

CHAPTER 2.2

WHAT MAKES HUMANITARIAN ACTION EFFECTIVE

'[Aid] was on time because everyone was motivated to help as soon as possible, wherever it was possible.'

— Local aid worker, Ukraine

The story of this period was one of technical gains: the system developed faster processes and supply chains, digitised, and invested in improving cash and coordination. Pre-positioned supplies,^x anticipatory action and rapid disbursements of pooled funds improved response times. Recipients consistently preferred cash, which also held the strongest evidence base of any modality. Analysis of US\$11.4 billion of humanitarian spending found cash support was 37.5% more efficient than food aid, and digital tools increased the speed and scale of delivery in major responses, including Ukraine. However, the system did not consistently incorporate people's perspectives on aid priorities or quality. Humanitarian organisations made improvements against the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) and other technical standards, but they did not respond adequately to feedback. Digital technologies provided some benefits, but there were too few safeguards; only 41% of aid recipients understood how their data was used – and cyberattacks increased. Humanitarian coordination structures improved quality where they functioned well and were the focus of sustained reform attention - but practitioners highlighted longstanding challenges and a need for better coordination beyond the international system.

Timeliness, anticipatory action and logistics

Surveyed aid recipients reported slightly lower satisfaction with timeliness than in the previous reporting period: only 53% said they were satisfied with how quickly assistance reached them, compared with 58% in 2022. However, there was significant variation. In some places, organisations pre-positioned supplies and

x Essential food, material or equipment stored in or close to high-risk locations before a disaster or crisis occurs.



partnerships, or secured pre-arranged financing, and funding and response times were fast (sometimes strikingly so); but a senior evaluator underscored that in many contexts, delayed donor financing, administrative processes and access slowed delivery. In Sudan, for example, these factors led to huge delays; one Sudanese person living in Kassala told us:



'Camp residents wait three to four weeks, or even up to five months in some locations, between food or non-food item deliveries.'

Across all case-study contexts, local organisations and volunteers were the first responders. In Sudan, volunteers explained they opened schools as shelters and distributed food and water 'well before major non-governmental organisations arrived'. In Ukraine, local organisations told us aid:



'was on time because everyone was motivated to help as soon as possible, wherever it was possible.'

In North Kordofan, Sudan, where formal humanitarian channels were largely absent in early parts of the crisis, Emergency Response Room community kitchens were partly sustained by diaspora funding. Although irregular, local humanitarians told us that diaspora remittances moved quickly and responded to specific needs identified by trusted individuals. In Myanmar, a displaced volunteer described how local volunteer groups verified needs in real time, 'operating around the clock, with staff rotating shifts to maintain full service'. There were some examples of the formal system engaging with these informal responses, although they were limited (see [Chapter 4.1](#)).

The timeliness of assistance was worst in protracted and internal-displacement crises. A review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) response to internal displacement in six countries found that, in protracted settings, the system was slow to recognise displacement situations early enough to prepare, and lacked both effective leadership to mobilise rapidly and mechanisms to transition out of emergency mode following the acute phase.¹⁴³ In Mozambique, the cluster system took four years to activate in response to conflict in the north, by which point the number of internally displaced people had risen from 100,000 to 646,000.¹⁴⁴ In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), an emergency appeal for 600,000 displaced people was only issued eight months after their initial displacement.¹⁴⁵



The system was slow to recognise displacement situations early enough to prepare



International organisations were able to respond quickest when they had pre-positioned supplies and established partnerships. In 2024, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) delivered supplies in Cuba within 72 hours of Hurricane



Oscar and in Brazil within 24 hours of severe flooding. The agency attributed this to pre-positioned stocks,¹⁴⁶ and it pre-positioned US\$9 million of ready-to-use therapeutic food in Burkina Faso and Nigeria.¹⁴⁷



Pooled funds with anticipatory-action windows and streamlined allocation processes often improved the speed of funding delivery and early-response actions



The State of the Humanitarian System 2022 (SOHS) found that timeliness was structurally dependent on financing architecture rather than operational capacity alone. The same was true in the 2022–25 period: the pace of donor responses influenced overall response speed in the Caribbean,¹⁴⁸ Haiti¹⁴⁹ and Sudan,¹⁵⁰ as well as for epidemic responses.¹⁵¹ Pooled funds with anticipatory-action windows and streamlined allocation processes often improved the speed of funding delivery and early-response actions. For example, Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) guidelines stated that first

disbursements should occur within 10 working days of project signature, and 2022 data showed that disbursements averaged 9.5 days.¹⁵² In 2023, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund distributed rapid reserve allocations in 24–28 hours. The OneGMS digital grant-management platform improved allocation workflows for the Central Emergency Response Fund and CBPFs, which reportedly further reduced administrative bottlenecks.¹⁵³ However, local humanitarians told us that improvements in finance timeliness did not always reach local organisations. A Trócaire pilot across five countries pre-positioned €10,000–25,000 in flexible funds with local partner organisations, allowing them to bypass approval delays (see [Chapter 4.1](#)).¹⁵⁴

