

2026 REPORT



THE STATE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM





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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

3RP	Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan	FTS	Financial Tracking Service
AAP	accountability to affected populations	GBV	gender-based violence
AI	artificial intelligence	GDHO	Global Database of Humanitarian Organisations
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action	GDP	gross domestic product
AWSD	Aid Worker Security Database	GHA	Global Humanitarian Assistance
CAR	Central African Republic	GHF	Gaza Humanitarian Foundation
CBO	community-based organisation	GHO	Global Humanitarian Overview
CBPF	Country-Based Pooled Fund	HAWG	Humanitarian Access Working Group
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund	HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard	HDP	humanitarian—development—peace
CVA	cash and voucher assistance	HNRP	Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
CWSA	Community World Service Asia	HPC	Humanitarian Programme Cycle
DAC	Development Assistance Committee	HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
DEI	diversity, equity and inclusion	IAHE	Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation
DFA	De Facto Authorities	IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations	ICJ	International Court of Justice
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo	ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
DRR	disaster risk reduction	ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
Elrha	Enhanced Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance	IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator	IHA	international humanitarian assistance
EU	European Union	IHL	international humanitarian law
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations	INGO	international non-governmental organisation
FCDO	United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	IOM	International Organisation for Migration
FGD	focus group discussion		

IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification	PSEA	prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse
IRC	International Rescue Committee	PSEAH	prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
JIAF	Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework	RC/RC	Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
KII	key informant interview	RSF	Rapid Support Forces
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, intersex or other	sclr	support to community-led responses
LNAs	local and national actors	SOHS	The State of the Humanitarian System
L/NGO	local and national non-governmental organisation	TEC	Tsunami Evaluation Coalition
MDB	multilateral development bank	UAE	United Arab Emirates
MEAL	monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning	UK	United Kingdom
MOPAN	Multilateral Performance Network	UN	United Nations
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
MSNA	multisectoral needs assessment	UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
NEAR	Network for Empowered Aid Response	UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
NGO	non-governmental organisation	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council	UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	UNSC	United Nations Security Council
ODA	official development assistance	US	United States
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territory	WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene
PiN	people in need of humanitarian assistance	WFP	World Food Programme
		WHO	World Health Organization



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2026 marks twenty years since ALNAP began gathering data for the first edition of *The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS)*. This sixth edition examines the performance of the international humanitarian system from 2022 to 2025, arguably one of the most turbulent periods in its history. Humanitarian needs rose sharply, driven by worsening food insecurity, high levels of forced displacement, more frequent climate shocks, and multiple new and protracted conflicts. At the same time, increasing violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) by state and non-state actors heightened protection risks for civilians and humanitarian actors. Just as needs peaked, the international humanitarian system experienced its greatest financial contraction, with funding falling by 30% from a record high in 2022 as major government donors cut their support.

This report considers performance against five policy areas:

1. Prioritisation under pressure

Growing needs and a sharp funding decline, from a peak of US\$47.5 billion in 2022 to US\$33.3 billion in 2025, forced the international humanitarian system to make difficult prioritisation decisions. Successive humanitarian programme cycles (HPCs) narrowed the humanitarian remit, reducing the number of people and type of programmes included in response plans. In 2025, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) led a hyper-prioritisation exercise to identify those in the most severe need. The percentage of people in need who were targeted for assistance dropped from 67% in 2023 to 60% in 2025, with 38% hyper-prioritised. Yet insecurity, political constraints and slashed funding prevented responses from reaching targets in many contexts.

Previous progress on identifying multisector needs, delivering relevant assistance and including vulnerable groups waned as the system concentrated increasingly scarce resources on a shrinking set of 'lifesaving' sectors and activities. Restrictions on diversity, equity and inclusion further undermined earlier gains in reaching marginalised groups. Women-led organisations, for example, reported widespread cuts and tailored services were often the first to close in some contexts.

Prioritisation decisions weakened information systems and reduced staffing throughout the humanitarian sector. While international organisations largely avoided the predicted wave of closures and mergers, many local organisations were hit hard, with little influence on upstream decisions and insufficient core funding to maintain staff and infrastructure. Many international organisations adopted opaque, top-down and reactive approaches to decision-making, eroding trust among staff and local partners. Abrupt programme closures also damaged trust with communities affected by crisis.

Humanitarians tried to better access non-Development Assistance Committee donors, philanthropic organisations and innovative finance, but these funding sources were unable to fill the gaps left by large government donors. The reduced size of the system generated calls for agencies to value complementarity over competition, and the shrinking remit intensified the need to connect with peace and development systems so that the people and programming no longer prioritised by humanitarians did not fall through the cracks.

2. What works, and at what cost

The funding crisis intensified scrutiny of humanitarian effectiveness, with growing political pressure to deliver more with fewer resources and demonstrate impact. Evidence showed that humanitarian actors often responded rapidly to epidemics and achieved positive impacts in several climate-driven food crises, potentially saving tens to hundreds of thousands of lives in Somalia and improving food security in Afghanistan. Overall, recipients' satisfaction with the *quality* of the assistance also increased, although there was not always enough emphasis on the things that people prioritised such as dignity, relevance and regularity.

Responses were fast where organisations had pre-positioned supplies, anticipatory financing or strong local partnerships. New evidence reinforced the value of acting before crises, including by reducing people's reliance on negative coping strategies. Anticipatory activations tripled over the study period, despite continuing to receive only around 1% of humanitarian funding.

As funding contracted, organisations expanded the use of cost-measurement tools, and the 2025 Humanitarian Reset began consolidating clusters and back-office functions. Digital technologies improved efficiencies, particularly in cash delivery. However, rapid digitalisation outpaced safeguards. Biometric data collection expanded while cyber-attacks increased, and 59% of aid recipients did not fully understand how their data was used.

Several well-evidenced approaches were underused at scale. Short funding cycles, lengthy funding chains and delayed disbursements continued to drive inefficient and more costly operating models, despite clear evidence of their shortcomings. Cash and voucher assistance remained the humanitarian modality with the strongest evidence base for effectiveness and efficiency, yet absolute funding for cash declined. Weak outcome measurement also limited the system's ability to demonstrate impact, including how and when humanitarian action saved lives.

Political and financial barriers undermined performance. In Haiti, Gaza and Sudan, for example, access obstruction and political deadlock or funding shortfalls contributed to catastrophic food insecurity and two famines. Reduced funding reversed some strong gains in nutrition programming and narrowed responses towards acute lifesaving activities. This was often at odds with people's priorities in protracted crises where livelihoods and education remained essential, alongside immediate relief. At the same time, the drive for efficiency at all costs raised concerns that cost-cutting could erode quality and deepen negative impacts on the environment and on staff wellbeing.

3. Protection and principles in a changing geopolitical landscape

Escalating IHL violations, shrinking humanitarian space and growing political restrictions exposed people affected by crisis and humanitarian staff to significant protection risks. During the period, international investigations found evidence of genocide in relation to Israel's actions in Gaza and the actions of the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan. Protection actors strengthened advocacy to ensure that protection was recognised as a 'lifesaving' intervention within the Humanitarian Reset and to strengthen the 'Centrality of Protection' in response planning and operations. However, stronger cross-sector engagement on protection and leadership from Humanitarian Coordinators was essential but lacking. Operational actors and donors also expanded humanitarian diplomacy to press for respect for IHL and humanitarian access, but these efforts failed to counter the scale of political obstruction and persistent impunity for violations.

States became the leading perpetrators of attacks on both aid and healthcare personnel, making this the deadliest period for humanitarian workers on record, with local staff facing the greatest risks. In response, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2730 in 2024 to protect humanitarian personnel and infrastructure, while some organisations expanded security management and insurance schemes for local staff and volunteers. Funding reductions

undermined these gains though, reducing investment in security staff, information-sharing and training. Growing insecurity also drove greater reliance on private security providers and technology firms to maintain access, highlighting the need for better safeguards to protect humanitarian principles and people affected by crisis.

Humanitarians struggled against strong governments and de facto authorities to provide impartial support and protection for people affected by crisis. Negotiations, often undertaken by frontline staff, required greater direction from organisational leadership and donors on the limits of acceptable compromise. Restrictive regulations governing civil society organisations further constrained efforts to protect people from human rights abuses while donor priorities around migration, counterterrorism and security continued to challenge humanitarian independence. Concurrently, the growth of politically driven crises intensified debates over the appropriateness of neutrality and independence principles as opposed to solidarity and justice. Humanitarians questioned what it means for organisations that rely on commitments to neutrality and independence for access, staff safety and influence to coexist alongside more explicitly political approaches to upholding humanity.

4. Power imbalances and improving accountability

The humanitarian system made the least progress and generated the most frustration in addressing entrenched power imbalances and structures. The same barriers to localisation repeatedly showed up in this period: limited funding, influence and flexibility for local and national actors, as well as transactional partnerships with international humanitarian actors.

A decade after the Grand Bargain, localisation commitments remained largely unmet. Local actors received just 4.3% of direct humanitarian funding in 2025, while national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) held only 11% of seats on Humanitarian Country Teams in 2024. Local and national NGOs continued to face heavy compliance requirements, limited funding flexibility and disproportionate risks when operating in insecure areas. While some organisations took steps to address colonial legacies and power dynamics, the system made very little progress as a whole.

The Humanitarian Reset prioritised greater use of OCHA-managed pooled funds to advance localisation, but concerns persisted over donor influence and fund governance. Political dynamics also risked reversing hard-won gains in localisation. The system recognised the value of locally led pooled funds, while approaches

like support to community-led responses (sclr) gained traction as a means for the international system to support local mutual aid processes. International humanitarian organisations increasingly sought ways to work with these locally led systems, but there were also warnings that these approaches could become co-opted by the formal humanitarian system, with more rigid international structures and processes undermining the unique community-embedded strengths and values that made them effective.

System leadership on accountability to people affected by crisis (AAP) evidenced at the beginning of the study period – including investment in OCHA’s Flagship Initiative which focused on community engagement and development of collective frameworks and tools – weakened as funding declined. Practical implementation of AAP was one of the system’s weakest areas, often treated as a technical exercise and remaining disconnected from planning and programming. Community feedback rarely shaped decisions and organisations struggled to respond to requests and complaints. Independent accountability platforms made encouraging progress but the system continued to largely assess its own performance, including on sensitive complaints around corruption and on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. Although the Humanitarian Reset called for a more ‘people-centred’ system, it did not articulate practical reforms to overcome structural barriers to meaningful accountability.

5. Learning and adapting to change

The nature of humanitarian crises has changed over the past 20 years and the international humanitarian system’s response to them has evolved through learning, innovation and reforms. By 2025, protracted crises accounted for 95% of humanitarian funding to interagency appeals, up from 54% in 2016; climate-induced crises became more frequent and complex, with 19 of the 25 countries most vulnerable to climate change also affected by conflict.

The system reiterated its commitments to the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus over 2022–25, driving changes in policy and coordination, but it continued to rely on short-term funding. The narrowing of the humanitarian remit to focus on people affected by recent shocks and acute lifesaving needs created gaps that development, peace and climate financing – themselves affected by funding reductions – did not fill. As a result, international financing and operations remained siloed, achieved limited impact, and failed to reflect the holistic needs and priorities of people affected by or vulnerable to recurrent and protracted crises.



The system strengthened its capacity for innovation and learning over successive editions of the SOHS. Evaluation coverage expanded, innovation units and dedicated funds matured, and shared platforms supported the uptake of new modalities. Cash assistance and anticipatory action moved from marginal to established approaches, supported by pilot evidence, donor investment and learning coalitions. The use of technology also expanded, although governance struggled to keep pace with rapid technological change. While the 2025 funding cuts weakened innovation and learning infrastructure, several organisations prioritised retaining these capabilities. A review of two decades of reform, however, revealed that the humanitarian system consistently made more progress on technical improvements but struggled to make structural changes to advance localisation, AAP and the HDP nexus.

The *2026 SOHS report* identifies key considerations requiring greater focus as the system moves forward in an altered operating context. It outlines learning from the past four years – from both progress and mistakes – to address opportunities, tensions and challenges in each of these areas:

1. Complementing broader ecosystems of support

The international humanitarian system will need to use its resources to play a more supportive, gap-filling and enabling role alongside local structures, knowledge and leadership. To support people falling outside a narrowed humanitarian remit, it will need to engage more effectively with international peace, development and climate systems by recognising and building on their different mandates, incentives and operating models in crisis-affected and fragile contexts.

2. Strengthening trust

Funding cuts, rushed decision-making, disinformation and limited progress on key Grand Bargain commitments have weakened several relationships on which effective humanitarian action depends. Rebuilding trust within those relationships will take time, but there are actions that can accelerate that process. These include strengthening accountability to people affected by crisis; translating localisation commitments into action by confronting persistent power imbalances and the humanitarian system's colonial legacies; investing in staff security and reduction of harm; strengthening advocacy for states to uphold IHL; and improving communication with donor publics, media and political actors to articulate the value of international humanitarian assistance in ways that uphold dignity and reinforce mutual solidarity with people affected by crisis.

3. Pursuing opportunities for structural and functional change

As declines in funding begin to stabilise, the humanitarian system should use this

period to move beyond survival mode. It should make strategic choices that reshape how it operates, placing the priorities of people affected by crisis at the centre of decision-making. At the same time, diversifying funding and delivery models will be important to reduce the system's dependence on a few large donors and international operational agencies.

4. Retaining what already works

Funding reductions should not come at the expense of the capabilities that the international humanitarian system has built over the past two decades. As organisations make difficult prioritisation decisions they should protect the institutional knowledge and experience of national and international staff, retain investments in data systems, and preserve the standards and safeguards that have strengthened the quality, safety and ethical delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Two decades of reforms have delivered important technical advancements and demonstrated the system's capacity to learn and improve: from stronger coordination to pooled funds, to joint intersectoral analysis, to cash-first policies. Yet reforms that require deeper shifts in operations and power have remained largely unfulfilled. The Humanitarian Reset has similarly advanced some technical reforms – such as coordination, prioritisation and expanded pooled funding – but it remains uncertain whether it will deliver the structural change needed to enable genuinely locally led and people-centred humanitarian action.

The international humanitarian system entered 2026 smaller, more fragile and facing fundamental questions about its role and identity. Yet this period of contraction also creates an opportunity to channel the commitment, experience and growing frustration of those working within and alongside the system into building a more effective, ethical and accountable model of international humanitarian action.



PART 1

INTRODUCTION

Image: Peru, 2023: Women working in a community kitchen pose in front of the facility. © Alexandre Laprise/ shutterstock

ABOUT SOHS 2026

Worldwide, a broad range of institutions and individuals undertake humanitarian action – that is, providing assistance and protection to save lives, prevent and reduce suffering, and preserve people’s dignity in crises arising from armed conflict, climate or geological hazards and other causes. This ecosystem of support operates both at home (for example, encompassing governments, national disaster-management agencies, survivors and their communities, religious groups, the private sector, local/national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local civil society groups) and abroad (for example, encompassing family, friends and diaspora groups).

The **international humanitarian system** is an additional, supportive layer of this ecosystem – and the layer that The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) assesses. For the purposes of this report, we define the international humanitarian system as:

The network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian action is undertaken when local and national resources are, on their own, insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis.

The system is **international** in the sense that it is cross-border, and **humanitarian** in the sense that at least one actor involved in its funding or delivery identifies with the goals, norms and principles of humanitarianism.ⁱ These actors – which may be funded by governments or private individuals/entities – include local, national and international NGOs conducting humanitarian activities, United Nations humanitarian agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, domestic government agencies and authorities, regional intergovernmental agencies, multilateral agencies, government aid agencies and other government offices that provide humanitarian funding and coordination.

This working definition sets the scope for this report, albeit one that can be contested. There is limited clarity and consensus on the borders of what counts as humanitarian action versus longer-term development assistance, on which actors count as local versus global, and on the extent to which relevant principles are

ⁱ These principles have traditionally been considered to include humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. [Chapter 3.2](#) discusses more about their interpretation and implementation.



enacted that make these actions 'humanitarian'. To better understand the role of international humanitarian action, it is essential to recognise the importance of locally led action and the range of aforementioned sources of support available to people affected by crisis.

Similarly, the system's engagement in fragile contexts and the growth of protracted crises requires us to consider its connections with development and peace actors. In this report, we aim to recognise these porous margins and better understand the efforts of broader actors in contexts affected by crisis. However, the SOHS focuses on holding the international humanitarian system to account. While it explores the effectiveness of the international system's engagement with other entities, as well as how they can influence the international humanitarian system, it does not assess the performance of those entities.

RESEARCH SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

This sixth edition of the *SOHS* assesses the size, shape and performance of the international humanitarian system between January 2022 and December 2025. It also identifies key trends that have emerged over the 20 years since the first SOHS study period began.

Its three primary research objectives (as in previous editions) are:

1. To describe the architecture of the international humanitarian system: What were the levels and trends in funding flows? What was the distribution of human and financial resources? What were the numbers/types of agencies involved? How has the composition of that system and its borders changed?
2. To assess the humanitarian caseload: How many humanitarian responses took place in the study period? What were the locations and types of emergencies? How did the humanitarian system identify and reach people in need of humanitarian assistance?
3. To assess performance: How did the humanitarian system perform, both against key challenges in this period and against Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) criteria, at the programme/project level and the policy/structure level? How well did the humanitarian system meet the expectations of people affected by crisis? How did this period compare with previous periods? How has the humanitarian system's navigation of a changing operational environment set it up for the future?



To address the system's performance against some of the key challenges in this period (and building on the approach adopted in the previous edition, the 2022 SOHS), this report is structured as follows.

PART 1: Introduction

- About the 2026 SOHS
- What have been the crises and global shifts?

PART 2: Performance of the international humanitarian system

- How has the humanitarian system prioritised in a period of constrained funding? ([Chapter 1](#))
- What works and at what cost? Effectiveness and efficiency under constraints ([Chapter 2](#))
- Has the system contributed to protecting people affected by crisis and its principles in a new period of geopolitics? ([Chapter 3](#))
- Is the humanitarian system sharing power or reshaping it? ([Chapter 4](#))
- How is the system learning and adapting to the changing nature of crisis? ([Chapter 5](#))

PART 3: Conclusion

- How has the system performed in this period?
- Is the system fit for the future?



Box 1: SOHS performance criteria

Since the creation of the first *SOHS*, ALNAP has used the OECD evaluation criteria, originally developed for evaluating development assistance, as a basis to provide a consistent assessment framework across different editions. The *SOHS* performance criteria are adapted from the OECD criteria designed to be used in humanitarian settings.¹

ALNAP launched new guidance on the OECD criteria for humanitarian agencies in September 2025.² Given that this was towards the end of the period covered in this report, we used the same criteria as in previous editions of the *SOHS*.

- **Sufficiency:*** The degree to which the resources available to the international humanitarian system are sufficient to cover humanitarian needs.
- **Coverage:** The degree to which action by the international humanitarian system reaches all people in need.
- **Relevance and appropriateness:** The degree to which the assistance and protection that the international humanitarian system provides addresses recipients' most important needs (as judged by both humanitarian professionals and people affected by crisis).
- **Accountability and participation:*** The degree to which people affected by crisis can hold actors within the international humanitarian system accountable and influence decisions related to assistance and protection.
- **Effectiveness:** The degree to which humanitarian operations meet their stated objectives in a timely manner and at an acceptable level of quality.
- **Efficiency:** The degree to which humanitarian outputs are produced for the lowest possible amount of inputs.
- **Coherence:** The degree to which actors in the international humanitarian system act in consistency with humanitarian principles and comply with international humanitarian law (IHL), and the degree to which they are able to influence states and non-state armed groups to respect humanitarian principles and conform to IHL.
- **Complementarity:*** The degree to which the international humanitarian system recognises and supports the capacities of national and local actors, particularly governments and civil society organisations.
- **Connectedness:** The degree to which the international humanitarian system coordinates with development, resilience, risk-reduction and peace-building systems.
- **Impact:** The degree to which international humanitarian action produces (intentionally or unintentionally) positive or negative longer-term outcomes for people and societies affected by crisis.

* These are traditionally assessed under other OECD criteria, which we have pulled out to examine in more detail for this report.



RESEARCH COMPONENTS AND METHODS

Similar to previous *SOHS* reports, data gathering on and analysis of the system's performance largely focused on the adapted OECD criteria presented in [Box 1](#). Specific research questions were also informed by early focus group discussions (FGDs) with people affected by crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Myanmar and the border of Ukraine in Poland; by consultations with 60 senior policy-makers and practitioners; and by discussions with our in-country research partners.

The report attempts to strike a balance between describing the past four years and providing findings that are relevant to a system facing a new constrained funding environment and a shifting geopolitical context since significant cuts in 2025. It also takes the opportunity to examine nearly 20 years of evidence across six editions of the *SOHS* to consider the extent to which the system has learned and changed over time and whether it is fit for an uncertain future.

Our findings are drawn from 10 research components to enable triangulation of different data sources and to build a detailed picture of system size, shape and performance: a combination of primary data collection and secondary data synthesis. Detailed methodologies for each component can be found in the accompanying [Methodology](#) document.



The report attempts to strike a balance between describing the past four years and providing findings that are relevant to a system facing a new constrained funding environment and a shifting geopolitical context



Primary data collection and analysis

Country-level research

Local research partners conducted and analysed FGDs, key informant interviews (KIIs), and collections of context-specific documentation and observations in Afghanistan, DRC, Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan and on the Poland–Ukraine border. These contexts were chosen to allow us to investigate key thematic issues and challenges that arose in the study period. These findings are also presented in separate country reports, authored by local research partners, which are available [here](#).



Aid-recipient survey

ALNAP worked with consultants to conduct a survey of 5,438 aid recipients in five crisis contexts (DRC, Haiti, Myanmar, Niger and Sudan) using computer-assisted telephone interviewing, computer-assisted web interviewing and computer-assisted personal interviewing to elicit their assessment of humanitarian performance. These contexts were chosen to provide some crossover and triangulation with the qualitative country studies, as well as more variation in regions and crisis types represented.

Practitioner survey

ALNAP conducted a global web-based survey, with 451 completed responses, to elicit the perceptions of humanitarian practitioners and host-government representatives on humanitarian performance. The survey was available in Arabic, English, French, Indonesian, Spanish and Ukrainian.

Global KIs

ALNAP conducted interviews with humanitarian practitioners and thought leaders to assess performance, identify important trends and address key evidence gaps.

Organisational mapping and analysis

ALNAP commissioned a consultant to analyse data collected from individual organisations and through desk-based review to estimate the number of humanitarian staff and organisations worldwide.

Thematic research on prioritisation

ALNAP commissioned two original studies to explore the process of prioritisation and its effects following funding cuts by the United States in 2025. The first synthesised global KIs, an online anonymous consultation and a document review to track system and organisational responses to the cuts. The second presented two case studies of the effects in Mali and South Sudan, drawing on FGDs with people affected by crisis and interviews with local and international humanitarian practitioners and national governments. ALNAP also commissioned two briefing papers.

Synthesis of secondary data

Evaluation synthesis

ALNAP commissioned a consultant to synthesise findings from humanitarian evaluations published between January 2022 and October 2025. From over 1,000 humanitarian evaluations, a shortlist of 420 was reviewed for inclusion, of which over 110 were chosen for more in-depth analysis.



Financial analysis

ALNAP conducted an analysis of data on public and private humanitarian financing.

Thematic study on the humanitarian–development–peace nexus and climate financing

ALNAP worked with a consultant to explore interactions between flows of humanitarian funding and development, peace and climate financing to contexts affected by crisis.

Literature review

ALNAP worked with a consultant to review over 300 research reports published within the study period on a set of 16 themes related to humanitarian policy and practice.

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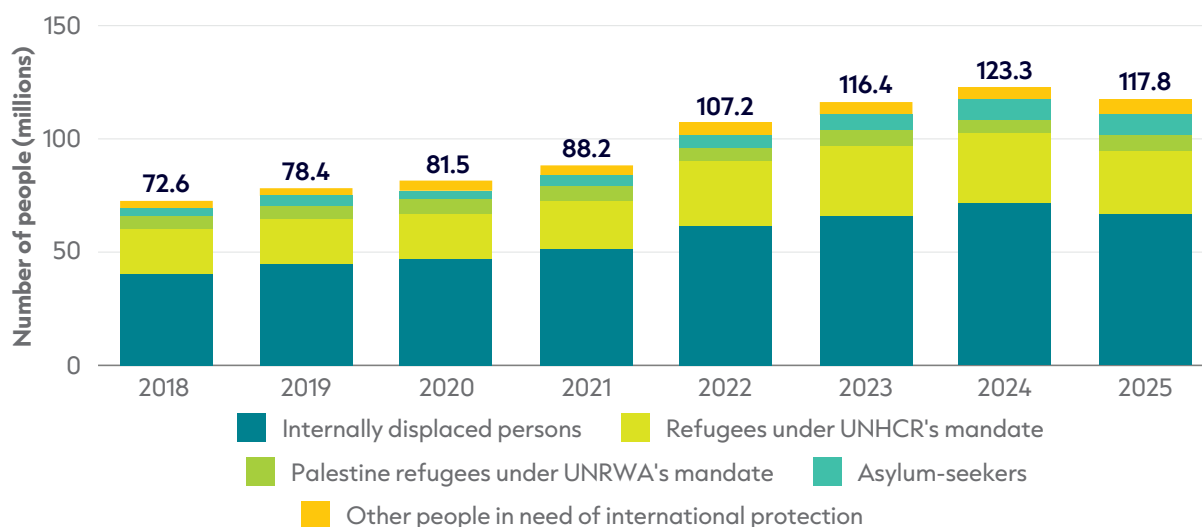
HUMANITARIAN CRISES AND GLOBAL SHIFTS, 2022–2025

At the start of the 2022–25 study period, sustained effort had reduced global suffering to historic lows by many measures: extreme poverty had fallen from 38% of the world's population in 1990 to around 9% by 2019, child mortality had more than halved between 2000 and 2022, and deaths from natural hazards had fallen dramatically over the preceding half-century.¹ Yet across this period, violence outpaced disasters as a driver of internal displacement for the first time, global temperatures rose and catastrophic hunger was reported in Sudan, Gaza and Haiti. At the same time, the humanitarian system faced a structural rupture, including the largest-ever annual contraction in aid funding and the closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This section sets out the crises, trends and events that shaped the humanitarian system in this period.

Violence outpaced disasters as a driver of internal displacement for the first time

Displacement

Forced displacement increased over the period. By the end of 2025, 117.8 million people were displaced: a slight decrease from 2024, but still close to record highs.² Of these, 68.7 million were internally displaced by conflict and violence. A further 13.6 million people were living in displacement after disasters. Large displacement movements in 2025 included approximately 10.8 million people in the Philippines (mostly displaced by cyclones and flooding), 10 million in Iran (linked to temporary evacuations from Tehran) and 9.7 million in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (the consequence of M23 violence).³ Disasters triggered 29.9 million internal displacements in 2025 – a drop from the unprecedented 45.8 million displacements in 2024 – and weather-related events accounted for 91% of disaster displacements.⁴ Forty-two countries recorded internal displacements linked to both conflict and disaster triggers.⁵

Figure i: Number of people forcibly displaced, 2018–2025

Source: UNHCR (2026) Global Trends, 11 June. Geneva: UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/global-trends>

Notes: Some Palestine refugees under UNRWA's mandate in Gaza have also been internally displaced in 2023 (1.2 million), 2024 (1.4 million) and 2025 (1.4 million). In this graph, these internally displaced refugees under UNRWA's mandate are only counted once, under the figure for 'Palestine refugees under UNRWA's mandate'. UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; UNRWA = United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

ALNAP

There were also increases in the number of refugees globally. In 2025, 41.6 million people were refugees, 65% of whom were hosted in neighbouring countries.⁶ For refugees, durable solutions – including voluntary repatriation, local integration and third-country resettlement – all declined over the period. That year, 70% of refugees were in protracted situations.⁷ Host countries increasingly opposed local integration, and resettlement opportunities had 'long failed to meet the needs of even a tiny percentage of the world's displaced'.⁸ There was also a sharp rise in forced returns; 2.9 million Afghans returned to Afghanistan in 2025 alone, driven by policy changes, tightening documentation requirements, misinformation, disinformation and deteriorating protection conditions.⁹

The 2025 Global Peace Index found that the world became less peaceful for the sixth consecutive year

Conflict

The number of state-based conflicts rose to 65 in 2025 – a new record. Interstate conflicts doubled for the second year running, from 2 in 2023 to 8 in 2025.¹⁰ The 2025 Global Peace Index found that the world became less peaceful for the sixth consecutive year.¹¹ The violent intensity of conflict also grew, with the number of conflict events nearly doubling between 2020 and 2024: from 104,371 to nearly



200,000.¹² In 2024, analysts estimated that, globally, one in seven people were affected by conflict.¹³

Between 2022 and 2025, four conflicts dominated the humanitarian landscape. The period began with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which, by mid-2025, had displaced 9.4 million people, caused over 49,400 verified civilian casualties and left 12.7 million people in need.¹⁴ Beyond its scale, the crisis reshaped the system itself, distorting donor funding patterns and generating an unprecedented European refugee response that bypassed the usual humanitarian architecture.¹⁵ Hamas' attack on 7 October 2023 was followed by over two years of conflict in Gaza that killed more than 71,000 Palestinians,¹⁶ and Israel's obstruction of access led to intense debates about humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. Sudan became the world's largest displacement crisis, uprooting some 14 million people¹⁷ and leaving more than half the population in need in 2025.¹⁸ In Myanmar, the post-2021 conflict continued alongside Cyclone Mocha and the 2025 Sagaing earthquake and amid prolonged internet shutdowns that obstructed assessment and response.¹⁹

Beyond these conflicts, the period saw a growing number of protracted crises lasting for five or more years. The DRC saw renewed escalation in its eastern provinces.²⁰ Crises in Ethiopia, Somalia, Haiti, Lebanon, Syria and the Sahel layered conflict, displacement and climate shocks. By 2025, around 80% of people facing high levels of acute food insecurity lived in countries whose food crises had persisted for more than a decade.

Climate and geological disaster

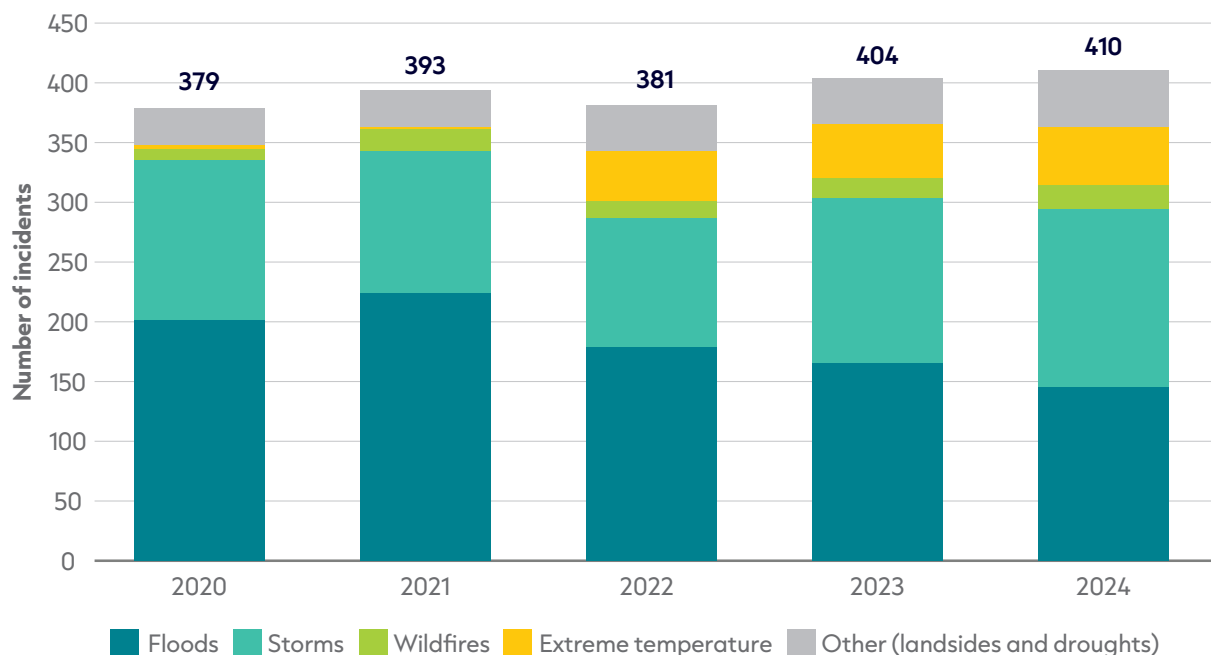


In 2025, the total cost of damages caused by natural and climate hazards was calculated at US\$224 billion



The climate crisis continued to accelerate: 2023, 2024 and 2025 were the three warmest years on the 146-year instrumental record.²¹ In 2024, the annual global average temperature exceeded 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels for the first time,²² and the temperature increase from 2022 to 2024 was the largest two-year increase observed since the 1870s.²³ While a single year above 1.5°C does not constitute a formal breach of the Paris Agreement target (which is assessed over multidecadal averages),²⁴ greenhouse gas concentrations hit record levels.

