

CHAPTER 5.2

20 YEARS OF THE SOHS: WHAT HAS CHANGED, AND WHAT HASN'T?

'We just haven't asked the big questions about where aid is going yet. The only question that's been asked so far is: "How do we keep the best parts of the old system with less money?"'

— Senior humanitarian adviser

Over the years covered by all six editions of *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS) (2007–25), the humanitarian system showed evidence of adapting: cash programming grew, anticipatory action was introduced and shared data infrastructure transformed needs analysis. However, where reforms required changes to power, funding flows or organisational mandates, progress was slower and gains reversed more quickly: direct funding for local and national non-governmental organisations (L/NNGOs) rose during Covid-19 but fell again within two years, and protection – declared a central purpose of humanitarian action in 2013 – remained one of the system's weakest areas. The Humanitarian Reset of 2025 represented the latest attempt to address problems documented since 2004. Whether it succeeds where previous cycles failed depends on if the system can ask harder questions than it has so far been willing to.

Reform over 20 years of SOHS

The humanitarian system experienced multiple shocks in the most recent SOHS period covering 2022–25 – as well as significant pressure to respond to those shocks quickly. The conversations that informed this report were characterised by recurring concerns that these conditions would lead to humanitarians reproducing



the existing system, but on a smaller scale, rather than allowing a deliberate rethinking of its purpose and architecture.

To better understand how the humanitarian system has operationalised shifts over time, we documented over 150 initiatives, innovations, learnings and reforms recorded over 2007–25 in the six SOHS editions, as well as data on their results. Here we explore what drove reforms and initiatives and what these efforts produced in practice, drawing on the longitudinal record before turning to the latest study period.



Reform has been a dominant and persistent preoccupation of the system in every SOHS reporting period



Reform has been a dominant and persistent preoccupation of the system in every SOHS reporting period; major frameworks introduced have included the cluster system (2005), Transformative Agenda (2011), Grand Bargain (2016), Grand Bargain 2.0 (2021), Grand Bargain 3.0 (2023) and the Humanitarian Reset (2025). In every era, the system produced a new major reform that aimed to address a similar set of well-documented problems: challenges in coordination, funding bypassing local and national organisations, a

lack of meaningful accountability to people affected by crisis and a failure to deliver on protection. Research spanning the full SOHS period (2007–25) consistently found that reform agendas avoided meaningfully challenging the underlying architecture of the system, producing 'wave after wave of normative commitments and technical guidance' while 'power, incentives and resource flows have been left fundamentally unchanged'.¹⁰⁵

The Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 (just before data collection for the first *2010 SOHS* began) set the foundation for cash-based programming, accountability to people affected by crisis and localisation. The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) undertook the first system-wide evaluation of a humanitarian response since the Joint Evaluation of the Rwanda Crisis in 1994. Though the TEC's recommendations responded directly to the tsunami, they reflected wider failures in emergency response and signalled the need for fundamental sector reform. There were already signs, however, that this agenda would be challenging. For example, regarding the TEC's finding that international organisations had failed to invest in local and national actors, the *2010 SOHS* concluded that local capacity-building had increased, but that there had been no measurable rise in direct grants.¹⁰⁶



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The TEC also identified failures in coordination and duplication, which fed into the humanitarian reform agenda that produced the cluster system and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). The 2012 SOHS found that these were tested in the Haiti earthquake (2010) and reported that local partners had been sidelined, leadership of the clusters was sometimes weak and there was not enough accountability to the people affected by the earthquake. Even so, the scale of the emergencies in the period 'changed expectations' of what the system could achieve, and reform elements including clusters and the CERF were credited with improving the timeliness of response in many instances.¹⁰⁷ However, the delayed response to the 2011 famine in Somalia – which the 2012 SOHS described as 'objectly slow at a systemic level' – raised concerns about timeliness.¹⁰⁸

By the mid-2010s, the cluster system, CERF and country-level pooled funding were established means of operation.¹⁰⁹ The 2015 SOHS noted improvements in coordination and timeliness in responses to major disasters and found that pooled funding had helped to reduce inefficiencies, though performance was poorer in conflict settings.¹¹⁰ These architectures would come to both enable future reforms (such as the Grand Bargain's expansion of Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs)) and constrain more fundamental changes.¹¹¹

Driven in part by protection failures (including in Sri Lanka and South Sudan), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) committed to the 'Centrality of Protection' in 2013, declaring protection the central purpose of humanitarian action. That same year, the system activated its first-ever L3 system-wide scale-up in response to the Syrian civil war – a mechanism introduced through the Transformative Agenda to mobilise operational capacity rapidly in major crises.^{xxiii} Yet the 'Centrality of Protection' would be tested and found lacking in every subsequent SOHS reporting period. In Syria, access denial led to the protection of civilians being described as 'an empty concept'.¹¹² Indeed, the response in Syria became an example of the system's inability to operate effectively in contexts of access denial and political obstruction. One meaningful achievement was United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2165, which authorised cross-border operations – but even this was 'not being sufficiently utilised by the UN'.¹¹³