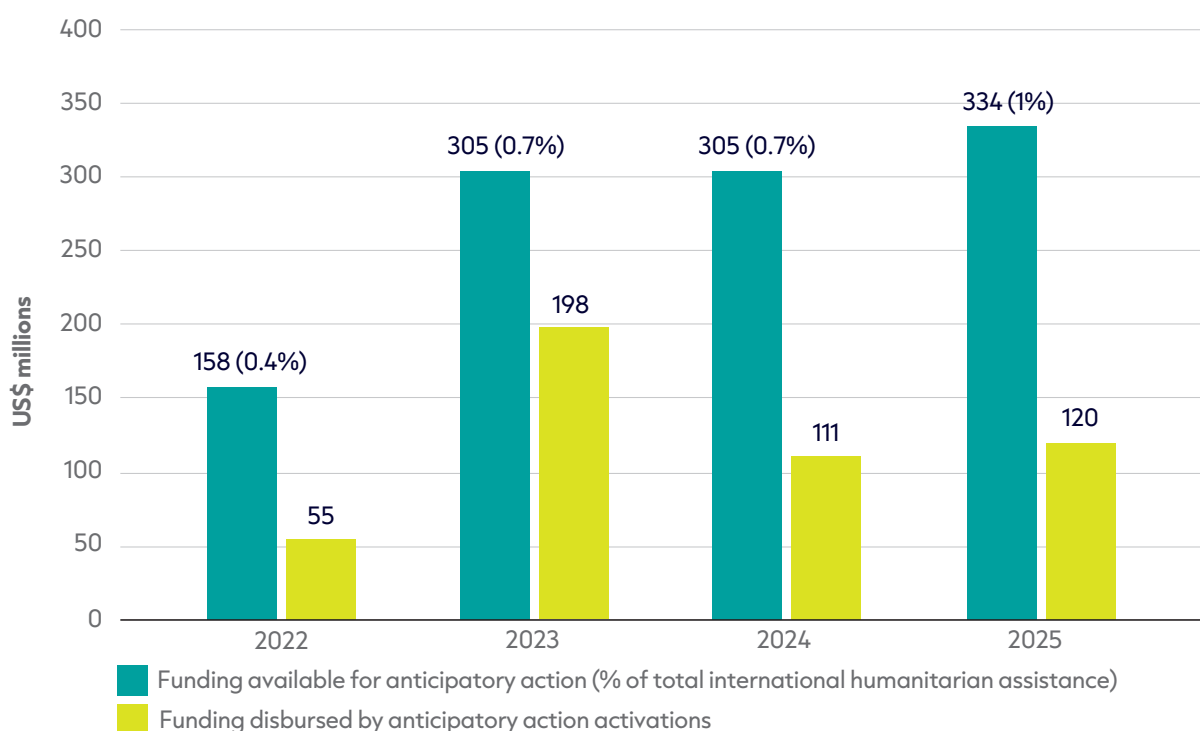
Many organisations showed substantial interest in anticipatory action, and there was new evidence that it was a driver for timeliness and effectiveness.¹⁵⁵ For example, a World Food Programme (WFP) synthesis noted that eight of 10 studies measuring food consumption found a positive effect from anticipatory action, and 11 out of 14 studies confirmed that anticipatory cash transfers reduced people's reliance on negative coping strategies (such as skipping meals).¹⁵⁶

A synthesis of impact studies illustrated that anticipatory action plays different roles, depending on context and design.¹⁵⁷ In some settings, it functions as 'earlier aid', accelerating welfare gains that reactive assistance eventually delivers anyway.¹⁵⁸ This evidence mainly came from sudden-onset flooding. For example, randomised controlled trials during the 2022 Nepal floods and the 2024 Bangladesh floods showed that anticipatory cash transfers (US\$115 and US\$41 per household) led to better food security, fewer negative coping strategies and improved mental health in the weeks after the floods.¹⁵⁹ Those receiving anticipatory aid often fared better during the hazard itself, but once the post-shock group received transfers of equal

value (one to two months later), differences in food security and coping outcomes narrowed or disappeared.

In more severe shocks, there was evidence that anticipatory aid unlocks protective and adaptive actions that reactive aid is too late to enable.¹⁶⁰ For example, in northern Nigeria, a large US\$400 lump sum per household produced no significant short-term consumption gains over post-shock aid, but it unlocked protective decisions (reinforcing shelters, safeguarding assets, pre-positioning, preparing for displacement). In Mongolia, early transfers (averaging US\$236 per household) helped the poorest herders maintain a critical threshold of animals through an extreme winter. The synthesis concluded that proactive action required transfers to be large and structured (typically lump-sum) and for the shock to unfold within a clear window that offered households feasible early actions.¹⁶¹

Figure 2.1: International humanitarian assistance available for anticipatory action and disbursed, 2022–2025



Source: Based on Anticipation Hub data.

Notes: ALNAP adapted the Anticipation Hub dataset by including missing activations in the active frameworks data for any given year. Caps on the total amount available under OCHA-coordinated frameworks in specific contexts have been taken into account to avoid double counting. Additional funding for frameworks under development (but nevertheless available) have been included in totals.



A recent summary of studies from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that every US\$1 spent on such action saved up to US\$7.¹⁶² Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated



cholera anticipatory action costs of US\$250,000 – up to 10 times cheaper than responding post-outbreak.¹⁶³ With a growing evidence base, funding rose to 1% of humanitarian spending in 2025 and funding disbursed through activations^{xi} reached 0.3% of total humanitarian assistance (US\$120 million).¹⁶⁴ Even so, this remained well short of the Grand Bargain caucus target of 5% of individual donor humanitarian budgets by 2026.

The largest funds for anticipatory action included the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF),¹⁶⁵ Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF)¹⁶⁶ and Start Ready.¹⁶⁷ Funding was concentrated in seven countries that absorbed 66% of all disbursed funding in 2025, and the average disbursement per activation fell to US\$821,000 – less than half the 2023 figure of US\$2 million – reflecting a pattern of more anticipatory action frameworks being set up with less money for each one.¹⁶⁸ Practitioners emphasised that scaling up anticipatory action would require substantially greater investment in systems, trigger mechanisms and relationships with government ministries (including financial ministries, where it is linked to social protection systems).

Where access permitted, significant investment in logistics and warehousing supported timelier delivery. In Ukraine and Gaza, the Logistics Cluster supported interagency convoys, enabling more predictable and timely access.¹⁶⁹ Warehouse optimisations enabled large quantities of assistance.¹⁷⁰ However, access obstruction remained a significant driver of delay. Blockades, security restrictions and the collapse of operational conditions (see [Chapter 3.1](#)) prevented timely delivery regardless of what had been pre-positioned or pre-financed. In the most constrained contexts, no amount of operational investment could substitute for the ability to reach people.

Quality

The humanitarian system invested heavily in quality frameworks over this period, with some indication of improvements. In our aid-recipient survey, 65% of respondents said they were satisfied with the quality of aid received (up from 56% in 2022) and 34% of aid practitioners identified quality as the area of greatest improvement over this period. Some commentators argued that definitions of quality were too technocratic¹⁷¹ and could be improved by being better contextualised with respect to community preferences.



