growth over the years, pooled funds accounted for just about 6% of the total international humanitarian assistance in 2021, up from 4.2% in 2014 (Development Initiatives, 2022), leading authors to highlight their contingency and gap filling role (Saez et al., 2021). OCHA CBPFs accounted for almost two thirds of the total funding to the UN pooled funds while just five donors

accounted for over two thirds of their total funding (Development Initiatives, 2022). Authors have identified the donors' reluctance to scale up CBPFs in the fact that they were not originally designed to be the main financing mechanism at crisis level (Saez et al., 2021). The quality of that funding is equally important. For pooled funds to be able to deliver predictable funding, donors need ensure that they disburse multi-year funding in line with the Grand Bargain commitment to increase the quality of humanitarian funding overall (Derzsi-Horvath et al., 2017). Multi-year funding from Switzerland to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, for example, while modest in scale was distributed over a seven-year period from providing decision-makers and partners "with a modicum of security and predictability over that period" (Featherstone et al., 2019b). On the other hand, the consistent receipt of donor contributions in the third and fourth quarters of the year in the case of the Iraq Humanitarian Fund severely limited its ability to "prioritize funds strategically and in complementarity with other available funding" (Featherstone et al., 2019c).

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Similarly, case studies have shown that CBPFs' performance is linked to the quality of humanitarian coordination in the contexts where they are operational (Featherstone et al., 2019b, 2019f, 2019e; Stoddard et al., 2017). In the case of the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund, for example, it was able to identify and allocate funding against the most urgent priorities thanks to the critical role of dedicated cluster coordinators who are fully dedicated and the inter-cluster working group play in the allocation process (Featherstone et al., 2019f). In Iraq, on the other hand, the lack of involvement of the inter-cluster coordination group resulted in the lack of comprehensive and shared analysis of needs making it difficult for the Iraq Humanitarian to transparently identify priorities (Featherstone et al., 2019c). The literature has additionally pointed to the fact that the clusters tend to replicate power imbalances between the cluster lead agencies and the other organisations leading to perceived conflicts of interests (Saez et al., 2021; Thomas, 2022). With the role of the clusters in the CBPF allocation processes largely unsanctioned, no specific processes have been put in place to manage any potential conflicts of interest (Thomas, 2022).

### **Advancing Organizational Mandates and Objectives**

To understand the extent to which pooled funds contribute to effective humanitarian responses, it is worth introducing a brief review of the expectations from different stakeholders as to their aims. Pooled funds are created for a variety of purposes and respond to different expectations. For donors, the overarching logic is the ability to entrust their funding to a specialized body, which can quickly, efficiently and accountably allocate the funding against the agreed purposes (Thomas, 2017b). For those without an in-country presence, it allows delegating the responsibility of grant allocation to those closer to actual needs. While losing visibility, donors pool risks, while at the same time reducing the administrative transaction costs linked to managing several grants (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2017). Pooled funds are seen as vehicles for humanitarian innovation – anticipating and more effectively responding to needs. Donors have shown a higher risk appetite when their funds are provided to pooled funding mechanism (Start Network,

undated). Pooled funds are also used as vehicles to enhance humanitarian policy objectives more impactfully than a donor could do on its own (Thomas, 2017a).

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From the perspective of recipients, there is more limited research on their perceived benefits. The research available is mostly on the experience of NGOs with the CBPFs (Els, 2019; Koepl, 2019). For some, such as L/NNGOs, pooled funds may be the only source of accessible funding (Saez et al., 2021), for others the opportunity to access funding for forgotten/under-the-radar crises (Start Network, 2022). In other cases, humanitarian actors have argued “for a pooled fund to maintain visibility of the crisis response to global funding decision-makers” (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019).

Finally, funds are often created to serve the institutional mandates of their management/host organisations, either directly such as the case of OCHA with the CBPFs and CERF, namely enabling coordination among humanitarian actors and aligning with UN coordination processes supporting humanitarian leadership (UN OCHA, 2022e), or in a more indirect manner, such as the funds hosted by UNDP or UNOPS, where the funds objectives align with that of the host, albeit through greater institutional separation objectives of the Fund.

### What are the gaps in the literature?

- **Conflicts of interest:** based on the available literature on the role of the clusters in CBPF allocation processes and on interviews with fund managers of NGO-led pooled funds, the issue of how to manage conflicts of interest is a critical one (both in terms of fund management and allocation processes). Yet, there are only passing references to it and no study is publicly available on effective models that allow to manage them. While it may seem like a technical question, addressing the perception of conflicts of interest will strengthen the inclusiveness of pooled funds and eventually their effectiveness.
- **Little evidence of outcome-level results (impact):** there is scant literature on the impact of pooled funds in terms of their overall effectiveness as financing instruments and their contribution to the effectiveness of the broader humanitarian response. What is available is specifically focused on the CBPFs. The lack of evidence mirrors a broader gap in the evidence available of the impact of humanitarian responses generally and is compounded by the fact that pooled funds are a relatively ‘new’ financing mechanism.
- **Return on Investment for NGOs is not clear:** the business case for donors to invest in pooled funds is relatively clear. The same cannot be said for NGOs. The literature focuses on the experience of NGOs regarding the CBPFs but there is no analysis of the comparative value of different pooled funds for different types of NGOs (e.g., L/NNGOs, medium-sized international NGOs, large international NGOs).

