

CHAPTER 2.3

EFFICIENCY AND ITS HIDDEN COSTS

'[The] balance has now tipped into compliance and risk driving decisions. Not the actual humans standing in front of you and their needs.'

– Humanitarian logistician, international

This period saw increasing pressure on humanitarians to do more with less. Although there were examples of excessive bureaucracy, the cuts also affected important common services and the pressure to demonstrate efficiency risked becoming a race to the bottom. Strong technical progress was made with new tools, better metrics for several sectors and growing investment in cost infrastructure, which improved the humanitarian system's ability to analyse spend. However, some of the interventions most likely to generate efficiency gains – flexible funding, multiyear funding, cash, anticipatory action and localisation – were underused. At a programme level, some efficiency gains were dependent on scale and some were undermined by sharp funding withdrawals. There was more awareness of the need to account for the environmental costs of the system and to mitigate the risks aid workers faced, many of whom lacked basic accident insurance.

The system's cost-efficiency initiatives

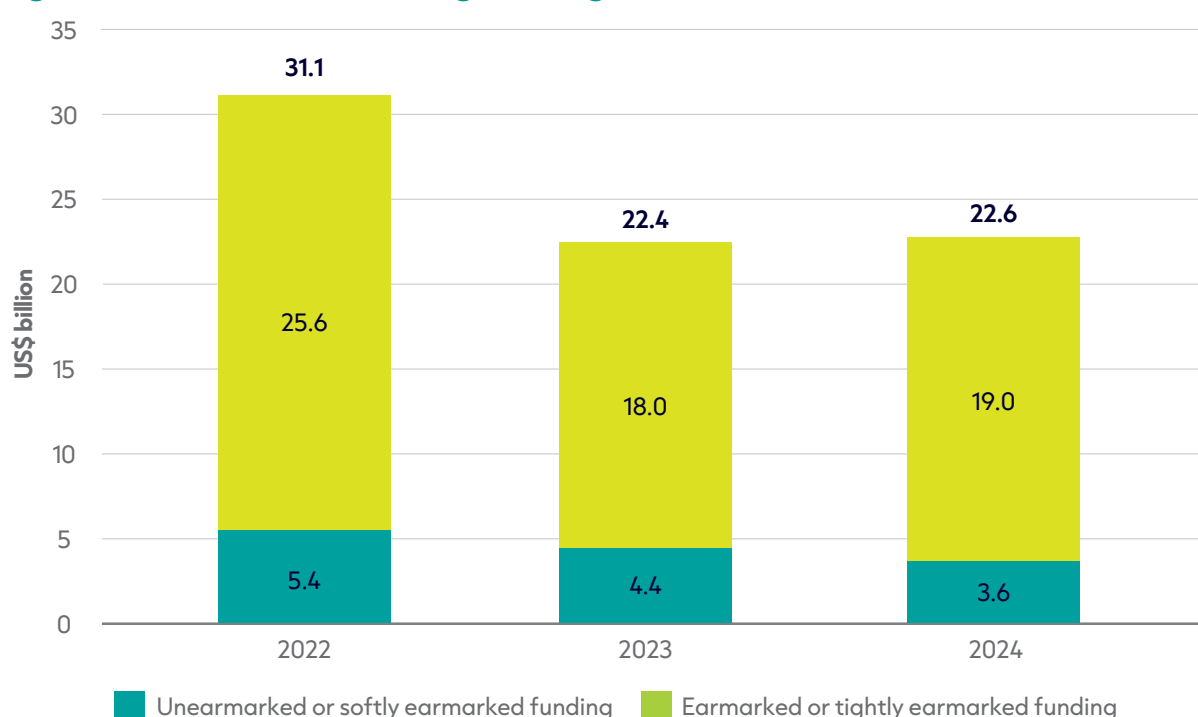
The Grand Bargain

The Grand Bargain Quality Funding Caucus consolidated a growing body of research demonstrating that flexible multiyear funding could deliver 'greater results per cost', as well as lower administrative burdens, higher staff retention, longer-term planning, deeper partnerships with local and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and longer-term outcomes.²⁶⁵

The Quality Funding Caucus concluded in 2022 with new donor commitments to increase multiyear funding.²⁶⁶ That year, more than half of reporting donors gave at least 30% of their funding as multiyear funding,^{xix} which dropped to 10 out of 22 donors (45%) in 2023 and rose to 14 out of 22 (64%) in 2024.²⁶⁷ However, the benefits of multiyear funding (reduced administrative costs, higher staff retention, more adaptive programming) only materialise when that funding is passed to implementing partners – and here, the picture was less positive. The share of United Nations (UN)/international NGO reporting organisations that provided multiyear funding to their partners decreased from 14 out of 26 (54%) in 2023 to 14 out of 33 (42%) in 2024.²⁶⁸ This mattered most in protracted crises,²⁶⁹ which accounted for more than 95% of humanitarian funding in 2025. Short cycles led organisations to restart rather than build on previous work, interrupted institutional continuity and eroded community relationships.²⁷⁰ A shelter practitioner described repeatedly providing new tarpaulins every six months because grant cycles did not allow for investment