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xi In anticipatory action, an 'activation' is the release of pre-arranged funds and the launch of the planned response when a forecast crosses an agreed trigger (for example, a flood or drought reaching a set threshold). Money is committed ahead of the shock and held until the trigger is met, then disbursed automatically, so assistance reaches people before or immediately after the hazard rather than after needs are assessed. The 'funding disbursed through activations' refers to money that actually flowed because a trigger was reached, which is a subset of total anticipatory action funding (some committed funds are never released if triggers are not met).



Reports also illustrated that quality was not consistent, with particular gaps for internally displaced people; for example, in one location, 'not a single Minimum Humanitarian Standard (formerly Sphere Standard) was being met in the [internally displaced people] response in Goma where 600,000 people had been displaced for over eight months'.¹⁷² The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) synthesis found that bridging the gap between delivery and outcomes required more consistent monitoring of the quality of goods and services.¹⁷³



When discussing quality, aid practitioners tended to emphasise technical standards while aid recipients tended to refer to relevance, regularity and dignity

When discussing quality, aid practitioners tended to emphasise technical standards while aid recipients tended to refer to relevance, regularity and dignity. In Sudan, food distributions that ignored dietary differences were described by aid recipients as low-quality. Long gaps between distributions were seen by aid recipients as a quality failure in both DRC and Sudan. The experience of accessing aid was itself a quality dimension. In Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, people described indignities in how aid was distributed; one Sudanese woman told us:



'We walk through the whole of the state to get water, it puts everyone in a humiliating situation and people experience bullying.'

However, there were also positive examples; another respondent in Sudan told us:



'There is no issue with quality. I was with Sadagaat [a Sudanese organisation] when they distributed the food, and there is no issues with the food and the quantities are enough, we also were asked if the food was good in terms of taste.'

Quality degraded under operational pressure. In Sudan, interviewees told us the government's denials of cholera included refusing to sign technical agreements with health organisations, resulting in medicines for infectious and chronic diseases being either unavailable or sold in markets at inflated prices. In Yemen, access restrictions and a lack of effective oversight resulted in the IAHE reporting poor-quality aid, including non-functioning hospital equipment and agricultural machinery, half-finished roads, out-of-date supplies, overflowing sewage tanks and no toilets at sites for internally displaced people.¹⁷⁴ In Myanmar, a respondent described water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) construction under time pressure:



'We had to quickly build 30 toilets ... couldn't give much thought to full WASH standards.'

In-country data illustrated that aid delivered with community knowledge supported targeting and quality. There was also evidence that technical standards improved the quality of assistance, particularly among local organisations delivering humanitarian assistance for the first time. In Ukraine, one local non-governmental organisation (NGO) described how they went from distributing whatever food they could find to distributing standardised packages; another local NGO followed specifications for briquette quality. In Gaza, both local and international organisations told us they used Minimum Humanitarian Standards to determine WASH requirements.

In-country data illustrated that aid delivered with community knowledge supported targeting and quality

The CHS revision placed greater emphasis on communities' active role in defining quality.¹⁷⁵ An impact assessment of the CHS found that it had helped to improve the quality of organisations' activities, with CHS scores increasing across successive audit cycles.¹⁷⁶ However, the lowest-scored commitment at every stage of the audit cycle was Commitment 5: 'complaints are welcomed and addressed'. This suggests that organisations found it easier to improve their internal systems than to build effective complaint mechanisms (see [Chapter 4.2](#)).

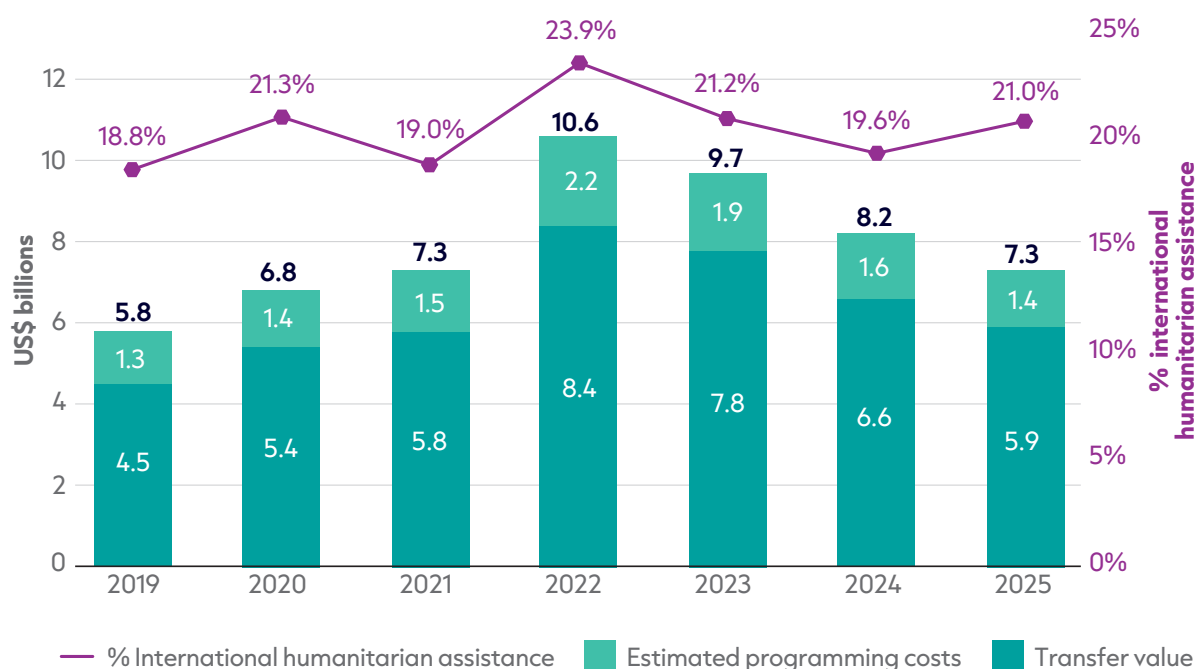
Cash

Cash and voucher assistance (CVA) was a central modality over the period and continued to have the strongest evidence base. Foundational debates about whether cash 'works' are largely settled; CALP Network's most recent *State of the World's Cash* report, which drew on nearly 100 key informant interviews and 860 practitioner survey responses, found broadly positive donor and practitioner attitudes; 86% of practitioners reported improvements in their organisation's