- **Role of pooled funds in rethinking the humanitarian system:** most of the literature focuses on the technical aspects of pooled funds. The effectiveness of pooled funds is closely linked however to the effectiveness of the broader humanitarian system and vice versa. There would be value in exploring the suggestions put forward by Saez, Konyndyk and Worden (Saez et al., 2021) to include pooled funds as a central piece of a revisited model for crisis response also in light of current trends in risk management.
- **Comparison between pooled funds which are organizational/mandate-driven and independently administered funds:** UN pooled funds tend to be broadly lumped together but there can be differences in their set up in the way they are managed. The most notable difference is between the funds managed to pursue a specific organisational mandate of the host (e.g., OCHA managed CBPFs and CERF strengthening coordination and in-country humanitarian leadership) and those administered by independent entities such as UNOPS or the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office. There is no analysis of the opportunities and constraints that either model represents. Such analysis would be particularly helpful in informing adjustments and/or the future set up of new pooled funds. It links as well to the discussion on conflicts of interest above.

## 2. Achieving Efficiencies in the Humanitarian System

While there is no common performance measurement nor standard definition of efficiency among the funds, efficiency indicators are regularly self-reported and evaluated in performance monitoring frameworks and used as metrics in fund design (Featherstone et al., 2019g; Save the Children & Start Network, 2020; UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2022; UN OCHA, 2022e). For donors, efficiency calculations generally factor in the relative workload and costs of financing structures and administrative oversight, as well as fiduciary risks. For funding recipients, the focus tends towards the multiple parameters associated with ease of access, flexibility of financing, and lessening of administrative burdens, reporting obligations and levels of risk.

An in-depth analysis of efficiency measurements as found in evaluations and self-reports was beyond the scope of this review. However, the increased levels of financing enjoyed by pooled funds and the recurrent calls for their greater use, indicate positive efficiency perceptions (Featherstone et al., 2019g; Saez et al., 2021; Thomas, 2022). The literature refers as well to improved efficiency over the lifespan of funds, including better quality financing, stabilization of financing mechanisms and enhanced risk management in post emergency funding periods (Carter, 2018; Featherstone et al., 2019g; Thomas, 2022). OCHA documentation and secondary literature reference progress both in CBPF and CERF alignment and the cost effectiveness of CBPF-centralized support systems, while maintaining a healthy degree of individual fund flexibility (UN OCHA, 2022).

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The relative efficiency of funds is in large part driven by their structure and their unique focus on attracting financing for efficient and effective disbursement (Saez et al., 2021). A lack of transparency, inefficiencies in allocation, disbursement or reporting, or failure to secure stakeholder buy-in would jeopardize the funds existence. Fund governance and advisory structures generally enable multi-stakeholder dialogues in which efficiency challenges can be voiced and addressed. The CBPFs for example, include a CBPF-NGO Dialogue Platform as well as NGO participation in the Pooled Fund Working Group, through the CBPF-NGO Dialogue Platform Advisory Group (PAG). The Start Fund is NGO membership-governed and -driven (Start Fund website).

In terms of donor considerations, one of the few key efficiency metrics highlighted in the literature is management cost ratios. For 2021, the CBPFs for example maintained an average management cost of 3.3% across the funds (UN OCHA, 2022a) much lower than most operational agencies. Reference has been made however to the high start-up costs to launch a CBPF as well as the need to avoid a proliferation of small funds, which are less cost effective than the larger funds (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2022) (The World Bank, 2022). It was also highlighted, that pooled fund mechanisms lower transactional costs through reduced layers of funding in particular for L/NGOs (ALNAP, 2022).

From a recipients' point of view, in general there have been calls to increase grant timeliness and quality of CBPF funding, including reducing the time it takes between calls for proposals, review, and project approval. There is a perception among NGOs that funding flexibility provided by donors has not adequately flowed down to the fund recipients (Els, 2019). Some INGOs in particular have questioned the value added in receiving funding from a pooled fund mechanism versus a bilateral donor (Koepl, 2019). Specifically, as per the few reviews conducted from an NGO perspective on pooled fund mechanisms, a number of efficiency challenges have been cited over the last few years including:

- Lack of budget flexibility including on staff costs; (Els, 2019)
- Lack of consistent overheads and standard sub-grantee conditionalities;
- Tight proposal deadlines, heavy due diligence procedures and long technical proposal reviews; (Els, 2019)
- Timeliness of disbursements and the shouldering of risk regarding currency exchange losses; (Stoddard et al., 2017)
- Need to further standardize capacity assessments and due diligence procedures; (Carter, 2018; Obrecht, 2019; Stoddard et al., 2017; Thomas, 2022)
- Short implementation periods, limited project extensions, delays in handling change requests, and lack of multi-year funding opportunities; (Obrecht, 2019)
- Challenges with uploading data and language barriers into the OCHA Grant Management System. (GMS) (Els, 2019; UN OCHA, 2022b)

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*“Some expressed the fear that as funds grow and attract larger and more diverse groups of donors, meeting the combined risk appetites of each donor will compromise future efficiency.”*

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It has also been highlighted that funds have struggled to lower the level of reporting and due diligence requirements per the nature of the organization and the size of the grant, with high-risk organizations receiving smaller grants with heavier administrative/reporting constraints.

