



National Audit Office



REPORT

Responding to sudden-onset humanitarian crises

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

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Key facts

£86.8mn

cost of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's (FCDO's) Humanitarian Crisis Response Department (HCRD) supporting responses to 12 sudden-onset crises (excluding staff costs), 2023-24 to 2025-26

19

number of sudden-onset crisis responses supported by HCRD, December 2021 to October 2025

608,000

estimated number of people supported by HCRD through core relief items, such as tents, hygiene kits and other items, November 2022 to October 2025

- 280** FCDO posts in 180 countries and territories, which are responsible for preparing to respond to crises, as at February 2026
- 59** FCDO humanitarian adviser roles across its global network, as at March 2026
- 72 hours** time within which the UK search and rescue team arrived in Turkey following the earthquake in February 2023
- 178** FCDO deployments of contracted specialist humanitarian professionals to support crises, November 2022 to October 2025
- £75 million** FCDO allocation to its Humanitarian Crisis Fund for 2026-27, which can be drawn on when response costs are not affordable from existing budgets
- £52 million** UK contribution to the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund, the second largest contribution in 2025

Summary

1 The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) leads the UK government's response to humanitarian crises overseas, including those caused by conflicts, natural disasters, extreme weather events, and diseases. Some crises occur suddenly, such as earthquakes, and are known as sudden-onset crises. Others emerge over time and can become protracted crises which require long-term support, such as those due to drought or conflict. Each crisis can require a different response, depending on factors including its location and the immediate impact of the crisis. FCDO responds to these crises through its overseas network of 280 posts, supported by geographical directorates and central teams. Before FCDO was created by the merger in 2020, this work was done by the Department for International Development (DFID).

2 FCDO's Humanitarian Crisis Response Department (HCRD) coordinates efforts to respond to sudden-onset humanitarian crises centrally, providing guidance and support to posts and regions. Most responses are managed between HCRD and teams in posts or regions. When a crisis overwhelms normal structures, FCDO can enter crisis mode to coordinate a response that may involve humanitarian, political and consular components. Since 2021, HCRD has supported 19 sudden-onset humanitarian responses.

3 Most of the cost of FCDO's crisis responses is counted as UK Official Development Assistance (ODA). The ODA budget is due to reduce from 0.5% to 0.3% of Gross National Income by 2027. However, FCDO aims to maintain a leading humanitarian role, prioritise spending on crises such as Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, and support multilateral organisations that respond to humanitarian emergencies.¹

¹ Multilateral organisations refer to international organisations such as the World Bank, United Nations agencies and international charities, supported by multiple donors. Bilateral spending is earmarked spending where the donor has specified where and on what the ODA is spent, and is usually to specific countries, regions, or programmes.

Scope and purpose of the report

4 This report examines whether FCDO responds effectively to sudden-onset humanitarian crises. Such crises require rapid decisions on whether and how the UK should intervene, and a surge of funding, staff and specialist capabilities to provide a response. These demands can place pressure on FCDO's capacity and funding, creating risks to value for money, at a time when FCDO is reducing its spending and workforce. In this report, we examine:

- FCDO's strategy and approach to sudden-onset humanitarian crisis response;
- FCDO's humanitarian capacity and core capabilities needed to continue responding; and
- the cost, speed and impact of FCDO's responses and the extent to which it evaluates and learns lessons from previous crises.

5 We do not examine FCDO's management of long-term ODA programmes, or foreign policy or consular responses which do not have a significant humanitarian dimension.

Key findings

Strategy and approach to responding to humanitarian crises

6 **The global humanitarian situation has worsened in recent years.** Conflict and climate shocks are causing more frequent and complex crises around the world. The United Nations estimated that the number of people requiring urgent humanitarian assistance and protection as a result of crises increased from 168 million in 2020 to 239 million by the end of 2025. This is increasing pressure on the global humanitarian system. However, global humanitarian funding has fallen, in cash terms, from \$19.5 billion in 2020 to \$16 billion in 2025. Many of the world's major donors have reduced their aid budgets. In 2025, the UK announced its aid budget would reduce from 0.5% to 0.3% of Gross National Income by 2027. This will mean the ODA budget is around £9.2 billion in 2027 (paragraphs 1.3, 1.4 and Figure 1).