Extreme heat was among the most common climate hazards faced by forcibly displaced people, affecting 86% of the 64 million people studied in one Red Cross/Red Crescent paper.²⁵ Between 2022 and 2025, the world experienced a succession of climate-driven and geophysical disasters. Pakistan's catastrophic

Figure ii: Global frequency of climate-related disasters, 2020–2024

Source: EM-DAT, CRED / UCLouvain, Brussels, Belgium <https://www.emdat.be>

Notes: Data version 7th August 2026



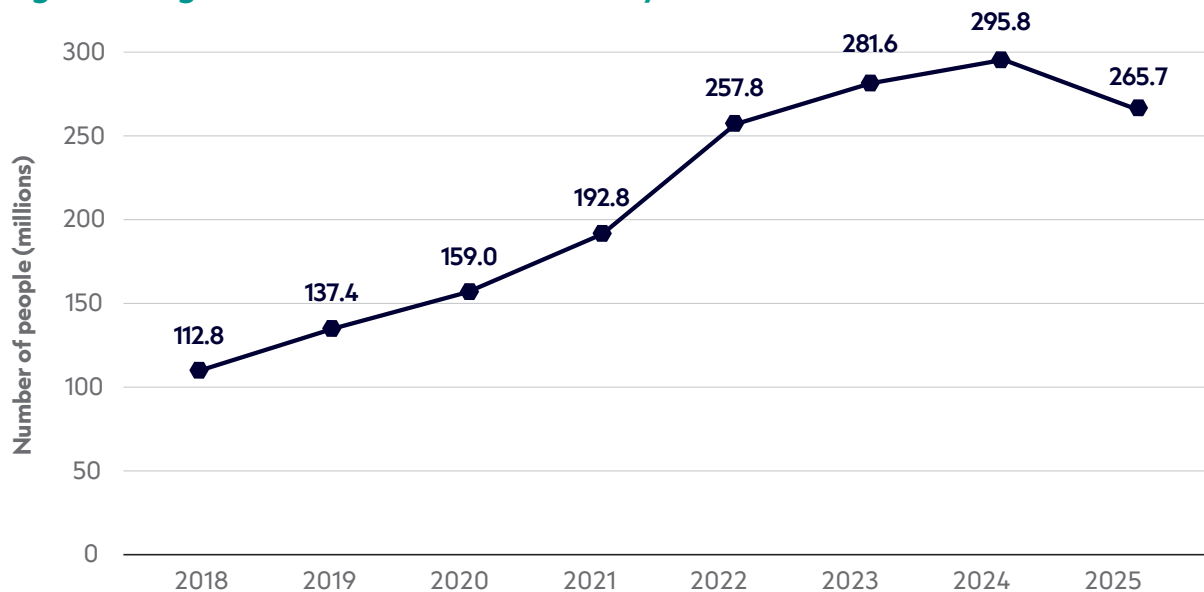
monsoon floods of 2022 killed 1,739 people and displaced 7.9 million;²⁶ the country suffered severe flooding again in 2025, when monsoon rains killed around 1,000 people and at least 1.9 million were evacuated.²⁷ In 2024, Brazil recorded its worst flooding in 80 years, which affected nearly every municipality in Rio Grande do Sul and displaced more than 600,000 people.²⁸ The following January, wildfires in Los Angeles destroyed over 16,000 structures, forced more than 200,000 evacuations and caused US\$53 billion in damage, making it the costliest wildfire event in US history.²⁹ Globally, 2024 was the worst year on record for forest fires with Brazil, Bolivia, Canada and Russia all experiencing the worst fires since satellite-based monitoring began in 2001.³⁰

There were also several large geophysical events in the period. In February 2023, the 7.8-magnitude Türkiye–Syria earthquake killed over 56,000 people and destroyed thousands of buildings in a region already destabilised by conflict.³¹ In March 2025, Myanmar’s 7.7-magnitude earthquake killed at least 3,800 people and injured 5,100 more.³² In 2025, the total cost of damages caused by natural and climate hazards was calculated at US\$224 billion, of which less than half was insured.³³



Food security crises

Figure iii: High levels of acute food insecurity 2018–2025



Source: FAO et al. (2026) 2026 Global Report on Food Crises. Rome: FAO, WFP and GNAFC. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd9424en>

Notes: The chart shows the number of people facing high level of acute food insecurity in countries/territories with food crises and data meeting Global Report on Food Crises technical requirements between 2018 and 2025.



Acute food insecurity reached record levels in 2024 and remained at near-record levels in 2025.³⁴ In 2025, famine was confirmed simultaneously in two of the most politically complex and access-constrained contexts in the world – Sudan and Gaza.³⁵ In Sudan, over 25 million people faced crisis level acute food insecurity (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3 or above) in 2024, and 21.2 million in 2025. At its peak, Gaza's entire population of 2.2 million people was in need³⁶ and facing crisis level acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) – the highest share ever classified for a given area³⁷ – while 90% faced emergency level acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 4 or above).³⁸ The number of people facing catastrophe conditions (IPC Phase 5) globally reached a 2024 peak of 1.9 million.³⁹



In 2025, famine was confirmed simultaneously in two of the most politically complex and access-constrained contexts in the world – Sudan and Gaza



Technology, mistrust and shrinking space

The technology landscape has shifted significantly since the last *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS), changing the context in which humanitarian operators operate. Drone attacks in conflict settings increased by 4,000% between 2020 and



2024, with drones used across a broader range of conflicts than ever before by both state and – increasingly – non-state armed groups⁴⁰ to harm civilians⁴¹ and civilian infrastructure, inflicting an enduring psychological toll.⁴² Militaries adopted artificial intelligence (AI), including in weapon systems, cyber and information operations, and military decision-support systems, raising fundamental questions about civilian harm and accountability under international law.⁴³



Online, harmful information shaped how people affected by crises understood those crises, who they trusted and whether they accessed assistance



Online, harmful information shaped how people affected by crises understood those crises, who they trusted and whether they accessed assistance.⁴⁴ Trust in institutions eroded sharply: the Edelman Trust Barometer 2025 found that nearly 70% of global respondents worried about being purposefully misled by authoritative sources.⁴⁵ For the third consecutive year, conflict was the main driver of internet shutdowns, 125 of which were recorded in 14 countries. Those responsible routinely cut connectivity to hide war crimes and atrocities and to intimidate civilian populations.⁴⁶ Humanitarian

organisations faced physical and reputational risks from misinformation and disinformation – and a growing workload and cost to manage this.⁴⁷

International humanitarian law violations and attacks on aid and health workers reached record levels (see [Chapter 3.1](#)). In 2024, violence against healthcare workers and obstruction of healthcare reached its highest recorded level.⁴⁸ The United Nations (UN) reported that 2024 was the deadliest year on record for aid workers,⁴⁹ while the Lancet Commission characterised deliberate attacks on civilians, health facilities and humanitarian access as ‘embedded features of contemporary conflict’ rather than occasional transgressions.⁵⁰



2024 was the deadliest year on record for aid workers



MULTILATERALISM

The 2024 Multilateralism Index found that participation in multilateral institutions had largely held steady or increased, while the performance of the multilateral system in addressing global challenges declined.⁵¹ Since then, US policy shifts have reduced both assessed contributions to the UN system and the predictability of financing. Deadlocks in the UN Security Council also defined the geopolitical landscape in this period: in 2024, seven draft resolutions failed due to a veto – the highest number since 1986 – with eight vetoes cast in total (four by Russia, three by the US, one by China).⁵²



The Pact for the Future, adopted at the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024 and described as the most wide-ranging international agreement in decades, was designed to make the international system more effective, inclusive and fit for 21st-century challenges. It included a Global Digital Compact, a Declaration on Future Generations and a commitment to Security Council reform – including redressing Africa’s historical underrepresentation. The Pact’s implementation prospects were complicated by the US withdrawing from the negotiations.⁵³



Between 2024 and 2026, the UN system’s overall financial resources were projected to shrink by approximately US\$16 billion – or nearly 25%



The UN80 Initiativeⁱ was the UN’s system-wide reform effort. Launched by Secretary-General António Guterres in March 2025 (when the UN marked its 80th anniversary), it aims to support the UN to become more agile amid tightening resources. Between 2024 and 2026, the UN system’s overall financial resources were projected to shrink by approximately US\$16 billion – or nearly 25%.⁵⁴ An internal memo from the UN80 Initiative task force in 2025 listed more than 50 suggestions on mergers and reforms, including streamlining the

operational responsibilities of the World Food Programme (WFP), the UNHCR, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO).⁵⁵ The action plan published in November 2025 set out 87 actions, stretching from peace operations and humanitarian response to technology, shared services and institutional mergers.⁵⁶

HUMANITARIANISM

The humanitarian system witnessed a series of reform agendas during this period. In June 2023, in recognition of evolving humanitarian needs, signatories endorsed Grand Bargain 3.0 for 2023–26, which focused on continued support of localisation, participation of communities affected by crisis and quality funding.⁵⁷ It also added several new themes to catalyse sector-wide transformation through anticipatory action and innovative financing.⁵⁸ As part of the 2023 update, the original workstreams were closed down in favour of a smaller structure. Several other initiatives designed to promote system change also gained prominence in the period, including OCHA’s Flagship Initiative, the Charter for Change and the Pledge for Change.

ⁱ UN80 was launched in rapid succession after the Humanitarian Reset. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is leading both for the humanitarian sector, which means substantial overlap in substance and leadership, though the two exercises are formally distinct.



Steep funding declines across the humanitarian and development systems in 2025 forced changes in the humanitarian architecture. The Humanitarian Reset (2025) was the reform framework active at the close of this period. Launched by OCHA Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher in March 2025 (and building on a 2024 efficiency review by Jan Egeland and Joyce Msuya),⁵⁹ it aimed to produce a lighter, faster, less bureaucratic system, including by closing Humanitarian Advisory Teams, reducing senior OCHA positions, simplifying the cluster system and devolving authority to Humanitarian Coordinators.⁶⁰ The main humanitarian proposal in the UN80 reform process that ran in parallel was a New Humanitarian Compact: a framework for structural change covering coordination, supply chains, data and role clarification across agencies.⁶¹

This 2026 *SOHS* report examines how the humanitarian system navigated these crises, operating environments and agendas, and what they meant for its performance.



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PART 2

PERFORMANCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM



Image: Türkiye, 2023 - Search and rescue teams work in the wreckage after the Türkiye earthquake. © cn.ycl/shutterstock

CHAPTER 1

PRIORITISATION UNDER PRESSURE

>	SUMMARY
>	CHAPTER 1.1 THE FINANCIAL SIZE AND SHAPE OF THE SYSTEM
>	CHAPTER 1.2 PRIORITISING PEOPLE AND PROGRAMMES
>	CHAPTER 1.3 ORGANISATIONAL DECISIONS AND SYSTEM-LEVEL FUNCTIONS

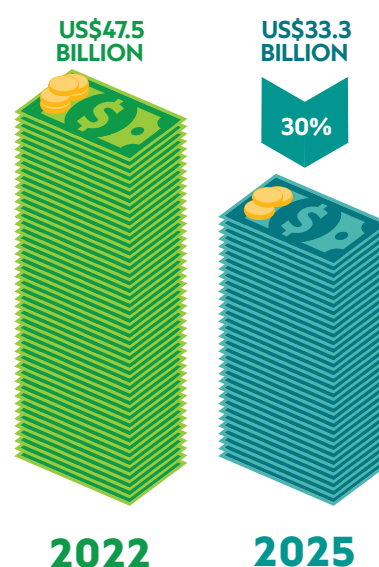
CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Significantly reduced funding and high need meant the international humanitarian system had to make hard prioritisation choices, which reduced the number of people it assisted, the size and type of programming, and the scale of humanitarian staffing, organisations and information infrastructures. Going forwards, actors within the system will need to think more about complementing local structures of support and effective coordination with development, peace and climate systems.

International humanitarian assistance (IHA) fell from a peak of US\$47.5 billion in 2022 to US\$33.3 billion in 2025 – a 30% drop – as multiple government donors cut funding. The sudden and widescale cuts by the United States in early 2025 had greatest influence. The 2025 United Nations (UN) coordinated appeal was only 35% funded: the biggest funding gap in appeal history, with a shortfall of US\$30.5 billion. Increased efforts to access non-Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors, philanthropic organisations and innovative finance seemed unlikely to fill the gaps. Humanitarians recognised a need to more positively influence publics and politicians if they were to protect or increase future government funding. By the end of 2025, despite changes in donors' share of IHA, the system remained financially concentrated on a small number of donors and international agencies. Funding reductions underscored the need to use IHA more strategically to complement other forms of domestic and international support for people affected by crisis.

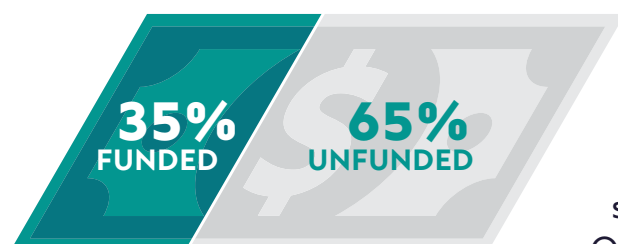
Humanitarian Programme Cycles (HPCs) narrowed the people and programmes included in the humanitarian remit, citing funding constraints and stretched responsibilities since the Covid-19 pandemic. As acute food insecurity and displacement rose above pre-pandemic levels, the number of people identified in HPCs reduced. In response to the 2025 cuts, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) led a hyper-prioritisation process to identify the people in most severe need to be targeted. The system struggled to meet those targets in many contexts due to cuts, insecurity and political restrictions.

Progress on reaching vulnerable identity groups was threatened by the 2025 funding cuts and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) restrictions. The system had also made progress on identifying



International humanitarian assistance dropped by 30% between 2022 and 2025

multisector needs, but it struggled in the wake of cuts to prioritise even sectors considered 'lifesaving'. While research showed the growing relevance of assistance, people affected by crisis continued to request, alongside immediate food security, greater focus on livelihoods, recovery and preparedness against future shocks – areas deprioritised by the Humanitarian Reset.¹ Without stronger engagement with development, peace and climate actors, there is a risk that the people and programming no longer prioritised may fall through the cracks.



The 2025 UN coordinated appeal was only 35% funded – the biggest funding gap in appeal history

Sudden US cuts in 2025 caused operational agencies to cut staff, programming and partners. Organisations with significant reserves and core funding had some protection, but local organisations were hit hard by closures; they had little influence on upstream decisions and lacked core and flexible funding to protect staff and infrastructure. Many organisational

decisions were criticised for being top-down, opaque and not strategic, reducing trust among staff and local partners. Trust was also lost with communities as programmes closed with little notice, communication or exit planning. Humanitarian organisations will need to think more strategically about where they add value in the financially reduced system to maximise complementarity rather than competition.

At the system level, the Humanitarian Reset drove choices on coordination structures, modalities and transitions. Perspectives on the process varied: some recognised effective leadership under pressure, but several local and international actors felt excluded from decisions. Several also critiqued a perceived choice to continue the same international model at smaller scale, rather than considering more locally led approaches or structural changes. Choices made in the humanitarian system seemed isolated from those in the development, peace and climate systems, despite them facing similar shocks. Isolated prioritisation risks not delivering for people affected by crisis, whose lives are shaped by multiple priorities and vulnerabilities.

CHAPTER 1.1

THE FINANCIAL SIZE AND SHAPE OF THE SYSTEM

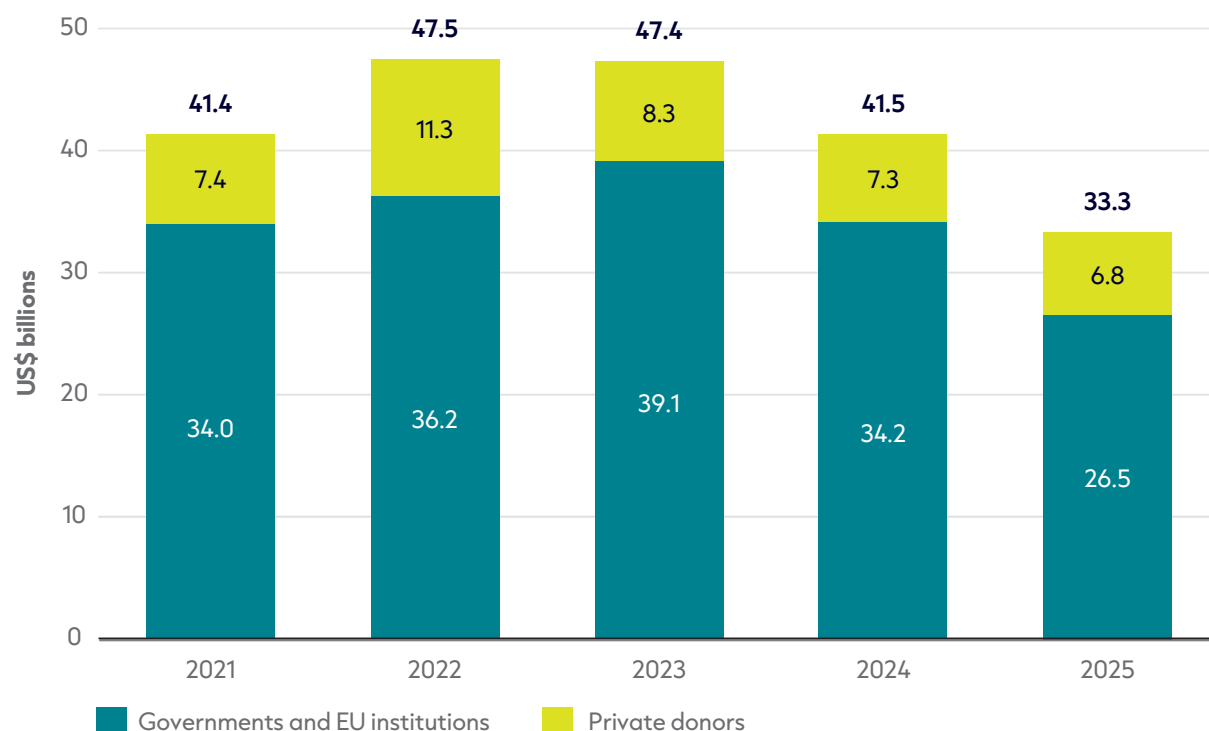
'You're not cutting fat. You're cutting muscle and bone. And bodies don't grow back quickly.'

– Thomas Byrnes, CEO and Founder, Market Impact²

In this study period, international humanitarian assistance (IHA) plunged by 30% from an all-time high of US\$47.5 billion in 2022 to US\$33.3 billion in 2025, while the interim years were characterised by significant stagnation and decline. Although 16 of 20 traditional donors had already cut IHA in 2024, the speed and scale of the cuts by the United States in early 2025 unleashed the effects of the system's dangerous dependency on a small number of government donors. By the end of 2025, widespread negative impacts on people affected by crisis were reported, United Nations (UN) coordinated appeals were only 35% funded, and IHA remained precariously concentrated among only a few donors and international agencies. Humanitarians stepped up efforts to explore potential new funding sources (such as non-Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors, philanthropists and innovative finance) and ways to bolster political and public will to protect government budgets. The cuts emphasised the importance of humanitarian support structures outside the coordinated international system, including the ultimate responsibility of national governments and strong contributions of mutual aid, local private actors and diaspora support; yet some of these structures were also showing signs of strain by the end of 2025. Experts warned of compounding humanitarian needs over the longer term, unless local structures are strengthened and international assistance plays a more effective complementary role.

From all-time peak to sudden trough

In the first year of this study period (2022), IHA continued its previous trajectory of growth and reached an all-time peak of US\$47.5 billion, partly driven by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war. Following a small contraction to US\$47.4 billion in 2023, IHA toppled by 13% in 2024 to US\$41.5 billion as 16 of the

Figure 1.1: Total international humanitarian assistance, 2021–2025

Source: ALNAP based on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) DAC, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS), UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and our unique dataset for private contributions.

Notes: Figures for 2025 are preliminary. Totals for previous years differ from those reported in previous Global Humanitarian Assistance (GHA) reports due to updated deflators and data. Data is in constant 2024 prices. The methodology used to produce total international humanitarian assistance is detailed in the 'Methodology and definitions' chapter in the 2026 GHA Report. EU = European Union.

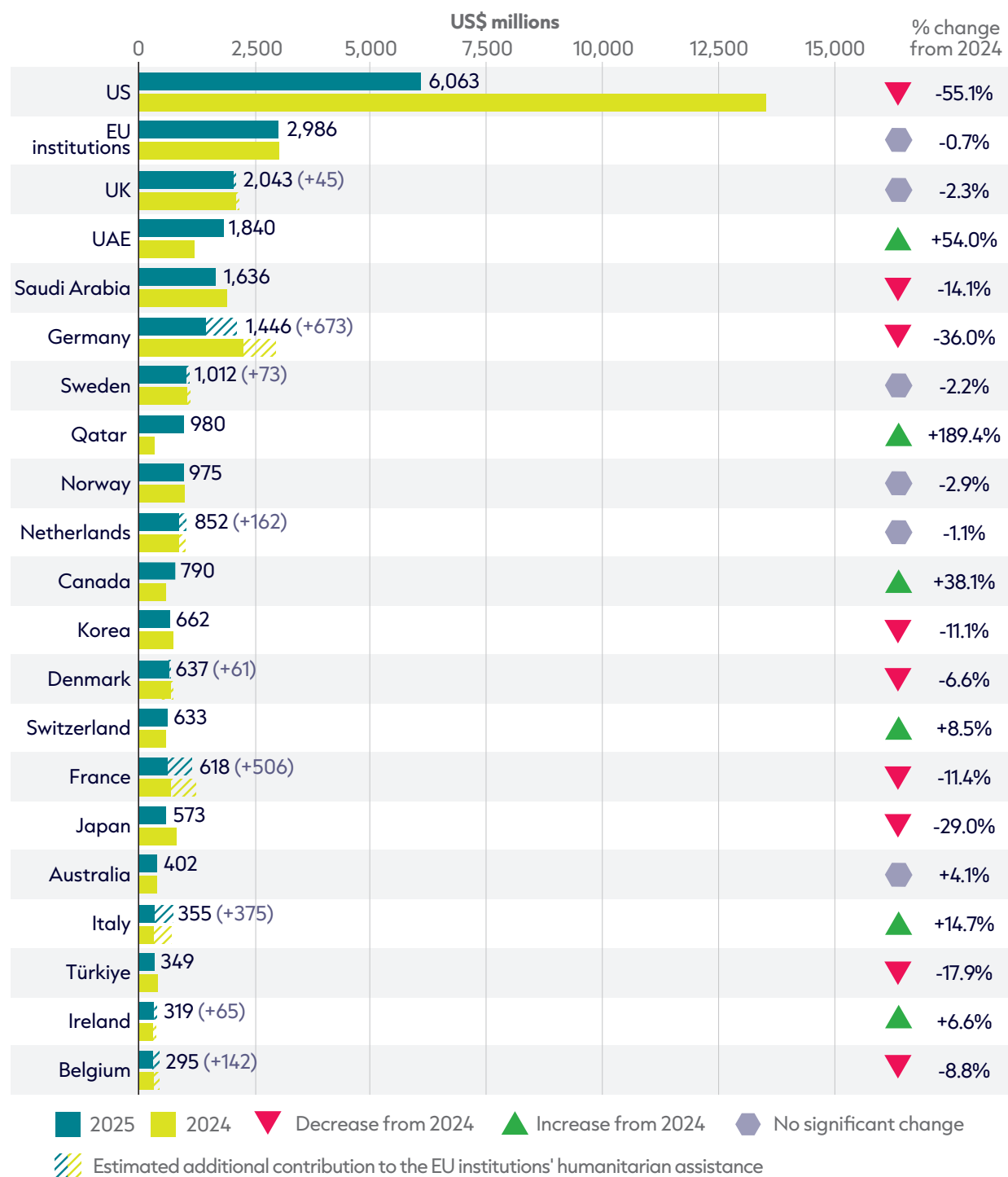


top-20 donors reduced their funding. The real shock came in 2025 though, when total IHA fell by a further 20% to US\$33.3 billion – a level of funding last seen in 2017, without a commensurate drop in crises (see [Humanitarian crises and global shifts 2022 - 2025](#)). The drop in funding recorded by the end of 2025 was, however, not as severe as some more pessimistic predictions made earlier in the year.³

The combined size and speed of the 2025 cuts caused widespread shock and revealed the dangers of a system dependent on a few government donors. The US government – whose funding had grown more steeply than other large donors before 2022 – froze all new foreign aid awards and issued Stop-Work Orders to existing foreign assistance awards in January 2025; in March, the US Secretary of State announced the termination of 83% of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programmes.ⁱ Unlike previous phased cuts or grant non-renewals, these mid-programme disruptions were immediate. As discussed in [Chapters 3.2](#) and [3.3](#), the cumulative loss of funding from multiple donors drove hard choices over which people affected by crisis should be supported and which humanitarian staff and functions could be retained.

ⁱ See the timeline of 2025's funding story at <https://alnapp.org/help-library/resources/humanitarian-year-in-review-shocks-and-reverberations-pdf/>

Figure 1.2: Change in IHA from top-20 public donors 2024–2025



Source: Based on OECD DAC, UN OCHA FTS and UN CERF.

Notes: 2025 data is preliminary. Data is in constant 2024 prices. 'Public donors' refers to governments and EU institutions. Contributions of current and former EU member states to EU Institutions' international humanitarian assistance shown separately. 2024 figures differ from the 2025 GHA Report due to final reported international humanitarian assistance data and a different year for constant prices. UAE = United Arab Emirates. UK = United Kingdom.

These cuts were variously described as a 'generational funding collapse',⁴ a 'seismic shock'⁵ and 'cutting muscle and bone' of the system.⁶ While the US reduction of US\$7.4 billion was the biggest cut (-55%), 13 of the top-20 donors also



cut IHA in 2025. The US and Germany alone reduced their funding by a combined US\$814 million (-36%), accounting for 88% of the total cuts, but Saudi Arabia (-US\$268 million, -14%) and Japan (-US\$234 million, -29%) also made large cuts. Private donations from individuals, corporates and foundations also fell in this study period: from a high of US\$11.3 billion in 2022 to US\$6.8 billion in 2025.

Against this trend, some donors held relatively steady, including EU institutions, the UK, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and Australia.ⁱⁱ Others even increased their funding, including the UAE (+US\$645 million, +54%), Qatar (+US\$642 million, +189%), Canada (+US\$218 million, +38%) and Italy (+US\$45 million, +15%), but these increases could not offset cuts by some of the biggest donors.

Funding in 2025 remained concentrated among a small number of donors, of which the US – despite significant cuts – remained the largest; however, this pattern of dominance shifted. The 2026 GHA Report indicated that, between 2016 and 2024, the ‘traditional top four DAC donors’ in the system (US, EU institutions, UK and Germany) provided between 61% and 67% each year of total public donor funding.⁷ In 2025, they contributed only 47%. These shifts potentially created space for a wider range of donors to influence the system. The system also remained concentrated in terms of which organisations received funding (see [Figure 1.3](#)). Of the US\$26.6 billion contributions by primary donorsⁱⁱⁱ in 2025, multilateral organisations received almost half (47%) as ‘direct’ funding. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) received 19%, followed by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement with 7% and pooled funds with 6%.^{iv} Despite localisation commitments (see [Chapter 4.1](#)), local and national actors^v received the least: only 5% direct funding.^{vi}

While multilateral organisations received most direct funding, this dropped from 58% in 2024 to 47% in 2025. This was mainly driven by US and German cuts to multilaterals (65% and 58% respectively) rather than signifying a donor-wide trend. Proportions of funding granted to other types of organisations changed little: the system remained concentrated on a small number of international actors, which functioned as either direct implementers or intermediaries, presenting a potential risk if those channels became blocked.

Of the trackable indirect funding that intermediaries passed on, US\$2 billion went to international actors and US\$1.3 billion to local and national actors (LNAs).

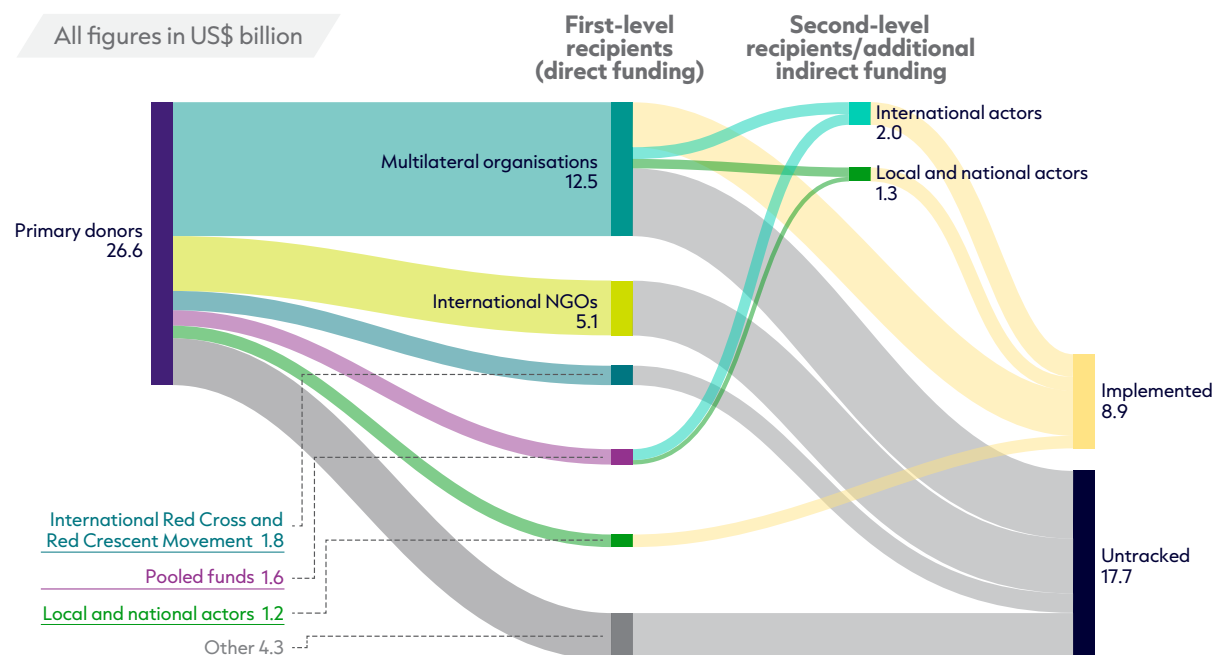
ii Calculated as within 5% of last 2024 disbursements.

iii Public and private donors tracked by OCHA FTS.

iv While there is no single definition of ‘pooled fund’, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) provides a working definition: ‘a pooled fund involves pooling money from more than one donor in an entity. That entity then distributes the funds to multiple recipients on the basis of defined criteria’ (see NRC (2022: 11) <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/pooled-funds-the-new-humanitarian-silver-bullet>).

v Including local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs) and government bodies.

vi Other’ organisations (eg, donor-development agencies and private individuals and organisations) received 16% of funding (US\$4.3 billion), mostly from Gulf states. The 5% for local and national actors does not directly align with the number reported under Figure 4.1 on funding direct to local and national actors, which is that 4.3% goes to local and national actors. This is due to methodological differences in the analysis: whereas Figure 1.3 looks at all trackable funding through public reporting systems (FTS), Figure 4.1 supplements this with data from other sources and thus uses a different denominator to align with UN budget totals. For the avoidance of doubt, 4.3% should be used as the figure for the percentage of funding going directly to local and national actors.