Benefits of multiyear funding only materialise when that funding is passed to implementing partners

Figure 2.4: Unearmarked funding to UN agencies, 2022–2024



Source: ALNAP based on Grand Bargain self-reports and UN agency annual reports or websites.

Notes: Data is in constant 2024 prices. 2022 flexible funding data is missing for UN Women and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and estimated for the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Unearmarked and softly earmarked funding for the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) only include global and regional humanitarian thematic contributions. For multi-mandate UN agencies that receive core funding across those mandates, the amounts of that spent on their humanitarian activities are not included due to a lack of comprehensive data availability.



xix Though data was incomplete (see Metcalfe-Hough et al. (2023) <https://odi.org/en/publications/the-grand-bargain-in-2022-an-independent-review/>).

in more durable solutions. In the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector, project-based funding led organisations to design discrete, time-bound projects that struggled to sustain infrastructure (see [Chapter 2.1](#)).

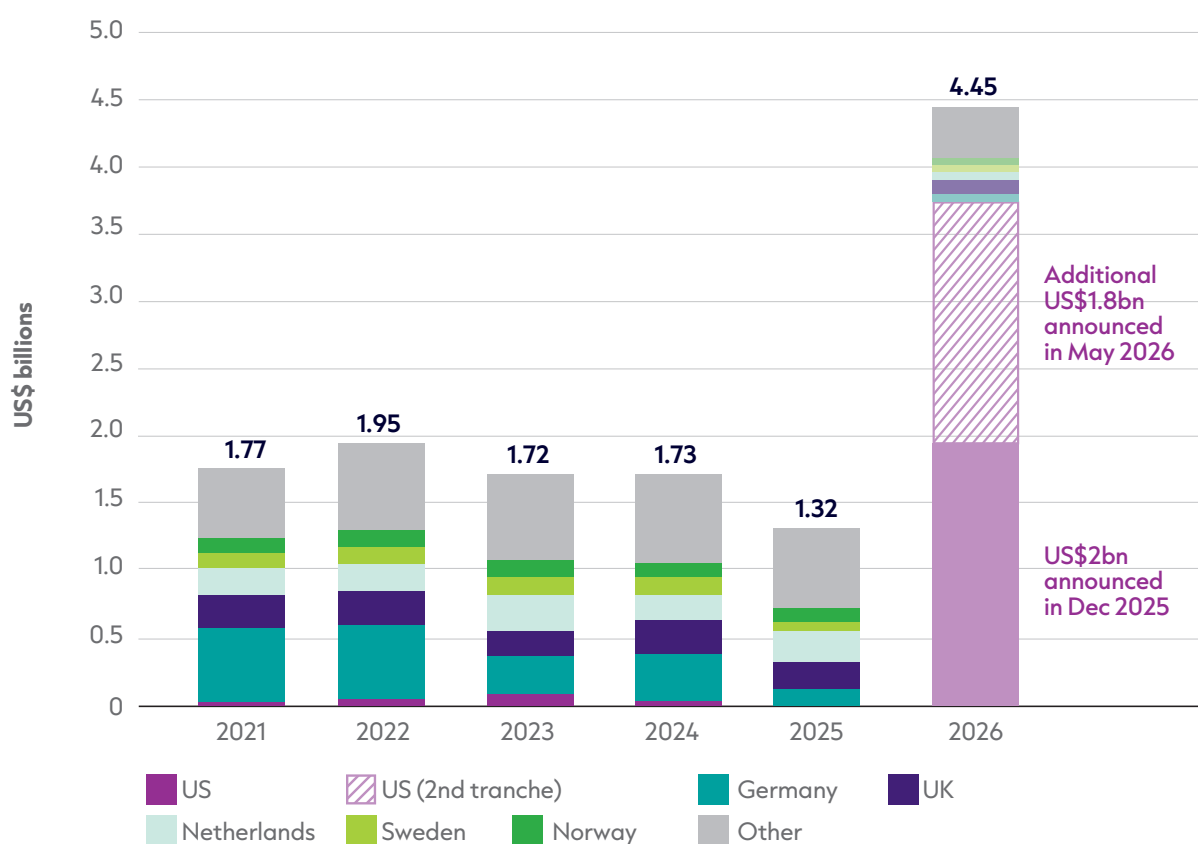


In terms of funding quality, the total amount of funding that was flexible (softly earmarked or unearmarked) reduced over 2022–24