The opposite of what is needed to support the capacity of the organisation and render the funding efficient (Carter, 2018; Stoddard et al., 2017). The risk to efficiency balance has also been challenged in trying to establish rapid response windows (Carter, 2018). Some expressed the fear that as funds grow and attract larger and more diverse groups of donors, meeting the combined risk appetites of each donor will compromise future efficiency (Els, 2019; Thomas, 2022).

#### What are the gaps in the literature?

- **Standardization and comparative analysis:** there are a noted lack of standard efficiency metrics which can be quickly found and applied comparatively across the funds (similar to energy efficiency and food value ratings). Likewise, there is a lack of comparative analysis among the funds in terms of efficiency, nor a discussion on potential triggers in fund design, systems, processes, or culture which could drive greater efficiency.
- **Lack of independent data (real time or otherwise):** most data annually reported by the funds is self-generated and self-reported by the funds themselves. Few funds make easily available the data gathered directly from donor and recipient feedback. The sharing of real-time feedback (including user feedback) would boost transparency and reactivity of funds to a wider array of recipient feedback.
- **Perspective of L/NNGOs:** few if any studies of efficiency from the perspective of L/NNGOs. The few studies on financing from the perspective of L/NNGOs have little reference to pooled fund mechanisms (Howe et al., 2019).

### 3. Promoting Innovation, Learning and Knowledge Sharing

The Humanitarian Innovation Fund and ALNAP have defined innovation as “an iterative process that identifies, adjusts and diffuses ideas for improving humanitarian action” (Obrecht & Warner, 2016). In addition to directly funding and supporting innovation through specialized funds such as the Humanitarian Innovation Fund and the Global Innovation Fund, pooled funds have generally been seen as effective vehicles to both promote and test innovative approaches to humanitarian financing.

Several authors have highlighted the need for reform of the humanitarian system and the potential of pooled fund mechanisms to serve as the tool to do so (Barbelet et al., 2021; Development Initiatives, 2022; Saez et al., 2021; Thomas, 2022). As single purpose vehicles which enable shared risk taking, pooled funds are uniquely placed to both develop and test new approaches to meet humanitarian financing objectives. Their ability to innovate and “reform the system” stems in part from their:

- Ability to attract both development and humanitarian funding (Barbelet et al., 2021; Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020b);
- In-built flexibility to adapt financing approaches to changing needs (Thomas, 2022);
- Multi-stakeholder governance processes and in-built coordination mechanisms promoting problem solving with the financial freedom to test solutions (Thomas, 2017b).

To date, innovative funding approaches have been used to promote anticipatory/foresight-based financing (Start Fund Anticipation and Start Ready); funding across the ‘triple nexus’, (Nexus Funds; Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan); an effective response to Covid-19; and increase funding to L/NNGOs (Start Fund Bangladesh and Start Fund Nepal). The UN has also started to test regional pooled funds to complement



CBPFs (UN OCHA, 2022a). Start Fund has also piloted the use of block chain technology to drive further fund efficiencies (Thomas, 2022).

To remain competitive, the identification and incorporation of lessons learned to increase the quality and impact of funds is critical. Within the CBPFs, there is increased focus on knowledge sharing and incorporating lessons learned. The new 2022 CBPF Global Guidelines place an emphasis on learning and “have been grounded in lessons learned from the CBPF operations thus far” (CBPF Global Guidelines, 2022). OCHA has launched a “Guidance, Learning and Reporting Section” fostering greater sharing among CERF and the CBPFs (Thomas, 2022). As co-chair of the Pooled Fund Working Group, Switzerland convened a meeting of pooled fund managers to share lessons learned among the CBPFs (Confederation of Switzerland website).

While there are examples of knowledge sharing and lessons learned within fund structures and networks, there is little evidence of the same among the different funds. There are repeated calls for better knowledge sharing among funds (Thomas, 2022), including catalogued learning and comparative studies (Thomas, 2017a, 2022) and launching a central resource center and communities of practice. There is also little evidence of pooled funds sharing lessons learned with other bilateral and multilateral donors in country (Thomas, 2022), nor with private sector foundations such as Ikea, Skoll or Hilton Foundations deemed innovative including in financing L/NGOs. Recommendations for example have called for the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative to consider how funds can be brought to the ‘donor table’ and meetings held across fund donor councils/forums to share lessons learned among the various funds which these donors oversee (Thomas, 2022). It has been highlighted that with the growth and increased competition among funds, this siloed approach risks duplication of efforts, waste of resources and a failure to leverage eventual synergies among the funds, especially given a growing tendency to create funds as “quick fixes” to meeting humanitarian financing needs and achieve better quality funding (Thomas, 2022).

