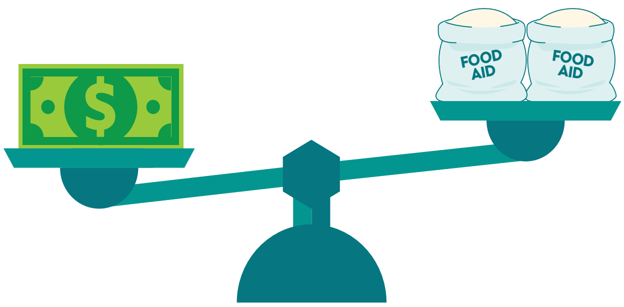
CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

Prioritisation exercises in 2024 and 2025 forced rapid choices about what to fund and raised questions about the results of humanitarian action: where the system was most effective and how it could deliver more with less.

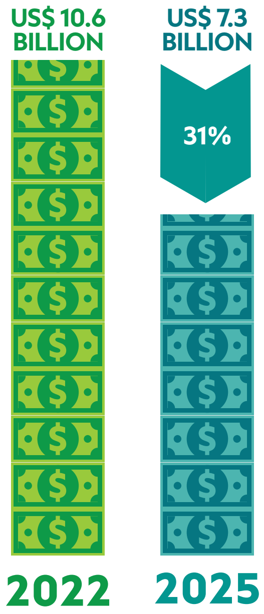
The clearest evidence of what the system could achieve came from climate-driven food crises in Somalia, where large-scale food assistance helped to avert famine, and in Afghanistan, where aid played an essential role in ensuring access to food and improving food security. The clearest evidence of its limits came from Sudan, Gaza and Haiti, where access obstruction, political paralysis and funding shortfalls proved decisive and led to catastrophic food insecurity and two famines. The system delivered rapid responses to epidemics but struggled to contain outbreaks; displacement, sharp reductions in immunisation and collapsed water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) systems drove cholera and other outbreaks. Funding cuts reversed gains in some sectors; for example, nutrition programming had achieved impressive results despite severe constraints in Yemen and Ethiopia, but in 2025 the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated disruptions to nutrition services for at least 14 million children against a backdrop of ongoing child stunting. Protection remained chronically underfunded as conflict-related sexual violence rose, and funding cuts ended safe spaces and other protection activities outright in some locations. Effectiveness depended as much on funding and access as on technical capabilities and community engagement.

For most responses, the measurement infrastructure simply did not exist to demonstrate whether and how lives were being saved, and outcome-level evidence remained scarce, making it difficult for the system to respond to the political moment.

However, there was progress. Responses were faster where organisations had pre-positioned supplies, anticipatory financing or established local partnerships, and new evidence strengthened the case for acting before crises peaked: anticipatory activations tripled, though they still attract only around 1% of humanitarian funding. Cash had the strongest evidence base of



Cash was found to be 37.5% more efficient than food aid.



Cash held at 21% of total humanitarian assistance in 2025 but in absolute terms dropped to 31% below its peak in 2022.

any modality and was 37.5% more efficient than food aid. Even so, in absolute terms, funding for cash and voucher assistance (CVA) fell for a third consecutive year to 31% below its 2022 peak.

Recipients' satisfaction with quality rose but satisfaction with timeliness fell, with delays worst in protracted and displacement crises. Aid practitioners tended to describe *quality* through technical standards, while people affected by crisis tended to refer to issues of dignity, relevance and regularity. The system's focus on acute lifesaving did not always match people's priorities: 17% of aid recipients said the main way aid could improve was helping them become independent and resilient, and communities in many protracted crises prioritised livelihoods and education alongside immediate relief. Digital technology expanded rapidly and supported efficient cash delivery, but there were not enough safeguards: fewer than half of aid recipients understood how their data was used, there were risks around huge increases in biometric data and the period was bookended by major cyberattacks.

Requirements per person targeted grew to US$255 (see Chapter 1.1) but, under pressure to do more with less, the funding per person reached almost halved, from US$178 in 2021 to US$90 in 2025. Organisations invested in cost-measurement tools and the Humanitarian Reset began consolidating clusters and back-office functions. The link between cost evidence and allocation decisions remained weak, however, and structural inefficiencies persisted, including heavy earmarking, multiyear funding not reaching partners and long funding chains. Short funding cycles and late disbursement were common, despite clear evidence that they forced more expensive operating models. The environmental and workforce wellbeing costs of humanitarian operations remained largely excluded from costs, with organisations often treating packaging waste, carbon emissions and frontline staff wellbeing as externalities. With a growing focus on cost, practitioners warned that a race to the bottom would reduce quality of assistance.