In terms of funding quality, the total amount of funding that was flexible (softly earmarked or unearmarked) reduced over 2022–24, but the share broadly held steady: around 16–20%. Proportions differed markedly between UN agencies; for UNICEF, for example, it spiked to 22% in 2022 (on the back of large private donations for its Ukraine response) and fell to 3% in 2025. Partial data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) indicated it remained the most flexibly funded agency (around 60%). Practitioners cited familiar barriers, including grant-management systems that continued to prioritise earmarking, short funding cycles and detailed approval and compliance requirements.²⁷¹

Figure 2.5: Funding contributions to OCHA-managed pooled funds, 2021–2026



Source: OCHA Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) and Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) data hubs.

Notes: Data is in current prices. Based on contributions data to UN-managed pooled funds. Data for 2026 is preliminary.

Some donors and practitioners saw pooled funds as efficient vehicles for unearmarked funding. Effective pooled funds should allow implementers to quickly and easily move funding between budget lines, geographical borders or years.²⁷² These funds often had relatively low management costs (an International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) study reported averages of 3.3% across funds) and fewer funding layers.²⁷³ Until 2026, pooled funds enabled donors to make progress in providing more funding for local organisations (see [Chapter 4.2](#)).

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However, structural challenges offset these benefits. NGO recipients reported tight proposal deadlines, heavy due-diligence requirements, lack of budget flexibility, short implementation periods and little progress in creating meaningful partnerships.²⁷⁴ There was also some concern that, as pooled funds grow and attract more diverse donors, the cumulative weight of different donors' risk appetites and accountability demands may erode flexibility.²⁷⁵ Pooled funds will play a much larger role in the next The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) period and have been promoted by the Humanitarian Reset as a core mechanism for the coordinated system. Pledges from the United States of US\$2 billion in 2025, followed by a further US\$1.8 billion pledge in 2026, marked a shift in how the US channels funding through the system. Practitioners expected these pledges to make OCHA a more significant fund intermediary, and raised questions about what a single donor at this scale would mean for the funds.²⁷⁶

Interviewees highlighted the structure of the funding chain as a further source of inefficiency. Financial modelling over 2022–24 estimated that local intermediaries could deliver programming that is 32% more cost-efficient than international intermediaries by reducing international overheads and salary costs (see [Chapter 4.2](#)).^{xx} The Share Trust analysed budgets from the Ukraine OCHA CBPF for 2023 and found that local intermediaries delivered programming that was 15.5% more cost-efficient than international intermediaries.²⁷⁷ It conducted similar analyses²⁷⁸ in Nigeria, the Middle East and Sudan, concluding that: 'if just 25% of Sudan's humanitarian funding for 2023/24 were redirected to local actors, it could unlock ... enough to reach an additional 1.2 million people with lifesaving support.'

These figures rested on assumptions that still need to be tested empirically at scale, and practitioners cautioned that realising the efficiency gains of localisation would require upfront investment in systems and partnerships. Nonetheless, many practitioners expressed support for the idea that directing

xx A study described local intermediaries as larger-scale local or national organisations, or coalitions of local agencies that can deliver larger-scale funding to proximate and community-based leaders (see Share Trust and Warande Advisory Centre (2022) <https://thesharetrust.org/passing-the-buck>).



more funding to local and national organisations would reduce costs and offer additional benefits that cost metrics do not capture (see [Chapter 4.1](#)).

The Humanitarian Reset

In 2023, the year of greatest-ever funding, the Grand Bargain's signatories dissolved the dedicated workstreams for cost reduction, quality funding and localisation in favour of a lighter Grand Bargain 3.0 framework.²⁷⁹ The Grand Bargain had introduced multiple layers of bureaucracy; enthusiasm for it was waning²⁸⁰ and the restructuring was intended to simplify its structures and processes. Nevertheless, ICVA warned that progress in areas such as reducing duplication and increasing quality of funding risked being lost.²⁸¹

The financial shocks of 2025 pushed efficiency back to the top of the agenda via the Humanitarian Reset

The financial shocks of 2025 pushed efficiency back to the top of the agenda via the Humanitarian Reset: a plan to redesign humanitarian architecture and coordination to make it 'lighter, faster, and less bureaucratic'.²⁸² OCHA built the Reset on a 2024 review, which found that Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanisms had become duplicative and process-heavy and that

substantial savings were available.²⁸³ The Reset took forward that review's main recommendations;²⁸⁴ in 2025, OCHA implemented hyper-prioritisation exercises (see [Chapter 1.1](#)), closed many Humanitarian Advisory Teams, reduced positions and began to simplify the cluster system.