### What are the gaps in the literature?

- **Meeting their potential:** the potential of pooled funds to reform the humanitarian financing landscape has been often highlighted, however there is a need for a follow up analysis as to whether the current direction which pooled funds are taking, including an increasing number of funds with little coordination or sharing among themselves, is a step towards this improved humanitarian financing landscape, or on the contrary risks increased fragmentation and inefficiency.
- **Measuring the impact of innovation:** there is little impact analysis on the innovative work of funds thus far, nor discussion on how innovation could be further progressed through better coordination or lessons learned among funds.

## 4. Advancing Overarching Policy Objectives

With the SDG agenda and the Grand Bargain, pooled funds – especially the ones managed by the UN – have tried to align with the emerging global policy agenda and related commitments. As in the case of the CBPFs, work has been done to integrate them in the functioning of the funds (UN OCHA, 2022e).

Beyond such integration, pooled funds have also been increasingly looked at as instrumental in achieving those commitments. The greater focus has been on using pooled funds as a proxy to advance the localization agenda (achieving the target of 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible). The focus on the pooled funds in support of the nexus is still in progress while less attention has been given to the role they can play in strengthening accountability to affected populations.

## Localization

Pooled funds are generally seen as effective intermediaries enabling direct funding to L/NNGOs with repeated calls to expand their use in this regard (Austin et al., 2019; Barbelet et al., 2021; Development Initiatives, 2022; Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020b; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022; Poole, 2018; Thomas, 2022). Through pooled funds, bilateral donors can indirectly provide smaller grants to a larger number of organisations, enabling L/NNGOs to receive international funding directly for their own activities outside of sub-contractual implementation agreements (Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020b; Pusterla & Pusterla, 2021; Thomas, 2022). Some reviews have highlighted that pooled funds have helped to level the playing field between INGOs and L/NNGOs disrupting what has been termed “anti-competitive collusion between donors and their favoured bilateral partners” (Poole, 2018). Though many would argue that the playing field has not been levelled enough (Barbelet et al., 2021).

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While overall direct funding to local and national actors declined from 3.0% in 2020 to 1.2% in 2021, (Development Initiatives, 2022) the levels of direct funding to national NGOs by CBPFs has steadily increased reaching 36% in 2022 above the Grand Bargain target of 25% (CBPF Data Hub). It is noted however that levels of financing to L/NNGOs vary largely across the CBPFs, with few funds surpassing 10 million USD per year (Pearson, 2022).

Both the CBPFs and the Start Fund have strived to improve their impact on localization, addressing barriers to entry, promoting quality funding, and supporting effective partnership models. The 2022 CBPF global guidelines describe localization as “a secondary aim” after meeting humanitarian needs (UN OCHA, 2022e) with the objective of promoting “quality of funding” and engaging local and national actors in fund governance, promoting their visibility and contributing to their capacity building (UN OCHA, 2022).

To increase uptake by L/NNGOs, some funds like the Venezuela Humanitarian Fund, have prioritized funding local actors, allocating 64% of their financing in 2021 to national NGOs (UN OCHA, 2022a). Other funds, such as the Nigeria Humanitarian Fund, created walk-in centres to increase capacities to access funding and ran training clinics. The Myanmar Humanitarian Fund provided additional “points” to L/NNGO applications. The South Sudan Humanitarian Fund capped levels of sub-contracting to further level the playing field and encourage direct funding to national NGOs. The Start Fund has commissioned several reviews on their approach to localization (Patel & Van Brabant, 2017).

Despite their relative success, many authors feel that the potential for pooled funds to support localization efforts could be further enhanced (Barbelet et al., 2021). To borrow an expression from the Norwegian Refugee Council, pooled funds are not a “silver bullet” to fund L/NNGOs (Poole, 2018). There are concerns that pooled funds do not go far enough to ensure an effective voice for national actors, address funding quality challenges nor promote organisational sustainability, and provide funding which is short term and unpredictable.

Questions have been raised around the “meaningful participation” of local and national actors in CBPFs. CBPFs have “provided opportunities for CSOs to have a seat at the decision-making table” (Poole, 2018). However, as one informant highlighted, representation may be balanced on paper, but an equal voice is not ensured when in practice you may have only one national actor represented amid several international ones (Informant interview; Els 2019). As highlighted above, this critique has also been raised in the context of the strong role which cluster coordination mechanisms play in fund strategies and allocation decision, and the lack of meaningful L/NNGO voice in these mechanisms. Switzerland as co-chair of the Pooled Fund Working Group has made localization one of its priorities including meaningful representation in PFWG meetings supported by paid consultants.

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“...representation may be balanced on paper, but an equal voice is not ensured when in practice...”