Figure 1.3: Funding flows to different recipient organisation types, 2025

Source: OCHA FTS, International Organization for Migration (IOM) grant awards data, OCHA Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) Data Hub, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Transparency Portal, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Collaboration with Funded Partners.

Notes: Funding allocated by UN agencies with partner data in each year are taken from their own reports where available. The total displayed for pooled funds is equal to allocations as opposed to contributions, which is lower; this has then been reconciled at the primary donors' level.



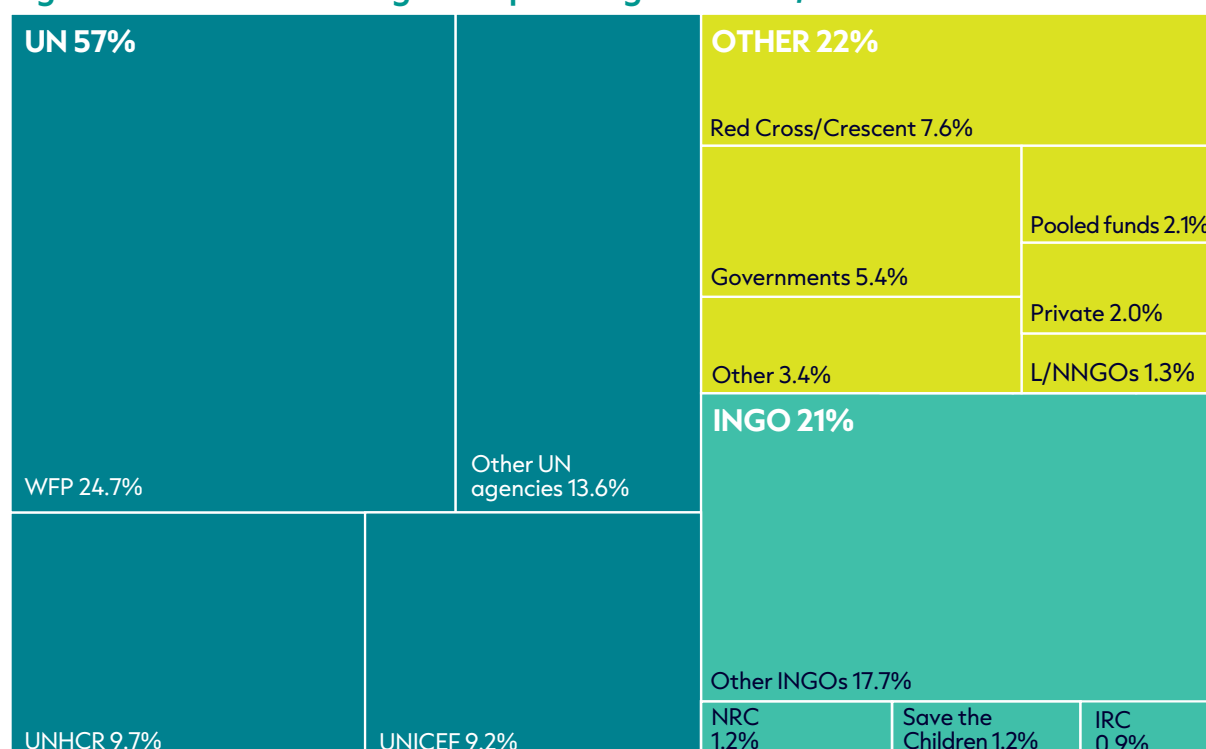
Multilaterals passed on US\$807 million to LNAs.^{vii} Pooled funds passed the second-largest amount to LNAs: US\$469 million in direct contributions. Two-thirds of funding that was passed through beyond the first level was not tracked on centralised platforms like the OCHA FTS, emphasising a need for better reporting by humanitarian donor and recipient organisations.⁸

Funding in this period remained concentrated in the same three UN agencies as in the previous The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) period (2018–21). These three agencies received 44% of total funding: the World Food Programme (WFP) was the largest recipient (receiving 25%), followed by UNHCR (10%) and UNICEF (9%). This was a reduction from the 48% received in the previous SOHS period. The 2025 funding cuts caused a greater year-on-year shift for WFP, whose share of funding reduced from 25% in 2024 to 21% in 2025.^{viii} Among INGOs specifically, NRC, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) received the largest proportion of funding in this period: 1.2%, 1.2% and 0.9%, respectively.^{ix}

vii The majority of this was recorded as coming from UNHCR and UNICEF; however, this partly reflects the fact that data from some other multilaterals was not available at the time of writing (see ALNAP (2026) <https://alnapp.org/help-library/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-gha-report-2026/>).

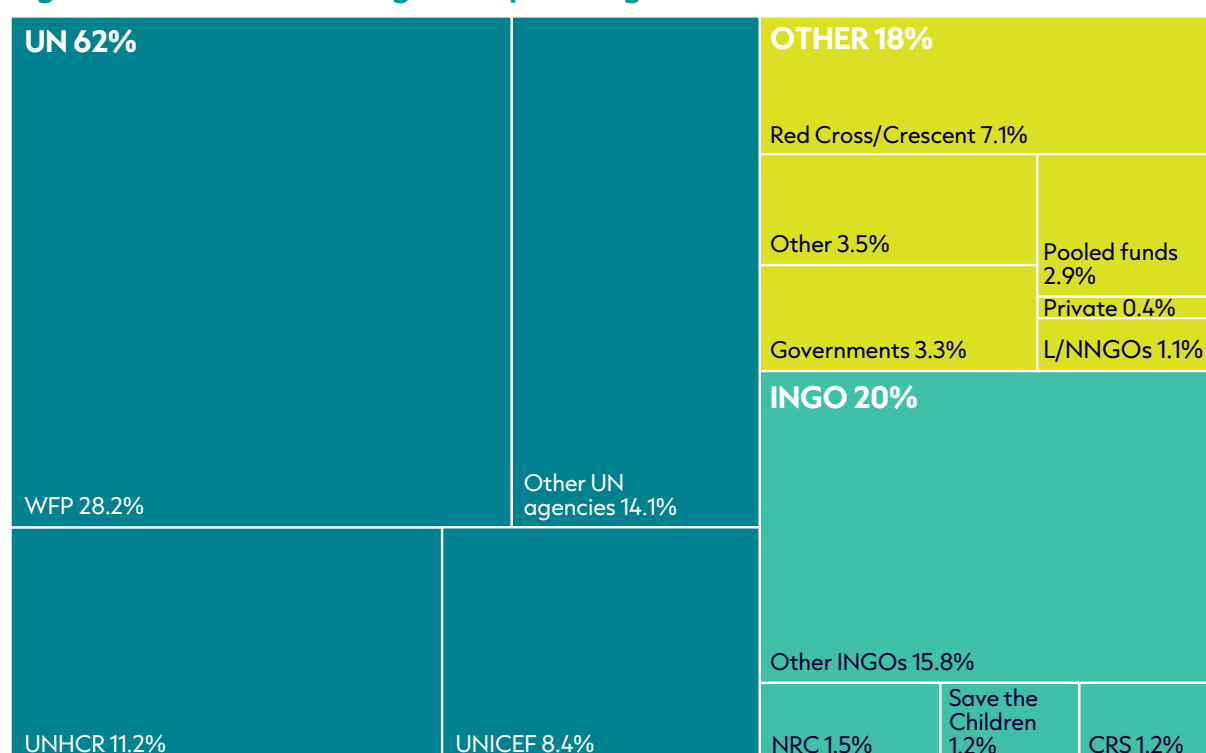
viii UNHCR's share fell from 11% to 8%, while UNICEF's remained largely steady.

ix Catholic Relief Services (CRS) received the third-largest share of funding in the previous SOHS study period (1.2%).

**Figure 1.4: Share of funding to recipient organisations, 2022–2025**

Source: UN OCHA FTS data

Notes: Figures are based on shares of net organisation-allocable funding and internal organisational coding. Data is in constant 2024 prices. As data is based purely on FTS, which largely disregards private humanitarian funding, NGOs that receive significant private funds are underrepresented.

**Figure 1.5: Share of funding to recipient organisations, 2018–2022**

Source: UN OCHA FTS data

Notes: Figures are based on shares of net organisation-allocable funding and internal organisational coding. Data is in constant 2024 prices. As data is based purely on FTS, which largely disregards private humanitarian funding, NGOs that receive significant private funds are underrepresented.





While the picture for IHA for 2026 onwards remains unclear, estimations suggest a deceleration of the rate of decline. The two scenarios presented in ALNAP's 2026 *GHA Report* include an optimistic 2% decline and pessimistic 11% decline on 2025 figures for public donors.⁹ Both suggest a deceleration in IHA retraction, largely because of a projected stabilisation of US funding. With an initial US\$2 billion and a subsequent US\$1.8 billion allocated to OCHA to manage in 2026, the US will likely remain the system's largest donor in this year.

Drivers of the cuts

Successive SOHS reports have pointed to the self-interested nature of foreign policy. In this period, several donors more explicitly stated that assistance should serve national interests, partly driven by the growing power of right-wing politicians across Europe and the US. The US State Department's 2026 strategy claimed: 'for too long, assistance justified on globalist or humanitarian bases benefitted groups unfriendly to the United States'.¹⁰

Humanitarian assistance fell down many donor governments' agendas in favour of increased security spending. World military expenditure escalated to US\$2,718 billion in 2024, representing 2.5% of global gross domestic product (GDP). This dwarfed humanitarian spending, with total IHA amounting to only approximately 1.5% of world military expenditure in 2024.¹¹ US military spending rose by 5.7% to US\$997 billion, but growth was mainly fuelled by Europe, where all countries except Malta increased their spend and Germany became the biggest



Humanitarian assistance fell down donor governments' agendas in favour of increased security spending



military spender in Central and Western Europe.¹²

The UK government was explicit about trade-offs in its February 2025 announcement that official development assistance (ODA) spending would fall from 0.5% to 0.3% of GDP by 2028 to support increased defence spending.¹³ Other European governments increased their spending following the US decision to suspend military aid to Ukraine in early 2025.¹⁴

US policy also sought to curtail rights-based approaches globally for being out of step with conservative principles. In February 2026, the administration announced a new policy, Protecting Human Flourishing in Foreign Assistance (PHFFA),^x which prohibited foreign assistance for 'discriminatory equity' or 'gender ideology'. This affected a broad range of domestic and international partners, while restrictions on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programming posed risks to humanitarian inclusion efforts and impartiality.¹⁵

x An expansion of the Mexico City Policy, also referred to as the Global Gag Rule.



Vocal accusations about inefficient and corrupt assistance threatened the legitimacy of the sector. White House statements about disbanding USAID included claims that it had been: ‘unaccountable to taxpayers as it funnels massive sums of money to the ridiculous – and, in many cases, malicious – pet projects of entrenched bureaucrats, with next-to-no oversight’.¹⁶ Donor and practitioner interviewees claimed that criticisms such as these towards civil society led humanitarian leaders to reflect on how the system articulates its effectiveness and value to politicians and publics.

Surveys in multiple countries, including EU member states, the UK and the US, indicated strong public support for their governments providing humanitarian or development assistance abroad.¹⁷ However, other studies indicated that support dwindled when people were asked to trade off humanitarian assistance with other spending priorities, suggesting that, without domestic political and socioeconomic shifts, support for aid remained ‘a mile wide and an inch deep’.¹⁸ Many members of the public have, however, given generously to humanitarian appeals; for example, the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) Ukraine appeal raised £421.3 million from the public.^{xi} Yet political and press attention can shape generosity and public attention: longer-term and less-publicised crises can receive fewer donations.¹⁹ While research indicated that the public is moved by compelling stories about aid, those stories compete with the broader news cycle and outdated stereotypes.²⁰ The cuts were a wake-up call for humanitarians to communicate better with the public on the system’s value while maintaining the dignity of people affected by crisis. One commentator said:

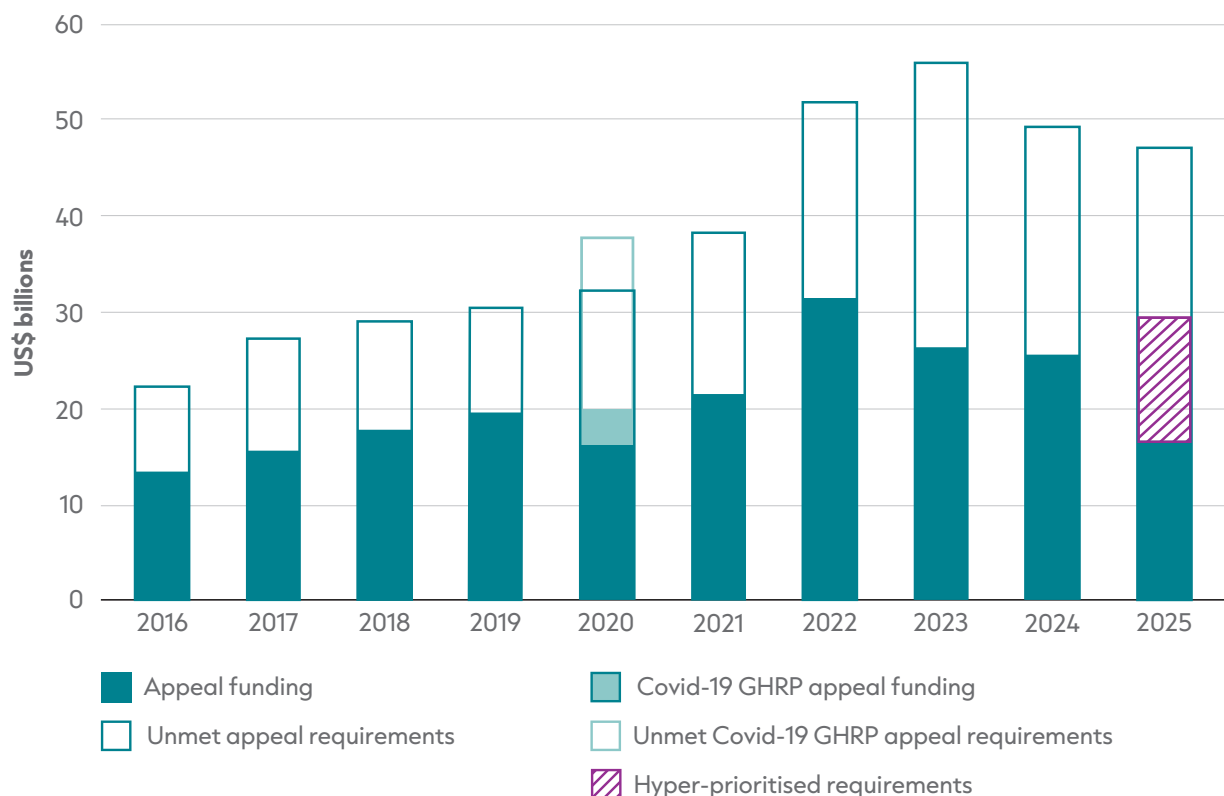


‘The stories we tell, the messengers we choose, and the evidence we use will determine whether aid continues to be sidelined or is reclaimed as a powerful tool for global justice.’²¹

The reality of funding gaps

The OCHA-led Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) process estimates the number of people in humanitarian need annually and associated funding required at global and country level. As indicated in [Part 1: Humanitarian crises and global shifts 2022–2025](#), multiple new and large-scale conflicts, protracted crises and threats arising from the climate crisis all drove global needs in the review period. Needs stated in UN-coordinated appeals were reduced, however, due to a revised methodology introduced by the HPC process at the end of 2023 that put clearer boundaries around the humanitarian remit (discussed in [Chapter 1.2](#)).

xi An additional £25 million in matched funds came from the UK government (see DEC (n.d.) <https://www.dec.org.uk/appeal/ukraine-humanitarian-appeal>).

Figure 1.6: Requirements and funding for UN-coordinated appeals, 2016–2025

Source: Based on OCHA FTS, Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) dashboards and UNHCR data.

Notes: Data is in current prices. 2025 shows two figures for requirements to reflect regular requirements and hyper-prioritised activities and resulting requirements in response to significant funding cuts in 2025. GHRP = Global Humanitarian Response Plan.



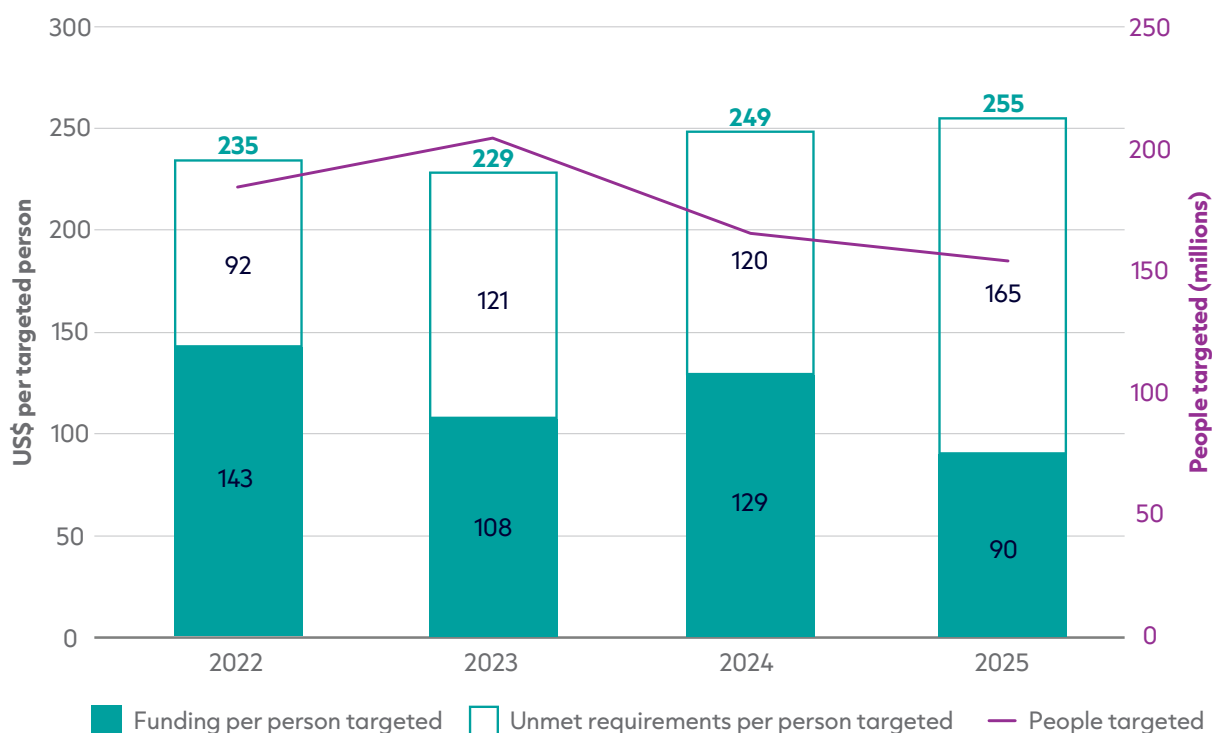
Donor funding to UN-coordinated appeals peaked in 2022 at US\$31.6 billion, which met 61% of requirements.^{xii} Funding then fell in every subsequent year – and by 35% between 2024 and 2025 alone (to US\$16.6 billion: comparable to 2017 and 2018 levels). Only 35% of the total 2025 appeals target was met, which was the biggest funding gap in appeal history (a shortfall of US\$30.5 billion). Due to the funding shocks in 2025, OCHA created a prioritised funding target (of US\$29.5 billion) to cover people most in need. But only 56% of that target was met.

Compared to 2022, humanitarian appeals targeted fewer people in 2025 and those people received less funding per person (US\$90 compared to US\$143).^{xiii} That year also saw by far the largest unmet requirements in this study period (US\$165 per person targeted in 2025 versus only \$92 in 2022). Even with reduced targets in 2025, only 35% of requirements per person were met.

There was strong variation in gaps across humanitarian appeals in 2025. The only two contexts that received enough funding per person to meet requirements were

^{xii} Total amount received peaked in 2022, but the percentage of funds met peaked in 2019, when 64% of requirements were met.

^{xiii} Requirements per person also went up in 2025, driven by the reduction in total number targeted, to an average of US\$255 per person.

Figure 1.7: Requirements and funding per targeted person in UN-coordinated appeals, 2022–2025

Source: OCHA FTS.

Notes: Data is in current prices. All appeals reported on FTS are included in the analysis. Requirements and funding per person are averages, calculated based on overall appeals data for funding, requirements and number of people targeted by each appeal as of May 2026.



the Philippines and Cuba, both of which were small appeals with relatively tiny amounts required per person (US\$32 and US\$12 respectively). Despite the scale of the crisis, recipients of assistance via Sudan's Regional Refugee Response Plan faced the greatest gap between requirements and funding per person in absolute terms: a shortfall of US\$556 per person, with 25% of the target met per person.^{xiv} The Mozambique flash appeal received the smallest percentage of requirements per person (7.4%), and those targeted received an average of US\$7.30 for requirements of US\$98.

Among surveyed aid recipients, 38% cited 'not enough aid' as the biggest challenge for assistance

Other evidence highlights insufficient assistance throughout this period. Evaluations of multiple responses, from Afghanistan to Yemen, found funding insufficient to achieve their aims.²² Among surveyed aid recipients, 38% cited 'not enough aid' as the biggest challenge for assistance in their area, making this the most common answer – and an increase from 33% in 2022. Similarly, the

^{xiv} The next-largest shortfalls were for those targeted in Venezuela's Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan and Syria's 3RP, where people targeted received only 10% of required funding.



top response for how the humanitarian system can improve was ‘give more’ at 25%.^{xv} Meanwhile, 43% of surveyed aid practitioners also highlighted inadequate funding as the biggest weakness in their setting: an increase from 37.8% in 2022. A local humanitarian actor in Gaza summarised the insufficiency:



‘You bring a little to many and enough for no one.’

While people affected by crisis felt the impacts of funding reductions as early as 2023 (for example, cuts to WFP rations for refugees in Uganda were linked to raised crime, prostitution, sexual abuse, school absences and child marriages),²³ the effects of the 2025 cuts were broader. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the effect of cuts on health facilities across 20 humanitarian settings reduced access to services for 53.3 million people between January and October 2025,²⁴ while Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that aid disruptions contributed to a rise in malnourished children in Somalia.²⁵ The cuts stripped away safety nets, pushing many vulnerable people to adopt increasingly dangerous coping mechanisms.²⁶ In multiple contexts, such as Bangladesh,²⁷ Kenya,²⁸ Mali and South Sudan, such coping mechanisms – including selling assets and sex, consuming seeds meant for crops and accumulating debt – increased protection threats for people experiencing vulnerability and catalysed concerns about a compounding future crisis in humanitarian needs.²⁹

Global modelling estimates of the 2025 cuts (with varying levels of certainty) predicted vast longer-term impacts. An article in *The Lancet* estimated widescale cuts of essential services and potentially over 14 million additional deaths – including over 4.5 million children under five – over the following five years,³⁰ while WFP estimated that funding and caseload gaps in 2025 could move between 10.5 million and 13.7 million people into emergency conditions (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 4).³¹

Future evaluations will be important to track the full impact of the cuts; however, they will rely on the system’s ability to gather data – not only where the system remains, but also where it has retreated. Whether predictive models are correct in their estimations of impacts will also depend on how other actors, including national governments and other local and regional structures, alter their policies and approaches to domestic crisis support in reaction to reduced foreign assistance.³²

The search for alternative funding

The funding cuts spurred a widespread search for new sources of support. International and national humanitarian networks reported increased interest among their members in non-DAC donors, philanthropies and innovative financing models.

^{xv} Comparable with 24% in 2022.



Non-DAC donors

The retreat of some of the largest traditional DAC donors resulted in humanitarians looking to other donor governments to help fill the void. The Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Qatar have been strong but fluctuating humanitarian donors over the past decade.³³ Between 2024 and 2025 their share of total public IHA rose from 10% to 17% (US\$3.5 billion to \$4.5 billion). UAE and Saudi Arabia



Between 2024 and 2025 the Gulf states' share of total IHA rose from 10% to 17% (US\$3.5 billion to \$4.5 billion)

became the fourth and fifth largest individual public donors in 2025, but the largest increase in spending was by Qatar, which almost tripled its humanitarian spend between 2024 and 2025.

Whether Gulf spending will help to fill the gaps is unclear due to a lack of public planning documents, a tendency to concentrate on a small number of contexts (46% of Gulf countries' 2025 spend went to Yemen and 16% to Palestine), and a potential need

to focus more on national priorities as a result of the cost of the 2026 US–Israel war with Iran.³⁴ They have also tended to channel money bilaterally: while 69% of Saudi Arabia's funding in 2024 went to LNAs, the majority of that was to local and national governments.³⁵ The contribution of other non-DAC donors remained small: 1.6% of IHA in 2025, with Türkiye providing the majority.³⁶

China's aggregate humanitarian funding was difficult to track because it does not report to coordinated system structures, but it has recently made significant investments in specific humanitarian crises. For example, China pledged US\$137 million in response to the Myanmar earthquake in early 2025, and China-supported crisis responders were among the first to provide assistance.³⁷ China also supported other regional humanitarian action in Cambodia, Mongolia and Nepal.³⁸ While some actors raised concerns about the potential negative influences of expanded Chinese engagement,³⁹ OCHA's Emergency Relief Coordinator, Tom Fletcher, made a direct appeal to China for greater humanitarian leadership in the wake of the US cuts.⁴⁰ While not insubstantial, there are signs, however, that China's spending is unlikely to fill the gap left by US funding; one estimate indicated that China provided around US\$1.5 billion for grants classified as capacity-building and humanitarian assistance in 2024.⁴¹

Philanthropies

It is difficult to provide accurate, up-to-date figures for philanthropic spending – there is no central clearing house for philanthropy, and measurement often relies on tax documents with an availability lag of about two years^{xvi} – but given that private funding only totals 20% of IHA, and philanthropy is just one component of private funding, it is unlikely to fill the gap left by public donors. Indeed, OECD estimated

xvi The *GHA Report* uses a survey of humanitarian organisations to report total private funding received.

total philanthropic funding to contexts exposed to high and extreme fragility at US\$3.2 billion in 2023, but noted that it was more likely to fund basic services in these contexts in comparison to ODA, which was primarily directed to emergency and humanitarian responses.⁴² The *State of Disaster Philanthropy Report 2025*⁴³ reported that 3,277 grant-makers provided US\$1.2 billion to disasters in 2023. Most of the funding went to response and relief; preparedness attracted the least funding, followed by risk reduction and mitigation. Funding also skewed towards sudden-onset disasters that tended to receive more public and media attention; complex humanitarian emergencies attracted lower amounts.⁴⁴

Funding skewed towards sudden-onset disasters that tended to receive more public and media attention; complex humanitarian emergencies attracted lower amounts

Some philanthropies tried to provide some cushioning to humanitarian partners after the cuts. For example, the Gates Foundation increased spending after USAID's closure,^{xvii} and a rare few drew down a bigger proportion of their capital, providing more assistance in the immediate term and reducing their endowments. MacKenzie Scott's Yield Giving donated US\$60 million to the Center for Disaster Philanthropy in late 2025 for instance (its previous largest donation had been US\$10 million).⁴⁵ Others increased emergency and rapid-response grants or gave more unrestricted grants to provide greater stability.⁴⁶ Feminist funder the Global Resilience Fund provided financial and convening support to women-led humanitarian organisations as they faced the double threat of budget cuts and US DEI regulations.

It is hard to characterise philanthropic giving because of the varied approaches and mandates of different funders. Many philanthropies reported targeting funds for the most catalytic impact rather than necessarily following UN-coordinated appeals. Individual approaches to doing that varied: several told us they targeted new crises to increase the impact of their individual contribution, others targeted forgotten or complex crises and some focused squarely on a specific geographic or thematic mission. They also varied in risk appetite; some were concerned about public reputations, while another said:



'The number one advantage is that we can provide a level of flexibility in funding and level of risk tolerance that institutional donors can't. Institutional funders are looking at taxpayer dollars and can't make mistakes.'

Indeed, some philanthropies have moved further on issues where government donors have remained stuck: 30.2% of global disaster philanthropy in 2023 went

xvii However, this only represented US\$9 billion across all types of funding (see Suzman (2025) <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/articles/development-aid-cuts-despite-progress>).



30.2% of global disaster philanthropy in 2023 went to organisations headquartered in the countries where the work took place

to organisations headquartered in the countries where the work took place,⁴⁷ and there were indications that a focus on sustainability may be translating into more investment in preparedness and resilience to future crises. Some philanthropies also collaborated in coalitions or pooled funds, such as the Strengthening Local Humanitarian Leadership Collaborative or Funders for Mutual Aid in Sudan.⁴⁸



Some philanthropies described increasing their engagement with government donors and exploring ways of working together. However, they also identified challenges, including different jargon, cultures and expectations of how they could navigate different operational models. One suggested that better partnerships would happen:



'if both sets of stakeholders did more to try and meet the other one where they're at rather than expecting one of us to go the entire way and become a full-fledged passionate humanitarian or an expert on philanthropic giving.'

Philanthropists felt it was also important for operational organisations seeking funding to recognise that philanthropies sometimes work differently from typical proposal models of grant-making, with their own perspectives on effectiveness, values and missions. One philanthropy said:



'I would encourage people to be curious, to view, approach and engage philanthropy not as an ATM ... but see them in their partnership role, their convening authority role, in their advocacy role.'