Best estimates suggest humanitarian procurement is responsible for 60–80% of response costs.²⁸⁵ Each agency had built its own systems and processes over decades,²⁸⁶ generating significant duplication. Digital initiatives often compounded rather than resolved these problems^{xxi} – and often further excluded local organisations, for whom integration was more complex and costly.²⁸⁷ To improve efficiency, the Reset prioritised common services (sharing of back-office functions, especially between UN agencies) – from procurement to logistics to telecommunications – building on the UN80 Initiative. At the start of 2025, only 40% of humanitarian organisations anticipated using common services.²⁸⁸

By May 2026, pilots of the UN80 New Humanitarian Compact had begun in five crisis settings.²⁸⁹ Other concrete steps included merging the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF procurement to prevent competition for goods and the driving up of prices, consolidating UN payroll centres, and pilots to share common premises and administrative platforms. Analysts nonetheless noted that the Compact focused on areas of easiest agreement, rather than

xxi Due to inconsistent data standards and limited system interoperability.

more fundamental restructuring.²⁹⁰ In May 2026, the European Commission announced a planned Humanitarian Supply Chain Charter to gradually make collaborative supply-chain approaches a funding condition for the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), building on €35 million already allocated to joint procurement and shared-services initiatives.²⁹¹

Cuts risked disrupting pre-positioning, supply-chain coordination and per-unit delivery costs

Some practitioners were concerned that common services were already under strain from the funding cuts. WFP – which operates the UN Humanitarian Air Service and manages shared warehousing, engineering and telecommunications services in over 75 countries²⁹² – faced a 40% funding reduction in 2025²⁹³ and announced workforce reductions of up to 6,000 positions.²⁹⁴ Cuts risked disrupting pre-positioning, supply-chain coordination and per-unit delivery costs. In 2025, for the first time in nearly a decade, WFP had no contingency stocks for Haiti’s hurricane season and no pre-positioned food for Afghanistan’s winter.²⁹⁵

The funding crisis exposed the system’s dependence on a small number of centralised providers for common services, which meant that financial shocks at those organisations propagated across the entire system. The impact varied significantly across sectors, shaped by differences in procurement architecture. Food and nutrition assistance depended most heavily on centralised pipelines, and funding contractions almost immediately led to pipeline challenges in six WFP operations.²⁹⁶ Sectors such as shelter and non-food items, which featured more fragmented or local procurement, showed greater structural resilience. WASH programming combined international supply with substantial local procurement of water-treatment materials, trucking and construction. Cash depended on local market systems and was somewhat insulated from upstream supply-chain challenges, though cash practitioners told us this made it ‘easy’ to cut or scale down.

Many practitioners viewed the diagnosis of the Reset as broadly correct but the response as insufficient

Many practitioners viewed the diagnosis of the Reset as broadly correct but the response as insufficient. Between 2022 and 2026, the proportion of respondents to our aid-practitioner survey who rated their sector’s use of resources as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ rose modestly (from 51% to 57%), yet those citing ‘inefficiencies, duplication and poor coordination’ as a weakness doubled (from 11.4% to 23%). While individual sectors may have managed



their resources better than in the past, practitioners were becoming increasingly frustrated by system-level inefficiencies.

People we spoke to identified a consistent set of structural inefficiencies that the Reset did not substantially address: short funding cycles, too many organisations in the funding chain, and the concentration of staff and resources in capital cities. A writer for *The New Humanitarian* argued that mandate creep and operational overlap between the largest agencies represented a significant – and largely unaddressed – source of inefficiency. As one senior humanitarian in Europe put it:



'We have to apply the Kivu test: if it doesn't help the women of eastern Kivu, we shouldn't do it ... There are too many studies, and seminars, and consultants ... It's about the people we fail massively at the moment. The gap has never been bigger between assessed need and actual delivery. How come there are 100 humanitarian actors in the capital city of a place, but when you go to the remote place, where the needs are greatest, there are three? There are too many who are not able and willing, and do not have the resources and culture, to meet those in greatest need. That is the question of this moment, really.'

Programme cost-effectiveness and cost-efficiency

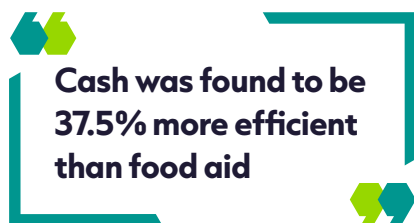
The efficiency of limited assistance matters enormously: a dollar spent on overheads, duplication or ineffective interventions is a dollar that does not reach someone in need. While this period saw investment in cost measurement – new tools, new metrics and growing donor interest²⁹⁷ – the link between cost analysis and actual allocation decisions remained weak, and the drive for efficiency risked concentrating attention on the costs that were easiest to count.