In the 2022 SOHS period, the system faced deliberate obstruction in Afghanistan and 'a complete breakdown in relations between the government and the humanitarian system' in Tigray.¹¹⁴ Agencies were unable to access much of Tigray for much of the war, and excess deaths were estimated at between 300,000 and 800,000.¹¹⁵ These crises underscored the tensions (examined in [Chapter 3.2](#)) between maintaining operational presence and protecting principled action.

xxiii The L3 system was itself later reformed in 2018, replaced by System-Wide Scale-Up Protocols after repeated extensions beyond the intended six-month period had become the norm (see Tyler and Gorgeu (2024) https://www.unevaluation.org/member_publications/learning-paper-protocol-reality-lessons-scaling-collective-humanitarian).



The Ebola epidemic in West Africa and the large-scale movement of refugees and migrants into Europe both peaked in 2015, which led to several adaptations. Most humanitarian organisations initially treated the Ebola response as a purely medical crisis, and 'time was lost while [organisations] attempted to clarify their role and deploy human and other resources'.¹¹⁶ The European migration response posed an analogous challenge: humanitarian needs arose, on or off the shores of some of the richest countries in the world, among populations who needed legal support and help navigating bureaucracies as much as material assistance. The 2018 SOHS concluded that the system had adapted to both situations but could 'not yet do so quickly or reliably' outside familiar contexts.¹¹⁷ By the time Covid-19 arrived, the 2022 SOHS found that the lesson from Ebola – that 'protection should have been a central and essential element' of pandemic response – went 'unheeded'.¹¹⁸

The response in Syria reshaped the nexus debate more than any other single event, forcing the system to confront protracted displacement in a middle-income country where a purely humanitarian response was structurally inadequate. A decade earlier the TEC had identified the failure to connect humanitarian response to longer-term development and political solutions – but this was now seen at a massive scale. Momentum grew for 'collective outcomes' that would help bridge humanitarian and development action – but the 2017 Rohingya crisis led the 2018 SOHS to conclude that, while 'the system appear[ed] to have become faster and more effective in identifying and meeting the life-saving needs of people', this was 'not mirrored by improvements in meeting longer-term needs'.



In 2025, nine years after the launch of the Grand Bargain, only 8.7% of humanitarian funding went directly and indirectly to LNAs



The 2022 SOHS similarly reported that events in Afghanistan, Tigray and Myanmar had prompted a regression to traditional humanitarian support, with the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan illustrating how development gains can collapse under conflict and the Tigray crisis straining nexus partnerships with the Ethiopian Government.¹¹⁹

The Covid-19 period forced rapid adaptation – agencies shifted to remote management, accelerated cash and leaned heavily on national staff – but it also exposed persistent failures.

Covid-19 temporarily increased reliance on local actors, and a small non-representative sample of 100 L/NNGOs found programming budgets increased by 28% on average.¹²⁰ The 2022 SOHS reasoned that Black Lives Matter and decolonisation debates had given localisation a new moral urgency. Yet in 2025, nine years after the launch of the Grand Bargain, only 8.7% of humanitarian funding went directly and indirectly to local and national actors.



There were some meaningful successes from these reform agendas: many large organisations shifted to a cash-first policy, giving recipients greater choice; the Grand Bargain enabled the Quality Funding Caucus and the expansion of CBPFs, which offered the potential for greater timeliness and efficiencies; there was growing buy-in to the Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) and the wider concept of joint intersectoral analysis to improve interagency planning and reduce duplication; and, by 2024, the Inter-Cluster/Sector Collaboration initiative (launched in 2022)¹²¹ provided tools for joint analysis and action in several contexts.

However, many of the problems identified in the 2022 SOHS were also present in previous reforms. The 2010 IASC Cluster Approach Evaluation found clusters were often process- rather than action-oriented,¹²² and the Transformative Agenda (2011) aimed to ensure that coordination structures were focused on strategy, planning and results rather than on information-sharing.¹²³ This finding was confirmed by Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs) in Somalia¹²⁴ and Yemen¹²⁵ in the current SOHS period (2022–25) and cited in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) efficiency review (2024)¹²⁶ as a primary driver of the Reset (2025). Similarly, the Grand Bargain's five-year review found that, while the concept of and rationale for localisation were 'no longer in question', the system had still not delivered on it (see [Chapter 4.2](#)).¹²⁷

In every SOHS period, commitments that required distributed behavioural change across many organisations showed the least progress. Localisation, mainstreaming protection and accountability to people affected by crisis all required political will from donors, shifts in funding architecture, willingness among leaders of large organisations to cede control, and changes in measuring and rewarding performance.¹²⁸ This has been characterised as a distinction between technical adjustments (where the system made genuine progress) and strategic transformations (where it consistently fell short).¹²⁹ ALNAP found the same pattern across 20 years of its lessons papers: technical learning improved but structural problems remained.¹³⁰ Barriers included large agencies' incentive to protect their funding and mandate, as well as the remarkably small number of donors whose priorities, reporting requirements and risk appetite shaped what the system did and how it did it.