7 FCDO has a long history of responding to humanitarian crises and continues to prioritise this work. We reported on DFID's response to crises in 2016 and found that it had responded to over 30 humanitarian crises between 2011 and 2016.² When it decides to provide support, FCDO responds to sudden-onset humanitarian crises in several ways, including assistance through its network of posts overseas. Between late-2021 and 2025, HCRD supported posts' responses to 19 sudden-onset humanitarian crises, including responses to floods in Pakistan and Libya and a disease outbreak in Rwanda. In the context of its reducing aid budget, FCDO has committed to prioritise spending on humanitarian crises, global health and climate. For 2026-27 to 2028-29, the UK plans to spend approximately £1.4 billion a year in places with the highest humanitarian need (paragraphs 1.5 to 1.9 and Figures 2 and 4).

8 FCDO responds to crises by drawing on capabilities in its central team, its partners, and across its overseas network. FCDO's network of 280 posts in 180 countries and territories can respond themselves to relatively small-scale crises. For larger crises, FCDO can enter crisis mode, enabling a coordinated response led by the responsible geographic or thematic area, supported by the Crisis Management Department (CMD), with HCRD working on the humanitarian part of the response. HCRD also supports posts with medium- to large-scale crises through a range of capabilities. This involves HCRD's own humanitarian expertise and capabilities, including search and rescue and medical services delivered by its partners, and the Humanitarian Crisis Fund (HCF) which is a fund of last resort for such crises. FCDO allocated £100 million to the HCF in 2025-26 and £75 million in 2026-27. FCDO also responds to humanitarian crises through contributions to multilateral organisations and global funds. HCRD provides training and guidance to posts, but there have been challenges for some posts to fully understand or use HCRD's services (paragraphs 1.12 to 1.16, 1.19 to 1.21 and Figures 4, 5 and 6).

² Comptroller and Auditor General, *Responding to crises*, Session 2015-16, HC 612, National Audit Office, January 2016.

9 FCDO has a high-level aim to maintain the UK's humanitarian rapid response capability but lacks a strategic assessment of its critical capability requirements.

The UK Humanitarian Framework (2022) set out FCDO's ambitions for humanitarian preparedness and response. Since then, the government has made commitments to maintain its leading humanitarian role and to prioritise bilateral support for crises such as Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, as well as supporting multilateral organisations responding to humanitarian emergencies. FCDO allocates ODA funding to individual countries based on factors including humanitarian need, global health, climate vulnerability, fragility and geopolitics. HCRD intends to maintain global coverage of sudden-onset humanitarian crises and has processes that guide its decision making on when and how best to respond. Reduced funding increases the risk that FCDO will not be able to deliver effective and timely humanitarian responses. In this context, while FCDO does review its capability requirements for major programme contracts before it renews them, it has not yet carried out an overall assessment of the humanitarian capabilities required across the organisation to meet its objectives (paragraphs 1.5, 1.6 and 1.16 to 1.18).

Humanitarian capacity and response capabilities

10 FCDO's ability to respond to sudden-onset humanitarian crises has been affected by organisational pressures on its humanitarian capacity, including the impact of the 2020 merger and FCDO's ongoing transformation programme.

Our report on the 2020 merger of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and DFID identified some benefits of improved cooperation between foreign policy and humanitarian efforts, such as in Ukraine. FCDO has found that humanitarian preparedness and response is not prioritised consistently, and HCRD is working with CMD to fully integrate humanitarian response into FCDO's wider crisis response. The FCDO2030 transformation programme will also affect FCDO's workforce, with headcount reducing by up to 25%. As at March 2026, FCDO had 59 humanitarian adviser roles across its global network. Reduced geographic humanitarian capacity poses a key risk to its ability to meet its aims. Our case studies reflect this, with all six posts involved either experiencing a lack of capacity or a risk of future lack of capacity. FCDO has set out a high-level framework for skills it needs and is developing a workforce strategy. This will need to include an assessment of FCDO's critical humanitarian capacity requirements across its overseas network (paragraphs 1.14, 1.15, 1.17, 2.2 to 2.7 and Figure 7).