The 2022 SOHS used 'cost per person targeted' as a tool to consider efficiency. Between 2022 and 2025, the requirements per person targeted increased from US\$235 to US\$255. As well as being driven by a reduction in the number of people targeted, cost increases in this period included rising fuel prices, supply-chain disruptions, inflation, higher food and security costs, and access constraints. Without more data on who was reached and with what, it is impossible to establish the extent to which these figures reflected genuine changes in the cost of delivering aid per person and how much reflected shifts in caseload or modality. Despite these costs the amount received per person was much lower, dropping from US\$178 at the end of the last SOHS period to just US\$90 in 2025.

There was new evidence on cost efficiencies of anticipatory action, cash and technology (see [Chapter 2.2](#)). For example, the UN Food and Agriculture



Organization (FAO), OCHA and WFP estimated every US\$1 spent in anticipatory action saved up to US\$7. In an analysis of US\$11.4 billion of aid, cash was found to be 37.5% more efficient than food aid.²⁹⁸ At the programme level, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) completed its 400th cost-efficiency analysis,²⁹⁹ including at least 24 cost-effectiveness studies that established evidence for simplifying malnutrition treatment (at a cost saving of 20% per child treated), for controlling infections and for undertaking preventative action to reduce intimate partner violence.³⁰⁰



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

A consortium of eight NGOs (managing a combined US\$5 billion) continued to invest in Dioptra: a web-based tool that calculates cost per output using existing accounting data.³⁰¹ The Grand Bargain's cash workstream adopted Dioptra as the 'official' way of analysing programme cost

efficiency, and Dioptra helped organisations to conduct over 650 cost analyses, including a synthesis of 79 cost-efficiency analyses for unconditional cash.³⁰² The recent Scenario Costing and Analysis for Large-scale Efficiency in Nutrition (SCALE) tool for malnutrition treatment allows users to input local cost data, define maximum budgets and instantly compare different approaches (such as whether to use simplified or standard treatment protocols). SCALE was launched in December 2025³⁰³ and, at the time of writing, is being piloted with the Kenyan and Somali Ministries of Health.

Despite these successes, there was a lack of high-quality cost data. Competitive pressures between agencies sometimes undermined data sharing, and the data that did exist showed discrepancies.^{xxii} Distinctions between direct and indirect costs were frequently blurred, and donors applied different cost expectations to NGOs and UN partners without a clear framework for reconciliation.³⁰⁴ WFP acknowledged that it was 'challenging to standardise any unit of cost', given the range of procurement modalities across country offices,³⁰⁵ and the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) synthesis concluded that 'establishing agreed efficiency metrics or at least common criteria appears a growing necessity'.³⁰⁶

Relatedly, *cheap* does not necessarily equal *cost effective* if it does not deliver the same level or quality of outcomes. Critics argued that a race to the bottom risked reducing quality standards or disincentivising holistic programming, though proponents of cost analysis countered that smarter spending was about maximising reach and impact rather than minimising cost.³⁰⁷ There were also

xxii For example, in the Sahel, education sector costs were recorded as US\$69 per person in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) but only US\$16 in UNICEF's own response to the same population; in WASH, these figures were US\$25 and US\$7. This raised questions about whether agencies overestimated HRP unit costs or whether larger agencies achieved genuine economies of scale (see UNICEF (2023) <https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/reports#/detail/20006/valuation-multi-pays-de-la-reponse-humanitaire-de-lunicef-la-crise-l2-burkina-faso-2019-2022>).

concerns that the system tracked its effectiveness in relation to immediate need, rather than reductions in need over time, leaving it unable to assess costs against longer-term outcomes.