Technical learning improved but structural problems remained



Norms, coalitions and innovation

The SOHS series documents significant changes in norms and a rise in systems to support innovation and change. The energy to reinvent has been part of the system since the first 2010 SOHS, and the 2015 SOHS documented that sudden-onset



The system's most significant innovations succeeded through a combination of evidence, coalition-building and normative change



disasters like the Haiti earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan had led to many 'interesting developments', including technical innovations, crowdsourcing initiatives, private-sector involvement and individuals giving directly at an unprecedented scale.¹³¹ Over the following decade, the system invested in innovation units, shared service providers (such as humanitarian-to-humanitarian (H2H) organisations) and dedicated financing mechanisms. Cash programming, anticipatory action and a generation of digital tools were all supported through these

investments. The system's most significant innovations succeeded through a combination of evidence, coalition-building and normative change.

Covid-19 was a major accelerant of digital tools: the pandemic pushed agencies to use digital tools for needs assessment and community communication (when physical access carried risks) and accelerated the shift to mobile money as a cash-delivery modality. However, it also exposed the digital divide, and a series of incidents, data breaches and cyberattacks reframed data as a protection risk. The 'digital do no harm' discussions that featured prominently in the 2022 SOHS emerged directly from these cases.

Cash programming has become a poster child for humanitarian innovation. Cash moved from a relatively marginal modality in 2010 to the best-evidenced approach in humanitarian response by 2022 through a combination of pilot evidence, learning units, donor investments and (eventually) updated coordination architecture. The Ukraine crisis produced the fastest and largest cash scale-up in history, and Lebanon's three-year unconditional cash guarantee for Syrian refugees produced some of the sector's strongest outcome evidence. However, a 2025 practitioners' letter argued that cash programming had become preoccupied by institutional mandates and coordination debates,¹³² which had prevented it from consistently delivering the localisation or dignity benefits that many anticipated.



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Anticipatory action followed a similar trajectory. The system invested in forecast-based financing pilots and developed models for pre-agreed trigger mechanisms, as well as dedicated units (including the Anticipation Hub^{xxiv} and Centre for Disaster Protection^{xxv}) that helped to build both learning around

xxiv See <https://www.anticipation-hub.org/>
xxv See <https://www.disasterprotection.org/>



Outside sudden-onset climate events, anticipatory action in settings affected by conflict remained nascent



technical infrastructure and the political case. By the current period, there was a growing evidence base and increased investments in anticipatory action (see [Chapter 2.3](#)).¹³³ Outside sudden-onset climate events, however, anticipatory action in settings affected by conflict remained nascent: pilots anticipating conflict-driven displacement and hunger showed promise, but scale-up was constrained by the difficulty of establishing

reliable triggers and inflexible finance mechanisms where political conditions were unstable.¹³⁴

There were also new funds and types of financing. The World Bank established the Pandemic Fund in 2022 for pandemic preparedness and response in low- and middle-income countries; by August 2025, the fund had a portfolio of almost US\$7 billion across 47 projects in 75 countries.¹³⁵ Blended finance pilots and impact bonds introduced some non-grant capital into parts of the system.¹³⁶ [Chapter 5.1](#) describes recent investments in 'innovative finance', such as insurance and risk financing; there were also growing investments in pre-financing, including, for example, for vaccines and nutrition supplies through the Bridge Fund first introduced in 2011 by the United States arm of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF USA).^{xxvi}

Some of the most significant innovation investments documented throughout all SOHS reports were in shared data and analytical infrastructure. A detailed timeline of humanitarian information management (published in 2026) documented all the major initiatives, systems and processes over 100 years, including for crowdsourcing information, data-sharing between organisations and automated services.¹³⁷



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By 2022, there was a meaningful shared evidence architecture that smaller operations and L/NGOs could access without having to produce evidence independently. Several commentators credited the JIAF with 'marked improvement' in Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs), and Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) trend data informed early warning in Somalia. However, despite progress, digital initiatives in the sector remained 'fragmented and held back by inconsistent data standards and

xxvi The Bridge Fund pools capital from impact investors (loans, typically with modest returns) and uses it to advance funds against confirmed pledges from governments, foundations or other donors so that procurement and delivery (vaccines, nutrition supplies, emergency response) need not wait on donor disbursements.