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There are repeated calls for pooled funds to provide more effective capacity strengthening to L/NNGOs (Barbelet et al., 2021; Featherstone et al., 2019g; Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020b; Howe et al., 2019; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022; Poole, 2018). Although there are a growing number of good practices and lessons learned which could be generated from pooled fund practices, there is no systemic approach to capacity building (including by conducting baseline assessments for capacity strengthening purposes), nor evidence that efforts benefit the organizations in the long term rather than simply the fiduciary responsibilities of the fund itself (Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020b).

There is a call on funds to adopt an “investment mentality” to NGO capacity building to borrow the term from the Near Network (Poole, 2018) and further invest in financing organisational development (Barbelet et al., 2021). There is also the call for more focused attention on women-led organisations, facilitating their capacity strengthening and their access to financing (Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020b). As highlighted in the MOPAN assessment on multilateral effectiveness, CBPFs played an important role as intermediary funding mechanisms for L/NNGOs. However, it “found no increase in the resources going towards strengthening the capacity of local actors and little progress in creating more meaningful partnerships with them, beyond sub-contracting” (MOPAN, 2021).

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“...call on funds to adopt an “investment mentality” to NGO capacity building to borrow the term from the Near Network and further invest in financing organisational development.”

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Likewise, several authors highlight the lack of “localization strategies”, including deliberate approaches to how CBPF funding could link with other funding sources and systemically work to strengthening NGOs and their partnerships (Barbelet et al., 2021; Featherstone et al., 2019g). A lack of exit strategies has also been highlighted, including the funds working to lessen eventual dependence on pooled funding mechanisms, by providing support to diversify funding streams and/or transition to development funding (Barbelet et al., 2021; De Geoffroy et al., 2017).

Although through the sharing of donor risks, some have highlighted that CBPFs have been able to establish risk management processes encouraging funding to L/NNGOs, (Poole, 2018), it is generally felt that overly stringent risk frameworks are still passed down to L/NNGOs with little evidence of risk sharing among donors and fund recipients. In addition, there is little consistency on the provision of security or other training to help L/NNGOs operate safely.

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Overheads rarely cover the full costs and remain inconsistent (Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020b). There is no evidence of CBPFs consistently advising organizations on how best to cover core costs (Thomas, 2022). Charter 4 Change advocates that overheads for L/NNGOs should increase to 10 to 15% given their cost structures (Charter4Change, 2020). To be noted however that in comparison to other funders it has been found that L/NNGOs appreciated the provision of CBPFs overheads (Carter, 2018).

In terms of access to funding, the adoption of tiered financing by the Start Fund and some CBPFs is seen as generally positive in terms of bringing on board a larger and more diverse groups of L/NNGOs (Poole, 2018; Thomas, 2022). Barriers however persist especially for smaller NGOs and community-based organisations. Beyond having to operate online and in English, L/NNGOs must meet due diligence criteria, which have yet to be harmonized among donors (Thomas, 2022). Partner Capacity Assessments which follow the due diligence are viewed as demanding processes, beyond the reach of many organisations (Carter, 2018). It has been noted that the need for increased coordination and harmonization among and between pooled fund mechanisms and other donors will only increase as more funding is focused on the few L/NNGOs able to meet international due diligence criteria (Ali et al., 2018).

To remedy some of these challenges, localization reviews recommend increasing the “quality and quantity of funding going to local actors through pooled funds”(Barbelet et al., 2021). Others call for the establishment of funds dedicated to L/NNGOs, and/or funds directly managed by local and national actors themselves, further enhancing L/NNGO visibility with bilateral donors (Barbelet et al., 2021; Howe et al., 2019; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022; MOPAN, 2021; Poole, 2015).

### What are the gaps in the literature?

- **Perspective of L/NNGOs:** with the increase in funding to L/NNGOs from pooled fund mechanisms, a comprehensive review of their perspectives as pooled funds recipients is missing. Likewise, there is a gap in disaggregated viewpoints, including based on the size of the organizations, the contexts, and sectors in which they operate, and the funds concerned.
- **L/NNGOs voice on capacity strengthening:** there is a lack of reviews which solicit L/NNGO ideas as to how pooled funds could better support their programmatic objectives and longer-term organizational development objectives.
- **Knowledge sharing:** there is a lack of knowledge sharing among funds on effective measures to promote organization strengthening and scale national NGO programmatic reach.

### Nexus

Enhanced engagement between humanitarian and development partners was the cross-cutting commitment in the 2016 Grand Bargain agreement. Shortly after its launch in 2016, the humanitarian-development nexus was reframed as the triple nexus (as a peace angle was added to it). According to the OECD, a nexus approach aims to strengthen “collaboration coherence and complementarity, [...] in order to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes of conflict” (OECD, 2020). “It focuses on the work needed to coherently address people’s vulnerability before, during and after crises “(Oxfam, 2019). While the concept in itself is not new, having been preceded by others such as disaster risk reduction (DRR), linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD) and the resilience agenda, the nexus approach aims to go beyond a mere programmatic application and to engender “structural shifts across the aid system that are changing how aid is planned and financed” (Oxfam, 2019).