CVA funding fell 11% to US\$7.3 billion in 2025 31% below its 2022 peak

CVA preparedness and capacity.¹⁷⁷ The Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations' (DG ECHO) 2022 Cash Transfer Thematic Policy declared cash was 'the most efficient and effective way of getting humanitarian assistance to people ... whenever possible and appropriate'.¹⁷⁸

CVA held its ground at 21% of the share of total humanitarian assistance in 2025. However, in absolute terms, CVA funding fell 11% to US\$7.3 billion in 2025: the third consecutive annual decline, and 31% below its 2022 peak. While this was partially due to the winding down of the cash-heavy Ukraine and Türkiye–Syria responses,

Figure 2.2: International humanitarian assistance for CVA programming, 2019–2025

Source: Data on CVA volumes was collected by the CALP Network from implementing partners and supplemented with estimates based on the OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS) and Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) Projects Module.

Notes: CVA volumes are an estimate based on provided survey responses and supplemented with estimates based on FTS data. For a few number of organisations that have consistently reported surveys over the past eight years but weren't able to submit in time this year, an estimate was used based on their reported volume in 2024. Double counting of CVA programmes that are sub-granted from one implementing partner to another is avoided where data on this is available. Transfer values for funding captured on FTS and HPC Projects are estimates based on the average ratio of transfer values to overall programming costs for organisations with available data. Data is not available for all included organisations across all years. Data is in current prices.



other barriers persisted. There were government restrictions on cash transfers in parts of West and Central Africa, and practitioners noted that cash was disproportionately easy to scale down relative to other modalities. Additionally, political leadership and attention had shifted as cash came to be seen as a settled agenda, agency mandate competition fragmented multipurpose cash into sectoral silos, and progress on locally led cash delivery remained slow.

A CALP Network study drawing on data from US\$11.4 billion of humanitarian spending implemented between 2014 and 2025 found cash to be 37.5% more efficient than in-kind food aid.¹⁷⁹ On average, 71–77% of a cash or voucher budget reached recipients directly, compared to just 54–56% for in-kind food aid. Modality, partner type and programme scale all had far bigger effects on transfer percentage than contextual factors. Cash became more efficient at moderate scale, with larger cash programmes transferring 77% of the budget to recipients, while in-kind

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distributions did not change with scale. Across partner types, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and local and national NGOs delivered the most efficient cash assistance (91% and 84%, respectively);^{xii} UN agencies performed strongly on CVA modalities, but they were least efficient on in-kind aid; and international NGOs were least efficient for CVA, though their performance varied widely. Previous research had suggested that CVA could account for 30–50% of global humanitarian assistance, if used wherever feasible and appropriate.¹⁸⁰ This report concluded that if the humanitarian system comprehensively applied the efficiency levers it identifies, between US\$1.1 billion and US\$3.3 billion could be saved each year. A separate study on electronic cash found it also reduced the risk of diversion (see [Chapter 2.3](#)).¹⁸¹

Evaluation data found several factors eroded efficiency advantages in some operating environments. In Syria, pre-distribution security-clearance procedures reduced cash's cost advantage over vouchers and in-kind assistance; in contexts with inflation and currency depreciation, constant market assessments added operational costs;¹⁸² and in at least one sudden-onset disaster, agencies without prior cash experience found it 'very costly and even impossible' to set up delivery mechanisms at speed.¹⁸³ In Sudan in 2024, inflation reached nearly 177% and grain prices were 500% higher than in 2023; damage to banking infrastructure pushed some actors towards *hawala* systems^{xiii} previously unrecognised by donors.

This period showed that the system could move quickly to deliver cash. The Ukraine response saw the 'fastest and largest cash programming scale-up in history': US\$1.7 billion was delivered as CVA between February 2022 and October 2023, 46% of which was multipurpose cash.¹⁸⁴ This was enabled by a high level of digitisation and digital literacy, strong existing infrastructure, a relatively well-funded response and mature social protection systems.¹⁸⁵

Ukraine and other responses reinforced the case for cash. Findings from multiple household assessments and surveys across 14 contexts indicate a consistently high reported preference for cash assistance among surveyed populations in multiple countries; some 48–98% of respondents said they preferred cash assistance above other modalities.¹⁸⁶ The World Bank and WFP's review found that cash, vouchers and in-kind transfers were similarly effective, on average, though cash tended to increase non-food expenditure and improve household asset accumulation.¹⁸⁷ Evaluations noted that people valued the fungibility of cash and used it for food, household expenses and medical costs.¹⁸⁸ An evaluation in DRC stated that multipurpose cash played an important role in treating people who were endemically disadvantaged with dignity.¹⁸⁹

xii Though the Red Crescent/Red Cross figure was skewed by one large outlier.

xiii An informal money transfer system that moves value across distances through a network of brokers (*hawaladars*) on the basis of trust, without physically moving cash or using formal banking channels.