limited system interoperability¹³⁸ (see [Chapter 2.2](#)). Some platforms, such as OCHA's Information Management Branch, were restructured after the 2025 funding cuts.¹³⁹ The funding crisis also strengthened the case for shared, open-source infrastructure: UNICEF's Humanitarian Cash Operations and Programme Ecosystem (HOPE) platform, a verified digital public good, already supported cash operations for 25 million people across 33 countries, and practitioners argued such systems offered a tested, lower-cost alternative to proprietary platforms.¹⁴⁰



Coalitions have been an important driver of innovation and change since the 2010 SOHS



Coalitions have been an important driver of innovation and change since the first 2010 SOHS. The Start Network, CALP Network and the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) functioned as coalition-based norm-setting exercises as much as operational ones, building the professional communities and shared standards through which new approaches spread. Several large organisations

built dedicated hubs for 'innovative finance', such as the Humanitarian Innovative Finance Hub (HIFHUB) for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.^{xxvii} The Digital Public Goods Alliance, which UNICEF co-founded, established open-source standards for digital public goods that began to shape how the system assessed technology investments.^{xxviii}

Investment in dedicated innovation capacity grew in the latest study period. UNICEF's innovation spending more than tripled between 2019 and 2024 (from US\$32 million to US\$116 million), supported by both internal funding allocations and flexible contributions from Nordic governments and private-sector donors.¹⁴¹ The World Food Programme (WFP) Innovation Accelerator continued to invest in a large portfolio of over 86 innovations.¹⁴² In 2024, it added a US\$2.8 million Google grant that supported a joint accelerator programme for 10 WFP ventures anchored in artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning and cloud computing.¹⁴³ Over the period, Elrha, the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub and Grand Challenges Canada similarly moved towards larger and more sustained engagements.

Many organisations attempted to retain innovation infrastructure through the funding cuts; UNICEF retained its Office of Innovation and several hubs, though the product innovation centre was restructured; Elrha dissolved its distinct initiatives but will continue to invest in systems innovation, building on the work it has supported on, for example, mortality estimation. Larger agencies continued to invest in data systems, private-sector engagement in back-office services and 'innovative finance'. A 2025 mapping of the global humanitarian ecosystem indicated it had continued to mature,¹⁴⁴ and many donors maintained innovation in their strategies at the end of the period.

^{xxvii} <https://hifhub.org/>

^{xxviii} <https://www.digitalpublicgoods.net/>



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AI, mentioned just once in the 2022 SOHS, burst onto the scene over this period. Global AI investments were unprecedented, reaching US\$285.9 billion in private economy-wide investment in the US alone in 2025,¹⁴⁵ while generative AI investments experienced over an eightfold increase between 2022 and 2024.¹⁴⁶

The scale of investment indicates that AI will be a significant factor in the global economy, governance and warfare over the coming decade. There are potential humanitarian applications ranging from disease surveillance to needs prediction to translation, and hundreds of organisations piloted AI-assisted tools during this period.

At a global level, the 2026 AI Index found that responsible AI benchmarks are 'not keeping pace with AI capabilities'.¹⁴⁷ Research found 93% of humanitarian staff experimenting informally with AI in their work,¹⁴⁸ yet most organisations have not developed clear governance and policies on its use, nor on data sovereignty and relationships with commercial providers to mitigate the significant risks. NetHope described the result as a fragmented 'shadow AI' landscape in which individual adoption outpaced organisational strategy, creating new cybersecurity and data-protection risks.¹⁴⁹ AI adoption also outpaced evidence, with many tools being deployed before their impact had been evaluated. WFP moved to renew its Palantir partnership despite a leaked internal audit finding 'inadequate risk management' and privacy concerns that had not been adequately addressed, with leadership allegedly saying that WFP systems had become so intertwined with Palantir's that withdrawal would be expensive and arduous.¹⁵⁰



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A range of initiatives have been introduced to address these issues. The AI Solutions for Humanitarian Challenges initiative funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) mapped potential AI applications across humanitarian-response phases and identified risks and barriers. The Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities (CDAC) Network, Alan Turing Institute and Humanitarian AI Advisory launched the SAFE AI project (also funded by FCDO), which developed governance guidelines and tools to verify AI trustworthiness. The project concluded that individual agency policies alone could not close the humanitarian AI governance gap. NetHope's AI Lighthouse provided practical frameworks and ethical guidance for



responsible AI adoption. However, despite these initiatives, senior practitioners were clear that:



'You can't do [AI] with a series of short-term projects. You need to minimise the power imbalance, address data architecture, ensure good AI governance ... it is a long-term process, and it needs to be done properly.'

Scaling for programmatic innovations was challenging in this period, although the innovation infrastructure was significantly more mature than in previous periods.¹⁵¹ In the last decade, many tools that were technically viable and useful proved hard to sustain within independent entities. FrontlineSMS closed in 2021 (after 16 years of operation), while Loop temporarily suspended operations in 2024, citing short-term funding problems as well as active resistance from the agencies it was meant to hold accountable – a reminder of the challenge of sustaining system-level services. UNICEF invested significantly in scaling innovations: 60% of its documented innovation spending went to funding initiatives to 'accelerate' towards scale, but most initiatives remained dependent on UNICEF resources, with limited examples of sustained adoption by governments or other organisations.