When it comes to financing the nexus, the attention of policymakers has focused on development financing, with new instruments that are better structured to operate in crisis-affected contexts. They have been found, however, not to encourage enough country-led prioritisation and coordination (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019). The current system of incentives towards greater coordination between humanitarian and development actors seems to favour the idea of the primary role of pooled funds to support the nexus. Reviews of financing options for fragile contexts encourage policy makers to think of pooled fund mechanisms as instruments that improve coherence between humanitarian, development and peace action (Milante & Lilja, 2022; OECD, 2017). With financing structures set up in terms of bilateral ODA and structural budget support, development actors are seen to face disincentives to coordinate (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019). Pooled funds seem therefore to allow for greater flexibility and to offer the promise to counterbalance more effectively competing country-level and development partner priorities (Humanitarian Financing Task Team, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019).

The UN has been working on a new generation of pooled funds that facilitate the blending, sequencing, and cross-referral of development and humanitarian resources to leverage the expected potential of pooled funds in this sense (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, Undated). The Malawi One Fund, for example, opened a humanitarian window to become a pivot fund, to encompass both humanitarian and development interventions (UN, 2019). The South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (South Sudan RSRTF) was credited with supporting cooperation across the nexus and thus contributing to the reunification of 130 abductees with their families in Greater Jonglei (UN Multi-Partner

Trust Fund, 2021). The EU Nexus Response Mechanism in Myanmar has been supporting joint assessments, thematic- and area-based programmes, and participatory design (NGO Voice, 2019).

The literature, however, has also been pointing to some of the shortcomings in the ability of pooled funds to currently support nexus objectives. Firstly, pooled funds generally remain short-term financing mechanisms. It was only in December 2022 that the guidelines for the OCHA-managed CBPFs, for example, shifted the implementation timeframes from 12 to 24 months (UN OCHA, 2017a, 2022e). Secondly, despite their interest, donors seem still reluctant to substantially invest in pooled funds (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019). Through the UN Funding Compact, UN Member States have committed to doubling the levels of resources channelled through development-related inter-agency pooled funds (UN General Assembly Economic Social Council, 2019). Finally, the literature has been pointing to the fact that the drive for better coordination across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding interventions has not consistently resulted in a joint analysis of needs and a common appraisal of the instruments best placed to respond (Saez et al., 2021) and there is still progress to be made to promote a more interconnected ecosystem of pooled funds (Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020a). Coherence and complementarity across funds have so far been formally explored between CERF and CBPFs as both are managed by OCHA. Acknowledging the fact that both pooled funds are often used in the same response, OCHA has been developing a set of principles to better build on their respective comparative advantages: temporal sequencing, complementing fund recipients and/or sectoral focus and geographical targeting and leveraging the common promotion of global priorities and cross-cutting issues (UN OCHA, 2022c).

#### What are the gaps in the literature?

- **No systematic and in-depth evidence of good practices:** lessons learnt exercises about how pooled funds can better support nexus interventions are forthcoming. Information at the moment is scattered and superficial. There is very little public evidence of attempts made to enhance the coherence and complementarity of different pooled funds in a given context and the benefits this may potentially lead to.
- **NGO expectations for the role of the pooled funds in supporting the nexus:** there are a few reports collecting the experience and expectations of NGOs towards the nexus. There is however no specific evidence of NGO expectations vis-à-vis pooled funds in support of the nexus. With the new generation of UN pooled funds mostly accessible to NGOs only indirectly (as UN implementing partners), lessons learnt exercises about them risk missing out on NGO perspectives.

#### Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP)

As opposed to the previous two policy agendas, there is limited research on how pooled funds can strengthen accountability to affected populations. In the 2022 Global Guidelines, CBPFs integrate AAP as one of the key principles for effective programming (UN OCHA, 2022e) and partners are expected to specify in their project proposals how affected people have been included in the design and will be consulted throughout the project implementation. Reference is made to the Core Humanitarian Standard but there is no evidence that they have engaged with the CHS verification process. To address this gap, the IASC AAP Task Force is expected to share in 2023 a meta review and synthesis of recommendations for donors' support to AAP as well as current donors' requirements for AAP (CHS Alliance, 2022), including pooled funds.

Passing references to pooled funds can be found in documents and reports more broadly addressing progress towards greater accountability to affected populations. Pooled funds are seen to be able to better support the changing preferences of affected people given their flexibility (Peer 2 Peer Support & IASC, 2017) and to strengthen the legitimacy of AAP frameworks and buy-in, “reinforcing the sense that collective AAP is a priority for the overall response” (Holloway & Lough, 2020). While humanitarian organisations have been increasingly integrating AAP systems internally, there are few collective approaches that cover the entirety of the humanitarian response (Peer 2 Peer Support & IASC, 2017).