New forms of private financing

As the public sector shrank, some humanitarian organisations and several government donors increasingly sought to engage different forms of private funding. For example, in 2024, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) supported research by the Institute for Studies on Conflicts and Humanitarian Action (IECAH) that explored how Spanish private-sector actors could better contribute to humanitarian action.⁴⁹ Other collaborations included a 2025 public–private partnership between WFP, the Grundfos Foundation and the Danish Government, which created a US\$40 million programme in Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda.⁵⁰ Building on its previous engagement with Islamic sources of private funding, UNHCR launched the Islamic Fund for Refugees in 2022: a Sharia-compliant funding tool for projects in Islamic Development Bank member states. In 2025, the Refugee Zakat Fund received over US\$23 million in Zakat contributions and approximately US\$16 million in Sadaqah contributions: a sizeable increase from 2024, when it received US\$14 million and US\$7.8 million respectively.⁵¹



The Grand Bargain 3.0 explicitly prioritised exploring so-called innovative finance⁵² – a wide range of approaches and mechanisms with the potential to unlock larger and more sustainable finance solutions⁵³ – making it a hot topic among humanitarians during this study period. The instruments explored included grants; debt; guarantees; equity pay for success, insurance and carbon finance; blended finance; providing contextual advice to development investors; and debt swaps/conversion (among others).⁵⁴ As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), the suitability of innovative finance mechanisms for different forms of humanitarian action varies; there may be more scope for their employment in anticipatory action and preparedness, or in linking them with longer-term development solutions.⁵⁵

Humanitarians and private-sector actors still need to understand each other better for more fruitful partnerships.⁵⁶ Many humanitarians are not equipped with the knowledge required to navigate relationships and investment models.⁵⁷ Indeed, 46% of respondents to our practitioner survey described their working relationship with private-sector actors as ‘poor’.^{xviii} However, there have been some training efforts to bridge the knowledge gap, including by the Start Network,⁵⁸ the Austrian Red Cross, HIFHUB,^{xix} the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and various universities and business schools.⁵⁹



Humanitarians and private-sector actors still need to understand each other better for more fruitful partnerships



Support structures beyond IHA

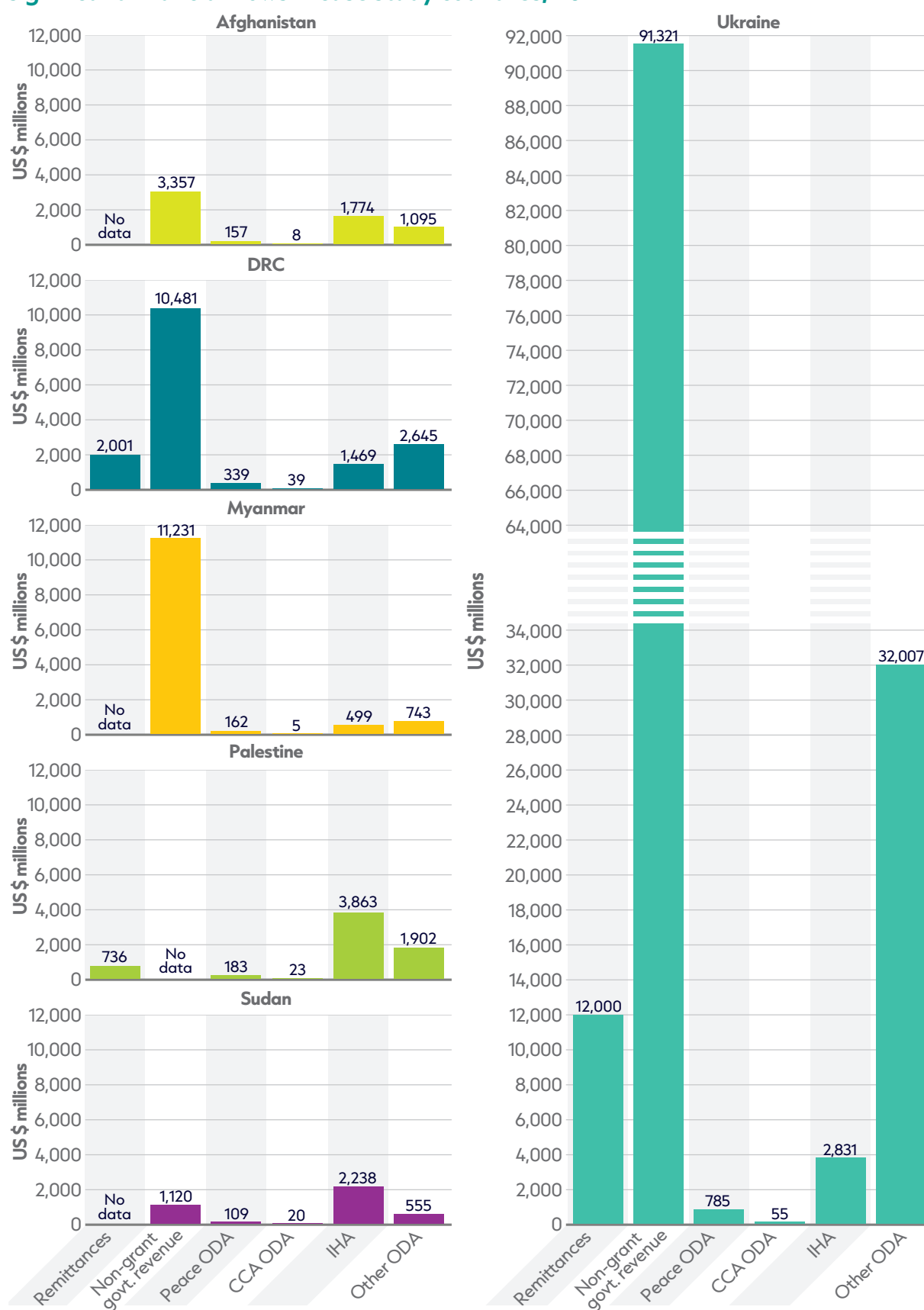
Multiple other financial flows and non-financial forms of assistance were vital for people affected by crisis, often outstripping IHA contributions either in size or their importance to these people. Our case-study countries demonstrated significant variation in the mix of domestic and international, public and private finance for 2024 (the most recent year of complete data), as well as in the role each flow played.

IHA formed a significant component of financing in several contexts, including Afghanistan, Palestine and Sudan. While absolute IHA to Ukraine was high, it was substantially lower than other forms of ODA; other ODA was also higher than IHA in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Myanmar. In all case-study contexts, non-humanitarian ODA for peace, disaster risk reduction and climate-crisis adaptation was low, with the latter being relatively tiny in several contexts.

xviii 31% described it as ‘fair’, 20% as ‘good’ and 4% as ‘excellent’.

xix HIFHUB is hosted by the Danish Red Cross and serves the broader Red Cross movement to help build the investable project pipeline, the organisational capacity and the cross-sector partnerships needed to move beyond grants to new sources of capital.

Figure 1.8: Size of international humanitarian assistance compared to other significant financial flows in case study countries, 2024



Source: ALNAP based on OCHA FTS data on IHA, World Bank data on remittances, IMF data on non-grant government revenue and OECD DAC data on ODA.

Notes: Data is in constant 2024 prices. For Palestine, the value for non-grant government revenue in 2024 was omitted from the graph due to widely diverging figures from other sources. CCA = Climate Change Adaptation.



Governments

Research indicated that, while some governments shifted their domestic policies to cushion against the effects of IHA cuts, their ability to make up the losses varied in the short term.⁶⁰ A review of African governments found humanitarian and social protection responses to be weaker than development responses.⁶¹ Government revenue (excluding grants)^{xx} was higher than other forms of financing in all case-study contexts aside from Sudan,^{xxi} underscoring the potential for state-led disaster management and public services.



Higher domestic revenues did not necessarily translate into governments filling gaps in humanitarian response



However, higher domestic revenues did not necessarily translate into governments filling gaps in humanitarian response. Domestic funding often focused on defence objectives, including in Sudan, Ukraine and Myanmar. In contexts like Myanmar and Afghanistan,^{xxii} restrictive policies limited humanitarian assistance to only parts of the population (see [Chapter 3.2](#)).⁶² Domestic disaster response was stronger in this period for several contexts not included in the six case-study contexts shown in [Figure 1.8](#), such as middle-income contexts

like India, Indonesia and the Philippines.⁶³ It was often strong in the Pacific region, including in Vanuatu, where the UN played a smaller part.⁶⁴ The role of Somalia in domestic disaster response and in coordinating humanitarian with development and peace planning also grew compared to previous SOHS periods.⁶⁵ (See [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#) for further information.)

Diaspora support

Diaspora support remained key for many people affected by humanitarian crisis. In 2023, recorded remittances grew to US\$656 billion, making up the highest proportion of external financing to low- and middle-income countries: above ODA and foreign direct investments.⁶⁶

In 2024, remittance amounts to our case-study countries varied significantly: they outstripped IHA in DRC and Ukraine, but were significantly smaller in Palestine. While comparable data was not available for Afghanistan, Myanmar and Sudan, other sources indicated fluctuations. The World Bank showed a drop in remittances for Afghanistan in 2025 due to forced returns of migrants from Iran and Pakistan.⁶⁷ A household survey indicated increased reliance on remittances

xx The data for government revenue excludes non-tax revenue received as grants from other governments and international organisations to avoid double counting

xxi Estimates for government revenue (excluding grants) in Palestine for 2024 are not presented because they varied widely between the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (with the World Bank estimate indicating much stronger retractions in GDP due to Israel's destruction of infrastructure) (see World Bank et al. (2025) <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/133c3304e29086819c1119fe8e85366b-0280012025/original/Gaza-RDNA-final-med.pdf>).

xxii Afghanistan experienced stronger fiscal self-reliance in this period through tax revenues, although external donor grants accounted for over 40% of public resources.

in Myanmar as the share of household income made up by remittances increased from 33% in 2022 to 45% in 2024.⁶⁸ While not quantified, the World Bank suggested that remittances in Sudan dropped sharply in 2024.⁶⁹ In non-case-study crisis contexts, too, remittances were central to supporting people affected by crisis: in Yemen, for example (where public finance was weak), remittances of approximately US\$6 billion in 2023 supported household consumption and broader economic activity.

In 2023, recorded remittances of diaspora support made up the highest proportion of external financing to low- and middle-income countries: above ODA and foreign direct investments

While it is difficult to parse out humanitarian versus development funding from global remittance figures, there are clear examples of diaspora support during crises. A Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination (DEMAC) mapping identified 200 diaspora organisations that donated to the Herat earthquake response, although our interviewees reported challenges in transferring private funds to Afghanistan due to banking restrictions.⁷⁰ The Sameer Project channelled diaspora funds to run camps in Palestine.⁷¹ Respondents in Ukraine, as well as in Sudan (where the diaspora helped to fund Emergency Response Rooms), expressed their appreciation for the flexibility and relative speed of diaspora funding. However, some people affected by crisis noted the uneven nature of individual transfers; they were only available to some households who had friends and family abroad, and they were easier to access for people in urban areas with more banking infrastructure. Respondents in Ukraine also noted that diaspora-network volunteers could experience burnout when trying to support a challenging crisis over the longer term.

Local private actors

Beyond international finance and domestic government revenue, the local private sector is often essential in a crisis. Research highlighted the importance of small and medium enterprises in contexts with diverse social and political structures, from the Philippines to Yemen.⁷² In our case-study contexts, people affected by crisis described local private actors as a key source of support – and often faster and more flexible than formal international assistance – in Afghanistan, DRC, Poland and Ukraine. In Afghanistan and DRC, these actors were largely individual businesspeople and those with private wealth, sometimes providing assistance as Zakat in Afghanistan. One Afghan woman told us:



'As soon as we crossed the border, I saw only private aid providers delivering aid directly to returnees. They were friendly and provided food items immediately.'



In Poland and Ukraine, private companies supported humanitarian action with technology, construction materials and logistics. However, in several contexts, local NGOs and civil society actors reported that private-sector support was inconsistent and largely reactive to acute stages of emergencies.

Mutual aid

During this study period, international humanitarians paid more substantive attention to the role of mutual aid; that is, 'the self-forming, self-organised and voluntary actions of individuals, families and communities who support one another during crises'.⁷³ The most well-documented example of humanitarian mutual aid was in Sudan, where over 1,400 Emergency Response Rooms took on a strong role in delivering humanitarian response across different contested parts of the country, supporting needs from food to protection.⁷⁴ An Emergency Response Room representative told us that these locally led networks proved to be both resilient and capable of reaching places where international humanitarians could not go. Community kitchens were also identified by humanitarians as a key source of support in Gaza, including over Ramadan. Indeed, one UN actor indicated the extent to which local volunteers drove the response in Gaza, explaining:



'Communities were our compass. Women organised themselves into committees to oversee distributions fairly. Youth volunteers created play circles for children. Elders mediated disputes over space in shelters.'

In Poland and Ukraine during this period, grassroots, solidarity-based volunteer movements built on their previous experience from the 2014 Russian invasion to respond. One young Ukrainian refugee explained that, between formal and informal support, 'if needed, you can always find someone here who will help'. Indeed, the 2024 World Giving Index found that some contexts affected by crisis were among the most generous for people giving their time or money, or helping someone they did not know, with Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria and Ukraine in the top 10.^{xxiii}

These structures have, however, felt the strain of drawn-out crises and experienced additional pressure due to funding cuts. In Ukraine, grassroots organisations told us they found their contributions stretched between helping military efforts and humanitarian assistance. In Sudan, respondents noted that vital volunteer structures became increasingly overstretched due to rising needs, diminishing community resources and limited external support. In Mali and South Sudan, people affected by crisis reported that funding cuts put more pressure on communities to support people experiencing vulnerability and strained community resources (like food, water and shelter).⁷⁵ And in Gaza, humanitarians reported that structures became hard to maintain: communities with little left to

xxiii Philanthropy was defined as people giving their time or money, or helping someone they did not know (see CAF (2024) https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/inside-giving/wgi/wgi_2024_report.pdf).

give had to focus more on protecting their own families than on pooling supplies.

To maximise the impact of humanitarian financing, strategies need to better understand the mix of resources present in each country: which resources are most significant, what they are funding, who they include and whether they support state systems, humanitarian response or household survival.

People affected by crisis paid the biggest price of the humanitarian system's overreliance on one institutional donor

Conclusion

In the wake of significant funding cuts during this period, people affected by crisis paid the biggest price of the humanitarian system's overreliance on one institutional donor. The shocks caused by the cuts revealed the fragility of a concentrated system that was vulnerable to the whims of individual political actors.

In the short term, international humanitarian actors' efforts to access alternative funding are unlikely to fill the gaps left by public donors. Over the next few years, the choices of the US and other key donors will determine whether the system continues its downwards funding trajectory or whether there is political will to reverse these trends.

To grapple with not only the financial crisis but also the legitimacy crisis (and note the two are intertwined), humanitarian actors will have to influence public as well as political attitudes towards valuing and protecting people affected by crisis globally. The sharp drop in IHA during this period underscored the importance of other systems of support for people affected by crisis, both international and local. To ensure the greatest impact, it will be vital to improve how this smaller amount of IHA coordinates with and complements – but does not displace – those support systems.

CHAPTER 1.2

PRIORITISING PEOPLE AND PROGRAMMES

'Every choice meant that some lives were saved while others were left at risk.'

— Local assistance coordinator, Palestine

Following stark funding reductions, humanitarian organisations faced difficult choices in prioritising between contexts, populations and programming, at speed, with limited up-to-date evidence to inform their decisions. Hyper-prioritisation processes at system level and reduced coverage by individual organisations curtailed the number of people in need who accessed humanitarian support. Before 2025, the system made some progress on effectively assessing needs and inclusion of vulnerable groups, yet these efforts were hard hit by access constraints, cuts and restrictive diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies. Organisations made some improvements in providing relevant assistance, but examples remained of ineffective tailoring to people's needs. The narrowed remit reduced humanitarian focus on people's holistic and longer-term priorities: a focus on lifesaving support underscored the need to improve coordination with development actors and local service-delivery structures to better support deprioritised people and programmes.

Prioritising global humanitarian needs

Across the system, humanitarian organisations had to make difficult choices over which populations and programmes to prioritise in this period. The Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC), led by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), remained a key driver of prioritisation decisions for the United Nations (UN) coordinated humanitarian system.^{xxiv} Early in the period, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance (PiN) included in *Global Humanitarian Overviews* (GHOs) grew to a peak of almost 369 million in the *GHO 2023*.^{xxv} Subsequent HPCs sought to lower numbers in line with historical pre-Covid-19 averages through stricter scope- and boundary-setting around the humanitarian remit.

^{xxiv} The HPC is a coordinated set of actions that humanitarian actors undertake to improve the predictability, speed and effectiveness of their response to emergencies. It is based on a six-step process: analysis, planning, resource mobilisation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation and reporting (see OCHA (n.d.) <https://knowledge.base.unocha.org/wiki/spaces/hpc/pages/3993075713/About+the+HPC>).

^{xxv} The GHO is an annual assessment of humanitarian needs and how to respond to them for the UN-coordinated humanitarian system (see OCHA (2025) <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2026>).



OCHA explained that changes were made so that: 'after consecutive years of expansion in the scope and requirements of coordinated humanitarian plans/appeals ... humanitarian action is focused on the people and places that need it most'.⁷⁶ OCHA saw narrowing of the remit as important in a period of dwindling funding: when launching the *GHO 2024*, OCHA Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) Martin Griffiths described it as 'ruthlessly prioritized'⁷⁷ and the 2025 HPC continued to narrow boundaries in response to declining funding and the 'persistent trend of humanitarian partners not reaching (let alone covering) the people who have been targeted for assistance'.⁷⁸



As well as reducing the number of people 'in scope', HPC processes narrowed the types of programming considered within the humanitarian remit

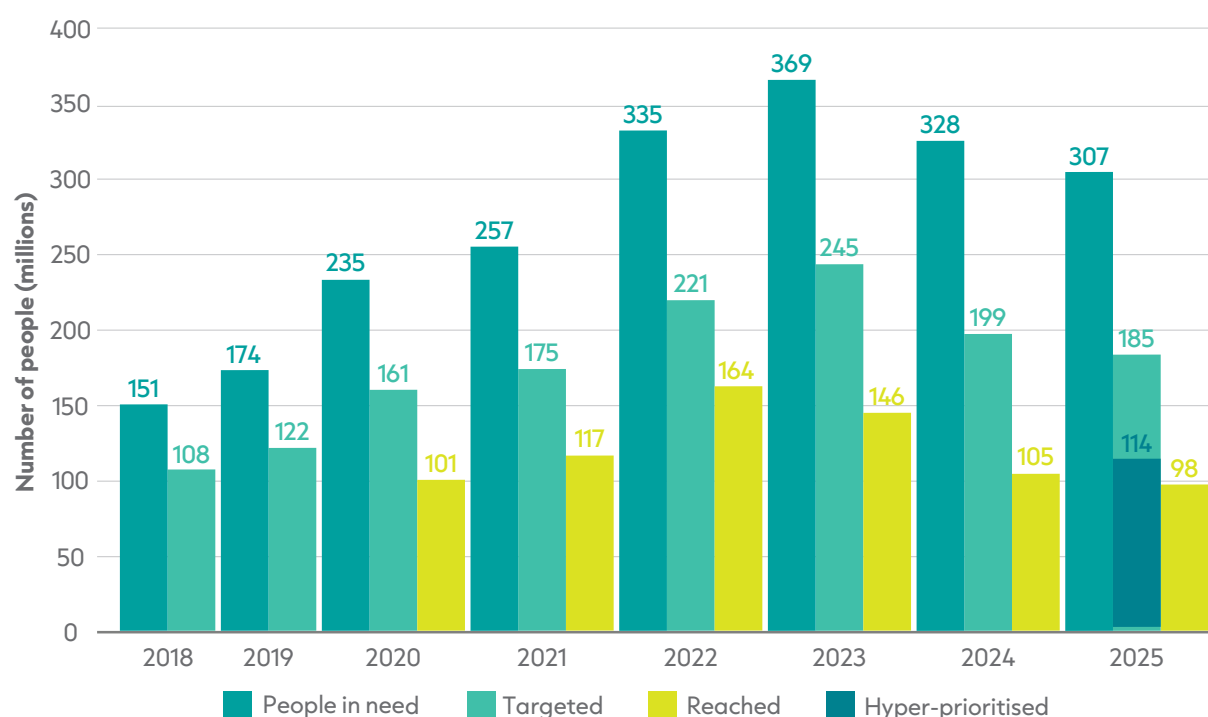


The definition of people affected by crisis narrowed: towards focusing on recent shocks and away from people with needs induced by other factors, like chronic poverty. HPC guidance explained that increased duration of Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans (HNRPs) over multiple years led to 'the assumption – over time – that the country's entire population is "in crisis"'.⁷⁹ As well as reducing the number of people 'in scope', HPC processes narrowed the types of programming considered within the humanitarian remit. The process increasingly focused humanitarian work on

'lifesaving' activities – or, as ERC Martin Griffiths put it, 'saying "no" to taking on 'the sorts of things that development agencies are actually much better at doing than we are'.⁸⁰ As a result, PiN numbers in the *GHO 2024, 2025 and 2026* were substantially lower than in 2022 and 2023. The *GHO 2026* (created at the end of 2025) reported 239 million PiN: a 35% reduction from the 2023 peak.^{xxvi}

Some humanitarian actors contested the decision to more narrowly define PiN. While HPC processes sought to draw a tighter circle around who was in humanitarian versus other forms of need, some critiqued the announcement that humanitarian needs were declining when they viewed them as increasing. For example, the World Food Programme's (WFP) and UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) 2026 global appeals emphasised rising needs, compared to pre-Covid-19 levels, linked to increases in acute food insecurity and forcibly displaced and stateless people.⁸¹ A WFP global brief stated: 'Only by showing the complete picture can the world grasp the true magnitude of the crisis and mobilize an adequate response'.⁸² Several senior humanitarians we spoke to recognised a need to narrow the boundaries of operational response but were concerned

xxvi OCHA guidance recommended that Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) estimate PiN for 2026 by focusing only on people in need living in areas classified by the Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) 2.0 as in intersectoral severity phases 3, 4 and 5. JIAF 2.0 conceptualizes intersectoral severity as the degree of humanitarian needs and protection risks that populations face relative to agreed humanitarian standards. In other words, intersectoral severity is based on universal humanitarian conditions that are manifested as outcomes in terms of death, acute malnutrition, epidemics, loss of livelihood coping strategies, and human rights violations' (see IASC (2023: 7) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/IASC%20Technical%20Manual%2C%20Joint%20and%20Intersectoral%20Analysis%20Framework%20%28JIAF%29%202.0.pdf>).

Figure 1.9: People in need, targeted and reached by UN-coordinated appeals, 2018–2025

Source: OCHA GHO and OCHA HPC.

Notes: Figures for people reached not available for all humanitarian plans. Figures for people in need and targeted exclude country Covid-19 response plans. People reached figures not available before 2020.



that the system not go too far in ‘narrowing who we see’, and that reforms did not become ‘an exercise of fitting needs to funding’.

Humanitarians have always prioritised within the PiN who they could target with humanitarian assistance, but funding cuts drove harder choices. The percentage targeted dropped from 67% in 2023 to 60% in 2025. Extreme funding cuts in early 2025 led to a new ‘hyper-prioritisation’, whereby HCTs further prioritised within the targeting figure who to reach first: those deemed to be in the most severe need of humanitarian support. ERC Tom Fletcher described the process as ‘the cruel math of doing less with less’.⁸³

Plans were revised in short windows to prioritise people in need in geographic areas experiencing high levels of severe needs.^{xxvii} The revised plans also prioritised Strategic Objectives focused on lifesaving and protection.^{xxviii} This process

^{xxvii} The revised plans focused on intersectoral severity 4 and 5. As described in the hyper-prioritised GHO 2026 report, ‘Intersectoral severity, as defined in the Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF), represents the degree of humanitarian needs and protection risks that populations face, ranked on five tiers. Intersectoral severity 5 is the highest level of concern denoting catastrophic humanitarian conditions and severity 4 denotes extreme humanitarian conditions’ (see OCHA (2025: 22) <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-cruel-math-aid-cuts-hyper-prioritized-report-june-2025>).

^{xxviii} Strategic Objectives are outlined in annual HNRPs to guide the activities of a coordinated response (see OCHA (2025) <https://humanitarianaction.info/article/hyper-prioritizing-country-responses>).



identified 114.4 million people to be most urgently targeted: 38.3% of PiN.⁸⁴ Tracked country plan hyper-prioritised targets were 90.2 million people or 29.4% of PiN. UNHCR led a similar process with eight refugee plans, resulting in the prioritisation of 27 million people (out of 33.6 million originally targeted) and deferring longer-term integration and capacity-building activities.⁸⁵ The *GHO 2026* continued with this approach, identifying 239 million PiN, targeting 135 million and prioritising 87 million.^{xxix} The *GHO 2026* represents the totality of these figures, while the subsequent 87 Million Lives campaign focused intensively on galvanising resources for the hyper-prioritised GHO first.⁸⁶

Challenges of system-level prioritisation

Perspectives were mixed on the outcome of system prioritisation. Some donors and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) viewed the process as a 'pragmatic response to a funding crisis' or 'painful and unavoidable – as good as it gets'.⁸⁷ Donors continued to rely mainly on the GHO for their planning, but also considered their organisational priorities, forgotten crises, appeals led by other agencies and information from their in-country staff and partners. Many people we spoke to agreed that the humanitarian system had become too stretched in what it is expected to deliver; however, they raised two main concerns regarding narrowing its remit through the HPC.

The first was that a shock-based approach would create exclusion errors, potentially missing people who were not impacted by a 'recent shock' in a country affected by crisis, but who had higher needs than those who were impacted. Or missing people with specific vulnerabilities (like internally displaced people) by focusing on geographic severity.⁸⁸ The HPC Steering Group agreed several mitigation measures in the 2026 HPC, such as including areas facing emergency thresholds of mortality and/or severe acute malnutrition, regardless of shock, and adopting a 'Pockets of Need' approach for specific areas that had higher severity of needs than the surrounding geographic area.^{xxx}

The second concern was about the short- and longer-term effects of these difficult decisions, especially if broader support systems from state services or development actors were not there to support the needs of people who no longer counted as being in humanitarian need or were not hyper-prioritised. In the immediate term, one humanitarian told us that not focusing on intersectoral severity phase 3 (severe) was like 'taking from the hungry to give to the starving'. Interviewees raised concerns that unassisted people in these lower severity levels

xxix The 2026 HPC focused on identifying the most severe and shock-driven needs globally, with PiNs incorporating JIAF intersectoral severity phases 3, 4 and 5. The number of people targeted focused on all those in phases 4 and 5, plus 50% of Phase 3, while the hyper-prioritised target sought to reach all people in phases 4 and 5 first.

xxx For example: 'a camp and/or besieged area with higher severity of need vis-à-vis the surrounding administrative area' (see OCHA (2025) https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/HPC%202026%20Discussion%20Paper_FINAL.pdf, p.3).



would fall into higher levels and increase future humanitarian caseloads, and that reduced presence and monitoring in those locations could result in needs going undetected. Many questioned the likelihood of the development system stepping in to support people and programmes now considered out of scope for humanitarians. One UN actor in Somalia said:



'I don't think [development actors] are ready to prioritise the protracted people. The development people work with [Sustainable Development Goals] that they need to achieve in several years' time.'

Levels of collaboration and inclusion in hyper-prioritisation and HPC processes reportedly varied by country and actor. A May 2025 report found that NGOs – particularly local and national NGOs (L/ NNGOs) – felt excluded from decision-making in the HPC process.⁸⁹ Representatives of coordination actors in South Sudan characterised the process as well-coordinated, but others 'criticized it as siloed, with clusters^{xxx} advocating for their own priorities in the absence of an overarching inter-sectoral vision'.⁹⁰ In Mali, while cluster leads were more involved in and informed about how choices were being made, HCT participants and other partners reported receiving limited information.⁹¹



Many questioned the likelihood of the development system stepping in to support people and programmes now considered out of scope for humanitarians



HPC guidance highlighted the importance of including community perspectives in planning, but there were tensions in practice. One senior humanitarian said:



'Humanitarian Country Teams are having to make cut-throat decisions and yet wanting to appear as people-centred as possible.'

Teams in Somalia and Colombia were able to draw on community-engagement approaches and inputs captured during their participatory Flagship Initiative pilots,^{xxxii} but community engagement was reportedly not widespread.⁹² A June 2025 NGO position paper highlighted that community inputs were underrepresented in the HNRPs and called for 'a new component of the HPC, which systematically includes what communities themselves prioritize as a starting point for deciding what type of response to launch'.⁹³

xxxii The humanitarian cluster system is 'a coordination mechanism used by the UN and other humanitarian organizations to respond to crises. It is designed to organize humanitarian actors into core sectors, such as water, health and food security. The aim is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the response, avoid duplication, and ensure that affected people's needs are met in a timely and appropriate manner' (see OCHA (n.d.) <https://www.unocha.org/we-coordinate>).

xxxii The Flagship Initiative was launched in 2023 as a three-year learning initiative to redesign humanitarian action by testing ways to better organise assistance around the priorities of people affected by crisis. It took place in pilot contexts: Colombia, Niger, the Philippines, Somalia and South Sudan (see Sida et al. (2025) <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/flagship-initiative-second-year-learning-report-april-2025>).



Who has been prioritised?

All appeals were poorly funded in 2025 (See [Figure 1.10](#)). The 2026 GHA Report found that funding fell for 18 of the 20 largest recipient countries from 2024 to 2025, with only funding for the Myanmar and Palestine appeals increasing (by 11% and 15% respectively).⁹⁴ On average, however, regional appeals and those with lower requirements received a smaller proportion of requirements than larger, country-based appeals.



2025 saw the greatest funding concentration: the 5 largest recipient countries accounted for 52% of all country-allocable humanitarian funding



Only 35% of funding requirements within OCHA-managed Humanitarian Response Plans, flash and regional humanitarian appeals were met in 2025.^{xxxiii} However, the proportion of funding met within each appeal varied significantly – from 7% to 78% (see [Figure 1.10](#)). Only five appeals received more than 50% of required funding. Two new emergencies were funded best: the Lebanon flash appeal (78% of requirements met) and the Myanmar earthquake appeal (74%). The Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) flash appeal received 66% of its US\$4.1 billion requirements, while Ukraine – despite being a

more protracted crisis – received 65% of its US\$2.6 billion requirements (financial support to Ukraine remained high among several European donors, in line with political alliances). Sudan's HNRP, as the largest appeal, received proportionally less funding than OPT and Ukraine.

Aside from the Rohingya Joint Response Plan, which received 53% of requirements, Regional Response Plans and appeals with smaller requirements were the poorest funded in terms of required sums. The two poorest funded regional plans, Syria and Venezuela, only received 10% of required funding, while the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) had the largest shortfall (US\$4.2 billion). The 10 smallest country-based appeals attracted an average of just 28% of requirements, while the 10 largest attracted 42%. Mozambique's drought flash appeal received the lowest percentage of funding requirements: just 7%.

Of the past decade, 2025 saw the greatest funding concentration (see [Figure 1.11](#)): the five largest recipient countries – OPT (19%), Syria (12%), Ukraine (8%), Sudan (8%) and Yemen (6%) – accounted for half of all country-allocable humanitarian funding (52%). The top four alone nearly constituted half of this funding, compared to seven countries accounting for the equivalent proportion in 2024. The remaining 48% of funding in 2025 went to 164 countries. There was also a change in the composition of the top-five recipient countries in 2025, with Afghanistan and the Democratic

xxxiii Flash appeals are created following sudden onset disasters to coordinate the early months of a response.