Technical innovation proved more tractable than normative change – and normative change more tractable than structural change – in the flow of power and resources



The broader pattern across all SOHS periods was that technical innovation proved more tractable than normative change – and normative change more tractable than structural change – in the flow of power and resources.¹⁵² Some practitioners argued that the innovation infrastructure that remains after the 2025 cuts should focus on locally led innovation ecosystems, 'tying funding to measurable outcomes that reflect local priorities'.¹⁵³ With budgets contracting and coordination systems under pressure to simplify, the system seems more likely to consolidate old hierarchies than to open space for coalition-based, locally led approaches.

Research and learning

The 2018 SOHS and 2022 SOHS documented substantial investments in learning and research infrastructure. These have matured into shared platforms (such as IAHEs), units (such as The CALP Network and the Anticipation Hub) and knowledge-synthesis mechanisms (such as the All India Disaster Mitigation Institute, Elrha, and ALNAP itself). The most recent period has brought interest in 'strategic foresight' methods and approaches: OCHA, the International



Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and UNICEF all invested in units or capabilities and the UN launched a Futures Lab in 2023 and included foresight as part of UN2.0's Quintet of Change.¹⁵⁴ However, embedding foresight within organisational planning processes proved harder than building individual skills; at least one evaluation found limited evidence of senior leadership systematically using foresight.¹⁵⁵

The pace of technological change in conflict and climate led larger organisations to invest in dedicated research partnerships and units to explore emerging challenges, and the *SOHS* series documents their contributions. The ICRC developed its staff and analytical capacity to understand the risks of AI in warfare, producing rigorous assessments of AI in autonomous-weapon systems, military decision-making and information and communication technologies. The Japan Platform – together with member NGOs and medical experts – conducted two years of research to develop guidance for organisations responding to nuclear disasters.¹⁵⁶ UNICEF's Nodes initiative partnered with over 24 academics across multiple institutions on frontier-technology research and its Innocenti unit produced important studies on the risks of AI and cyber-operations for children.¹⁵⁷ IFRC launched a new unit and produced in-depth research on building resilience to harmful information. These investments reflected a recognition that retrospectively learning from crisis responses was insufficient to prepare for conflicts and disasters shaped by technologies whose implications were only beginning to be understood.

At the organisational level, investment in evaluation increased since 2007 – that is, until 2025. Large international NGOs and UN agencies invested significantly in evaluation: UNICEF's evaluations doubled between 2018 and 2023,¹⁵⁸ and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) evaluation expenditure – while still below the UN Joint Inspection Unit's recommended range (0.5–3% of total budget) – amounted to US\$6.9 million in 2024. However, the system invested less in the decision architecture that would translate evaluation findings into changed practice. A cross-organisational review found that, while generating management responses to evaluations was fairly well institutionalised across multilateral organisations, follow-up on whether they had implemented recommended actions was weaker, and this varied according to how long organisations tracked implementation, whether they used a digital platform to track progress and whether they reported the implementation status publicly or only internally.¹⁵⁹ At the system level, the IAHE reports frequently made systemic recommendations, but they were often 'signposts for reform' rather than receiving management response plans or requiring follow-up.¹⁶⁰

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Local and national actors held much of the contextual knowledge upon which adaptation depended, but they remained underserved within formal learning infrastructure



Local and national actors held much of the contextual knowledge upon which adaptation depended, but they remained underserved within formal learning infrastructure. Compared to international actors, national humanitarian practitioners had less access to opportunities to share tacit learning, and research in the system was less relevant to them.¹⁶¹ There were clear hierarchies in what donors and international organisations counted as 'good evidence', with local knowledge the least valued.¹⁶² The rapid scale-up and -down of

local and national organisations also presented challenges; Caritas Odesa in Ukraine, for example, grew from 20 to 120 staff within months but struggled with institutional costs, such as training.¹⁶³

Some organisations experimented with shared digital infrastructure to support learning. Digni (a Norwegian network of 17 faith-based organisations) and FONAR (a small Ghanaian environmental NGO) found that such platforms worked best when they included human interaction and facilitated discussion and in-person training, rather than when used as standalone self-paced content. Smaller organisations said they gained significant value from shared infrastructure that they could not otherwise afford, but that they needed more support to get started.¹⁶⁴

High staff turnover remained a barrier to learning, especially for tacit knowledge. For example, one practitioner in Ukraine told us:



'All this system-building still relies on specific individuals. And when a person leaves, entire processes can be lost. Because they are not described, not formalised.'