Some good practices towards collective AAP have started being documented with CBPFs playing an important role. One interesting example is the one of the Central African Republic (CAR) Humanitarian Fund, which developed a brief guide to integrate AAP into the fund’s projects and allocations with support from the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (UN OCHA, 2022d). Collective funding solutions, such as the CAR Humanitarian Fund, can safeguard the collective nature of the approach to AAP but they still require greater flexibility (Barbelet, 2020). In CAR, research has suggested a hybrid approach using a consortium system to fund collective AAP action and thus uniting “the collective nature of the Pooled Fund mechanism with the flexibility required” (Barbelet, 2020). Evidence from Syria has additionally pointed to the opportunity of implementing a system-wide Action Plan for Change using the AAP framework as a catalyst. The Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG) for the cross-border operation in north-west Syria used feedback from displaced Syrian communities to shift the response’s shelter approach thanks to support from the CBPFs (UN OCHA, 2022d).

### What are the gaps in the literature?

- **Limited evidence from interface with CHS:** while the Core Humanitarian Standard is integrated into the 2022 CBPFs Global Guidelines, there is no public evidence of its interface with pooled funds. Gathering lessons learnt and good practices on this would serve to inform broader assessments of enablers and obstacles and could provide a blueprint for the adjustment / future set up of other pooled funds.
- **Use of pooled funds to support collective mechanisms to communicate with communities and address feedback:** there is interest highlighted in the literature in using pooled funds to bypass individual organisational incentives and support a collective response-wide approaches to AAP. Evidence is, however, scattered and would benefit from an in-depth look into what type of flexibility would be required to address feedback consistently and how pooled funds should be further adjusted in case.
- **Scaling up good practices:** examples of good practice of pooled funds advancing AAP have started to surface in the literature on AAP. These examples, however, are still presented quite broadly and would benefit from a dedicated understanding of the conditions / criteria that enabled them to be considered as good practice so that they could be further replicated.

## Summary of Gaps

The review above offers a scan of the existing literature on pooled funds with specific gaps identified in each of the areas considered. There are common threads running through these gaps, which have been summarised below for ease of reference.

### Nuancing perspectives

The review of the literature has shown that there is a need to nuance perspectives. There are very few documents presenting the specific perspective of L/NNGOs as well as a disaggregated view of different NGO constituencies.

- Bottom-up L/NNGO perspective on pooled funds (which funds do they access, experience, recommendations)
- In-depth overview of perspectives, expectations, and recommendations of different types of NGOs about pooled funds as a general financing mechanism

### MEAL at an individual fund level

Pooled funds rely on fund-specific performance indicators. Overall, however, there is little evidence linking performance to stakeholder expectations and impact.

- Measurement tool from the perspective of the INGOs and L/NNGOs (how should success be defined?)
- Little evidence of outcome-level change (impact)
- Limited documented learning across funds

### Need for more comparative studies

To enhance complementarity across funds in any given contexts, and between pooled funds and other financing mechanisms, further studies highlighting the comparative value of the different funds would be helpful. There is little systemic sharing across funds nor is there a repository of lessons learned and support for new funds being created. Even the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, which serves as the platform and administrative home for more than 200 funds and has key data on each fund, has not published thematic learning reports on key strategic issues for pooled funds, whether on their set up, on how to enhance complementarity across funds, on comparative value. An analysis of the following is missing:

- Funds versus other funds;
- Funds versus bilateral funding in the same contexts;
- Further study on NGO-led pooled fund mechanisms and pooled fund variants (basket funds, quick response funds, single donor pooled funding mechanisms and consortium funding models).



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“...further studies highlighting the comparative value of the different funds would be helpful. There is little systemic sharing across funds nor is there a repository of lessons learned and support for new funds being created.”

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### Pooled funds in the overall system

The literature has shown the close interrelation between the performance/effectiveness of pooled funds and that of the broader humanitarian system. Yet, there are very few studies on the questions below:

- Role of pooled funds in rethinking humanitarian financing system;
- Limited assessment of impact and forward vision on Localization, Nexus, and AAP;
- Impact of increasing pooled funds (trends);
- Limited coordination within a capacity building/funding ecosystem.

## Future Trends

Before delving into possible ways forward for ICVA regarding its positioning on pooled funds, it can be helpful to draw a brief analysis of future trends. This section does not pretend to be exhaustive nor to provide an in-depth analysis of different trends. Its aim is rather to draw attention to two specific sets of considerations which can help influence the way forward.

### Scope and size of pooled funds

There is no doubt as to the potential theoretical impact of pooled funds on the quality of crisis response. That is why there is still a strong interest in pooled funding despite their limited reach. To achieve their full potential, however, pooled funds would need to constitute a significant portion of funding for humanitarian action. While there has been a steady increase in the share of humanitarian funding channelled through pooled funds, it still accounts for less than 10%. It is expected that contributions to pooled funds will continue to grow by 2030, but it is unlikely that the balance of power between different funding volumes will look much different. There is no clear forward looking or consolidated strategy for humanitarian donors on pooled funds. Looking at the commitments set out in the UN Funding Compact aiming to double the share of non-core contributions to the UN provide through development pooled funds as a proxy, that commitment is on track, but it has gone from 5% in 2017 to 11,7 % in 2020 (UN, 2022). At the same time, the number of Member State contributors to development-related inter-agency pooled funds has decreased between 2017 and 2020 (Ibid.). There appears to be interest from donors to invest into pooled funds, but questions remain not only as to the volume but also as to whether the base of donors interested in them will be broadening. Further questions remain as to the interest of various stakeholders (from donors to agencies) to invest into a full rethink and implementation of current humanitarian coordination structures which are interconnected with the effective impact of pooled funds.