A decade into the sector's cost-efficiency journey, practitioners observed that organisations were still generating evidence for donor compliance rather than learning, and that embedding cost evidence into programme design required deliberate institutional effort and cultural change.³⁰⁸ OCHA's activity-based costing pilot in Nigeria, rolled out using a standardised approach based on costs from 10 countries³⁰⁹ for the 2026 planning cycle, represented a serious attempt to make cost data actionable^{xxiii} – but whether it influences resource allocation depends on data quality and institutional willingness to act on the findings. Donors leading on this issue – such as DG ECHO, which includes efficiency metrics in its proposal analysis – relied on field experts' 'feel for what is reasonable' in each context.³¹⁰ The IRC noted that: 'today, we find ourselves at the same inflection point with cost-effectiveness that impact evaluations faced 10 years ago – everyone wants one, even if they're not sure what they'll do with it. Some of the most well-intentioned offenders are donors: Many organisations generate piecemeal evidence for the sole purpose of donor compliance, rather than any learning objective.'³¹¹

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The environmental and human costs of the system

The growing emphasis on cost data raised a familiar question: Which costs matter? While discussions of efficiency tended to focus on the organisational perspective, practitioners and researchers increasingly discussed the environmental costs of operations, costs borne by people receiving assistance and costs borne by the humanitarian workforce. These findings are only the visible tip of a huge iceberg of unmeasured costs, including in time (for waiting, travel, documentation), opportunity (income, caring responsibilities), social impact (stigma, family separation, community tensions) and psychological wellbeing (reduced agency, increased stress). They represent one of the largest blind spots in humanitarian cost analysis: the system must rethink the cost equation to measure not only the cost per recipient but also the cost to the recipient. Rarely measured too are the costs averted by acting earlier, which may mean we have understated the case for pre-shock investment.

xxiii OCHA piloted activity-based costing in Nigeria. Instead of aggregating project proposals, it identified the specific activities needed to meet humanitarian objectives and assigned a standardised cost to each. This made it possible, in principle, to compare costs across organisations delivering services such as water trucking (for more information see OCHA (2025) https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/HPC%202026%20Discussion%20Paper_FINAL.pdf).



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The environmental footprint of humanitarian operations was substantial but rarely measured over 2022–25. One estimate put total sector emissions at 35.3 megatonnes of CO₂e in 2022³¹² – equivalent to a European city of 4.6 million people.³¹³ Emissions trended sharply upward, driven by conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan.³¹⁴ The vast majority (75%) came from procurement and the remainder mostly from freight (12%),

business travel (7%) and energy (5%).³¹⁵ While some air travel was necessary, senior humanitarians told us that some represented ‘a way of working’; and analysis suggested that reducing air and land travel would likely yield the biggest emissions reductions.³¹⁶ Baseline assessments attempted to assess different categories of waste, including plastic packaging;³¹⁷ and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) noted that uncontrolled waste-burning posed health and safety risks around camps.³¹⁸

For people affected by crisis, the environmental footprint of humanitarian operations had immediate and lasting effects. Hugo Slim, author of *Humanitarianism 2.0: New Ethics for the Climate Emergency*, argued that assessing and responding to need requires humanitarian action to find ‘life-saving harmony between humanity and nature’.³¹⁹ One senior humanitarian said that the sector’s historical reliance on camp-based approaches to managing displacement had concentrated populations in ways that significantly amplified environmental stress. UNHCR estimated that 20–25 million trees were lost annually in and around refugee settlements, 90% of which were taken to meet demand for cooking fuel.³²⁰ In both the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Gaza, for example, our research found displacement-driven deforestation that was compounded by the lack of assistance.

The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) launched a Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations in 2021, which gained over 400 signatories committed to reducing the sector’s environmental footprint.³²¹ The European Union’s supply-chain reform agenda included environmental sustainability and called for lifecycle assessments and green product specifications in procurement.³²² DG ECHO made environmental standards a condition of funding: its Minimum Environmental Requirements became mandatory in 2023,³²³ and its revised Resilience Marker now includes an environmental dimension to assess whether projects mitigate negative climate and environmental effects – for example, by protecting the traditional ecological knowledge of local communities – as well as assessing approaches to





waste management and supply chains.³²⁴ DG ECHO showed some willingness to accept higher costs for environmental compliance, trialling acceptance of up to 10% higher costs for greener projects.³²⁵

Several agencies developed methodologies, tools and pilots to reduce emissions from humanitarian operations. For example, the IFRC published a Green Logistics Guide and the ICRC developed a Humanitarian Carbon Calculator (used by over 40 organisations). There were pilots to optimise supply chains at WFP, UNICEF,³²⁶ UNHCR³²⁷ and the Logistics Cluster.³²⁸ A Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) review of sustainability issues across five appeals identified five areas for greening supply chains, including local procurement, cash and voucher assistance, and green energy solutions.³²⁹

A June 2025 update to the Humanitarian Reset asked how the sector could bring together scaled-up anticipatory action and a green humanitarian system,³³⁰ and was subsequently included in the autumn 2025 roadmap.³³¹ Commentators noted that beyond this general ambition, however, it remained hard to see a clear pathway towards operationalisation; and the Climate Action Accelerator warned that, in the context of the funding crisis, organisations tended to push back climate commitments in day-to-day arbitrations as less urgent than immediate crisis response.³³²