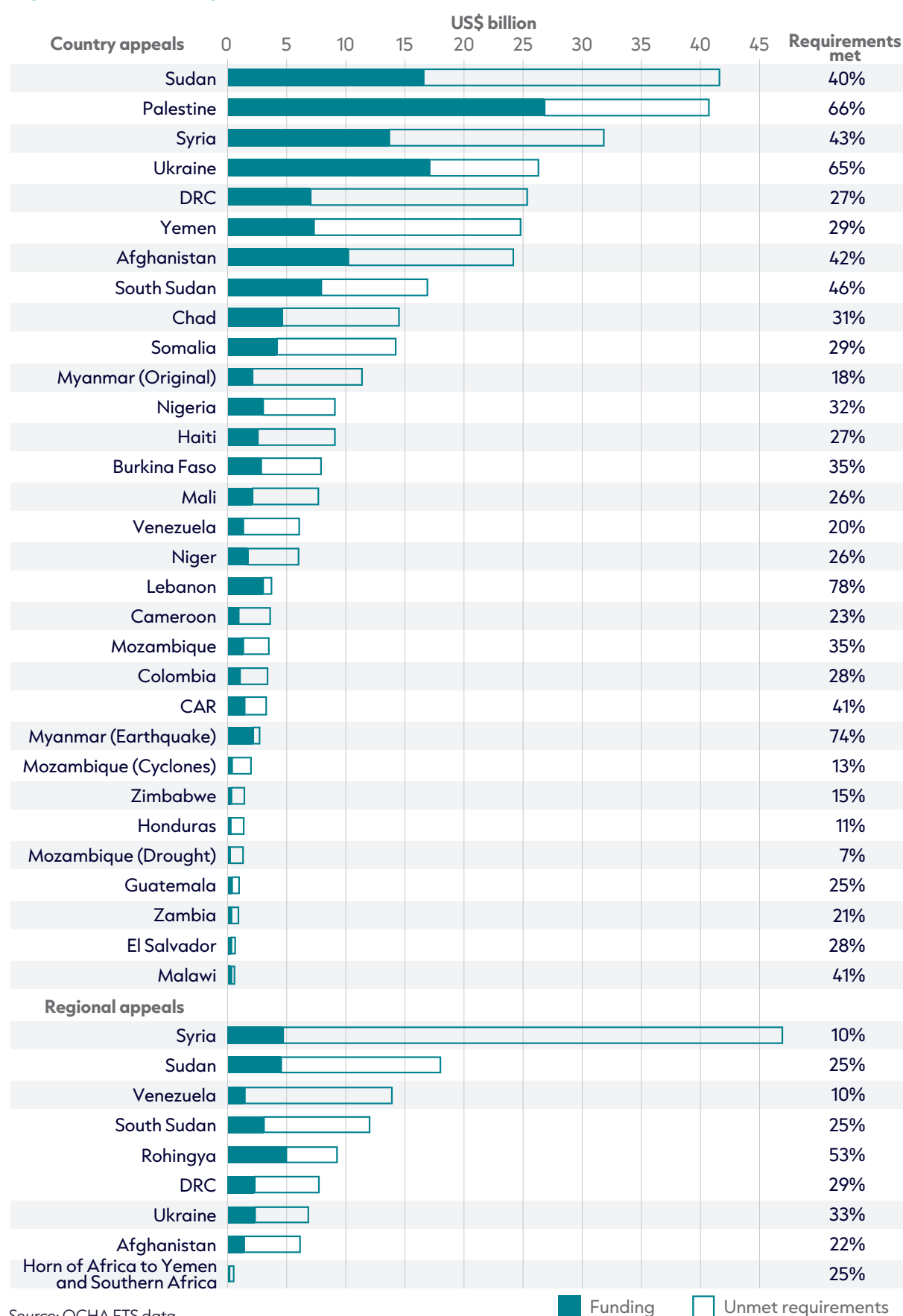
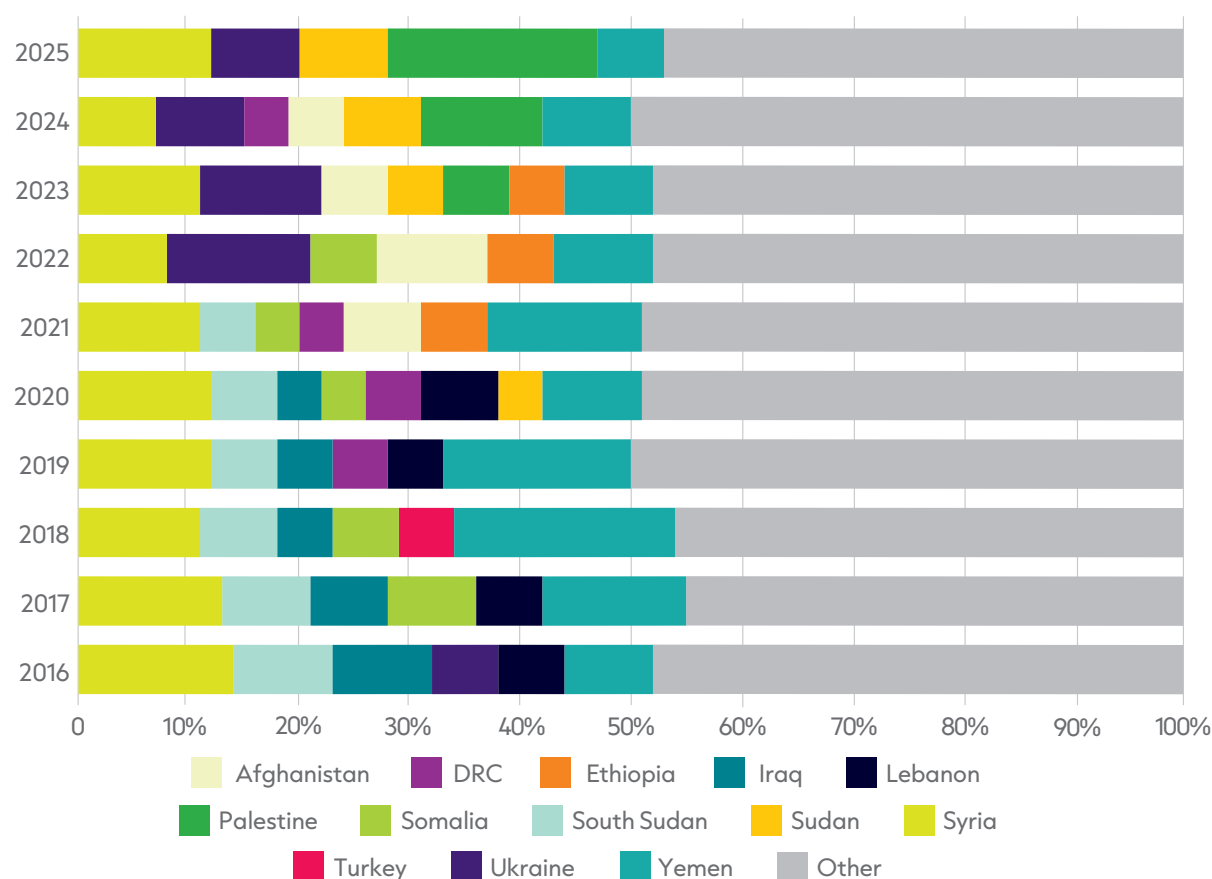
Figure 1.10: Funding and requirements by UN-coordinated appeal, 2025

Figure 1.11: Countries receiving 50% of funding, 2016–2025

Source: OCHA FTS data.

Notes: Data is in constant 2024 prices. Proportions are of total country-allocable humanitarian finance; flows reported to FTS with a recipient country.



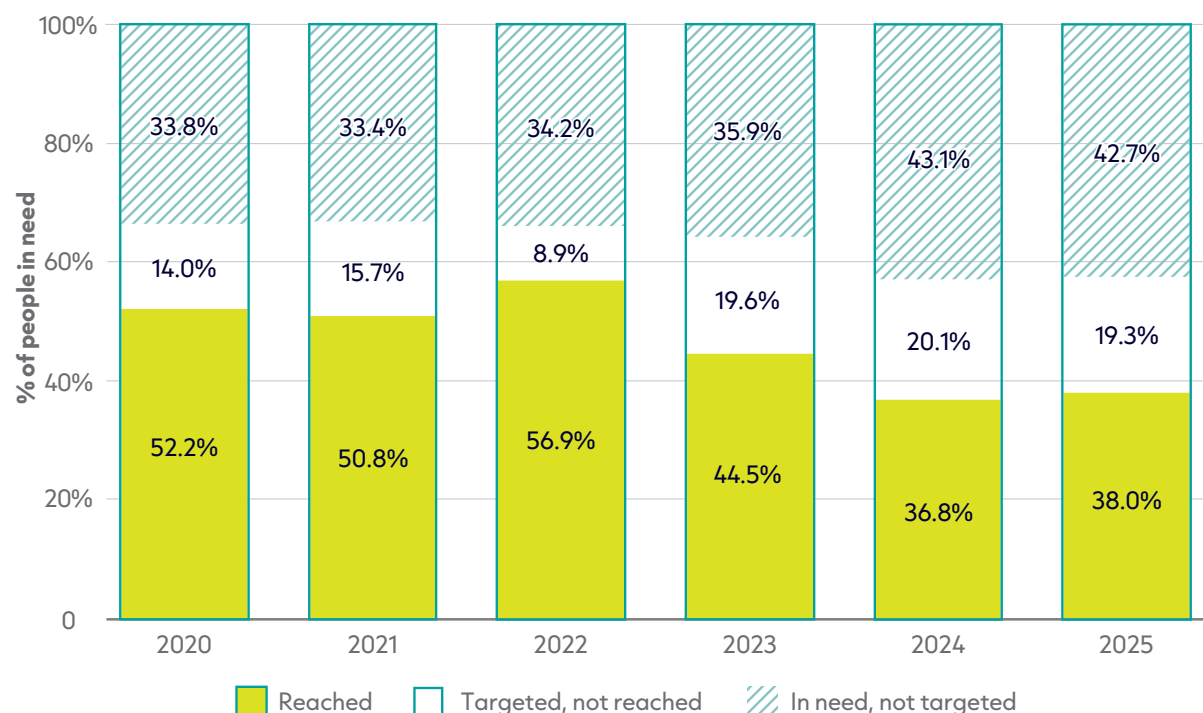
Republic of the Congo (DRC) pushed out. Between 2016 and 2025, eight contexts accounted for over half of country-allocable humanitarian assistance: Yemen (which received 11.3% of all funding); Syria (10.8%); South Sudan (nearly 6%); and Ukraine, Afghanistan, OPT, Ethiopia and Somalia (nearly 5% each).

Annual volumes of pooled funds for underfunded and forgotten crises dropped from US\$818 million in 2022 to US\$480 million in 2025.^{xxxiv} The decline in this component of funding was steeper than the rate of decline of aggregate international humanitarian assistance, suggesting that pooled-fund support for the most underfunded contexts was disproportionately squeezed.^{xxxv}

As funding dwindled, so did the number of people reached by UN-coordinated appeals. In plans with available reach data, an estimated 97.8 million people were

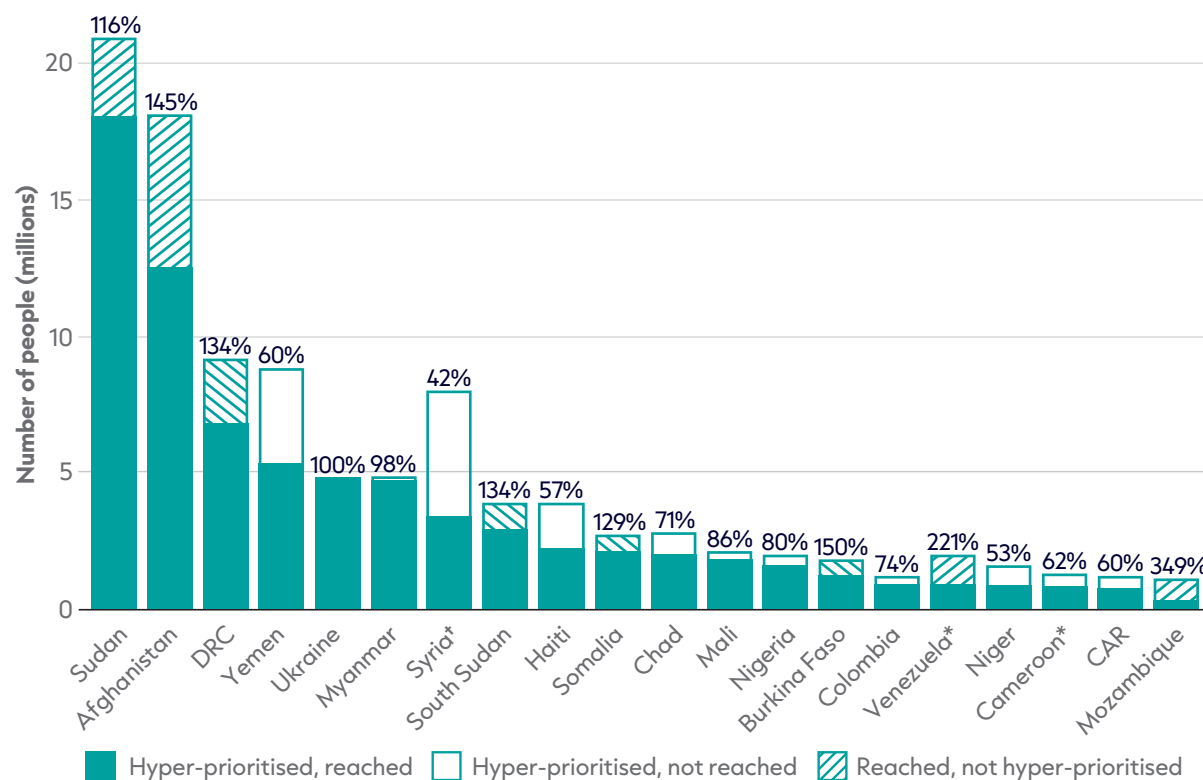
^{xxxiv} Figures for 2025 are based on partial-year data and will increase as further allocations are reported. For the methodology used to calculate these figures please see the accompanying [Methodology](#) document.

^{xxxv} Over the period, the Central Emergency Response Fund Underfunded Emergencies (CERF UFE) window contributed 39% and Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) allocations in European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) listed Forgotten Crisis countries contributed 61%. The decline since 2022 was largely due to reduced CBPF allocations. The CERF UFE window was more stable over time due to more predictable allocation rounds, while CBPFs were subject to donor fluctuations in different contexts. In 2025, funding heavily concentrated on a small number of large protracted crises: Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and South Sudan. There was variation in contexts among the two funding mechanisms, suggesting differing definitions of 'forgotten' or 'underfunded'.

Figure 1.12: Percentage of people reached in UN-coordinated appeals, 2020–2025

Source: OCHA GHO and OCHA HPC.

Notes: Figures for people reached not available for all humanitarian plans. Figures for PiN and targeted exclude country Covid-19 response plans.

**Figure 1.13: People hyper-prioritised and reached in UN-coordinated appeals, 2025**

Source: OCHA GHO and OCHA HPC.

Notes: Only plans with hyper-prioritisation in 2025 are shown. No reach data currently available for OPT HNRP.





reached in 2025 (66% of people targeted and 38% of PiN): well below the 2020–22 average, when over half of PiN were estimated to have been reached. It should also be noted that people reached does not necessarily equate to *needs fulfilled*.

Of the 46 UN-coordinated appeals in 2025, 21 included hyper-prioritised targets. Estimated reach exceeded these targets in some plans and fell significantly below in others: 16.5 million people were not reached despite being hyper-prioritised, while 14.9 million were reached despite not being hyper-prioritised. The Sudan HNRP had the highest estimated reach (20.9 million people) and exceeded the hyper-priority target (18 million). Eleven plans reached fewer people than were hyper-prioritised: an average of 68%. The Syria HNRP reached the lowest proportion of hyper-prioritised people: 42%.^{xxxvi}

Assisting people most in need

Funding and access constraints were key barriers to coverage in this period. Evaluations revealed that insufficient funding contributed to coverage gaps in multiple contexts, while our in-country research in six contexts reported reductions in coverage as funding dwindled.⁹⁵ Surveyed aid recipients told us the biggest challenge with assistance was insufficient aid, followed by access. Similarly, surveyed aid practitioners reported insecurity, lack of finances and bureaucratic restrictions/political interference as the biggest barriers to reaching those in need, with insecurity and finances being greater concerns than in 2022.^{xxxvii}

Assessment and targeting

Our practitioner survey suggested improvement in the quality of needs assessments: 61.4% considered them 'good' or 'excellent' in 2025 compared to 53.9% in 2022. In 2023, the JIAF 2.0 was released: a collective effort by UN agencies, NGOs and donors to create a global standard for estimating and analysing humanitarian needs and protection risks using five intersectoral severity phases.⁹⁶ A 2024 OCHA review found that JIAF 2.0 enabled greater emphasis on the multisectoral nature of needs; 96% of users found it more logical and useful than JIAF 1.0.⁹⁷ Its adoption was accompanied by an increase in the number of multisectoral needs assessments (MSNAs) conducted with people affected by crisis and informing HPC processes. Assessments typically focused on existing need rather than risk-based analysis or mortality data that several interviewees suggested could help enhance existing approaches; however, in 2025, IMPACT Initiatives trialled an Acute Needs Analysis methodology in 19 countries, focusing on urgent and preventable loss of life using known drivers of mortality.⁹⁸

^{xxxvi} Other large underreach plans included Niger (which reached 53% of hyper-prioritised people), Haiti (57%), CAR (60%) and Yemen (60%).

^{xxxvii} Bureaucratic restrictions were the biggest concern in 2022, followed by insecurity and then finances.



Evaluations indicated that, while many needs-assessment processes were strong, quality varied and key assessment criteria – including on vulnerabilities like age or disability status – were sometimes missed in early stages of crises.⁹⁹ Demographic data was sometimes outdated, leading to underestimates of the number of people meeting agency criteria.¹⁰⁰ Accuracy was particularly challenging in high-mobility contexts; for example, humanitarian actors in DRC and Gaza told us they struggled to keep camp information up to date because the number of internally displaced people increased rapidly as conflict spread. Funding cuts also threatened the infrastructure required to support effective needs assessments and targeting; in 2025, for example, acute food security assessments dropped significantly and the UNHCR/WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting hub closed.^{xxxviii} The number of MSNAs conducted dropped from 16 countries in 2024 to 13 in 2025, and half of those assessments were geographically narrowed, reducing the visibility of countrywide needs.¹⁰¹ Cuts to global information infrastructure (see [Chapter 1.3](#)) also threatened the humanitarian system's ability to track and predict needs.

Our in-country research found that the involvement of local humanitarian actors in needs assessments varied by context and international partners. While aid practitioners cited information from local organisations and voluntary networks as important to processes in contexts like Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, they sometimes felt extractive. For example, Emergency Response Room members in Sudan reported providing data to international actors but having limited further engagement in analysis and decision-making. In contrast, local organisations in Ukraine reported that some international actors – including Oxfam, Mercy Corps and UNHCR – were responsive to their inputs. However, one Ukrainian NGO said they disagreed with international actors on the definition of 'needs':



'They did take some of our comments into account, but not all. That one condition – that everyone, absolutely everyone, had been affected – they never accepted.'

Involvement of people affected by crisis in needs assessments was mixed. In our survey, 55% of aid recipients said an aid provider had consulted them on what they needed prior to provision – up from 33% in 2022^{xxxix} – yet focus group discussions suggested their systematic engagement in needs assessment remained limited (often to choosing from a 'menu'). Some organisations used more participatory approaches, such as WFP's vulnerability scorecards and community food committees.¹⁰² Limited resources, however, threatened more meaningful engagement; for example, the 2026 HPC guidance – which aimed to improve the

^{xxxviii} The 2026 *Global Report on Food Crises* reported that some countries produced no acute food insecurity assessments, but for many, the frequency of data collection reduced and there was lower population coverage and less disaggregation for displaced populations. For example, WFP conducted 30% fewer survey interviews than in 2024 (see [FAO et al. \(2026\) *https://doi.org/10.4060/cd9424en*](#); WFP (2026) [https://ainap.org/help-library/resources/strategic-evaluation-of-wfps-approaches-to-targeting-and-prioritization-for-food-and-nutrition-assistance/](#)).

^{xxxix} Most were consulted on both what was needed and who should receive it, but slightly more were consulted on the former.



engagement of people affected by crisis – suggested that agencies use existing data to identify people’s preferences, rather than conducting new consultations.¹⁰³

Among surveyed practitioners, 67% considered the prioritisation of people with the most urgent needs in this period to be ‘excellent’ or ‘good’. In contrast, aid recipients did not always agree with agencies’ targeting criteria: only 51% of those surveyed thought aid went to those most in need. While this was up from 36% in 2022, the increase should be treated with caution: it represents the views of those who did receive assistance in a period of increasingly limited aid. Evaluations indicated that communities affected by crisis were sometimes confused by agency targeting decisions and unsure whether they were fair.¹⁰⁴ Transparency helped in some camps for internally displaced people in Kassala, where residents told us the regular updating of lists gave them more faith in targeting decisions. People also continued to redistribute aid by sharing assistance beyond targeted households or pooling what they received.¹⁰⁵

In early stages, agencies sometimes used blanket targeting across wider populations affected by crisis to reduce the risk of accidentally excluding people in need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁶ Many shifted to vulnerability-based targeting as responses continued, but some maintained blanket targeting, either to avoid driving local conflict or due to an inability to differentiate between levels of need.¹⁰⁷ An evaluation of the UN Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF) Afghanistan response found that populations were ‘uniformly in need’ and that ‘few immediately obvious markers of vulnerability existed to differentiate community members’.¹⁰⁸ Funding cuts reduced agencies’ flexibility to blanket-target and threatened effective vulnerability-based targeting, which relies on data and presence.



Ultimately, it fell to frontline staff to enact difficult decisions about who received assistance



Ultimately, it fell to frontline staff to enact difficult decisions about who received assistance. A local NGO leader in Ukraine repeated the words of their team member:



‘Who am I to say that she doesn’t meet some criteria somebody has created to receive the assistance? I can see that she’s standing in the old coat and it doesn’t look like she has been eating well.’

Beyond turning people away, a community leader in Gaza gave this stark example of life-or-death choices:



‘A patient could be critically injured, like someone with amputated limbs still alive, but I would have to prioritise someone with a slightly better chance of survival instead. It became a matter of trade-offs.’



Access and political influence

Access challenges and insecurity continued to restrict coverage in this period, which featured conflict, large-scale political blocks on assistance and increased attacks on aid workers (see [Chapter 3.1](#)). Armed conflict and insecurity affected access in multiple case-study contexts, including DRC, Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan and Ukraine. Local staff in Ukraine said that increased drone activity and a lack of protective equipment hindered their access to frontline areas, and that access to Russian-occupied territories was limited by dwindling international presence and coordinated access systems.¹⁰⁹ Evaluations found that access limitations reduced coverage in contexts like Eritrea, Somalia, Yemen and Syria.¹¹⁰ An evaluation of UNICEF's response in Syria concluded: 'Targeting has often been influenced as much by opportunities to programme as by assessed needs and priorities'.¹¹¹

Funding pressures also reduced access to more challenging locations. Humanitarian actors in Sudan reported that communities were deprioritised in food security cuts if they resided in places that international actors found it difficult to get to. In DRC, humanitarians reported that assistance became increasingly concentrated near agencies' office locations. However, NGOs in Gaza tried to reach difficult locations. One local coordinator explained:



'Early on, feasibility tended to dominate, because we could not move everything everywhere. As we stabilised a few corridors, we pushed equity harder.'

One interviewee, reflecting on the inclusion of some areas that international actors typically found it hard to access in 2026 HNRPs, wondered whether the time and resources required to prioritise more insecure areas was adequately factored into financially constrained plans.

Local government, de facto authorities and community leaders influenced who received assistance in multiple contexts. In Afghanistan, local and international staff reported that local government officials influenced targeting. One national actor said: 'Aid intended for 10 designated villages was ultimately distributed across 40 to 50 villages'. The involvement of local chiefs and stagnation of membership of community committees were seen as problems for ethical targeting in DRC. One focus group participant said:



'You might be conflicting with the camp's president and get excluded during names identification ... [if] you are a single mother, if the president proposed love to you, and you refuse[d] the proposal, he might exclude you.'



In some cases, national authorities wanted more influence over international needs assessments. One regional official in Afghanistan expressed frustration that UN organisations were not using the list of eligible returnees provided by the De Facto Authorities:



'Without any coordination with us, [they] are roaming around street by street and making the lists of returnees.'

Political blockades, conflict and funding cuts combined to drive scarcity in several contexts, contributing to a breakdown of security and social cohesion. Local officials in DRC recounted conflict and stealing between internally displaced people who were registered for assistance and those were not. One women's representative in Kavuma said:



'Victims will not understand the reason why there is insufficient aid, they will just assume that we, their representatives, took what they could receive.'

One INGO representative in Gaza described the deterioration in security when small amounts of assistance did pass through Israel's blockades:



'We don't like to call it "looting", we call it ... "self-distribution", where people started coming to the truck immediately to take any items that are coming in from the crossing.'

In response to concerns around causing more harm and damaging social cohesion, a WFP brief at the end of 2025 contained a stark recommendation: 'Provide a meaningful level of assistance, or don't assist at all.'¹¹²

Inclusion of the most marginalised groups

There was some progress in policies and programming for multiple marginalised groups in 2022–25, including those for whom progress was particularly limited in the previous SOHS period (such as people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, intersex or other (LGBTQI+)). Only 57% of surveyed aid practitioners thought organisations' inclusion of marginalised groups was 'excellent' or 'good', however, indicating room for improvement.^{xl} Meanwhile, funding cuts and political restrictions hindered the potential to systematically adopt pockets of good practice.¹¹³

^{xl} While this is a small majority, it is significantly higher than in 2021 (41%).



There was some indication that humanitarians began to integrate intersectional considerations, such as a greater focus in MSNAs, but most effort was directed at individual identities.¹¹⁴ Among these, gender continued to see the greatest progress, including growing sector expertise, more consultation with women and girls, and greater emphasis on feminist approaches¹¹⁵ – though evaluations indicated that gender-sensitive processes did not always translate to practical improvements.¹¹⁶ Despite the 2024 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender Policy highlighting the spectrum of sexual orientations and identities,¹¹⁷ the focus of most humanitarian gender programming in this period was limited to women and girls.¹¹⁸ A global UNHCR gender-based violence (GBV) evaluation found ‘strong gaps’ in supporting male survivors of GBV in the CAR, Malaysia, Peru and Syria, with male survivors of rape unable to access post-exposure prophylaxis.¹¹⁹ Local organisations in Poland and Ukraine also highlighted the lack of humanitarian support for men and boys, including war veterans.

A 2024 global overview by Outright International and Edge Effect found that LGBTQI+ inclusion began to move out of the ‘too hard’ basket for humanitarians.¹²⁰ Promising programming was cited in Lebanon and Bangladesh, and in countries in Latin America and elsewhere in Asia. For example, in Colombia, Caribe Afirmativo worked with Mercy Corps and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to provide protection and livelihoods support to LGBTQI+ communities.¹²¹ Successful examples were more concentrated in comparatively permissive environments, such as Poland and Ukraine, where Gender Stream and UNHCR provided inclusive shelters, and the first LGBTIQ Communities Technical Working Group was recognised within the National Protection Cluster.¹²² Recognition of the full diversity of the LGBTQI+ spectrum was limited, however;¹²³ interviewees in Poland noted a lack of accommodation and hormonal therapy for trans people affected by crisis.

A 2024 global overview found that LGBTQI+ inclusion began to move out of the ‘too hard’ basket for humanitarians

There were some improvements in programming for people of different ages and people living with disabilities. The Age and Disability Technical Working Group in Ukraine promoted inclusive outcomes in humanitarian planning for people living with disabilities and older persons,¹²⁴ improvements were made to the Türkiye–Syria response after initial gaps in data for older people,¹²⁵ and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) assistance in Haiti reportedly met the needs of elderly people and people living with disabilities.¹²⁶ Several evaluations, however, indicated that provisions for older people and people living with disabilities were often limited.¹²⁷ Humanitarians and people affected by crisis told us there were few disability-inclusive camps and shelters in Gaza, Sudan or Ukraine, despite the growing number of people injured by war.



The system made some progress on including marginalised ethnic groups. For example, local advocacy with international partners led to the inclusion of non-Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war, including Roma people. WFP strengthened inclusion of Indigenous people through improved needs assessments and tailored programming in multiple contexts, particularly around resilience to future crises and climate shocks, through a focus on livelihoods, social protection or disaster risk reduction.¹²⁸ Yet evaluations and literature provided few examples of the inclusion of Indigenous people. One senior inclusion expert urged humanitarians to better engage with Indigenous-led organisations and highlighted the potential value of their knowledge to food security and climate programming.

Barriers to greater inclusion remained in this period. Data and assessments did not always consider people experiencing vulnerability. While there was some improvement in gender and age disaggregation of PiN and people targeted in UN-coordinated appeals, this was inconsistent and no disaggregation was publicly available for people reached.^{xli} The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) for the Türkiye/Syria response found that needs assessments lacked data on inclusion, which negatively affected early programming.¹²⁹ Local organisations in Ukraine reported rigid categorical cut-offs and restrictive drop-down criteria that excluded Roma, LGBTQI+ people and males unable to work.



Local actors representing marginalised groups were often the force behind sustained inclusion efforts



Local actors representing marginalised groups were often the force behind sustained inclusion efforts.¹³⁰ For example, in Gaza, one camp was affiliated with the General Union for Persons with Disabilities, which led to improved access. Yet research reported burnout and fatigue among individuals who took on large burdens in restrictive environments.¹³¹

There was also overlap between people needing assistance and the national staff or volunteers

who were meant to supply it. Some local organisations in Ukraine and Poland told us they treated support for volunteers as a priority because ‘if you don’t help them, they won’t be able to help others’. Regulations did not always support such inclusion; a displaced humanitarian worker in Gaza reported being turned away by a shelter director. As the war continued, some organisations allocated some internal budget to supporting affected employees.

xli Based on our analysis of available data, in 2025, of the 90.2 million people hyper-prioritised for assistance, 31.8 million were male and 35.2 million were female; gender data was unavailable for 23.2 million people. The proportion of disaggregated data in plans increased from about 10% in 2021 to 55% in 2025, though the latter was a reduction from 2024. The HPC Steering Committee has outlined the usefulness, but also challenges, of improving disaggregated data (see OCHA (2024) <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/statement-humanitarian-programme-cycle-steering-group-limitations-mandatory-population-data-disaggregation-endorsed-24-april-2024>).



Social and political restrictions limited inclusion efforts. For example, organisations supporting LGBTQI+ individuals experienced security risks in Ukraine.¹³² In Afghanistan, the De Facto Authorities' ban on national female staff was a significant barrier to inclusive assistance for women and girls. A regional coordinator told us why the ban was so difficult:



'Our female national staff is the backbone of our office to engage with affected women.'

Local and international humanitarian agencies spoke of adaptations they made to support women, including providing escorts, separate working spaces and transport (which inflated operating costs), or training male household members on kitchen gardening so they could share their learning with women and girls.

While USAID had been the driver of some progressive inclusion policies earlier in this study period, for example developing a global policy on including LGBTQI+ people across its programming in 2023,¹³³ President Trump's DEI restrictions increasingly introduced since January 2025 had negative global effects. Amnesty International found that US funding restored in 2025 often excluded programming on gender, LGBTQI+ people, and refugee and migrant rights.¹³⁴ The International Planned Parenthood Association concluded: 'foreign aid has become a political weapon, used to enforce hateful ideologies at the expense of women in all their diversity, and against LGBTQI+, poor and immigrant communities'.¹³⁵ Confusion over what was permissible under new US rules, and concerns over legal action against agencies, may have increased self-censorship over inclusion programming and advocacy.¹³⁶

Funding cuts more broadly damaged inclusion efforts. Many women-led and feminist organisations reported funding shortfalls in 2025.¹³⁷ There were rapid impacts for marginalised people affected by crisis: women, children, elderly people and displaced populations in Mali and South Sudan were disproportionately affected by the budget contractions,¹³⁸ cuts to translation services threatened the ability of speakers of marginalised languages to understand their rights and access services,¹³⁹ and LGBTQI+ shelters were among the first to close in Poland and Ukraine. For the reduced humanitarian system to fulfil its mandate of supporting people most in need of assistance, strides are needed on inclusion to regain recently lost ground.



For the reduced humanitarian system to fulfil its mandate of supporting people most in need of assistance, strides are needed on inclusion to regain recently lost ground





What has been prioritised?