The 2022 *SOHS* found challenges for cash in the inclusion of some people living with disabilities, older people and irregular migrants, as well as suitability issues linked to market conditions. Despite advances, evidence during this period continued to underscore the need to consider infrastructure, digital literacy and the marginalisation of specific populations. People who were poorer, more food-insecure and in landlocked and logistically harder-to-reach areas were likely to be more costly to assist; researchers cautioned that cost efficiency should not become a way of excluding more vulnerable people.¹⁹⁰ Relatedly, while a 2025 systematic review of evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa found that social cash transfers improved material resources for female-headed households facing food insecurity, it was inconclusive regarding the effect on agency.¹⁹¹

There was increased interest in integrating cash with social protection, although this remained small-scale. Covid-19 demonstrated that national systems could be rapidly expanded at scale, prompting governments to create or extend digital payment infrastructure and registries of people affected by crises.¹⁹² The CALP Network's analysis found that delivery systems embedded within national frameworks appear to be more efficient than new humanitarian delivery mechanisms.¹⁹³ In the Somalia Baxnaano programme, DG ECHO worked with the World Bank to develop a shock-responsive component covering 1.2 million people at US\$20 per month, with temporary top-ups triggered by flooding or food insecurity.¹⁹⁴ WFP invested in expertise and networks and positioned itself as a key player in social protection.¹⁹⁵

Digital cash was used within diaspora responses as well as within the formal system, although there was rarely coordination between the two. In Afghanistan, diaspora groups mobilised funds, but the banking system and other constraints meant the money was delayed and did not reach recipients for the winter, when it was most needed. In contrast, the Ukrainian fintech company Tranzzo integrated payment solutions into its Diia app within three days of the start of the war, enabling more than 280,000 Ukrainians to donate over US\$10 million in the following two months.

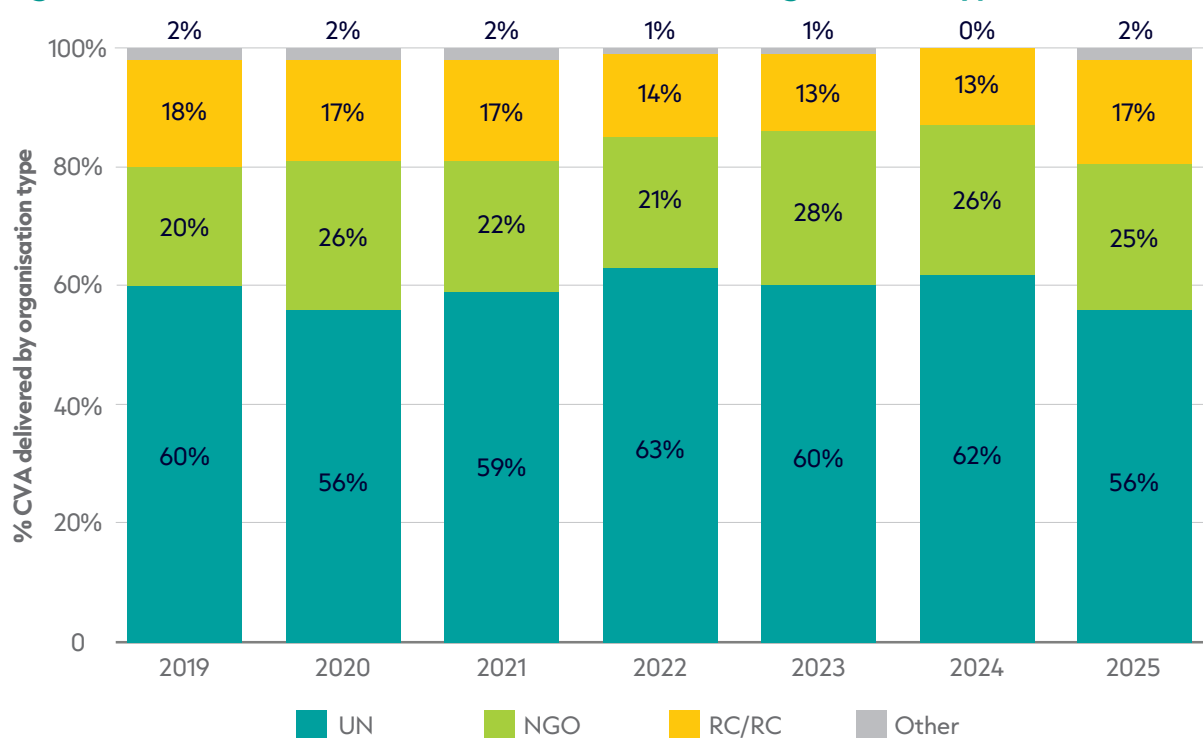


Group-based cash modalities shifted power dynamics by placing communities in control of resource allocation



There was also increased interest in group cash transfers (cash provided directly to unregistered, emerging or self-mobilising community groups), normally as a complement to household-level CVA and sometimes for anticipatory action efforts.¹⁹⁶ Comparative reflections from Christian Aid, particularly regarding survivor and community-led response,^{xiv} reasoned that group-based cash modalities shifted power dynamics by placing

xiv An approach that transfers power and resources directly to people affected by crises, such as through microgrants and support to local self-help groups.

Figure 2.3: Annual CVA volume distribution across organisation types, 2019–2025

Source: Data on CVA volumes was collected by the CALP Network from implementing partners and supplemented with estimates based on OCHA FTS and HPC Projects Module.

Notes: RC/RC = Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. Where possible and identifiable, the CALP Network data reflects the type of organisation that distributed the funds, such as an NGO receiving a sub-grant from an intermediary. However, not all organisations provided this level of detail in their reporting. Updates to the data have changed 2024 values on those previously reported.



communities in control of resource allocation.¹⁹⁷ In Sudan, a pilot linking multipurpose cash assistance to Emergency Response Rooms found that the programme reached mobile populations thanks to neighbourhood-based targeting and the involvement of local organisations, whose feedback guided adaptations to improve inclusion, despite power outages and infrastructure challenges.¹⁹⁸

Cash-coordination challenges underscored ongoing issues around earmarking, mandates and institutional tensions. In June 2021, 95 organisations signed a call for action demanding clarity from the Emergency Relief Coordinator on cash-coordination leadership and scope – a problem unresolved for over a decade.¹⁹⁹ The IASC principals endorsed a new Cash Coordination Model in March 2022;²⁰⁰ by March 2024, 90% of identified contexts had implemented the changes.²⁰¹ Cash Working Groups acquired standardised terms of reference and formal reporting lines within cluster architecture, and the model emphasised the importance of local actor co-chairs.²⁰²

In practice, UN agencies delivered the vast majority of cash. Agency competition continued to shape cash coordination at the global level, with organisations



perceived as protecting institutional interests over collective outcomes. Some country-level groups showed stronger practice though: for example, Somalia integrated multipurpose and sectoral cash, and subnational groups in Sudan and Syria convened local and national actors.