At the same time, some humanitarians emphasised the importance of a climate-justice approach to environmental footprints. Thirteen organisations published a paper distinguishing between ‘functioning’ emissions (such as flights, offices and vehicles), which they argued should face an ambitious 50% reduction target, and ‘subsistence’ emissions (embedded in goods and services delivered directly to people affected by crisis), which they contended should not face a quantified reduction target.³³³ They argued that the people who humanitarian organisations serve have contributed least to the climate crisis, making it unjust to alter their access to food, medicines and essential goods in pursuit of organisational decarbonisation targets.³³⁴ One practitioner put it starkly:

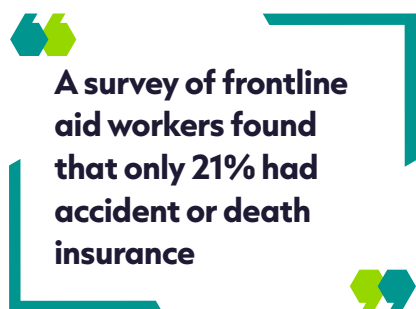
In the context of the funding crisis, organisations tended to push back climate commitments in day-to-day arbitrations as less urgent than immediate crisis response



‘We shouldn’t be discussing whether we can reduce the animal protein to children suffering from malnutrition.’



More broadly, there was a risk that, in a race to demonstrate efficiency, greater costs would be passed on to people affected by crisis – costs that were occasionally reported in literature and evaluations.³³⁵ For example, one evaluation reported that in-kind food assistance ‘demands more time from recipients (transport to the distribution point, long queues, lack of certain items, etc)’,³³⁶ while others noted inflationary costs, such as an increase in assistance driving up rental prices³³⁷ and the cost of goods. In one study, refugees spending restricted digital transfers at licensed shops paid prices 16–30% higher than those paying in cash for the same goods, suggesting organisational efficiency gains may sometimes be offset by costs to people receiving aid.



A survey of frontline aid workers found that only 21% had accident or death insurance

Funding also failed to account for some of the costs borne by the humanitarian workforce itself. Smaller organisations faced pressures and requirements to minimise their overheads, and this led to leaders making trade-offs between investing in staff duty of care or other organisational costs.³³⁸ A survey of frontline aid workers found that only 21% had accident or death insurance and it revealed

stark disparities in access to medical insurance, evacuation plans and security infrastructure (see [Chapter 4.1](#)).³³⁹ There was also growing recognition of the high risks of physical harm and vicarious trauma among humanitarian workers.³⁴⁰ 48% of respondents (and 59% of international NGO workers) cited ‘excessive workloads leading to burnout’ and ‘safety risks’ among their top-three concerns regarding working conditions. In addition, 30% of surveyed aid practitioners said there was insufficient funding for mental-health support for aid workers. Some larger organisations offered mental-health and psychosocial support, but its availability and quality varied widely – and at least one dedicated mental-health support service closed entirely.^{xxiv}

Aid diversion

Some diversion is inevitable in extreme crisis, and aid diversion and fraud continued to be a challenge. Development Economist Charles Kenny has written extensively on diversion, noting that exact global figures for aid lost to corruption are essentially unknowable and should be treated with scepticism.³⁴¹ The evidence that does exist is fragmented and context-specific. Of the aid practitioners who responded to our survey, 69% said corruption and aid diversion in their contexts was ‘moderate’ or ‘high’ – and this percentage was remarkably consistent across different types of crises and organisations.

xxiv The Headington Institute, for example – which, for 25 years, supported the resilience and trauma recovery of aid workers and emergency responders worldwide – discontinued its direct services in late 2025 (see <https://headington-institute.org/>).



Respondents cited a wide range of types of diversion: from extraction by armed groups, to staff manipulating financial systems, to subtler forms of waste within organisations. Research reports also examined issues around gatekeeping in Somalia,³⁴² the dynamics of subcontracting in Afghanistan³⁴³ and disincentives to reporting corruption in various settings.³⁴⁴

Available figures from audits and investigations covered a range of issues: the US State Department found disallowed costs in Afghanistan of around 0.4% of audited funds;³⁴⁵ of US\$835 million in Syria programming, the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) Inspector General reported US\$11.5 million in recovery from fraud and corruption investigations (around 1.4%);³⁴⁶ and in more challenging cases, such as Houthi-controlled Yemen, WFP estimated at least 10% diversion.³⁴⁷ While these numbers illustrate how diversion depended on operations and monitoring conditions, they are not comparable and do not support any single sector-wide rate.