An International Rescue Committee (IRC) review of humanitarian leadership found that many essential leadership skills came from experience rather than formal training. Coaching and mentoring were widely recognised as some of the most effective capacity-building methods for leaders, alongside simulation, scenario-based training and peer exchange.¹⁶⁵ Some organisations had structured programmes that combined these elements such as IASC's Emergency Team Leadership Programme.¹⁶⁶ The IRC review noted that ethics training, while critically needed, was largely absent from most leadership curricula.¹⁶⁷

People we spoke to expected the 2025 cuts to undermine the system's formal learning infrastructure. UNHCR's evaluation budget was cut from US\$6.9 million in 2024 to US\$5 million in 2025, with further reductions projected and only one global thematic evaluation planned for 2026.¹⁶⁸ Closure of the US Agency for International

Development (USAID) also resulted in the loss of its Innovation, Technology and Research Hub and its bureau-level evaluation teams. Senior knowledge management posts were reportedly cut at UNICEF, WFP and other agencies, while smaller organisations reliant on project funding lost significant proportions of their staff.¹⁶⁹ By mid-2026, one mapping exercise had identified seven evidence and data platforms that had closed since the cuts and a further eight interrupted or of uncertain status.¹⁷⁰

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Implications for the Humanitarian Reset

The Humanitarian Reset is the latest in a succession of major reform frameworks stretching back two decades. Throughout our research for this *2026 SOHS*, practitioners questioned whether the system is applying what it has learned from previous reform cycles or simply repeating the same patterns under greater pressure.

The evidence from this chapter suggests the Reset has instigated progress in areas that the system has always found easiest to change. The number of humanitarian clusters was reduced from 11 to eight, analytical processes led to the hyper-prioritisation of needs, and concrete steps were taken to expand pooled funds and CBPFs. These are the kinds of changes the system has historically been able to achieve – which is not to say that making these changes is easy, but that it does not require redistributing power or fundamentally changing who controls resources. As one senior humanitarian advisor said:



'We just haven't asked the big questions about where aid is going yet. The only question that's been asked so far is: "How do we keep the best parts of the old system with less money?"'

Three specific critiques are worth noting here. First, a decade after the 'Centrality of Protection' commitment, protection received little attention in early Reset discussions (though there was significant advocacy by protection actors and greater consideration in later elaborations of the Reset – see [Chapter 3.3](#)). Funding cuts left millions, including children in Afghanistan and Syria, without protection services; they led to service coverage for gender-based violence being halved or eliminated in several countries; and they caused mine-action capacity to be reduced.¹⁷¹ Even before the cuts, protection was among the weakest areas of performance across the IAHE evaluations,¹⁷² in many settings the 'Centrality of Protection' had not been fulfilled,¹⁷³ and in northern Ethiopia the Humanitarian Country Team was criticised for failing to protect people.¹⁷⁴ Harms continued –



including those committed by the system itself through digital risks and sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (see [Chapters 2.2](#) and [4.2](#)).

Second, on accountability to communities affected by crisis, some commentators criticised the Reset for failing to meaningfully consult with communities. A commitment to stronger accountability has been embedded into almost every reform initiative, with important investments in initiatives such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) and working groups on accountability to affected populations. However, [Chapter 4.2](#) describes limited progress; of all CHS commitments, organisations are least likely to fulfil their commitment to welcoming and addressing complaints.¹⁷⁵ Research from Ground Truth Solutions concluded: 'the humanitarian reset must be led by what crisis-affected people need. The world cannot afford – morally or financially – a humanitarian system that isn't shaped by this principle.'¹⁷⁶



This period also featured discussions about how change from outside the system may fundamentally shift how aid is delivered in future



Finally, some practitioners argued that the formal humanitarian system, which originated from mutual aid and solidarity, has been captured by expansionist organisational agendas – and that budget cuts and restructuring alone will not address its fundamental efficiency problems. This period also featured discussions about how change from outside the system may fundamentally shift how aid is delivered in future, with practitioners telling us they looked for hope outside the system, including in mutual aid and diaspora networks.

Neighbourhood networks, women's groups and other forms of mutual aid have formed the first layer of response in most crises.¹⁷⁷ ODI Global proposed an ecosystems approach as an alternative framing, which would treat state-led responses, civil society mobilisation and community-led action as central to humanitarian response, rather than as add-ons to an international architecture.¹⁷⁸ A group of 18 global leaders convened by the NEAR Network called for a system built on 'South–South solidarity', self-reliance and sustainability.¹⁷⁹

Assessing performance against OECD evaluation criteria

[Table 1](#) presents our assessment of how the humanitarian system has performed against the core Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) evaluation criteria. It draws together the evidence examined across the preceding chapters, which the report's authors weighed against each criterion to rate change as improvement, partial progress, mixed progress, decline or no change.



Since the 2012 SOHS, every edition has made this assessment, tracking the same set of criteria so that performance can be compared over time. The table should be read as a structured snapshot of issues examined consistently since the first edition rather than a full summary of the report's insights. The assessment should be read bearing in mind that, over the current 2022–25 period, the system faced increasingly hostile operating environments, growth in protracted conflict and climate crises, and loss of funding – all of which undermined performance.