A 2025 cash practitioners' letter to the Humanitarian Reset warned that gains were fragile: the use of cash was falling, there were persistent institutional tensions over multipurpose cash and the system was perpetuating power imbalances.²⁰³ Despite strong evidence for multipurpose cash, it had become increasingly technocratic, siloed and competitive. Practitioners argued that no scale-up could succeed without these issues being resolved.²⁰⁴

Despite strong evidence for cash as a modality, it had become increasingly technocratic, siloed and competitive

Digital delivery and risks

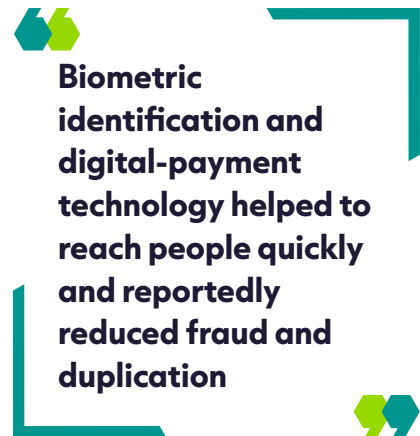
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Use of digital technologies accelerated dramatically, with strong evidence for some specific applications (particularly digital cash). Their adoption outpaced evidence of effectiveness and data-protection systems, however: only 41% of people that we surveyed said they understood how their data was used, dropping to just 32% among younger people.

Significant investments were made across data management, biometric registration and artificial intelligence-assisted delivery.²⁰⁵ For example, forecasts were increasingly used to analyse the risk of disasters, including at OCHA's Centre for Humanitarian Data and WFP. Digital cash expanded as a share of overall CVA, accelerated by the Ukraine response and the digital payment infrastructure built during Covid-19. Biometric use spread across more operations and contexts.²⁰⁶ Crisis mapping became more automated, with machine learning applied to satellite imagery to forecast crop failures, predict displacement and map damage and disease risk.²⁰⁷ Digital mental-health support, first piloted at scale during Covid-19,²⁰⁸ reached more people across more crises. There were also examples of locally designed tools, such as the Lebanon Red Cross geographic information system (GIS) tools;²⁰⁹ proponents argued that ownership and accountability 'look different' in locally adapted digital systems and are hard for a top-down global system to replicate.



Technology contributed to operational efficiency, particularly on needs assessments, monitoring and cash transfers. Real-time data platforms, such as the Humanitarian Data Exchange (or HDX) and WFP's HungerMap, enabled faster data collection and analysis, and WFP reported saving US\$21.2 million over traditional data collection in 2023 (although some data platforms were lost following funding cuts – see [Chapter 5.2](#)).²¹⁰ Biometric identification and digital-payment technology helped to reach people quickly and reportedly reduced fraud and duplication; tools included WFP's SCOPE, UNICEF's Humanitarian Cash Operations and Programme Ecosystem (HOPE) and UNHCR's Biometric Identity Management System. WFP's Building Blocks, for example, used blockchain to process more than US\$555 million in Jordan and Bangladesh, reduced transaction fees by US\$3.5 million²¹¹ and prevented US\$200 million in unintended assistance overlap in Ukraine.²¹²



Research showed that the cost savings offered by technology depended on organisations' infrastructure and negotiating ability,²¹³ and some analysts argued that the benefits from fraud-reduction came from the early stages of supply chains (such as procurement and supplier payments) rather than at the point of distribution.²¹⁴

There was evidence of positive outcomes from some technologies, such as telemedicine and digital cash. Satellite data and predictive analytics were used to forecast cholera outbreaks in Yemen.²¹⁵ A randomised study of digital payments to extremely poor female-headed households in Afghanistan found substantial improvements in food security and mental wellbeing, despite limited tech literacy.²¹⁶ WFP's Building Blocks (a blockchain-based cash-distribution system) enabled 2.2 million people to access assistance from different humanitarian organisations to the same account.²¹⁷ Among mutual aid groups, digital platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Telegram) were found to be vital to fundraise, gather in-kind resources, recruit and select volunteers, disseminate information, coordinate interventions and set up accountability systems.²¹⁸ Overall, however, there was insufficient investment in assessing the outcomes of technologies tested in humanitarian settings.²¹⁹ Efficiency benefits were often framed as contributing to effectiveness, 'despite the absence of any scientific evaluation' of impact.²²⁰

Connectivity was important for displaced people to access information and services; sustain family and community links across borders; open pathways into digital and financial economies; and support mental wellbeing through entertainment, social connection and moments of leisure.²²¹ With 95% of the global population living within range of a mobile signal, mobile phones were often

the primary early warning modality and they were central to the UN's Early Warnings for All initiative.^{xv} However, gaps persisted: forcibly displaced people were 50% less likely, and women 12% less likely,²²² to have internet access. The Connectivity for Refugees initiative,²²³ launched in 2023, partnered with private-sector providers to extend access for people in refugee camps and remote areas. In eastern Chad, for example, mobile operators committed to 4G coverage across all camps, with construction underway at the time of writing expected to reach more than 700,000 people.^{xvi}

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Humanitarian tools often relied on collecting data from people affected by crisis – and the numbers were striking: WFP's SCOPE^{xvii} database hosted data on at least 63.8 million people,²²⁴ UNHCR's Biometric Identity Management System had 12 million biometric profiles and covered over 90 country operations,²²⁵ and KoboToolbox processed over 20 million surveys monthly through more than 14,000 organisations.²²⁶ Biometrics were reported to serve multiple functions: preventing duplicate registration, verifying identity at assistance-distribution points, supporting family reunification and facilitating access to services, including banking and healthcare. Proponents argued that biometrics reduced fraud and improved targeting, but some aid practitioners were concerned about data protection, whether people affected by crises were able to meaningfully consent to their data being used and held, and the potential for data to be shared.²²⁷