Recent trends have shown that there is an interest in setting up different models of pooled funds (humanitarian, nexus, development, NGO-led, global thematic pooled funds) as well as funds being used as 'quick fixes' to secure significant and quality financing. The volume of official development assistance (ODA) provided by multilateral development banks to the annual largest 20 recipients of humanitarian assistance has grown significantly, doubling from US\$5.8 billion in 2015, to US\$11.6 billion in 2020 (Development Initiatives, 2022). The World Bank in particular is providing more financing through crisis-focused mechanisms that increasingly intersect with traditional humanitarian response. Especially if reach and aims are not considered in complementarity across different funding streams, competition, and duplication across funds and with agency funding is to be expected. Effective donor coordination with funds considered as donors in their own right will remain essential.

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## Climate financing

With the number of climate-related disasters continuing to rise, there is an expectation that climate finance “could present one option for alleviating pressure on humanitarian systems” (Development Initiatives, 2022), including as channelled through pooled funds. Climate finance should be balanced between finance for mitigation and for adaptation. There is a clearly defined expectation that funding for climate adaptation and mitigation should be in addition to other funding commitments. Yet, some adaptation funding seems to be reported both as humanitarian and climate financing (Development Initiatives, 2022). Currently, only a small proportion of climate finance goes to countries already at risk of multiple crises in fragile and conflict-affected states (ICRC, ODI, ICVA, Mercy Corps, RCCC, UNHCR, WFP, 2022). Most of the climate finance going to fragile and conflict-affected contexts come from multilateral climate funds (90%) in the form of grants (Ibid.). Given the intersection of climate risks and fragility, and the increased attention to the measures needed to tackle climate-dependent developments, humanitarian actors have started identifying ways to better integrate the different agendas in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (ICRC, 2021; ICRC, ODI, ICVA, Mercy Corps, RCCC, UNHCR, WFP, 2022). At the COP27 Climate Summit donors pledged new funding for the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) and Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF) and several others backed the funds’ ambitious goals for meeting the most urgent adaptation needs (Global Environment Facility, 2022). While equally adopted at COP27, the Loss and Damage Fund is yet to be defined more clearly. Climate funds will in any case increasingly work alongside other pre-existing pooled funds and will need to tackle similar questions around tolerance to risk, risk of fragmentation and reaching the local level. They are mechanisms that humanitarian actors, including NGOs, should be aware of and include in any analysis of complementary added value across funds in any given context.

## Way Forward for ICVA

The review of the literature has shown the attention pooled funds have garnered as a humanitarian financing tool in recent years. Pooled funds have grown in number and funding levels, and they have been increasingly used to help meet the commitments agreed to in the Grand Bargain. Not needing to justify their value anymore, pooled funds are currently at a crossroads as new models and approaches emerge. In practice, such funds channel only a small percentage of the overall humanitarian funding and are not without constraints. The literature shows that some improvements in their ways of working and performance are still needed. A comprehensive analysis of the relative value of pooled funds for their different types of stakeholders is also missing. Is it worth paying attention to them?

It is not a matter of whether to invest into influencing their future progress or not, but rather how. Pooled funds hold the promise of better-quality funding – flexible and unearmarked – and for many L/NNGOs, they are the sole source of direct funding. Not having to rely on pass through funding from operational agencies, pooled funds are a critical element in the sustainability of many L/NNGOs. They can be an incredible ‘force for good’ to create space for innovation, enable greater coordination and more effective humanitarian responses. They do operate, however, within a humanitarian architecture that has its own shortcomings. Where the system works well, pooled funds have already demonstrated their potential. Where it does not, pooled funds are not able alone to change the rules of the game. To fully fulfil their promises, pooled funds will need not only to grow but also to be looked at as an essential component of any reform of the humanitarian coordination architecture needed.

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With the current promise of an increased proliferation of pooled funds in the future and a diversification of their models, it will be important to track their progress. There are undoubted advantages in leveraging the complementarity of the different funds with other financing tools and across pooled funds available in any given context. There is also a risk that complementarity gives way to competition especially in the absence of a clear analysis of the comparative value of each fund and in the case of drops in overall humanitarian funding flows. ICVA and their members have an important role to play in charting the way for pooled funds to fulfil their promise for all – donors, INGOs, L/NNGOs alike.

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“There is also a risk that that complementarity gives way to competition especially in the absence of a clear analysis of the comparative value of each fund and in the case of drops in overall humanitarian funding flows.”

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### **MENA**

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(Coordination)

## Geneva Office

Humanitarian Hub, La Voie-Creuse 16, 1202 Geneva  
[secretariat@icvanetwork.org](mailto:secretariat@icvanetwork.org)  
[www.icvanetwork.org](http://www.icvanetwork.org)