11 FCDO has an effective model of using a specialist supplier to provide rapid response capabilities, including deployments, early warning information and expert logistics support. The Humanitarian Emergency Response Operations and Stabilisation (HEROS) programme is delivered primarily by a supplier, Palladium International Ltd. HEROS provides FCDO technical and operational expertise, including early warning analysis, deployable humanitarian expertise and specialist logistical support during crises. Palladium supported FCDO with 28 responses between 2023 and 2025. This included providing 74 early warning risk briefs, 178 humanitarian deployments, and core relief items (such as tents and hygiene kits) to support an estimated 608,000 people. An independent evaluation of the HEROS programme in 2023 reported that the main stakeholders considered that HEROS was critical for enabling effective and timely responses to crises (paragraphs 2.7 to 2.11 and Figures 8 and 9).

12 FCDO uses proven specialist capabilities, other government departments and multilateral organisations to enhance its humanitarian responses across a range of contexts. Through HCRD's Emergency Deployments Team 2 programme, the UK government can deploy emergency medical and search and rescue capabilities to respond to humanitarian crises. For example, in 2024, the UK Emergency Medical Team supported the Rwanda government to curtail the Marburg virus disease outbreak, and in 2023 the UK International Search and Rescue team rescued eight people following the Turkey–Syria earthquake. FCDO coordinates with other government departments and agencies. For instance, during the Hurricane Melissa response in Jamaica, the Ministry of Defence provided military engineers to support urgent repairs and distributed hygiene kits. FCDO also funds multilateral organisations, including the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and global pooled funds, including the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), to which FCDO contributed £52 million in 2025 (the second largest contribution that year). These contributions can enable larger-scale responses when compared with bilateral assistance, provide reach in places with little or no FCDO presence, and release funds within hours of crises occurring. As budgets reduce, FCDO expects to rely more on such organisations and pooled funds to respond to small- to medium-scale crises (paragraphs 2.12 to 2.14 and Figures 11 and 12).

13 HCRD is actively working to improve FCDO's preparedness for humanitarian crises and the resilience of countries affected by emergencies. Preparing for, strengthening resilience to, and anticipating humanitarian crises can be more cost-effective than responding once a crisis has occurred. FCDO sees this as increasingly important. Its crisis doctrine, which sets out the fundamental principles for responding to overseas crises, has "90% preparation" as a key principle of its crisis management approach. HCRD supports FCDO's country posts to be prepared through risk analysis, early warning, preparedness training, and access to rapid support through partners. When responding to the Bangladesh floods (2024) and Hurricane Melissa (2025), FCDO's preparedness played an important role in enabling a fast and effective response. HCRD also works with its partners to build emergency response capability in some affected countries, such as Ethiopia and Malawi, strengthening resilience to future crises (paragraphs 2.18 to 2.21 and Figure 12).

Monitoring performance, costs and impact

14 FCDO is able to respond to sudden-onset humanitarian crises in a timely manner. Timeliness is often critical to saving lives and increasing the value for money of a response. It can also reduce the risk of emergencies becoming protracted, and therefore the scale, duration and cost of the response required later. We have seen in our case studies that FCDO's range of capabilities can respond quickly, whether delivering core relief items, or deploying expert personnel or emergency response teams. In the Turkey–Syria earthquake, the search and rescue team was deployed within 72 hours of the earthquake, while deployment of a team within three days of Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica meant that the UK was one of the first responders. FCDO has maintained timely responses despite operational challenges. These include difficulty in obtaining information in rapidly evolving contexts, and continuity of staff at overseas posts (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.4 and Figure 12).

15 FCDO does not centrally track the full costs of responding to sudden-onset humanitarian crises, which means it cannot judge the relative cost-effectiveness of its responses. FCDO had to undertake in-depth work with posts to provide us with financial data on HCRD-supported responses, as its accounting system is not configured to categorise spending in the way needed for this purpose. The data showed that the cost of HCRD-supported responses, from the Humanitarian Crisis Fund and from reprioritised budgets, for 2023-24 to 2025-26 was £86.8 million (responding to 12 crises). This decreased from £36.5 million in 2023-24 to £8.5 million in 2025-26 (excluding FCDO staff costs). This lack of comprehensive cost data means FCDO does not have a complete picture of overall spending on sudden-onset humanitarian crises or the cost-effectiveness of its capabilities. This limits FCDO's ability to assess value for money and to make informed trade-offs between different response options (paragraphs 1.20, 3.8 and Figure 6).