Against this backdrop, our finding that only 41% of aid recipients understood how their data was used was concerning. A 2023 report from the Engine Room found that large UN agencies, particularly WFP and UNHCR, functioned as drivers for biometric adoption through their scale and influence, including making funding to implementing partners conditional on their use of SCOPE.²²⁸ Sandvik's 2023 book highlighted the commoditisation of humanitarian data, which the author argued results in significant security risks and the exploitation of crisis zones for tech experimentation.²²⁹

The period demonstrated that the risks of inadequate consent and data protection were not hypothetical. On the sharing of Rohingya refugee data with the Myanmar authorities, discussed in the 2022 *SOHS*, researchers argued that UNHCR had violated its own policies by failing to conduct proper data-impact assessments, while Human Rights Watch found that refugees were not meaningfully informed their data would be shared.²³⁰ In Kenya, ethnic Somali

xv An initiative to ensure that everyone on Earth is protected from hazardous weather, water, or climate events through life-saving early warning systems by the end of 2027 (see UN (2022) <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/early-warnings-for-all>).

xvi Communication with UNHCR Connectivity for Refugees.

xvii WFP's beneficiary information and transfer system (see WFP (n.d.) https://usermanual.scope.wfp.org/cash-accounts/content/common_topics/introduction/1_introduction.htm).

Kenyans who registered to access camp services were later unable to obtain national ID documents when the Kenyan government integrated UNHCR's biometric databases into its own registration systems; an estimated 40,000 people – many registered as children – became effectively stateless and were unable to access employment, education or financial services. Yet despite documented harms, organisations 'largely continued with business-as-usual'.²³¹ More broadly, concerns also grew over the sector's deepening reliance on a small number of private technology firms, such as Palantir, whose core business lay in military and intelligence contracting, to power supply-chain and data systems.²³²

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Inter-agency data sharing was a persistent gap throughout the period. Humanitarian data was produced across fragmented systems with incompatible standards, driven by project and donor incentives rather than shared organisational needs, and it was frequently unavailable where response decisions were made.²³³ A senior WASH expert told us there was poor intra-sectoral data sharing, driven by concerns over data being misused, which led to case-by-case negotiations. UN80 identified real-time interagency data sharing as a priority and proposed a Data Commons across the UN system,²³⁴ though limited progress had been made at the time of writing. In October 2025, IASC principals agreed to establish a Humanitarian Data Collaborative (convened by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response) to address fragmentation and build collective data governance.²³⁵ The initiative was promising but early-stage; its first diagnostic and co-design phase was planned for early 2026. Data sharing with governments posed a separate challenge with additional complex risks.

Humanitarians faced growing cybersecurity risks over this period

Humanitarians faced growing cybersecurity risks over this period. A 2022 attack on International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) systems compromised the data of over 515,000 'highly vulnerable people, including those separated from their families due to conflict, migration and disaster, missing persons and their families, and

people in detention',²³⁶ and then a 2026 attack on WFP exposed the sensitive information of 600,000 households in Gaza.²³⁷ Local organisations in Ukraine and Poland, which were especially vulnerable to disinformation campaigns and digital shutdowns, told us they lacked the staff or resources to address the risks. The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Digital Apex



programme partially addressed this gap before its discontinuation. Reflecting on the 2022 ICRC cyberattack, former Director-General Robert Mardini advocated for ‘an attitude of frugality’ towards data collection and resisting the ‘temptation’ to collect more data than is absolutely mission-critical.²³⁸

Coordination

Two decades since the cluster system was introduced, coordination remains one of the most-discussed dimensions of humanitarian response. In our survey, 55% of aid practitioners rated coordination as good or excellent in their contexts; yet 47% believed its costs outweighed its benefits. Aid workers in Libya, Sudan and Venezuela told us practitioners wanted more responsive coordination, not less – but they questioned whether the current approach delivered what was needed.

A desire to simplify and strengthen coordination informed the changes proposed through the Humanitarian Reset. Coordination structures had grown: the Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) that led the response in each country took on more members, and thematic subgroups^{xviii} increased (from 170 in 2019 to 225 in 2023). The Egeland-Msuya 2024 report²³⁹ found scope to reduce internal processes, rationalise overlapping coordination bodies and cut unnecessary international meetings. Evaluations identified two challenges: over-coordination (in which proliferating structures generated a high meeting burden) and an absence of collective decision-making. These were not new findings; they were among the challenges the Grand Bargain set out to address in 2016. As the Emergency Relief Coordinator acknowledged in June 2025: ‘Our problem historically is not lack of ideas for reform, but lack of execution’.

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An International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) review described HCTs and other coordination structures as information-sharing rather than decision-making bodies.²⁴⁰ Where strategy-setting did occur (such as in Somalia,²⁴¹ where early advocacy and scale-up decisions were credited to humanitarian leadership), accountability mechanisms for implementation were absent or weak.²⁴² In northern Ethiopia, protection failures were partly attributed to HCT leadership failures²⁴³ (see [Chapter 3.3](#)). Coordination mechanisms had not resolved the discrepancy between internally displaced people’s needs and the sectoral organisation of the cluster system.²⁴⁴ Growing HCT sizes partly explained the drift towards information-sharing:²⁴⁵ the average number of HCT members reached 35 in 2023,

^{xviii} Specialist working groups; for example, on cash, community engagement and accountability to affected populations, information management and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (see Humanitarian Action (2025) <https://humanitarianaction.info/article/subgroups-under-hcts-and-iccgs>).



with the largest reaching 68 members in Myanmar, though the IAHE synthesis noted that even smaller HCTs struggled to develop a strategy-setting function.²⁴⁶ Membership growth was driven by organisations seeking inclusion in what they perceived as an important decision-making forum, but as forums became broader and more diverse, they tended further towards information-sharing.