Evolving HPC guidance encouraged a shift away from activities that development or state actors could more suitably undertake and a stronger focus on lifesaving activities. However, sector-specific funding requirements in UN-coordinated appeals were reduced across nearly all sectors for the *GHO 2025*: compared to 2024, total requirements for humanitarian sectors fell by 6% (from US\$48.2 billion to US\$45.5 billion); funding allocated by donors to specific sectors by the end of 2025 fell by a steep 36% (from US\$21.7 billion to US\$14.0 billion); and the average proportion of funding requirements met fell from 45% to 30% – with so-called ‘lifesaving’ sectors experiencing some of the biggest gaps (See [Figure 1.14](#)).^{xlii}



Funding, and the percentage of required funding met, fell across core lifesaving sectors in 2025



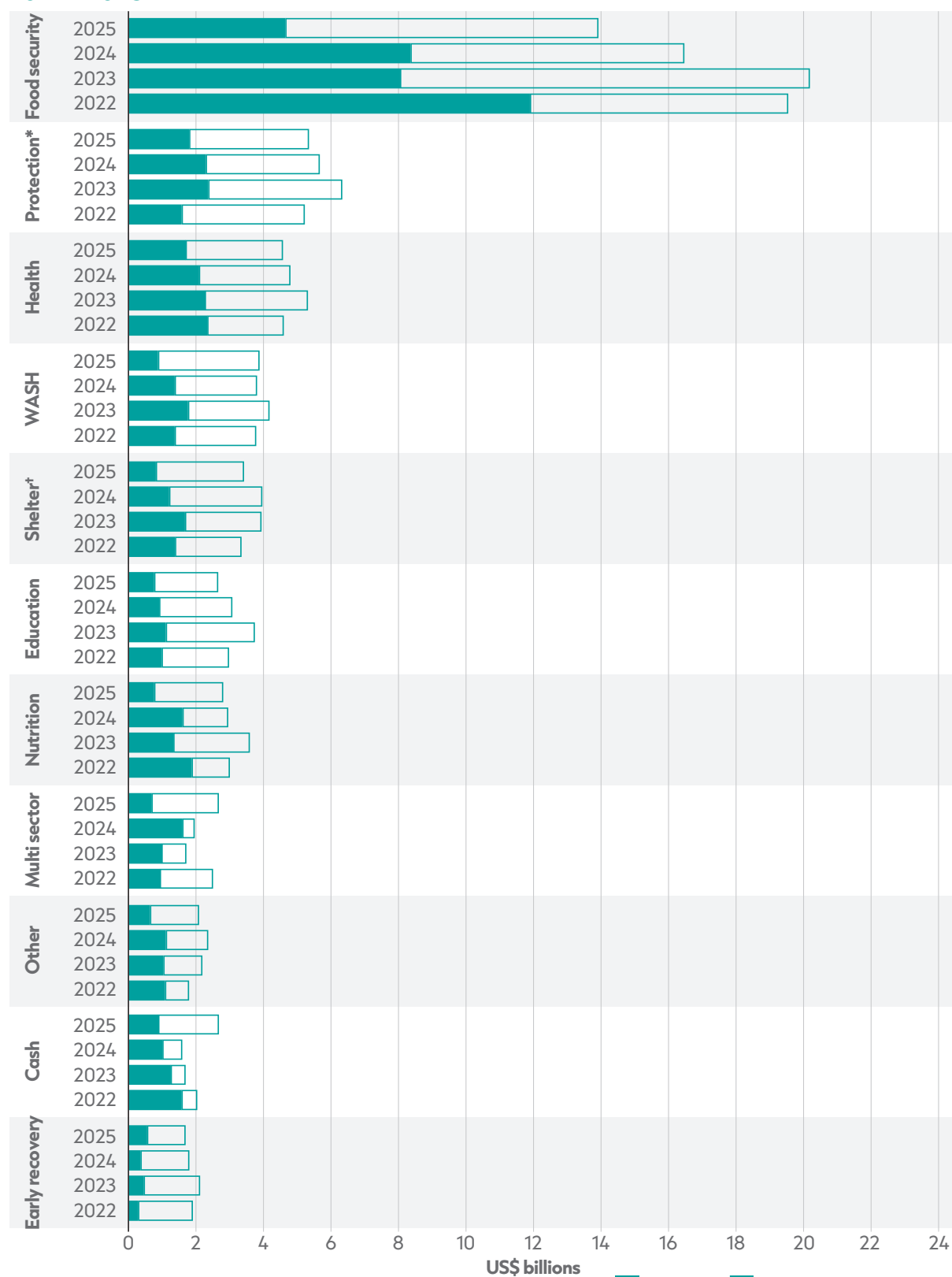
Funding, and the percentage of required funding met, fell across core lifesaving sectors in 2025. Food security continued to dominate funding: it accounted for 31% of requirements, received 33% of total funding and had 33% of its required funding met (a large reduction from 61% in 2022, the peak for this study period). Health received the second-largest amount of funding across the 2022–25 period but became the third-largest sector in 2025, when funding fell by 19% against 2024 and

just 37% of funding requirements were met (down from 43% in 2024). The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector had the lowest proportion of requirements met for any sector – only 22% – leaving 24 appeals meeting below 20% of WASH requirements. Emergency shelter and non-food-item (NFI) requirements were met at a similar percentage to WASH: just 23% in 2025. These percentages were lower than in several other sectors not typically considered ‘lifesaving’.

In early 2025, donors and practitioners strongly advocated that protection was lifesaving and required greater emphasis in the Humanitarian Reset.¹⁴⁰ While protection^{xliii} received the second-largest amount of funding in 2025, total funding for this sector dropped by 22% compared to 2024 – and only 34% of its requirements were met. While previous SOHS reports highlighted protection as a particularly underfunded sector, this drop in requirements met in 2025 was significantly smaller than some other sectors: 7%, compared to an 18% drop for food security and a 13% drop for WASH. Its requirements also dropped by only 6% from 2024, compared to a 15% drop in requirements for food security between 2024 and 2025.

xlii Sector figures are extracted from FTS by examining funding requirements and funding received for all response plans (this includes all response plan types and response plans regardless of whether they are included in the GHO). This may differ from other sources, such as figures produced by Global Clusters, which may include funding that was directly reported to the cluster.

xliii Protection includes requirements and allocations to the protection sector broadly, plus specific funding for child protection, GBV, mine action, housing, land and property, human trafficking and smuggling.

Figure 1.14: Requirements and funding per sector in UN-coordinated appeals, 2022–2025

Source: OCHA FTS data.

■ Funding □ Un-met requirements

Notes: Data is in current prices. *Protection includes requirements and allocations to the protection sector broadly, plus specific funding for child protection, GBV, mine action, housing, land and property, human trafficking and smuggling. 'Other' includes: agriculture, camp coordination/management, coordination and support services, emergency telecommunications, logistics and other low volume sectors. Funding 'not specified' to a humanitarian sector or allocated across 'multisector (shared)' is not included here because it has no consistent stated requirements. Technical sectors align to FTS global clusters. Figures include HRPs, flash appeals and refugee response plans.



While nutrition requirements were only cut by 5%, the sector experienced one of the largest proportional falls in funding in 2025 – 54% – and only 26% of its requirements were met (compared to 54% in 2024). This shortfall raised concerns that focusing only on immediate food provision could have long-term health effects. Education requirements saw a larger cut – 13% – and a funding reduction of 16% compared to 2024, with only 28% of requirements met. While the nutrition and education sectors received less absolute funding, gaps in requirements were lower than for some sectors deemed more essential in the Humanitarian Reset, like WASH and emergency shelter.

Requirements for early recovery were the lowest in 2025 – a 12% reduction from 2024 – but, surprisingly, it was the only sector to experience a significant increase in funding: a 70% increase to US\$568 million. And 37% of funding requirements were met in this sector – an increase from only 19% met in 2024. This seems counter to the sector's shifting remit and plans to phase out early recovery by the end of 2026, and it can mainly be explained by two outlier contexts: US\$200 million was allocated for early recovery in the OPT flash appeal (despite no requirements), and US\$155 million was allocated for early recovery in Syria's response plan.

While not a sector, multipurpose cash requirements increased by a huge 68%. However, despite a push to prioritise cash in the Humanitarian Reset as a preferred modality, funding fell by 13% and only 32% of requirements were met.

The requirements for 2025 reflected figures set before the funding cuts, as well as deepened prioritisation. Requirements set for 2026 appear to clarify new priorities. Reductions in requirements were generally lower for 'lifesaving' sectors than for longer-term approaches: requirements for food security, health, shelter and WASH fell by 37%, 38%, 26% and 24% respectively. While not typically considered a lifesaving sector, nutrition only fell by 25%. In comparison, early recovery and agriculture fell by 84% and 67% respectively. Protection and education sat in the middle: with 44% and 42% reductions. The least-reduced sector was multipurpose cash (21%), reflecting its continued prioritisation as a delivery modality in the Humanitarian Reset. End-of-year 2026 data will demonstrate whether donors' funding followed these new prioritisation patterns.

Was programming relevant to people's priorities?

Our research suggests the programmes that agencies and donors prioritised were not always in line with what people affected by crisis said they needed. Only 53% of respondents to our aid-recipient survey said the assistance they received addressed their 'most important needs' at the time. While still low,



this was an improvement on 2022 (34%). The second most-common request from survey respondents for improving humanitarian assistance was to 'provide the type of aid most needed' (23%), behind 'give more' (25%). Surveyed aid practitioners were more optimistic – 69% rated their ability to provide assistance relevant to people's needs as 'excellent' or 'good' – but what people affected by crisis consider their most important needs may differ to how the international system classifies humanitarian need (as discussed shortly), as well as the type of programming within its narrowed remit.

Evaluations found gaps in relevance both at the response level and for individual programmes. An IAHE synthesis found that, while focusing on food security was often relevant to meet essential needs, it was rarely enough to meet people's priority needs beyond this, when other sectors became deprioritised.¹⁴¹ It also found that, even if non-food needs are prioritised in planning, these needs are not always backed up by funding. For example, WASH was identified as part of the lifesaving agenda in Somalia, but limited WASH funding was later linked with negative disease outcomes.¹⁴² Agency evaluations showed varying levels of relevance for communities. For instance, 93% of goat recipients in a CARE Pakistan flood response were satisfied with the breed,¹⁴³ but in contrast an evaluation of UNICEF's response in Afghanistan questioned its focus on scholastic materials over infrastructure: 'UNICEF distributes two 20-page notebooks to pupils sitting in the sun. [But] we have not witnessed a day without seeing three pupils faint and three pupils having nosebleeds [from heat and dehydration].'¹⁴⁴



Agency evaluations showed varying levels of relevance for communities



People affected by crisis told us that agencies provided food items without the means to cook them, seeds to people who did not own land, and sanitary pads for men and elderly women. A representative of a local organisation for people living with disabilities in Ukraine recounted leaving the home of an older woman with a disability, who required rehabilitation and medical assistance:



'She says: "Oh God, let me give you some shampoo". She pulls out from under her sofa – it is piled with shampoos, shower gels ... She lived on the third floor, and she could not go down to the first floor to take a shower.'

Many complaints focused on food provision; for example, providing too much of one item (like rice) or providing corn in areas of DRC where people usually eat wheat. People affected by crisis in Ukraine reported lack of variety:



'7 kg of rice, 7 kg of pasta ... People were simply overwhelmed with these grains.'



Similarly, families in Gaza requested more varied food to meet their nutritional and cultural needs. Beyond nutrition, one mother told us:



'I feel helpless and sad when my daughter asks for foods like fruits or sweets.'

People in DRC, Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine reported selling or trading food assistance. We also heard requests for more appropriate and durable shelter, including for refugees in Poland and returnees from Pakistan to Afghanistan, who were provided with temporary tents without access to electricity and drinking water. A local authority representative in Gaza told us:



'the constant delivery of single-use relief items – plastic sheeting, temporary tents – ... generated waste and offered no durable solution.'

People in Gaza also reported a lack of assistance tailored to colder weather, with communities describing winter as the 'season of death'.

In multiple contexts, people affected by crisis preferred cash to in-kind assistance,¹⁴⁵ including 91% of urban aid recipients surveyed in Sudan.¹⁴⁶ An IAHE synthesis indicated that people often requested cash because it allowed them to tailor assistance to their specific needs – beyond what the system may prioritise.¹⁴⁷ Multiple individual agency evaluations also found a preference for cash due to its flexibility and choice.¹⁴⁸ For example, WFP found that cash covered a range of needs in El Salvador, from buying medicine to paying for electricity or the internet, with the latter enabling children to access online education during Covid-19.¹⁴⁹ A stronger focus on cash in the Humanitarian Reset could contribute to greater relevance if lessons on its most effective use are learned (see [Chapter 2.2](#)).



A stronger focus on cash in the Humanitarian Reset could contribute to greater relevance if lessons on its most effective use are learned



Community requests for support beyond immediate needs

In this period, communities consistently requested support beyond immediate lifesaving needs. The third most-common need reported by surveyed aid recipients was livelihoods (10%), behind food (44%) and cash/vouchers (18%). A Ground Truth Solutions synthesis covering 12 countries between 2023 and 2024 found that what humanitarians provided was often out of line with the communities' longer-term priorities to be more resilient against future shocks.¹⁵⁰ Humanitarian actors' focus on such longer-term priorities came under increased threat in 2025 from funding cuts and the narrowing of their remit.



Requests for medical services for non-communicable diseases were common. People affected by crisis in Sudan indicated that some local organisations provided medicine to people with diabetes or to kidney disease facilities, but that other chronic disease medicines were rarely available through humanitarian channels. People in Afghanistan also reported a lack of medicine for diabetes, but some used cash transfers to buy supplies. A local NGO representative in Poland recounted:



'people were saying: "Hey, stop bringing clothes, we have enough" ... while medicines are not so easy to find.'

While public donation movements often sent items like clothes, there were efforts to channel that solidarity into more contextually relevant assistance. Such guidance was issued by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and the Institute for Studies on Conflicts and Humanitarian Action (IECAH), for example.¹⁵¹

People affected by crisis commonly requested more livelihood support. In Afghanistan, women and people living with disabilities, who felt trapped by their dependency on short-term assistance, expressed a strong desire for vocational training in tailoring, embroidery and small-scale business development. Agencies in Poland expressed a strong need for appropriate livelihoods skills for refugees to support their integration. Evaluations indicated that – where provided – livelihoods programming was relevant, including an International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) programme in Bangladesh slums, where the mixture of business and disaster risk reduction support was relevant to needs, and an Islamic Relief livelihoods project in Yemen, which was relevant to the needs and priorities of vulnerable groups.¹⁵²

Levers for relevance

Survey results indicated that effective engagement with, and accountability to, people affected by crisis was important for relevance. Aid recipients who reported that humanitarian actors communicated well with them, consulted them and enabled them to provide feedback were 1.6 times, 1.8 times and 1.4 times (respectively), more likely to find assistance relevant (see [Chapter 4.2](#)).

Flexibility to respond to changing needs was also influential. The flexibility of Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) funding in Ukraine was found to support responsiveness to changing needs



Aid recipients who reported that humanitarian actors communicated well with them, consulted them and enabled them to provide feedback were 1.6x, 1.8x and 1.4x more likely to find assistance relevant





over time.¹⁵³ An evaluation of the European Union (EU) complex response in Yemen found that providing additional funding for changing situations and new challenges helped partners respond to evolving needs.¹⁵⁴ Partners also referred to UNICEF's increased flexibility and decentralised decision-making, which enabled adaptability to changes in public health emergencies.¹⁵⁵ Despite some of those positives, however, a review of the first year of the Flagship Initiative concluded: 'the system is rigid and unable to adapt to context if communities' needs and priorities differ from the standardised aid on offer'.¹⁵⁶

The role of local staff in prioritising relevant assistance was also important. An evaluation of CARE's multisector response in Pakistan found that local staff were key in supporting relevant programming through their deeper understanding of the context and connections with communities.¹⁵⁷ As discussed, local organisations led by representatives of people experiencing vulnerability also helped tailor assistance. In-country research provided reminders of the real-time decisions, made by frontline staff under pressure, regarding which sector is most relevant. One local authority representative in Gaza remembered:



'We received a desperate alert from a hospital in Khan Younis that their oxygen generators were about to shut down. Without fuel, dozens of patients – including children – would lose their lives. The problem was that our convoy for that sector was not scheduled until the following day, and approvals were stalled. We convened a snap call with [the UN Department of Safety and Security], rerouted a truck that had been assigned to WASH supplies, and secured a midnight clearance after two hours of nonstop negotiation.'

The funding cuts became a barrier to relevance and increased pressures on staff though. Agencies reluctantly made many cuts to programming that people affected by crisis prioritised. One INGO representative said:



'A certain category of help became less relevant because of the absence of money, not because people don't need it ... We downsized educational activities because of funding constraints, not because it was not a priority.'

Interviewees raised concerns about reduced cross-sector collaboration. One cluster coordinator said:



'For everyone to be considered humanitarian, this is no longer feasible. The portion of the cake has gone down and the competition between the sectors will be there.'



Some were particularly concerned that a focus on lifesaving would create a greater divide between short-term basic needs on the one hand, and preparedness and resilience against future crises on the other. One food security expert explained:



'If I try to protect the livestock and cropping season, and [don't] provide food assistance, people will sell their livestock ... Same is with the agriculture ... People eat those seed[s] if the food is not reaching [them] at the right time. So it was never meant to be one or another. It was [meant to be] together to make an impact.'

Conclusion

In this period, people affected by crisis bore the brunt of difficult prioritisation decisions over who and what to fund – decisions that also put pressure on frontline staff who enacted system-level choices. Funding cuts and political constraints sharply reduced coverage and threatened nascent gains on inclusion and relevance. The full effects of decisions to narrow the scope of humanitarian action, in terms of the people and programmes considered for prioritisation and the targeting choices made within those parameters, will play out over future years. In the absence of strong local support systems or development actors, the people and needs no longer covered by the international humanitarian system risk being unsupported. Greater efforts are needed from actors across humanitarian, development and peace systems to meaningfully connect their work and to strengthen local infrastructure to help bridge those gaps.



The full effects of decisions to narrow the scope of humanitarian action will play out over future years



CHAPTER 1.3

ORGANISATIONAL DECISIONS AND SYSTEM-LEVEL FUNCTIONS

'It was less prioritisation and more just stemming leaks caused by cutting of funds.'

– Representative of an international organisation

Humanitarian actors made tough decisions in this period on how to prioritise organisational and system-level roles and structures. The sudden financial shock in 2025 caused large-scale cuts to experienced staff, with local organisations the worst hit by funding freezes, cuts and uncertainty. The speed and scale of the cuts meant many organisations moved quickly, without longer-term strategic thinking or inter-organisational coordination and complementarity. Meaningful engagement with staff, local organisations and people affected by crisis was not employed effectively in decisions at organisational or system levels. The Humanitarian Reset prioritised specific mechanisms for coordinated response in a reduced system, but several local and international actors pushed for a more wholesale reconfiguring of the international system or alternative locally led forms of support. Data infrastructures lost funding, catalysing calls to protect the system's ability to monitor and anticipate future needs. The narrowing of the humanitarian remit and withdrawal from multiple contexts underscored the need to coordinate much more effectively with development, peace and climate systems, which also faced significant shocks.

From organisational growth to rapid cuts

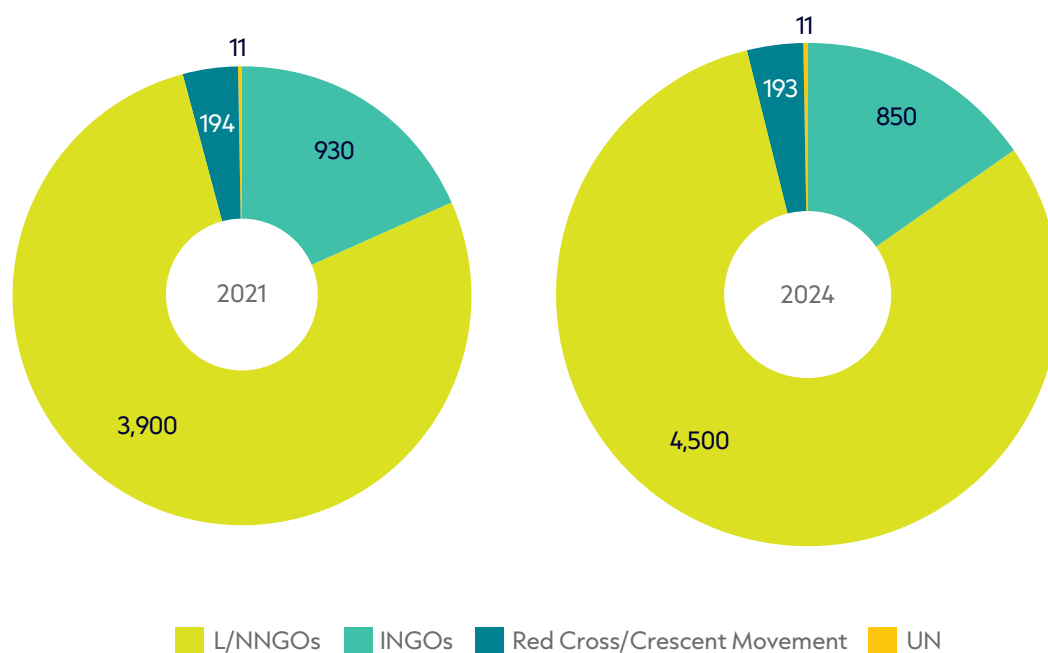
The last *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS) reported that, in 2021, there were approximately 5,000 humanitarian organisations in the system, including 930 international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), 3,900 local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs), 194 Red Cross/Red Crescent (RC/RC) organisations^{xliv} and 11 United Nations (UN) entities. By 2024, this number had grown to just under 5,600. The number of UN and RC/RC members remained steady: 11 and 193^{xlv}

^{xliv} The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and national societies.

^{xlv} The Nicaraguan Red Cross was dissolved in May 2023.

respectively. The number of INGOs decreased to 850, which reflected some formally announced closures, while some others were removed from the Global Database of Humanitarian Organisations (GDHO)^{xlvi} after determining they had no active humanitarian programmes. L/NNGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) underwent a sizeable increase to approximately 4,500, representing 81% of all organisations in the system.^{xlvi} As in the 2022 SOHS, this growth can partially be attributed to data improvements and more systematic data gathering on CBOs, although community-led assistance structures also expanded in contexts like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Sudan and Ukraine.

Figure 1.15: Estimated number of humanitarian organisations, 2021 vs 2024



Source: Data from GDHO (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/GDHO).

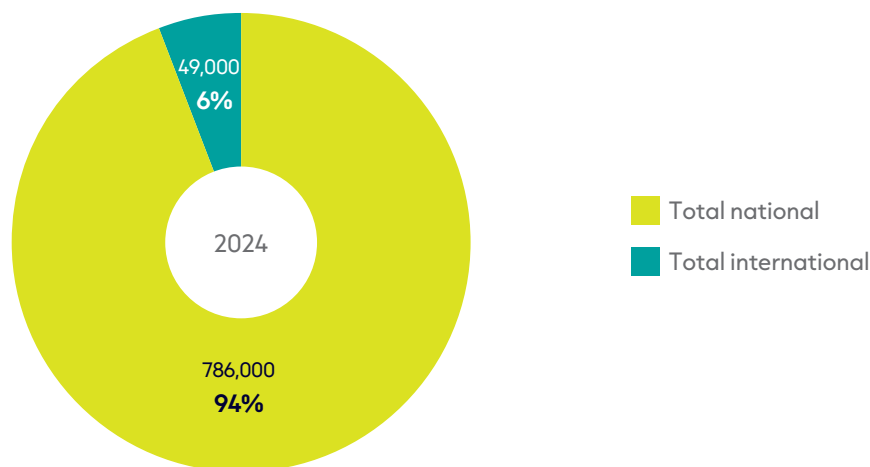


During the same period, the number of global humanitarian staff grew to the highest ever recorded: approximately 835,000 in 2024 (compared to approximately 755,000 in 2021).^{xlvi} All other organisation types saw a small reduction in their staff numbers from a peak in 2022, while the number of L/NNGO staff grew each year. National staff across organisational types continued to fuel the system: 94% of all staff in 2024 were nationals of the affected country of operation.

^{xlvi} See Humanitarian Outcomes (n.d.) <https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/gdho>; see also Annex 1 for more information.

^{xlvi} These figures represent best estimates derived from GDHO data. The database is updated on a rolling basis, and lags in identifying new organisations or confirming closures mean that point-in-time counts are indicative rather than precise.

^{xlvi} While this reflects stronger data collection of staff numbers in national and local organisations, it also represents a real rise in those organisations' personnel: from 194,000 in 2021 to 269,000 in 2024. This is the largest recorded total across the full 2012–24 SOHS period – and a 9% increase on the 2020 figure cited in 2022 SOHS. However, part of the increase is due to a methodological change: in the last SOHS, the L/NNGO staffing figure was based on the estimated number of L/NNGOs working in the humanitarian system in official response contexts in 2020, compiled from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) 'Who's doing what where' (3Ws) data pulled from <https://humanitarianresponse.info>. Improvements in the GDHO have enabled a direct count in this report.

Figure 1.16: National and international in-country humanitarian personnel, 2024

Source: Data from GDHO (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/GDHO).



While data is not yet available to confidently capture the effects of the 2025 cuts, a preliminary estimate based on a stratified sample of humanitarian organisations



By the end of 2025, a preliminary estimate of 23% of staff were lost across the system; L/NNGOs bore the brunt, potentially losing 41% of their staff against 2024 levels



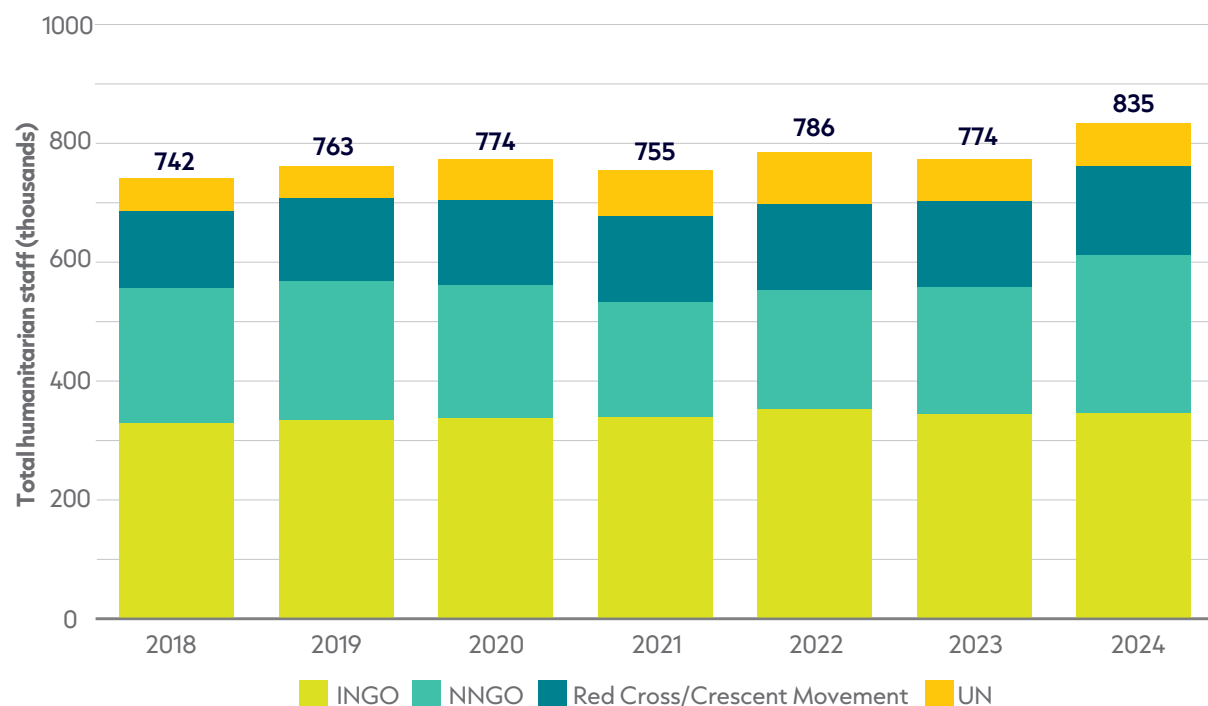
within the GDHO suggests that the number of organisations fell by 9% between 2024 and 2025 to approximately 5,100.^{xlix} L/NNGOs were the only organisation type to suffer significant closures: approximately 500 closed in 2025 – a reduction of 11%. For reasons discussed shortly, international organisations were better able to protect their existence, but all types of organisations experienced staff losses. By the end of 2025, a preliminary estimate of 23% of staff were lost across the system; L/NNGOs bore the brunt, potentially losing 41% of their staff against 2024 levels.

Expenditure patterns of agencies in 2022–24 echoed those of the last SOHS. In 2024, UN agencies had the highest total humanitarian expenditure^l at US\$21.65 billion, compared to US\$5.45 billion for the top-five INGOs, US\$2.33 billion for ICRC and IFRC, and US\$14.52 billion for all other humanitarian organisations.

Over the 10 years from 2015 to 2024 (inclusive), average increases in humanitarian expenditure were highest for the UN at 4.8%, followed by the top-five NGOs at

^{xlix} Since most organisations had not yet published 2025 statistics at the time of writing, for the 2025 estimates of number of organisations/staff numbers/expenditure, the consultants used the GDHO tier classifications to construct a stratified sample of humanitarian organisations, from which the researchers collected available figures via individual consultation. The sample included: the five largest INGOs, three additional Tier 1 (largest) INGOs (Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Save the Children, CARE and Oxfam), all UN humanitarian agencies; 20 INGOs across Tiers 2–6 (to represent a range of sizes and geographic location); 293 national NGOs participating in a two-phase survey conducted between February and December 2025, of which 69 responded to the follow-up phase; and a global estimate of impacts on the international entities of the RC/RC Movement, based on public statements and reporting.

^l Humanitarian expenditure is calculated as the portion of total operational expenditure spent on emergency relief aid as opposed to development or other assistance.

Figure 1.17: In-country humanitarian personnel by organisation type, 2021–2024

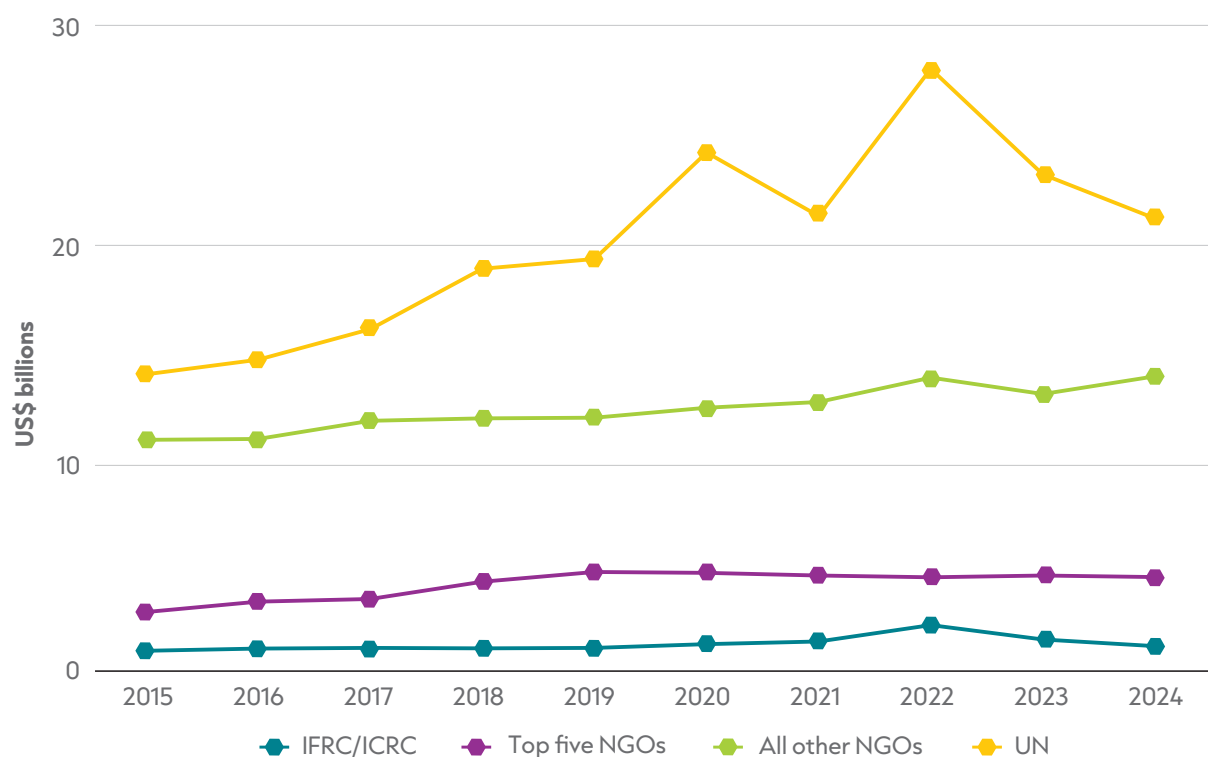
Source: Data from GDHO (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/GDHO).