16 There are gaps in FCDO's central performance information, which limits its ability to evaluate the performance and outcomes of individual crisis responses.

In sudden-onset crises, the need to prioritise speed can mean FCDO puts less emphasis on capturing information on performance and results. HCRD does monitor the performance of its partners using performance frameworks and annual reviews. These are useful management tools, although they do not focus on how well FCDO responded to individual crises. In late 2023, HCRD introduced indicators for measuring aspects of its responses to crises, including the number of beneficiaries reached. It has collated data for eight of the 11 crises that it responded to since then. It also runs lessons learned exercises covering operational processes for individual responses, and there are examples of FCDO applying lessons in subsequent responses, such as faster deployment of a humanitarian field team during the Hurricane Melissa response. However, while HCRD is responsible for the core capabilities, it does not have a complete view of the results of the responses to crises, which FCDO's regions and posts are more likely to have. External reviews of HCRD's programmes also found that data limitations made it difficult to draw conclusions about results achieved. Previous ODA cuts resulted in reductions in monitoring, evaluation and learning budgets, and further cuts increase the risk of these activities being constrained. Without better monitoring, data and evaluation, FCDO's ability to demonstrate the value for money of its response work and make effective decisions on where to prioritise resources will be constrained (paragraphs 2.11, 3.5, 3.6, 3.10, 3.11, 3.14 and 3.15).

17 FCDO's responses to humanitarian crises have had clear benefits, including through the rapid delivery of aid, deployment of expertise and influencing of other humanitarian organisations. Although impacts are not aggregated centrally, we have seen examples of these through our case studies. We have also seen the positive influence that FCDO has on other humanitarian organisations. FCDO took a leading role in the response to Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica and has been an advocate for anticipatory funding in the United Nations CERF. It also influenced local organisations and the government in Bangladesh to strengthen national needs assessments and disaster-management response processes (paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7).

Conclusion

18 FCDO has strong operational arrangements in place for responding rapidly and effectively to a range of humanitarian crises. It maintains and uses deployable capabilities and partnerships which enable it to quickly mobilise expertise and relief items and to achieve positive humanitarian impacts.

19 FCDO is now operating in a context of increasing humanitarian demand and significantly constrained resources, which means that it will increasingly have to prioritise its responses in future. It has a high-level vision for its rapid response capabilities, with a focus on preparedness and resilience. FCDO lacks, however, a strategic assessment of its future needs for humanitarian capabilities, as well as consolidated performance and cost information. Without addressing these limitations, particularly as resources tighten, FCDO risks undermining its ability to maximise the long-term effectiveness and value for money of its crisis response function.

Recommendations

20 The following recommendations are aimed at strengthening FCDO's ability to respond to sudden-onset humanitarian crises.

- a** FCDO should complete a strategic assessment of the resources it needs to deliver rapid, effective humanitarian responses under reduced ODA budgets. This should identify which capabilities should be prioritised for funding and set out how FCDO's organisational transformation is expected to affect capacity and effectiveness, particularly across the overseas network.
- b** FCDO should strengthen how it communicates its offer and training for overseas posts, ensuring that posts clearly understand the capabilities available to them through HCRD and how to access the support effectively. FCDO should ensure it has arrangements to assure itself that posts understand and apply this offer and training.
- c** FCDO should prioritise its own preparedness activities and building the resilience of affected countries in high-risk geographies to respond to crises. It should track progress in these geographies against stated objectives for preparedness and resilience.
- d** FCDO should define and monitor a set of central performance indicators for sudden-onset humanitarian crisis response, covering speed, quality, capability deployment and results. It should require these metrics to be applied consistently across humanitarian crisis responses, by a combination of HCRD, geographic regions and posts – depending on responsibilities for responding to each crisis.

- e** FCDO should explore options for improving the quality, completeness and usability of its cost information for humanitarian crisis response. It should then make practical improvements, enabling it to routinely assess value for money. Better cost information should be used to inform its decisions on the overall size and use of the HCF.
- f** FCDO should improve how it identifies, disseminates and implements lessons from humanitarian crisis reviews, with an increased focus on the outcomes achieved. The process should involve HCRD, geographic regions, posts and CMD where appropriate. HCRD and CMD should ensure these lessons are used to inform future planning, programme design, guidance, and humanitarian crisis response delivery across FCDO.