Table 1: Performance of the humanitarian system against OECD evaluation criteria, 2010–2025

Performance area	2026 SOHS 2022–2025	2022 SOHS 2018–22	2018 SOHS 2015–17	2015 SOHS 2012–14	2012 SOHS 2010–11
Sufficiency	After a peak of US\$46.1 billion in 2022, funding dropped by 13% in 2024 and by 20% in 2025 to US\$33.3 billion. The risk of concentration of funding was exposed as US funding stopped suddenly in early 2025, with this country's contribution dropping by 55%. UN-coordinated appeals were only 35% funded, compared to 61% in 2022. People affected by crisis continued to cite limited assistance as the biggest barrier to support. A small number of government donors stepped up their humanitarian spending in response to the cuts in 2025, including several non-DAC donors. Humanitarians increasingly looked to alternative sources of funding, including philanthropies and innovative finance, but these efforts did not fill the gap left by government funding.	▼	—	▼	—
Coverage	Only 38% of people in need (PiN) were reached in 2025, falling well below the average level between 2020–22 of over 50%. Changes in Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) methodology drew a tighter remit around who was considered in need of humanitarian assistance, making year-on-year comparisons challenging. Funding to different contexts varied widely, with political proximity driving some donor choices that did not always align with the size of needs. Funding cuts combined with politically imposed access constraints and insecurity to reduce effective coverage. Improvements in multisectoral needs assessments (MSNAs) were hit by funding cuts, reducing data availability to identify humanitarian needs in the short and potentially longer term. Early gains on including a range of potentially vulnerable identity groups were threatened by funding cuts and tightening diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) restrictions.	⬢	▼	▼	—

▼ Decline

⬢ Mixed progress

▲ Partial progress

▲ Improvement

— No change



Performance area	2026 SOHS 2022–2025	2022 SOHS 2018–22	2018 SOHS 2015–17	2015 SOHS 2012–14	2012 SOHS 2010–11
Relevance and appropriateness	Surveys indicated improvements in assistance meeting most important needs between 2022 and 2025. People affected by crisis identified food security as their top need, closely followed by cash, livelihoods and resilience. However, the humanitarian system narrowed its focus to immediate 'lifesaving' support. ⬢ Funding gaps to 'lifesaving' sectors also grew in 2025. There was some positive tailoring of assistance for different identity groups, but negative examples remained. Cash was seen as relevant and preferred in many cases. Provision levels fluctuated, but a substantial increase in requirements for multipurpose cash in the 2026 HPC process indicates the system's growing prioritisation of this modality.	⬢	▲	▬	▲
Accountability and participation	There was continued proliferation and investment in AAP and PSEAH frameworks and tools. However, many were complex, technical and resource-intensive, and their effectiveness and practical implementation remained difficult to assess. There was some progress towards more collective AAP strategies, but in practice these efforts often lapsed, did not produce tangible outcomes or moved too slowly to change decision-making. Where they meaningfully existed, communication, consultation, transparency and 'closing the loop' were significantly associated with more positive results on dignity, relevance, targeting and quality. However, participation and community engagement remained tokenistic in many settings. The limited availability of independent mechanisms, weak enforcement and the tendency to reduce AAP mainly to community feedback mechanisms undermined trust and reinforced a wider crisis of trust and legitimacy. Funding cuts halted or slowed initiatives intended to strengthen AAP, PSEA and community engagement, increasing vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse, even as some independent mechanisms and associations made progress.	⬢	▲	N/A	N/A
Effectiveness	The system reduced mortality and averted famine where resources and access allowed, such as in Somalia. There was also evidence of improved wellbeing and other outcomes for people in crisis, particularly in the food security, nutrition and education sectors. However, gains were frequently reversed by funding cuts, and in Gaza, Sudan and Haiti the system was fundamentally constrained. Overall, the evidence base stayed weak, with scarce outcome-level evidence, though there were new methodologies for better mortality estimation as well as improved data on famine prediction. ⬢ Preparedness, early action and pre-emptive financing improved timeliness. Anticipatory action stayed small, but the evidence on what works strengthened, with activations tripling since 2022. Sector-specific efforts to improve quality continued and aid recipients reported higher satisfaction with quality, though standards did not always prioritise the things that mattered most to them. The system made some progress on programming for gender-based violence and child protection, but protection remained chronically underfunded.	▲	▲	⬢	⬢