3.9%. Taking just this study period, annual average growth was highest among all other NGOs at 3.0%, followed by the UN at 1.8%. In 2024 the top five INGOs in terms of humanitarian spend were MSF, World Vision International, IRC, NRC and Catholic Relief Services replaced Save the Children International in 2024.

Expenditure trends have somewhat tracked available funding, largely growing over the decade up to 2024. Peaks were seen in 2020 and 2022, in line with the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Spending reduced for UN and the UN and RC/RC bodies (ICRC and IFRC), following the 2022 peak of system funding. Apart from the top-five INGOs, NGO spending rose amid funding reductions in 2024, potentially due to local organisations responding to high levels of needs in conflicts like Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine.

Annual expenditure figures up to the end of 2025 are not yet available for most organisations, making it difficult to assess the impact of the cuts. If preliminary estimates of staff cuts directly translated into expenditure cuts, we could see reductions of 26% for the UN, 18% for the top-five INGOs, and 25% for all other NGOs. Early indications of large cuts facing ICRC and IFRC did not materialise in 2025, and their annual reports for that year show a combined decline in humanitarian spend of just 2%. However, some organisations expect impacts to

Figure 1.18: Humanitarian expenditures by organisation type, 2015–2024

Source: Data from GDHO (www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/GDHO).

Notes: Numbers adjusted for inflation.



continue with further cuts in 2026 and beyond. In addition, the estimate does not include all additional costs of redundancies or trade-offs between keeping national over (more expensive) international staff, which organisations told us they made; nor does it include all cuts to programming or core costs for every organisation.¹⁵⁸

Organisational priorities after funding cuts

Some organisations began responding to funding shortfalls prior to 2025. For example, a major liquidity crisis at ICRC led to substantial budget cuts in 2023, the World Food Programme (WFP) began a major internal strategic review process, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began rationalising positions, and several organisations – like IFRC, NRC, Save the Children and World Vision – began discussing reprioritisation before the end of 2024.¹⁵⁹ Our humanitarian practitioner survey revealed that, in the face of the sudden 2025 cuts, the most common prioritisation practice was terminating staff contracts (among 50.4% of respondents), followed by reprioritising and altering programming, scaling back or closing frontline services and closing bases and offices.

Large-scale job cuts came quickly in some organisations, many directly tied to the Stop-Work Orders issued by the United States in January 2025. By the end of



February, the US government had fired or placed on leave over 5,600 US Agency for International Development (USAID) employees globally.¹⁶⁰ By April, over 12,000 staff contracts had been terminated across the sector.¹⁶¹ Staff cuts were particularly quick and deep for local NGOs due to reliance on project-based funding and low reserves.¹⁶² UN cuts arrived more slowly (aside from for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which depended more heavily on US project funding),¹⁶³ but by the end of the year, António Guterres had announced an 18.8% reduction in UN staff from approved levels for the year due to the combination of US cuts and shortfalls from other member states.¹⁶⁴



Cuts fell disproportionately, hitting local female staff and young professionals the hardest

Even within organisations, cuts fell disproportionately, hitting local female staff and young professionals the hardest – who held a high proportion of health, education and gender programming roles.¹⁶⁵ Several UN organisations reportedly removed junior positions and younger staff, raising questions about reduced future capabilities, innovations and leadership.¹⁶⁶ Of 31 multilateral agencies in a Multilateral Performance

Network (MOPAN) study, only UNHCR and the World Health Organization (WHO) reported making cuts to their senior-level positions.

Some organisations we spoke to tried to limit negative effects at the country level; for example, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) managed a 20% budget cut primarily by not renewing vacant posts at headquarters level, IFRC planned to reduce global and regional staff more than country staff, and NRC consolidated several regional positions into a smaller number of global roles for gender, disability and climate.

Some other organisations reconfigured their geographic structure in a bid to save costs and potentially move decision-making closer to crisis-affected contexts. For example, among 18 multilateral organisations in a MOPAN survey, 10 consolidated offices and nine relocated from higher-cost hubs in locations like New York or Geneva.¹⁶⁷ The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) consolidated seven regional offices into five, WFP closed its southern Africa regional bureau in Johannesburg and consolidated its functions with the East Africa bureau in Nairobi, and UN Women relocated staff positions to Nairobi and Bonn.¹⁶⁸ In several contexts, however, operational presence drew further away from people affected by crisis. One interviewee described how OCHA's 16 Colombian offices became four sub-offices and one capital office; another interviewee, in Somalia, saw strong reductions in OCHA's presence, including the closure of field offices and increased reliance on roaming capacity from Mogadishu.



While legal structures – particularly in international organisations – provided some cushioning through formal redundancy procedures, many processes were sudden and painful. One INGO staffer in our online consultation said:



'Duty of care to staff was promoted in emails but not in actions, with staff being let go of – without any warning – with little notice.'

A national staff member shared their experience: 'I gave 10 years to this organisation, and they let us go over a two-line email. That broke something in me.'¹⁶⁹

Opportunities to re-enter the sector were limited for people who lost jobs. Job vacancies published on ReliefWeb decreased by approximately 65% between 2024 and 2025.¹⁷⁰ Staff who stayed in post also faced challenges. A national network member in Ukraine told us that remaining staff found the loss of colleagues 'very stressful and demotivating'. Community World Service Asia (CWSA) survey of national staff highlighted the mental toll of job losses, uncertainty and doing the work of multiple people.¹⁷¹ Overall, interviewees and survey respondents felt the departure of experienced colleagues was a huge loss to the sector.

Varied exposure to negative impacts of cuts

Some organisations were able to adapt their adjustments made in 2023 or 2024 to the 2025 shock: IFRC accelerated a strategic review for efficiency, NRC brought forward a planned structural adjustment and WFP sped up its internal reform process. Organisations that were less affected in the short-term were not so reliant on USAID or had more diversified funding streams or substantial core funding; for example, Oxfam America had a policy of not accepting government funding, and Concern had a diversification policy that limited its reliance on a single donor to 30% of total funding.

Some international organisations allocated core funding and reserves to cover positions and programmes, with some telling us they spent over US\$1 million a day delaying staffing cuts. However, reserves were exhaustible, and organisations that used substantial amounts expressed concerns about weathering challenges in coming years. In contrast, smaller and local NGOs with limited reserves or core funding worried about their very survival beyond 2025.¹⁷²

The disproportionately harsh effects of the cuts on L/NNGOs highlighted the system's limited progress on localisation (see [Chapter 4.1](#)). Local respondents to a 2025 OCHA survey reported the highest levels of funding cuts;¹⁷³ many remained reliant on project-based funding and had received few overhead costs in previous



years, restricting their ability to absorb losses. Both the lack of flexible funding and the impact of partners' decisions higher up the chain limited their prioritisation choices – and, in some contexts, forced short-term or permanent closures.¹⁷⁴ In Sudan, for example, 70% of community kitchens had to pause activities in February 2025.¹⁷⁵ A MOPAN report found that multilateral organisations' scaling back of support for local and community-based partners reduced jobs, technical assistance and community engagement.¹⁷⁶ Feminist, women-led and refugee-led organisations in particular were reportedly adversely affected, including those working intersectionally with age, disability and sexuality.¹⁷⁷

The disproportionately harsh effects of the cuts on L/NGOs highlighted the system's limited progress on localisation

These difficult experiences could present an opportunity for international actors to learn to bolster localisation efforts. As one respondent to our online consultation said:



'We had nine years after making the commitment of the Grand Bargain; if we had implemented it, we would not be in the situation we are in now – but we ignored it.'

Some humanitarian actors, especially local ones, found ways to adapt or collaborate to ease the impact of cuts. In South Sudan, frontline and coordination actors recounted sharing vehicles, staff and infrastructure;¹⁷⁸ the Feminist Humanitarian Network reported feminist organisations sharing office space, IT facilities and transportation;¹⁷⁹ and a third of women-led organisations responding to a UN Women survey planned more collaborative consortium funding bids.¹⁸⁰ For CBOs, there was a sense that funding cuts did not mean the work stopped. One feminist leader quoted in a report explained:



'We lost all funding, but we kept gathering in someone's living room. That space became our shelter, our strategy room, our care centre.'¹⁸¹

Another said:



'We held healing circles online, in secret. No budget. Just us. We needed a place to cry and to dream.'¹⁸²



Organisational decision-making processes

Staff described many organisational responses to the 2025 cuts as reactive and pragmatic rather than long-term and strategic. One online consultation respondent said:



'It was less prioritisation and more just stemming leaks caused by cutting of funds.'



Aid practitioners told us the three most frequent drivers of prioritisation choices were top-down



Uncertainty hindered clear decisions; weeks after the US issued Stop-Work Orders, organisations remained unsure whether suspended programmes would be unfrozen¹⁸³ and whether they would be paid for committed funds. Aid practitioners told us the three most frequent drivers of prioritisation choices were top-down: 'cuts were donor imposed, we did not have much choice' (43.15% of respondents), 'our organisation's HQ provided instructions' (35.73%),

and 'country leadership team identified where costs could be reallocated' (27.64%). Fewer respondents cited more participatory or collaborative decision-making.

Our online consultations revealed staff were frustrated that organisational decision-making was opaque, unfair and influenced by the ease with which certain staff, consultants and partners could be let go. While some reported transparent processes that took labour union concerns into account, and others thought their leadership did the best they could under pressure,^{li} many others highlighted inequities. One INGO staffer reported:



'Country offices bared [sic] the brunt of the cuts, while [the Senior Management Team] and senior leaders in global roles prioritised saving their positions. Where was the humanitarian mandate?'

Former staff of Development Initiatives criticised the organisation – a casualty of the earlier 2024 cuts – for not giving severance pay to its personnel in Kenya and prioritising payments to United Kingdom-based staff.¹⁸⁴

Organisations were often isolationist and short-term in decision-making. MOPAN reported that multilateral organisations were 'making short-term budgetary adjustments rather than pursuing co-ordinated approaches to longer-term sustainability'.¹⁸⁵ One INGO survey respondent told us their organisation used internal analysis because guidance and support from Humanitarian Country

^{li} Of 50 respondents, only 12 (24%) disagreed with the statement: 'The organisation did the best they could in the circumstances.'



Teams (HCTs), clusters and donors came too slow. Several survey respondents and interviewees were concerned that prioritisation focused too much on reducing costs and not enough on efficiencies, which would enable a stronger strategic approach or deliver for the greatest number of people affected by humanitarian crisis. The ability to make more strategic decisions, however, was entwined with various factors: the existence of adaptive management processes, flexible funding or reserves that could allow investment in more effective transitions, and the extent to which organisations (as opposed to donors or partners) had decision-making autonomy.

Few organisations reported using data to make prioritisation decisions. IRC was an exception, publicly leaning into cost-efficiency and impact data to make key prioritisation decisions in its 2025 strategy. In our practitioner survey, the second-rarest response to the question of what drove prioritisation decisions was a new needs assessment (by only 13.6% of respondents). One online consultation respondent explained that years of limited focus on systematic monitoring and evaluation meant that, even if leaders wanted to use data to inform their decisions, it simply was not available. They warned:



'If you can't measure it, you can't improve it.'

Recent consultations by ALNAP suggest that internal monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) staff and functions were often hit by cuts, potentially threatening future strategic decision-making.

We found little evidence that local and national actors were systematically involved in their upstream partners' prioritisation decisions. Respondents to our aid-practitioner survey ranked 'identifying priority activities in coordination with local and national NGOs/civil society organisations' among the least-common influences over their organisations' decisions (sixth most frequent, by only 16.18% of respondents) – slightly more common than coordinating with local and national governments or engaging with recipient communities (14.16%). Local NGOs in Sudan described the process of prioritisation as top-down and internationally driven. And those in Ukraine reported that very few of their international partners engaged with them on decisions (although UNHCR was an exception) and that international actors prioritised their own capacity. In general, many local organisations found themselves on the backfoot when experiencing humanitarian scale-down and exit for the first time. One local NGO representative expressed their disbelief:



'such a huge organisation [an INGO] has no plan B; this is outrageous simply because we were left like this – we were simply left with nothing.'



Surveyed practitioners reported that identifying priorities with recipient communities was the rarest factor influencing organisations' decisions. Several online consultation respondents highlighted a lack of communication with, and the cost of slow decision-making for, people affected by crisis, who 'would rather have certainty so they can plan than an uncertain dribble of assistance'. One lamented lost opportunities:



'We should have sat down and asked what people see as relevant for an organisation like ours and tried [our] hardest to align to that.'

Humanitarian actors also damaged their reputations with communities by not effectively communicating the implications of decisions to them.¹⁸⁶ However, the humanitarian actors closest to communities often had no power over decisions or ability to mitigate their negative effects, meaning decisions higher up the chain risked their reputations. Local organisations in DRC, Mali, South Sudan and Sudan reported a breakdown of trust and reliance on local frontline staff to communicate painful changes and manage the consequences. A representative from a women-led organisation in Afghanistan explained:



'The [USAID] project got cancelled and our office was very much affected. We had a number of "beneficiaries", all women, identified who were waiting for receiving their aid and this did not happen. This affected our reputation in the community also.'

The cuts, and the choices made in their wake, underscored the need for humanitarian actors to invest – from the start of projects – in better exit planning.¹⁸⁷ They also challenged the system's legitimacy, both for the people working in it and the people it exists to serve. A third of respondents to our aid-practitioner survey said their trust and pride in the humanitarian system had decreased since 2022. One international aid worker in our online consultation explained:



A third of respondents to our aid-practitioner survey said their trust and pride in the humanitarian system had decreased since 2022



'Too many of us are now feeling jaded and burnt out by leadership decision-making that deprioritised people and prioritised the bottom dollar.'

A local private-sector actor in DRC said:



'On the side of the population, they are in the same situation, but it is the organisations that are complaining.'



A broad range of interviewees commonly expressed concerns that the humanitarian system had entered a crisis of not only funding but also legitimacy.

Future competition or complementarity?

Amid predictions that the funding environment would remain constrained in coming years, several agencies explored mitigation strategies. Local and international organisations reported creating income-generation projects,¹⁸⁸ adopting different technology solutions, pursuing private partnerships¹⁸⁹ or focusing more on programming that requires soft skills rather than hardware. Some INGOs sought to maintain functions for attracting new donors and funding opportunities; for example, Save the Children¹⁹⁰ prioritised maintaining fundraising and marketing positions over some other roles. In line with the public legitimacy gap, some INGOs increased their public advocacy¹⁹¹ and efforts to lobby governments to reinstate their official development assistance (ODA) commitments.¹⁹² For example, VOICE launched a media campaign about humanitarian assistance, targeting young European adults.

Reduced funding risked creating greater competition. A review by the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) concluded that 'INGOs are showing their colours to how they are reacting to funding cuts'.¹⁹³ An INGO respondent to our online consultation reported:



'INGOs wanting to "plant their flag" and focus on getting the most funding for their organization.'



The coming years will be critical in determining whether the international system evolves towards greater complementarity or slips further into competition

In an effort to counter such practices, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)¹⁹⁴ called for greater commitment to complementarity among humanitarian organisations through stronger consideration of their added value and by making space when individual organisations are not best-placed to respond. Similarly, a MOPAN study encouraged multilateral organisations to better consider their comparative value and avoid overlap by assessing their respective core functions, thematic areas and organisational attributes.¹⁹⁵ As the effects

of the cuts continue to be felt, the coming years will be critical in determining whether the international system evolves towards greater complementarity or slips further into competition. The latter could further undermine the system's



legitimacy in the eyes of people affected by crisis and local humanitarian actors, increasing the trust deficit. As one online consultation respondent said:



'Go back to your origin story: Why do you exist in the first place? Why were you set up? Is there anyone else whose place you are occupying?'

Prioritisation processes at the system level

OCHA's Humanitarian Reset was the biggest driver of the processes and structures to be prioritised at the system level. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) published the Reset Roadmap in 2025, elaborating on the Define, Devolve, Deliver and Defend pillars of its previous approaches.^{lii} The Reset outlined a greater focus on transitioning away from humanitarian support, stronger strategic leadership for Humanitarian Coordinators and HCTs and streamlined coordination, greater collective advocacy on protection and humanitarian diplomacy, and increased use of multipurpose cash to deliver assistance. It also promised a more people-centred approach to accountability and a greater focus on localisation and locally led action, including via greater pooled-fund commitments and targets for local and national actors. The Reset added a new Enable pillar and outlined commitments to anticipatory action and environmental concerns, which did not feature strongly in earlier communications.¹⁹⁶

The Reset announcement and subsequent elaboration drew varied reactions from different system actors. Many donors and international humanitarian actors we spoke to welcomed the strategic direction the Reset provided at a complex time. They were optimistic about proposals to improve efficiency and maximise cash and pooled funds. However, several were concerned over tensions between its stated commitments and questioned whether a focus on 'lifesaving' would enable meaningful, people-centred approaches.¹⁹⁷ There were also questions about whether some of the mechanisms prioritised would function in a constrained political environment. For example, interviewees noted the drop in use of cash in recent years and increased restrictions, from both donors and governments, in states affected by crisis. For pooled funds to play a more positive and consistent localisation function than previously, concerted efforts would also be required to make these funds more accessible and the governance more inclusive of local actors (see [Chapter 4.1](#)).¹⁹⁸

The UN80 reform process, launched by the Secretary-General in March 2025, also aimed to prioritise functions across the broader UN structure (see [Humanitarian crises and global shifts 2022–2025](#)). While many interviewees and commentators welcomed the opportunity to make the UN fit for purpose, they expressed

lii Define: focus on greatest needs; Deliver: timely and streamlined response; Devolve: people-centred; Defend: principles and humanitarian space (see IASC (2025) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Humanitarian%20Reset%20Roadmap%2C%2010%20November%202025.pdf>).

concerns that decisions prioritised rapid cost-cutting over a strategic approach to future aims and functions. A recent MOPAN review concluded that the siloed nature of structural realignment and operational reduction risked 'creating a mismatch between the system envisioned through reform and the system that is emerging through attrition'.¹⁹⁹

Frustration was apparent in some quarters that both the Reset and UN80 were too focused on doing more of the same on a smaller scale. Vocal international and local humanitarian leaders urged more fundamental system adjustments to make assistance more locally led and people-centred.²⁰⁰ Some senior humanitarians noticed a desire among key international actors to back a UN-coordinated system because multilateralism was under attack and due to concerns about substantial changes during uncertainty. One humanitarian told us:

Frustration was apparent that both the Reset and UN80 were too focused on doing more of the same on a smaller scale

'There's a real fear that if you dismantle the system as it's currently configured, what comes afterwards may be chaos or even worse. And nobody, especially in these kinds of strained times, wants to take that risk.'

Other discussions centred on whether system decision-making was inclusive – and whether it should be. Several interviewees recognised inherent trade-offs between making collaborative decisions and acting decisively in a period of crisis, with one senior humanitarian suggesting that the Emergency Relief Coordinator needed to ask for 'forgiveness rather than for permission' when democratic processes were not feasible. In an early effort to feed into centralised decisions, civil society networks raised joint concerns about the Reset in an open letter; later, the UN engaged more with IASC representatives and opened up several consultations with NGOs, including local and national actors.²⁰¹ Many L/NGOs still saw the Reset process as exclusive, some questioned the continued relevance of UN-led processes to their work, and some advocated for a greater need to recognise existing – or imagine new – locally led ecosystems of humanitarian action.²⁰² As one local representative told us:

'Let them do their thing, we'll get on with ours. What has their prioritisation got to do with us?'

Prioritising system information structures

The cuts had rapid negative effects on several information infrastructures that humanitarian planning depended on. Many interviewees were concerned



about the closure of the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) in January 2025 and, following its partial resumption in mid-2025, referenced the need to protect it.^{liii} Interviewees also expressed strong concerns about the scaling down of multisectoral needs assessment and growing reliance on out-of-date assessments to make vital decisions. A MOPAN survey reported that 10 multilateral organisations had reduced their resources for monitoring, evaluation and institutional learning.²⁰³ For example, the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) displacement-tracking matrix faced cuts to operations, and we were told of large pressures to cut information-management costs at OCHA, posing risks to food security and displacement monitoring. In 2025, dedicated information-management support in cluster coordination also substantially declined,²⁰⁴ while ReliefWeb reported that the total volume of humanitarian information updates dropped by approximately 20% compared to 2024, noting that: 'behind these figures are real consequences: fewer assessments, delayed analyses, smaller teams and reduced visibility for crises struggling to compete for attention and funding.'²⁰⁵

These reductions risked short- and long-term consequences for prioritising people with the greatest needs. A senior UN staffer told us:



'People don't understand that to be able to prioritise Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) 4 or 5 – you need data to do that.'

Aid workers in Mali, Somalia and South Sudan all raised concerns about the ability to track worsening vulnerability indicators, especially in contexts no longer prioritised in Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans where humanitarian presence reduced.²⁰⁶ Over the longer term, a senior WFP staffer stressed the need to:



'collect evidence on the cost of inaction, in terms of impacts on community, markets and social cohesion – the impacts of what the system collectively has not been able to prioritise.'

In the face of such threats, there were several efforts to protect data within the humanitarian system: FAO reported prioritising its data functions following the cuts, leadership at WFP made a strong directive to protect monitoring and, despite being hit by funding cuts and job losses, ReliefWeb maintained most of its functions through technical efficiency improvements that began in 2024.²⁰⁷ In October 2025, the IASC principals agreed to establish an ecosystem-wide Humanitarian Data Collaborative to create a resilient and equitable data

liii FEWS NET brought in climate data, including from scientific partnerships with NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which were also severely affected by US funding cuts. This highlights the indirect effects of wider US government cuts on the humanitarian data ecosystem (see Worley (2025) <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/03/25/humanitarian-data-drought-deeper-damage-wrought-us-aid-cuts>).



system, enabling all actors – including local organisations and communities – to access the information needed for decision-making.²⁰⁸ The Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) also convened major donors to track data-capacity gaps and establish coherent policies on supporting data ‘enablers’ who supply the system with key information.^{liv}

Coordinating with interacting systems

In line with recommendations from actors like the interagency Global Solutions Working Group, the Reset Roadmap aimed to ‘embed resilience-building and planned transitions out of humanitarian action into all operations, including via joint analysis/planning approaches’.²⁰⁹ Some interviewees were hopeful that strong transition planning could encourage humanitarians to leave contexts where they were arguably no longer needed. However, multiple interviewees at headquarters and country levels expressed confusion around the Reset plan to accelerate the transition of international humanitarian response out of eight operations, and questioned why these included countries like politically volatile Colombia.^{lv} Some questioned the likelihood of a smooth transition and of other actors stepping in to fill gaps, given the limited strengthening of local structures in recent years and lack of progress on the humanitarian–development–peace nexus (see [Chapter 5.1](#)).

We found limited evidence that system-level prioritisation decisions were made in coordination with decision-making in development, peace and climate systems. While development- and peace-focused agencies told us they felt excluded from humanitarian planning processes, senior humanitarians described limited



There was growing scepticism that development, peace and climate actors – who also experienced financial shocks – would fill the gap left by a shrinking humanitarian remit and footprint



engagement from development leadership, beyond some individual actors committed to cross-system collaboration in the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank. Overall, there was growing scepticism among humanitarians that development, peace and climate actors – who also experienced financial shocks – would fill the gap left by a shrinking humanitarian remit and footprint.

While final figures on development and peace funding are not yet available for 2025, the systems are poised for significant declines. Growth in development spending had already stagnated in 2024, and funding for peace had dropped.

liv Other donors involved in the initiative included the Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO); the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); Canada, Switzerland, Norway, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain.

lv The planned accelerated transition contexts were Cameroon, Colombia, Eritrea, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan and Zimbabwe.



While there was much speculation in 2025 that the cuts to development would be even harsher than those to the humanitarian system, preliminary analysis by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that, among Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors, development spend dropped by 26.3% between 2024 and 2025, while humanitarian spend dropped by a larger 35.8%.²¹⁰ However, ALNAP's analysis found that approaches differed among individual donors.^{lvi}

Trends also indicate that development financiers, including bilateral and multilateral development banks, became increasingly driven by national self-interest and returns on investment, which made conflict-affected or politically volatile contexts and social-safety-net systems less attractive investments than roads and jobs.^{lvii} While non-climate ODA grew in 2024, climate finance took a hit from US cuts and from restrictions on climate programming, along with likely future cuts reported from European donors.²¹¹ Given the reduced resources across other international support systems, it is even more crucial for the different systems to not make prioritisation decisions in isolation, because these decisions have powerful effects on the lives of people experiencing vulnerability. One consultation respondent said:



Given the reduced resources across other international support systems, it is even more crucial for the different systems to not make prioritisation decisions in isolation



'Meaningful nexus thinking should be more urgent than ever but it seems that any gains made over the last years in moving towards effective nexus programming are being lost, with prioritisation between humanitarian, development, climate and peace-building once again being seen as a zero-sum game and silos being reinforced.'

Conclusion

Some innovations and collaborations emerged from difficult prioritisation decisions at both organisational and system levels during this period. However, decision-making, uncertainty and sudden exits reduced trust, both among humanitarian organisations, and between humanitarian practitioners

lvi In ALNAP's GHA analysis, among donors for which data is available for both ODA and humanitarian spending, 20 favoured humanitarian spending over other forms of ODA, while 18 favoured the remainder of ODA, calculated by the percentage change in humanitarian versus other ODA spending (see ALNAP (2026) <https://alnapp.org/help-library/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-gha-report-2026/>).

lvii For example, a review of the World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence, 2020–25 found that their support was inefficient to overcome constraints to private investment in fragile, conflict-affected and violent settings (see World Bank (2025) <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/evaluations/evaluation-wbg-strategy-fragility-conflict-violence-2020-25>), while their strategy for 2026–30 has a stronger focus on delivering jobs – not necessarily the basic services most needed by people affected by crisis (see World Bank (2026) <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/publication/a-wbg-strategy-for-engaging-in-fcv-settings-2026-2030> World Bank 2026).



and people affected by crisis. Cuts to staff and organisational closures disproportionately hit local organisations – which, despite years of commitments to localisation, lacked the flexible finances that enabled other organisations to weather the sudden shock.



Humanitarian actors will need to choose whether to become more competitive or more complementary



As the effects of the cuts continue to manifest, and to most effectively use remaining resources for people affected by crisis, humanitarian actors will need to choose whether to become more competitive or more complementary. The loss of skilled staff, MEAL functions and system-level monitoring data risks a system-wide loss of learning and the ability to plan and respond, requiring stronger collective efforts to maintain these functions.

The retraction of humanitarian presence in multiple contexts underscores the need for humanitarians to coordinate more meaningfully with (similarly financially strained) peace and development systems in prioritisation choices that combine to impact people's lives. Lessons learned from the sudden 2025 cuts could improve how the international humanitarian system prioritises staff, functions and collaborations in the future, whether working with the UN-coordinated system or alternative locally led structures.

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CHAPTER 2

WHAT WORKS, AND AT WHAT COST

>	SUMMARY
>	CHAPTER 2.1 SAVING LIVES AND REDUCING HARM
>	CHAPTER 2.2 WHAT MAKES HUMANITARIAN ACTION EFFECTIVE
>	CHAPTER 2.3 EFFICIENCY AND ITS HIDDEN COSTS

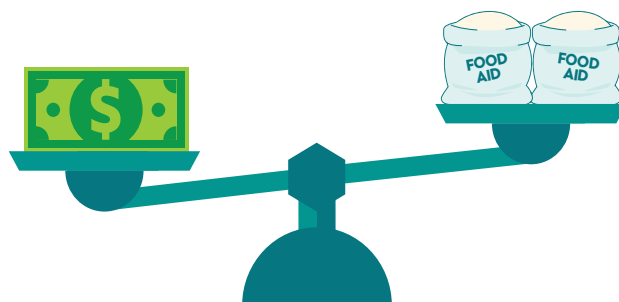
CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

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

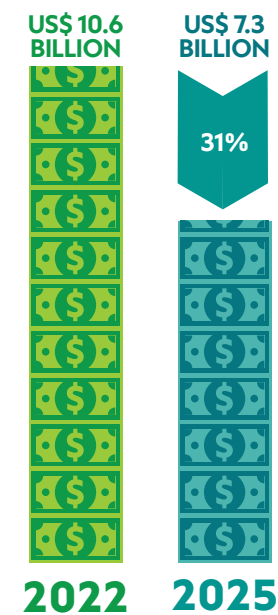
The clearest evidence of what the system could achieve came from climate-driven food crises in Somalia, where large-scale food assistance helped to avert famine, and in Afghanistan, where aid played an essential role in ensuring access to food and improving food security. The clearest evidence of its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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2.1

SAVING LIVES AND REDUCING HARM

'Right now, we need assistance – there is no food, no medicine, we have malnutrition, pregnant women are dying.'

– *Emergency Response Room volunteer, Sudan*

The humanitarian system delivered effective responses where it was adequately resourced and access was possible – the 2022 Somalia famine response, the polio campaign in Gaza and nutrition programming in Ethiopia were amongst the clearest examples. Interagency analysis concluded that the system played a crucial role in averting the worst potential outcomes across several crises and there were examples of progress from pandemic investment, to community health, cash programming, and support for the informal system. However gains were uneven, sometimes reversed by funding cuts and hard to demonstrate convincingly. Moreover, adequate resourcing and access were rarely obtained at scale across the 2022–25 period. The system delivered effective rapid responses but struggled to contain epidemic disease, protect civilians or sustain shelter and education outcomes in the face of conflict, obstruction and funding cuts. People affected by crisis asked for more support for livelihoods and education, seeing self-reliance as lifesaving in its own right.

Why effectiveness mattered

Between 2022 and 2025, against a backdrop of deepening crises and shrinking budgets, humanitarian action reached more people in need than ever before. But did it work? With aid budgets collapsing and the sector's value under open political challenge, the question carried more weight than at any point in *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS) series. This chapter steps back from the political moment to ask what the evidence actually showed: the effects humanitarian action had on the people it reached, where it fell short and why.

The short answer is that the system did demonstrate that it could save lives and alleviate suffering under some conditions. Humanitarian effectiveness

also depended on whose priorities were being assessed. Many people living through crises did not separate immediate and longer-term needs the way the system did. In Somalia, a lack of livelihood opportunities ranked above food insecurity as the biggest issue people faced, while in Chad people's top priorities centred on livelihoods and education – despite severe food and water shortages.¹ Some people saw support for self-reliance as lifesaving in its own right, rather than a luxury to be addressed once survival was secured.

The system did demonstrate that it could save lives under some conditions

This chapter is structured by sector because that is how the humanitarian system organises itself and how most evidence is generated and reported. Several qualifications run through everything that follows. Measurement focused on outputs rather than outcomes, making it difficult to fully assess what was achieved – or what was lost. Moreover, the formal system's performance was only part of the picture; it often did not capture the responses of local organisations, diaspora networks or mutual aid (documented in [Chapter 4.1](#)).

Food and famine

The 2022 SOHS² was cautiously optimistic about how the system was responding to hunger: lessons from the four famines of 2017 appeared to have been learned and there was evidence of effective responses. However, the report also raised concerns regarding the resurgence of conflict-driven famine, manipulation of food security data and an overemphasis on food aid. Would the lessons of 2017 stick?