Two cases during this period illustrated the risks of diversion at scale and the sector's capacity to detect and respond to it. In Ethiopia, USAID monitoring staff found evidence of widespread diversion of food assistance in Tigray in March 2023.³⁴⁸ Although over 20 million people relied on food assistance, USAID and WFP suspended it:³⁴⁹ a countrywide pause that lasted more than five months. When assistance resumed, it was via a substantially reformed delivery and monitoring architecture.³⁵⁰ A subsequent USAID Office of Inspector General evaluation of the 15 USAID emergency food awards active in Ethiopia during this period – totalling more than US\$1.4 billion – found that diversion was undetected because of heavy reliance on remote monitoring, insufficient agreement-officer capacity and weak incident reporting.³⁵¹ The diversion itself was reported to have implicated both federal and Tigray regional government actors.³⁵²

In Somalia, by contrast, a UN Secretary-General investigation identified post-delivery aid diversion and prompted the Humanitarian Country Team to adopt a coordinated package of reform measures.³⁵³ The Humanitarian Coordinator submitted a progress report on these reforms in June 2024, and a subsequent evaluation stated that its reforms held important lessons for the wider sector.³⁵⁴ In Somalia, operating constraints and poor system design meant the monitoring infrastructure was underused and, while financial oversight was performed, discretionary tools that might have identified risks were not in use.³⁵⁵ The Somalia case showed that diversion could be addressed proactively and collectively when political conditions and leadership aligned.

This period also saw broader investment in counter-diversion systems, including third-party monitoring, community feedback mechanisms and reforms to



commodity pipeline management. Practitioners interviewed in Sudan described a range of diversion risks – from armed-actor checkpoint extraction to local and government actors manipulating recipient lists – alongside sustained efforts by humanitarian organisations to detect and counter them. Respondents to our practitioner survey expressed that mitigation was possible and highlighted financial policies and organisational processes as effective deterrents.

Some donors and agencies saw digitisation as a solution to diversion, but it sometimes redistributed risk. Digital registration systems – including WFP’s SCOPE, UNICEF’s Humanitarian Cash Operations and Programme Ecosystem and UNHCR’s Biometric Identity Management System – reduced certain types of fraud through deduplication. Cash transfers also often reduced diversion, since they offer fewer entry points, attract less visibility and carry tighter identity-verification and regulatory controls.³⁵⁶ However, as technology allowed more remote programming, some organisations removed the controls that traditionally prevented fraud (in-person registration, physical verification and community-based identification), which changed the nature and distribution of risks. In Ukraine, multiple self-registration platforms that were operated by different organisations led key informants to estimate registration-duplication rates of approximately 20% in one study.³⁵⁷ Our in-country research revealed that lags between registration and payment also created confusion for some people and led to re-registration. In Colombia, the shift to remote modalities made it harder to verify funds reached the right people, and it also made it harder to reach people with low digital literacy, limited phone access or poor connectivity.³⁵⁸

Some donors and agencies saw digitisation as a solution to diversion, but it sometimes redistributed risk

People affected by crisis bore the costs of diversion (including not receiving assistance and the strengthening of armed groups³⁵⁹) and also excessive controls (including through delays, exclusion and costs to dignity: see [Chapter 4.2](#)). One survey respondent argued:



‘the balance has now tipped into compliance and risk driving decisions. Not the actual humans standing in front of you and their needs.’

The political environment in which these operational realities played out led the system to be more cautious. The bureaucracy that aimed to improve regulation and oversight – which the sector built in response to past diversion and fraud concerns – itself generated significant costs. And analysts warned this can lead to assistance that ‘fails both tests of locally prioritized and locally delivered because of the weight of the counter-bureaucracy’.³⁶⁰



Conclusion

The 2022–25 period saw advances in cost-measurement tools such as Dioptra and new evidence on the cost benefits of cash. However, the link between costs, outcomes and actual allocation decisions were weak, and most organisations still did not collect cost-efficiency data systematically. The interventions most likely to yield efficiency gains (flexible multiyear funding, cash, anticipatory action and localisation) remained underused, and quality funding often failed to pass through to local partners. Practitioners told us the push towards cost savings incentivised cheaper, short-term responses and reduced investments in security, institutional continuity, community relationships and the long-term investments that underpin effective aid.



The interventions most likely to yield efficiency gains (multiyear funding, anticipatory action and localisation) remained underused



ENDNOTES

- 1 GTS (2026) Whose Priorities Count? A Make or Break Moment for Global Solidarity in Crises. Vienna: GTS.
<https://alnnap.org/help-library/resources/whose-priorities-count-a-make-or-break-moment-for-global-solidarity-in-crises/>
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