▼ Decline

⬢ Mixed progress

▲ Partial progress

▲ Improvement

▬ No change



Performance area		2026 SOHS 2022–2025	2022 SOHS 2018–22	2018 SOHS 2015–17	2015 SOHS 2012–14	2012 SOHS 2010–11
Efficiency		Perceptions of efficiency among aid workers improved modestly. The Reset aimed for a lighter, faster, less bureaucratic system, including reducing clusters and increasing shared back-office services. For some practitioners, it left the deepest inefficiencies untouched – including long funding chains and mandate overlap between the largest agencies. Donors provided similar levels of multiyear and flexible funding through to 2024, but international agencies passed less of it on to their partners. Modelled efficiency gains from funding local actors did not materialise.				
	●	The evidence base for cash grew, and it remained the most cost-efficient modality. The share of cash held at 21%, but absolute volumes fell for a third consecutive year. The system invested in cost-measurement infrastructure, including Dioptra, Scenario Costing and Analysis for Large-scale Efficiency in Nutrition (SCALE) and activity-based costing in Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), but the link between cost data and actual allocation decisions remained weak. Sharp, often chaotic, funding withdrawals in 2025 undermined existing efficiency gains. In the drive for savings, the sector risked eroding the long-term investments efficient aid depends on.	▲	▲	▲	▬
Connectedness		Joint analysis and planning were undertaken across multiple food security crises and new structures such as the UNDP–UNHCR Global Collaboration Framework. Collective outcomes tended to focus on immediate needs rather than underlying drivers; among practitioners responding to our survey, nexus programming was the lowest-rated performance measure. Development, peace and climate finance contracted at once. Multilateral development banks brought development finance closer to humanitarian contexts, though much was in the form of loans.				
	●	Disaster risk reduction (DRR) and anticipatory action delivered the clearest nexus-style results, with early-warning coverage reaching 60% of countries and evidence that sustained investment in DRR cut disaster deaths. Peace continued to be the least-integrated pillar of the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus, but some practical gains were made, particularly in community-level protection and peace programming. Cuts to peace-building and peacekeeping undermined proactive structures that had supported humanitarian protection activities. The work by local actors connecting HDP efforts was an untapped source of learning for international actors.	▲	▲	▲	▲

▼ Decline

● Mixed progress

▲ Partial progress

▲ Improvement

▬ No change



Performance area		2026 SOHS 2022–2025	2022 SOHS 2018–22	2018 SOHS 2015–17	2015 SOHS 2012–14	2012 SOHS 2010–11
Coherence		Humanitarians stressed the importance of humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law (IHL) in the face of violations, but they had more nuanced debates about the appropriate contextual implementation of humanitarian principles by local actors. Frontline staff navigated principles in negotiations to provide humanitarian assistance impartially, but their efforts were stymied by political blockages from governments and de facto authorities. Donor governments' increasingly explicit self-interested approach and funding cuts threatened both the impartiality and independence of humanitarian action. Organisations that advocated for the rights of people affected by crisis were subject to harassment and detentions, including by state actors. In the face of new security threats, humanitarians built capabilities to navigate drones and the implications of digital security technology for IHL. Recognising the need to strengthen UN member states' respect for IHL and hold violators to account, humanitarians stepped up their influencing efforts, with an increased focus on humanitarian diplomacy.				
Complementarity		Despite 10 years of Grand Bargain commitments, the system fell short on localisation and local leadership. In 2024, 9.5% of humanitarian funding reached local and national actors directly and indirectly; direct funding stood at 3.8%, and L/NGO representation in Humanitarian Country Teams was 11%. Funding cuts, the US\$2 billion pooled-fund injection and the Reset were widely perceived as setbacks to localisation. They heightened political tensions around funding and risked eroding hard-won gains. Mutual-aid approaches shifted from being treated as 'niche' to receiving more serious and nuanced attention, with growing calls for greater support. Concerns persisted that mainstreaming or scaling up mutual aid could lead to co-opting and a return to conventional humanitarian approaches. Relationships with states and existing governance structures remained uneven and, in some contexts, were largely bypassed. One-size-fits-all coordination arrangements and emergency response mechanisms often failed to build on existing national and local systems and were not consistently adapted to middle-income contexts.			N/A	N/A

▼ Decline

Mixed progress

Partial progress

Improvement

No change



Conclusion

Evidence from across all six editions of the *SOHS* illustrates how the system has learned, adapted and attempted reform in response to shocks and crises. Changes that did not require the redistribution of funding, mandates or decision-making power were more likely to succeed, while those that did faced



What the humanitarian system does in the next two to three years will shape not just its immediate capacity but its ability to learn and adapt in the crises that follow

continued resistance. The current moment is a test of whether the system can achieve something it has not managed in 20 years of reform cycles: make structural changes rather than solely technical ones.

Pockets of progress have shown the system better connecting on community-protection structures, mutual aid and locally led response – and these examples point to what a differently structured system might look like. What the humanitarian system does in the next two to three years will shape not just its immediate capacity but its ability to learn and adapt in the crises that follow. That

capacity will depend on whether the system can learn from those who act first and stay longest, and whether it will draw on a foundation of principled humanitarian action that is accountable to people affected by crisis.



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