The Reset addressed HCT-level coordination directly. Tom Fletcher's February 2025 statement gave Humanitarian Coordinators authority to reshape HCT composition based on operational relevance rather than institutional membership entitlement.²⁴⁷ The UN80 process, launched in March 2025, included proposals to empower Humanitarian Coordinators – giving them greater authority to reshape coordination structures at country level – and to strengthen country directors' obligation to act on collective decisions rather than deferring to their own headquarters.²⁴⁸ Some analysts argued that the process avoided the structural changes needed to make agency heads genuinely accountable to Humanitarian Coordinators at country level. The June 2025 IASC update also discussed an updated coordination model in which humanitarian leaders should have 'stronger accountability' to communities.²⁴⁹ At least two-thirds of Humanitarian Coordinators identified localising response as a priority following the announcement, and some said the funding crisis created an opening to press national governments to take greater ownership of coordination.²⁵⁰

For cluster coordination, performance varied significantly by cluster and context. Part of this reflected capacity constraints: while clusters coordinated over 19,000 humanitarian partner organisations globally in 2024, coordination capacity was at just 64% – and was projected to drop – meaning that assessments of cluster performance often reflected partial or diminishing staffing.²⁵¹ Some commentators pointed to clusters' information-sharing role in large responses, reducing the number of bilateral meetings and ensuring smaller organisations were informed of decisions and how the sectors were working. Other respondents emphasised the technical aspects of coordination and argued that better coordination should be based on sharper use of shared data around risks and impacts. A five-country study by the Global WASH Cluster, UNICEF and Tufts University (2022–25) found that effective coordination enhanced the quality and strategic value of humanitarian WASH response.²⁵²

The decision to reduce the coordination architecture from 11 to eight clusters under the Reset reflected a judgement that the system had overextended itself.²⁵³ Formal IASC guidance on in-country adaptation was not published until March 2026, and country-level consolidation remained ongoing at the time of writing. Some changes were received positively, though advocates warned that folding gender-based violence into the protection cluster would obscure the needs of



women and survivors. The Reset also provided limited guidance on mixed settings, where refugee and internally displaced populations coexist and UNHCR-led refugee coordination operates alongside the cluster system. This raised concerns among some senior humanitarians that the cluster and refugee coordination systems would diverge further.

Ongoing power issues and exclusion in coordination mechanisms (see [Chapter 3.1](#)) led an ICVA review of transitions in Iraq and Indonesia to recommend that donors explicitly fund NGO coordination roles.²⁵⁴ There were particular challenges in staffing coordination roles in remote locations, which constrained timeliness and aid delivery at the subnational level.²⁵⁵ By 2024, only 25% of subnational roles were filled and 61% of subnational coordinators were fulfilling dual roles:²⁵⁶ a known impediment to effective coordination.²⁵⁷ Dedicated cluster information-management capacity also fell over the period, weakening the system's ability to consolidate data.²⁵⁸



Coordination with the state continued to be a challenge: only 40% of surveyed practitioners described government involvement as 'excellent' or 'good'



Coordination with the state continued to be a challenge: only 40% of surveyed practitioners described government involvement as 'excellent' or 'good'. Practitioners emphasised that humanitarians need to do more to respect and support states' primary responsibility to assist and protect their own citizens, while people we interviewed from outside the sector often saw the international humanitarian system as overly focused on internal coordination. Positives were the growth in government-led anticipatory action and shock-responsive social protection,

and that national systems were used in several countries to deliver faster and cheaper cash responses. In Ethiopia, scaling up the national safety net cost 25–30% less per household than setting up separate humanitarian assistance.²⁵⁹ Overall, however, the period was dominated by conflicts – and, in many cases, challenging engagement with states (see [Chapter 3.3](#)). The IAHE synthesis found the humanitarian system repeatedly failed to agree on a unified approach to engaging host-state authorities in conflict, leaving agencies to pursue divergent strategies and unable to define collective 'red lines' on access and principles (notably in Afghanistan, Yemen and northern Ethiopia).²⁶⁰

There was limited coordination with the informal system, even when reach was limited. In Sudan, for example, Emergency Response Rooms told us they shared information to help international organisations understand needs and enable remote programming in areas like Al Fasher and the Nuba Mountains, but



no structured collaboration or coordination mechanisms were in place. One international NGO interviewee told us that authorities sometimes viewed Emergency Response Rooms as opposition-aligned and that several groups therefore kept a low profile and communicated discreetly. Diaspora groups also expressed reservations about engaging with the formal international system, which they believed had no interest in engaging with them. One diaspora representative told us:



'They don't support the diaspora, they don't have us in their agendas. We work with our networks of trusted people.'

There has been great interest in area-based coordination models as a way to decentralise structures, support local planning and integrate the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.²⁶¹ In Myanmar, for example, OCHA established Area HCTs and sub-national Inter-Cluster Coordination Groups, with national NGOs nominated as co-chairs of all five Area HCTs.²⁶² While we found no published outcomes, early results suggested that structural redesign towards local co-leadership was feasible, but it may require new ways of organising (286 partner organisations participated in the coordination structures in Myanmar in 2024, for example).²⁶³

The Flagship Initiative implemented area-based coordination in four countries and a review found it made the most sense at the local administrative level, when people affected by crisis and local government representatives could meaningfully participate in decision-making. However, there were significant barriers to adoption; the review concluded that: 'Genuine implementation of the Flagship way of working would require a major, simultaneous commitment by donors, most HCT members, and multiple parts of OCHA working together. This major joint effort did not happen.'²⁶⁴

The Humanitarian Reset accelerated interest in area-based models, but how they would connect with national cluster structures remained unresolved. Local coordination might improve while national and local systems remain poorly linked, creating inefficiencies that offset the gains.

Conclusion

In this period of constrained funding, humanitarian organisations had to consider and prioritise the most effective approaches to delivering aid. The evidence points clearly to several promising mechanisms. Pre-positioned supplies, pre-arranged financing and anticipatory action all produced better outcomes than post-shock responses. Working with community knowledge and



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structures improved quality and take-up, including where trust in formal providers was low. Pilots showed that supporting local organisations with pre-positioned funding allowed them to respond to a greater number of people more quickly. CVA had the strongest evidence base – and recipients consistently preferred it. Coordination received more sustained attention than at any point since the 2005 reform, but restructuring the architecture risked absorbing energy without resolving the

underlying tensions between agency autonomy, local leadership and collective accountability. The question for the next period is: What will it take to shift investment towards approaches with the strongest evidence base – and is there enough political will to do so?

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