Hunger rose sharply during this 2022–25 study period, driven by escalating need, contracting resources, obstruction of aid and political failures. Famines were also declared in Sudan and Gaza, and, in addition to these declarations, there was a resurgence of catastrophe conditions (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 5) in contexts of armed conflict.³ Despite formal famine warnings in Gaza and Sudan and catastrophe conditions (IPC Phase 5) in Haiti, operational constraints, chronic underfunding and obstruction of aid prevented an adequate response. In Haiti, IPC classifications technically functioned as intended – they consistently documented a protracted crisis in which nearly half the population faced acute food insecurity (Phase 3 or above) between August 2024 and February 2025, including 2 million in emergency (Phase 4)⁴ – yet these classifications were unable to trigger an adequate response because gang violence made access impossible. In Sudan, the IPC's Famine Review Committee noted that humanitarian aid could only prevent



famine temporarily and in limited areas, unless broader conflict drivers were addressed.⁵

The period saw Sudanese⁶ and Israeli⁷ authorities challenge the IPC's findings, as well as debate about whether the IPC's famine thresholds were fit for purpose. Researchers called for updates to the classification system, arguing its mortality threshold of two deaths per 10,000 people per day was designed for rural African settings. In their analysis, meeting the threshold in a context like Gaza (where pre-war baseline mortality was below 0.1 deaths per 10,000 people per day) would require a more than 20-fold increase in non-trauma deaths, compared to the six- or seven-fold increase required in rural Somalia or South Sudan.⁸ Researchers also argued that the requirement for all three IPC Phase 5 indicatorsⁱ to be met simultaneously also incentivised authorities to restrict data access.⁹ In several contexts, restrictions on data access made the true scale of need harder to establish.

The most positive evidence of effective famine response came from Somalia. During the 2022–23 drought that occurred during ongoing political instability, an estimated 74,700 people died: a devastating toll, but one that interagency analysis suggests would have been tens – possibly hundreds – of thousands higher without the massive scale-up of humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation's (IAHE) conclusion relied on counterfactual analysis using IPC trend data: famine was predicted, predicted trends did not materialise and humanitarian aid appeared to be a determining factor. The IAHE concluded that humanitarian assistance 'helped prevent famine and saved many lives'.¹¹ Similarly, in Afghanistan, the IAHE found food and livelihood assistance played 'an essential role in ensuring access to food, relieving pressure on household budgets, and halting the extremely adverse trends in food insecurity'.¹² Again, the IAHE used IPC trend data, albeit drawing correlations with food security indicators rather than famine-outcome data.



The most positive evidence of effective famine response came from Somalia



In both these and other food security responses, organisations were able to address malnutrition despite enormous constraints. In northern Ethiopia, for example, the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) Severe Acute Malnutrition treatment programmes demonstrated resilience to operational adversity in ways that other sectors did not. Therapeutic feeding exceeded Sphere standards (globally recognised minimum requirements for humanitarian response), with

ⁱ The famine indicators are: 1) at least 20% of households face an extreme lack of food; 2) Global Acute Malnutrition prevalence exceeding 30% among children under five years; and 3) death rate exceeding two per 10,000 people per day, or an under-five mortality rate exceeding four deaths per 10,000 children under-five per day.



cure rates of 88–95% and mortality rates well below Sphere thresholds,¹³ despite operating under extreme access and funding constraints that left most other sectors underperforming.¹⁴



Across multiple contexts, cash transfers significantly improved consumption, food expenditures, food security and nutritional status



A 600-paper review found strong evidence for the effectiveness of cash transfers and several other food security strategies. Across multiple contexts, cash transfers significantly improved consumption, food expenditures, food security and nutritional status. A meta-analysis found these strategies also significantly reduced stunting and improved dietary diversity in children under five, though no effect on wasting was found. However, results varied significantly by context, and in several settings cash only improved child-nutrition outcomes when combined with behaviour-change communication.¹⁵

Other interventions included programmes to help farmers access better crop varieties, store harvests more safely and access training and information.¹⁶ A range of other approaches looked promising, from growing more nutritious crops to improving weather forecasting, but these had not been studied widely enough to draw firm conclusions.

Delivering aid before rather than after a climate shock could improve food security and avoid harmful coping strategies. However, recipients did not always prioritise food; a study of protracted displacement in South Sudan found most households used anticipatory transfers to improve shelter ahead of flooding, producing mixed results on food security outcomes¹⁷ (see [Chapter 2.2](#) for a discussion on anticipatory action).

Despite the success in preventing famine, the Somalia IAHE found that some targeting methods eroded resilience. For example, as food responses scaled up, people were incentivised to abandon sites that offered durable solutions and to re-register as newly displaced elsewhere in order to qualify for assistance.¹⁸ The IAHE raised the question of whether responses should concern themselves with medium-term outcomes, including negative aid effects. The World Food Programme's (WFP) summary of 23 programme evaluations found emergency support persistently failed to connect to longer-term programming across multiple contexts, suggesting the same pattern elsewhere.¹⁹

The picture was considerably bleaker in other famine contexts. The Sudan famine was the largest and most complex in recent decades. In Gedaref and Kassala, families we spoke to waited three to four weeks between food distributions,

and some sites went five months without any aid at all. In Eastern Sudan, farmers abandoned planting for fear of Rapid Support Forces (RSF) incursions. While Emergency Response Rooms and the associated community kitchens²⁰ mounted an extraordinary response, their efforts struggled to address a crisis that left over 19 million people²¹ in acute hunger. Moreover, the humanitarian system was unable to compensate for the simultaneous collapse of health; of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); and of agricultural systems on which food security depends. Local organisations told us that deaths from hunger were directly attributed to humanitarian resource gaps. Meanwhile, our survey among aid recipients in Sudan found that only 17% of people said they received sufficient quantities, 25% said aid was timely and 31% said they had been consulted about the aid – the lowest figures of any country context we surveyed.

In Sudan, local organisations told us that deaths from hunger were directly attributed to humanitarian resource gaps

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) previously funded approximately half of the global supply of ready-to-use therapeutic food – the frontline treatment for severe acute malnutrition in children under five.²² Donor cuts triggered temporary plant closures, staff reductions and raw-material expiry across the supply chain,²³ as well as cost increases. Funding cuts also disabled key data infrastructure: for example, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) – a major US-funded system underpinning humanitarian planning across more than 30 countries – was shut down in January 2025 and remained offline for approximately five months before partially resuming operations in June 2025 under US State Department management.²⁴ The 2026 *Global Report on Food Crises* reported data losses in 18 countries.²⁵

There was evidence of targeting and prioritisation decisions reducing effectiveness (see [Chapter 1.2](#)). WFP generally opted to reduce rations rather than caseloads, but concluded that this had led to assistance being ‘spread too thinly’, raising questions about whether it could realistically hope to improve food security outcomes.²⁶ Its reduction of rations included those for households classified as IPC phases 4 and 5, in some contexts,²⁷ and it directed funding towards crisis response over resilience and addressing root causes.²⁸ Over 90% of WFP’s in-kind food rations in 2023 did not meet nutritional needs; while this had improved slightly by 2024, 80% of rations remained nutritionally inadequate. This sometimes created tensions: in Nigeria, for example, communities refused to participate in vulnerability-ranking exercises, while in other places, people said they would refuse aid entirely if only some received it.



Senior practitioners also worried that deep cuts in assistance in locations like Mali, where 0.9 million people were facing crisis (IPC Phase 3) in 2025,²⁹ would create problems at the community level. One said:



'How do you do programming that is accepted by community? It's quite problematic from a security standpoint. It is hard to do hyper-targeting. It's a very Western notion. Strong social networks that mean doing assistance for one person and not others doesn't work.'

A Global Brief concluded that WFP should 'provide a meaningful level of assistance or don't assist at all'.³⁰ Its 2026–29 strategic plan committed to reach fewer people with higher-quality and better tailored assistance³¹ – a shift that raised hard questions about who would be left out.

These funding and prioritisation decisions had consequences for food security outcomes. At its peak, food assistance in Yemen reached half of the population;³² but by the time the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan was published, nearly half of all children under five suffered moderate to severe stunting. In Ethiopia, ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) stocks were projected to run out;³³ in May, the Ethiopian Ministry of Health reduced the dose of RUTF that each child would be given to stretch supplies, while WFP warned that it risked halting treatment for 650,000 mothers and children.³⁴ In Bangladesh, UNICEF recorded a 27% surge in children presenting for severe acute malnutrition treatment in Rohingya refugee camps, which was attributed to disease outbreaks and ration cuts.³⁵ UNICEF – which estimated that at least 14 million children worldwide faced disruptions to nutrition services³⁶ – continued efforts to diversify RUTF procurement towards manufacturers in high-burden countries³⁷ and ran trials on alternative formulations using locally available ingredients.³⁸ In a move towards more joined-up nutrition programming, UNICEF and WFP launched a Joint Action to Stop Wasting in late 2024, with the aim of aligning their prevention and treatment roles and coordinating RUTF supply chains.

New research illustrated how humanitarian engagement with people affected by famine could make famine survival harder, which was particularly important given the scale of triage decisions being made. The social fabric that enables communities to survive hunger includes networks of mutual obligation and norms around asking for help.³⁹ Anthropological work in South Sudan documented how 'hunger courts', while enforcing a mutuality that saved lives, publicly shame families for failing to provide for hungry relatives and transfer blame onto kin rather than the political and economic systems that caused the famine in the first place.⁴⁰ Famine-related songs also shaped community memory around personal



and family failure.⁴¹ The consequences of this were important for humanitarians. Across famine contexts, shame shaped whether and how people sought help: some socioeconomic groups were too ashamed to ask for help, some mothers did not bring visibly malnourished children to clinics, and families grieved privately rather than mobilising.⁴² How humanitarians engage with people affected by famine may compound these dynamics.

Epidemics and morbidity

The conditions that drove food insecurity in this period also created an environment in which epidemic diseases spread. Cholera deaths reached their highest level in more than a decade, mpox was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern twice, and polio resurged in endemic and non-endemic countries alike. The humanitarian system again demonstrated it could respond rapidly when resources and political will were present; but it could not deliver sustained, equitable health access to contain outbreaks. Early data revealed that, when aid cuts hit, communities reported closure of health and nutrition facilities.⁴³



The humanitarian system again demonstrated it could respond rapidly when resources and political will were present;



The humanitarian system was capable of rapid initial responses to well-resourced epidemic emergencies. An evaluation of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations' (DG ECHO) epidemic response found 'very strong evidence' of rapid response.⁴⁴ In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), local humanitarians told us that the World Health Organization (WHO) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) collaborated

rapidly in response to the mpox outbreak in North Kivu, deploying mobile clinics to areas without hospitals. Perhaps most impressively, in Gaza in mid-2024, daily, nine-hour, area-specific humanitarian pauses were secured after a 10-month-old baby was confirmed paralysed by polio. A coalition coordinated 708 vaccination teams and 2,700 health workers, 'carrying out this campaign at unprecedented scale and speed under the toughest conditions in Gaza'.⁴⁵ A large-scale assessment of the Covid-19 pandemic found that, when forced to act at speed, the system demonstrated it could simplify, flex and coordinate effectively.⁴⁶ Yet the same review found that these gains were reversed once the emergency phase ended, when institutions reported a rapid return to 'business as usual'.⁴⁷



Throughout the study period, conflict-driven displacement spread disease faster than surveillance and response systems could keep pace. When fighting intensified in South Kivu, patients fled mpox treatment centres during gunfire incidents and returned to their communities before completing isolation. Other patients crossed into Burundi with active infection, creating (as a Provincial Health Division described it) 'a vicious cycle that hinders efforts to stop the spread'. The same dynamic operated in cholera contexts. In Sudan, continuous displacement drove three successive waves of cholera by pushing millions into congested conditions with inadequate water and sanitation, while health centres were destroyed or repurposed as shelters and frontline workers went unpaid for months.⁴⁸ Practitioners noted that the erosion of civilian surveillance capacity had likely slowed the identification of outbreaks, including Ebola in DRC, raising the risk that future outbreaks would not be picked up early enough.



Conflict-driven displacement spread disease faster than surveillance and response systems could keep pace



A systematic review of 51 studies across 13 disease categories found that conflict drives infectious disease through multiple intersecting pathways: displacement into overcrowded settings, destruction of WASH infrastructure, breakdown of health surveillance systems, loss of healthcare personnel and disruption of vaccination programmes.⁴⁹ Health disinformation also increased. Critical factors for containing outbreaks included collaboration between international agencies, governments and local frontline organisations; bio-surveillance information-sharing; and political commitment to access⁵⁰ – none of which were reliably delivered during this period.

Indeed, while the system delivered rapid responses, it struggled with outbreak control. Cases of cholera rose year on year over 2021–24, reaching 560,000 cases across 60 countries.⁵¹ In Yemen, there was no pre-existing response plan, the initial plan missed key actions (such as community-directed WASH),⁵² and vaccines were not delivered until 16 months into the outbreak.⁵³ Globally, the International Coordinating Group was forced to shift to a single-dose Oral Cholera Vaccine and suspend some preventative campaigns due to an acute global shortage. Tensions rose between agencies; MSF described the situation as 'incredibly frustrating'.⁵⁴ At the same time, the manufacturer of the Dukoral cholera vaccine reported a 72% increase in sales driven by demand from high-income-country travellers who faced negligible risk⁵⁵ – a repeat of vaccine-equity challenges identified during Covid-19 and mpox.



However, the system did show some evidence of learning, especially in relation to mpox. In DRC, the government strengthened its One Health Framework, which aimed to support multisectoral coordination across human, animal and environmental health.⁵⁶ One Health platforms operated in multiple provinces, operational plans and roadmaps decentralised surveillance and response,⁵⁷ and a 2023 pilot integrated data.⁵⁸ A Pandemic Fund-supported project also provided more investment in lab and workforce capacity and surveillance.⁵⁹



Indirect effects cause more deaths than direct violence, accounting for 70-90% of excess deaths in many crises



Some of the most rigorous evidence from the period concerned how epidemics and crises affected existing health systems and morbidity burdens. Indirect effects (such as insufficient WASH, inadequate housing, food insecurity and the breakdown or overwhelming of already fragile public health systems) accounted for 70-90% of excess deaths in many crises.⁶⁰ In Yemen, a review of healthcare accessibility found that a diphtheria

outbreak was 11 times more likely to occur in districts facing ongoing conflict;⁶¹ and there were 57% more diphtheria cases in 2023 than in 2021 and 2022 as a direct consequence of collapsed vaccination systems. In Gaza, adherence to medical follow-up among patients with non-communicable diseases declined from 96.7% before the war to 40.7%; more than 90% of primary healthcare facilities reported shortages of insulin, antihypertensives and dialysis supplies; and only 14 of 36 hospitals remained partially functional.⁶² In general, maternal mortality was also significantly higher in conflict-affected countries, and progress in addressing it had stalled since 2016;⁶³ yet WHO case studies from Ethiopia, Myanmar, Ukraine and Colombia found that mobile health teams, skilled-birth attendants and community-based midwifery produced measurable improvements, even in conflict conditions.⁶⁴

The humanitarian health sector entered the period with the benefits of expanded community-based delivery and improved epidemic-response infrastructure from Covid-19, and growing evidence on anticipatory action for health. In 2024, WHO published its H3 Package:⁶⁵ an integrated services framework to include non-communicable disease, palliative and rehabilitative care alongside communicable disease and maternal health. However, the US accounted for approximately 45% of development assistance for health between 2019 and 2022.⁶⁶ The global health financing architecture had been 'inherently vulnerable' and the sector had not, by the end of the review period, developed a systematic contingency plan for a withdrawal of this scale.⁶⁷



One area where evidence supported a lower-cost approach to maintaining basic health delivery was investment in community health workers. Previous research found that community health workers in humanitarian settings often continued to provide services during crises, including those involving prolonged conflict and population displacement.⁶⁸ The 2024 World Health Assembly resolution on health emergency preparedness explicitly recognised that these community health workers and capacitated volunteers were at the forefront of emergency preparedness, prevention, response and recovery.⁶⁹ However, the evidence also pointed to structural limitations of this model, including attrition,⁷⁰ a narrow scope of practice, and dependence on supply chains and referral pathways.



Protection and wellbeing

Beyond food and disease response, people living through crises in this period faced threats to their physical safety, psychological wellbeing and dignified survival. Protection was chronically underfunded relative to need, and the system struggled to gain traction on collective protection objectives across the IAHEs.⁷¹

Sexual and gender-based violence and child protection.

UN-verified cases of conflict-related sexual violence increased during this period, and gender-based violence (GBV) was assessed as severe or extreme in 22 of 25 countries experiencing humanitarian crises.⁷² The Johns Hopkins–*Lancet* Commission estimated that 21% of forcibly displaced women experienced sexual violence.⁷³ In DRC, an MSF-Epicentre survey on health consequences included injury or disability in 51% of cases, sexually transmitted infections in 34%, extreme relational disruption in 30%, reproductive complications including miscarriage in 20% and stigma in 15%.⁷⁴

There was some evidence of improvements in sexual and GBV programmes in the period. For example, in Uganda, results improved when CARE International combined multiple pathways for supporting women.⁷⁵ In DRC, MSF supported more survivors by combining door-to-door community outreach (which identified and escorted survivors to services) with free treatment (delivered through a local health centre), bringing more survivors into care within the critical 72-hour window than national and provincial averages.⁷⁶ In Sudan, where the RSF has inflicted sexual violence,⁷⁷ Women's Emergency Response Rooms (WERRS) provided an important protection function; each WERR had its own small pot of funds that could be used to support survivors, and the WERR was not required to report on it in order to protect privacy and strengthen community trust.⁷⁸



Across GBV and child-protection efforts, many programmes relied on referral systems and partnerships with state infrastructures that were often under strain



Across GBV and child-protection efforts, many programmes relied on referral systems and partnerships with state infrastructures that were often under strain. In Sudan, widening gaps in referral pathways held back attempts to follow through on protection cases, line ministriesⁱⁱ lacked staff trained in protection, and camps had limited security. In Gaza, civil society actors coordinated referrals across GBV, child protection and psychosocial support but struggled to meet demand (for example, interviewees told us that Sawa received over 2,000 calls a day to the GBV

and protection hotline). Research demonstrated the importance of child-friendly spaces,⁷⁹ but these seemed to be cut in several contexts, with one Emergency Response Room volunteer telling us:



'We have rape among children. 11–12 year [old] girls are being raped ... We had protection activities for women and children: safe spaces, [psychosocial support], [sexual and reproductive health] awareness, dignity kits ... We stopped in Feb 2025, since the funding stopped coming ... Now, no organisation is providing any protection activity.'

Mine action and land rights

The Afghanistan IAHE highlighted mine action and land rights as strong areas of protection programming.⁸⁰ While some donor conditions hindered humanitarian engagement with the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination, the evaluation indicated that intervention significantly reduced the risk of death or injury and that the Housing, Land and Property sub-cluster enabled people affected by crisis to claim their rights through combined legal advice.⁸¹ Other reports tied mine-action interventions to more positive food security outcomes in Lebanon,⁸² and the Mines Advisory Group's work in Iraq improved communities' perceptions of safety and enabled some to resume their livelihoods activities.⁸³ Protection specialists also deemed collective advocacy important to supporting the Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas,⁸⁴ which was followed up with an international conference in 2024 to support implementation.ⁱⁱⁱ On land rights, the Global Protection Cluster compiled a review of lessons learned to improve support on legal rights and justice (see [Chapter 3](#) for further discussion of the system's commitments to protecting people affected by crisis).⁸⁵

ii District-level offices of government ministries with specific sectoral mandates.

iii There was still work to be done by the end of 2025 to translate the Declaration into national policies and shifts in military doctrine, as well as to strengthen civilian harm-tracking (see GPC (2026) <https://globalprotectioncluster.org/publications/2401/reports/report/global-protection-forum-2025-official-report>).



Shelter

Coverage was a major challenge for the shelter sector. In 2024, shelter partners reached just 18% of the 93 million people needing shelter and non-food items.⁸⁶ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) *2024 Global Report* found that only 42% of refugees and asylum seekers, and just 29% of internally displaced people, had access to habitable housing.^{iv}

In 2024, shelter partners reached just 18% of the 93 million people in need

In early 2024, a rapid assessment of 33 sites operated by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Gaza found as little as 1 m² of covered living space per person.⁸⁷ Evaluations in Yemen⁸⁸ and Haiti⁸⁹ documented concerns with durability and quality of materials; recipients stated the need for more permanent solutions. Structural problems included Sphere's 3.5 m² of living space remaining the primary operationalised standard for shelter, as well as ambiguity around the terms 'dignity' and 'privacy' in the dominant definition of 'shelter' and these being dependent on a reader's knowledge.^v One shelter specialist told us they were 'almost never' able to provide 'safe, dignified and adequate shelters' in camps and spontaneous settlements, and instead had to consider practical constraints like whether families would be able to move with and rebuild the shelters if they were displaced again. The Global Shelter Cluster sought to improve standards through the Shelter Severity Classification System, finalised in 2022 after a pilot in north-west Syria, where it assessed need across three dimensions: the shelter structure, living conditions inside it and access to services around it.

In general, there was limited evidence available on the outcomes for the shelter sector, and direct links between shelter conditions and health, education and livelihoods outcomes remained poorly understood. However, two approaches showed particular promise for replication: in Ukraine, cash offered a model that integrated temporary accommodation into the private rental market and supported displaced people's own priorities; and in the Philippines, a diaspora remittance-loan model for home retrofitting improved access to finance for female-headed households, supported adherence to building standards and produced shelter that was therefore more resilient against future climate shocks.

Privacy loss and violence were consequences of overcrowding and disproportionately affected women and girls.⁹⁰ However, the system's technical orientation meant these tended to be treated as issues of protection rather than

iv These figures used UNHCR's own definitions of habitability rather than the Sphere minimum of 3.5 m² per person (see UNHCR (2025) <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/global-report-2024>).

v The Sphere definition reads: 'Shelter is the household living space, including the items necessary to support daily activities'. The DG ECHO's Key Results Indicator framework operationalises the Sphere space standard into a measurable indicator, phrased as 'basic, safe and dignified shelter solutions'. Save the Children and other implementing organisations use the same formulation as their standard indicator.



shelter quality – and, as such, they fell out of shelter monitoring entirely. Studies reported that people found it traumatic to be in chaotic or poorly organised shelter, and overcrowding was a determinant of both physical and mental health outcomes.⁹¹ In both Gaza and Sudan, people living in poor shelters expressed frustration at the lack of privacy. Inadequate shelter led to disease transmission and increased GBV risk, but this was poorly documented, making the broader impacts of shelter systematically undervalued. One aid worker told us:



'The main issue is privacy. [Internally displaced people] are extremely vulnerable ... One of the key ways to protect dignity ... is by ensuring privacy for families.'

WASH

Inadequate water and sanitation is a factor in disease control, malnutrition and infection control within healthcare facilities. Researchers tracking US WASH disbursements against reported deaths showed that funding declines coincided with increased cholera mortality; by mid-2025, Angola, DRC, Sudan and South Sudan alone saw more than 3,000 deaths.⁹² A 2023 cohort study in India found a 30% lower risk of cholera in households practising improved WASH measures over five years, with children under five experiencing the most significant benefits.⁹³ However, it is not always possible to establish clear outcomes. Recent research also emphasised that WASH should be understood as a fundamental right to safety and dignity.

The WASH sector continued to struggle to meet minimum standards^{vi} and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) independent review on internal displacement found that millions of people were living without basic clean water.⁹⁴ From 2021 to 2025, funding against requirements never exceeded 35% on average,⁹⁵ and funding to the WASH sector fell by 50%^{vii} in 2025 compared to 2024.⁹⁶ UNHCR reported that its refugee operations provided an average of 18 litres of water per person per day in 2023 and 2024 – below the minimum standard of 20 litres for protracted situations.⁹⁷

Needs varied significantly by context and WASH practitioners emphasised the measurement challenge. The Household Water Insecurity Experiences Scale gained traction as a complementary experiential measure of service quality. By 2024, only 53% of refugees had access to a safe household toilet: down from 63% in 2023.⁹⁸ The lack of resourcing for WASH was a factor, as well as inadequate sludge management, pit-latrines collapse and resources being diverted to new displacements. In northern Ethiopia, water-trucking targets were reduced to 5 litres per person per day during the Tigray blockade due to lack of fuel and cash, and menstrual health standards were not met in any of the three regions affected

vi The 2022 SOHS identified WASH as the sector with the most documented failures against Sphere minimum standards, although this may be partially due to the lack of cross-context threshold-referenced data for many other sectors.

vii Percentages from this report differ from the data in Figure 1.14 that uses FTS data examining funding requirements and funding received for all response plans.



by conflict.⁹⁹ In Yemen, sewage tanks overflowed and sites for internally displaced people lacked basic sanitation, which was attributed to inadequate oversight, underfunding and access constraints.¹⁰⁰ Across 30 countries, 1,738 people affected by crisis said the biggest WASH gaps were in basic services to enable access to safe water (23%), sanitation (19%) and hygiene items (19%).¹⁰¹

A fundamental challenge was the project-based model of WASH,^{viii} which repeatedly produced unrealistic funder expectations, failed handovers and weak accountability to intended users.¹⁰² A senior WASH expert explained that in camps and displacement settings there was rarely an agreed design life for WASH infrastructure – without specifying whether a water system needed to serve a population for five, 10 or 20 years, investment in durable infrastructure was discouraged in favour of short-term fixes. However there were positive examples: in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, the WASH cluster continued to improve its 197 faecal sludge treatment plants and implemented an innovative underground network of tanks with a lifespan of around a decade moving sludge at a fraction of the cost of trucking.¹⁰³ In Goma, DRC, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and World Bank pioneered a blended finance model aiming to bring water to 11 million people across a growing pipeline of projects.¹⁰⁴ Such initiatives provide important learning for the sector in moving towards longer-term infrastructure.

Longer-term harms and outcomes

Livelihoods and resilience

Of the aid recipients we surveyed, 17% said the main way that aid providers could improve would be to 'help us become independent and resilient'. In protracted crises, this figure rose, cited by 28% of respondents in DRC and 24% in Haiti. The tension between lifesaving priorities and resilience-building ran through many of the LAHEs – yet, even in protracted crises, funding pressures repeatedly led to organisations prioritising immediate relief.¹⁰⁵ In Ethiopia, agriculture was underfunded throughout the responses and livelihood assistance was a major gap.¹⁰⁶ In Yemen, underfunding limited efforts to combine short-term assistance with longer-term strategies.¹⁰⁷ In Somalia, scaling back livelihood and resilience activities to fund short-term lifesaving responses 'contributed to an erosion of the resilience of affected communities'.¹⁰⁸



While there were some examples of progress in linking humanitarian response to longer-term resilience, these were the exception, not the rule



viii With discrete projects, rather than sustained investment in water and sanitation systems and services. For example, building a borehole, latrine block or water point does not guarantee operation, maintenance or long-term functionality once the project ends.



Restrictive legal environments, discrimination and trauma made livelihoods support hard to deliver, and development actors rarely extended their systemic approaches to displaced populations the way they did for host communities.¹⁰⁹ Progress in some host countries had come through policy reforms driven by the Global Compact on Refugees, and there were promising early results from a Ugandan graduation programme.¹¹⁰ Social protection also offered a route to more durable support, though the links to humanitarian cash were still rare (see [Chapter 2.2](#)). While there were some examples of progress in linking humanitarian response to longer-term resilience, these were the exception, not the rule (see [Chapter 5.1](#)).

Education

Around 103 million children in the world's most violent and fragile^{ix} countries were out of school in 2024.¹¹¹ Girls remained banned from secondary and university education in Afghanistan, and attacks on education sites or teachers, as well as the military use of schools, increased by nearly 20% globally in 2022 and 2023 compared to the previous two years.¹¹²



There was greater investment in evidence around education in emergencies, as well as increased interest in how technology could bridge education gaps



There was greater investment in evidence around education in emergencies, as well as increased interest in how technology could bridge education gaps. UNICEF reported that 99% of out-of-school children aged 10–14 years who completed accelerated education programmes in Ethiopia transitioned into formal primary school in 2024.¹¹³ An EdTech Hub review found that radio-based learning had the strongest positive evidence for feasibility and effectiveness, while evidence on internet-based learning was mixed.¹¹⁴ An International Rescue Committee/Sesame

Workshop Ahlan Simsim programme found that Syrian refugee preschool children achieved literacy and numeracy gains comparable to one year of in-person preschool after just 11 weeks.¹¹⁵ However, success of EdTech interventions correlated strongly with socioeconomic status.¹¹⁶

Mental health

Evidence from Ukraine during the period illustrated the effects of conflict on wellbeing: in 2023, UNICEF reported that many Ukrainian children were exhibiting signs of learning loss, lack of routine and distress.¹¹⁷ Similarly, survey data from 2022 found that adult civilians living in heavily bombarded areas reported elevated rates of suicidal ideation and feelings of helplessness

^{ix} The World Bank listed 39 countries in conflict or fragile in 2024 (see World Bank (2024) <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/b3c737c4687db176ec98f5c434d0de91-0090082024/original/FCSListFY25.pdf>).



compared to those in moderately damaged areas.¹¹⁸ WHO's October 2024 health needs assessment found mental-health concerns were the most prevalent health issue, affecting 46% of Ukrainians.¹¹⁹ These findings are likely to be relevant in other contexts of protracted conflict. Another cohort study from Malawi in *The Lancet*, which followed children through to adolescence, found links between severe childhood malnutrition and mental-health symptoms years later, even where other long-term risks were not evident.¹²⁰

There was increased investment in mental health, including the Greentree Acceleration Plan, announced in September 2025 and backed by a US\$13.2 million grant from the Wellcome Trust, which targeted mental health in humanitarian settings, beginning in Chad and Lebanon. In Ukraine, the government led the process to develop a roadmap for mental health and psychosocial support,¹²¹ and agencies aligned their services; for example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) delivered services for 6.5 million people,¹²² and EdCamp Ukraine supported schools to integrate social, emotional and ethical learning.¹²³



A literature review on health evidence found that mental health and psychosocial support had become the most-researched area of humanitarian health

A literature review on health evidence found that mental health and psychosocial support had become the most-researched area of humanitarian health, with 104 papers and a trend towards research on nonspecific distress and wellbeing.¹²⁴ For example, a meta-analysis covering 43 randomised controlled trials found that cognitive behavioural therapy may improve depression symptoms in children and young people affected by humanitarian emergencies (though creative activities sometimes worsened symptoms).¹²⁵

A 2025 WHO meta-analysis found children and adolescents who received targeted interventions reported fewer stress symptoms, and the positive effects were sustained at follow-up.¹²⁶ Digital mental-health support scaled to reach more people across more crises, though broader evidence for digital mental-health interventions underscored concerns about safety in acute distress.

The evidence gap

Humanitarian response is premised on the assumption that it saves lives – yet the precise extent to which deaths were averted across different responses over 2022–25 was difficult to assess. Mortality estimates are not only technical outputs; they shape the scale of a response and influence diplomatic and



Humanitarian response is premised on the assumption that it saves lives – yet the precise extent to which deaths were averted was difficult to assess



military decisions – and ‘damaged infrastructure, security disruptions and political motivations’ all suppress counts.¹²⁷ There was some innovation in mortality estimation: the Somalia Mortality Estimation Database integrated mortality estimates with upstream risk factors (including drought indices, disease outbreaks and food security classifications); retrospective analysis suggested it could have identified mortality hotspots months before the peak of the 2022–23 drought.¹²⁸

Analysis of the use of mortality data in three contexts (Central African Republic, Somalia and Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh) found that measurement was shaped as much by politics, security and bureaucracy as by method. Funding for mortality measurement rose with each new crisis and then fell away; as a result, Somalia’s monitoring system lost capacity between droughts, and the Somalia Mortality Estimation Database’s 2022 findings came too late to inform the response.¹²⁹ Data was also politically sensitive: in Central African Republic, a survey estimated mortality at four times higher than UN figures.¹³⁰ However, there was some evidence that, when evidence *did* reach decision-makers, it made a difference. Earlier Somali modelling was credited with faster scale-up in 2017 and 2022.¹³¹ Interviewees also described how mortality data had been used within donor agencies and foreign ministries to inform decision-making; however, this was not always visible due to political sensitivities.

Over the period, there were efforts to generate stronger evidence of the type of aid that was most effective, including for food security, health, multipurpose cash and WASH. However, large evidence gaps remained, especially for people experiencing the greatest vulnerability and for contexts receiving the least funding.¹³² In the nutrition sector, for example, data on school-age children and adolescents was scarce, especially for boys;¹³³ most non-communicable disease evidence came only from the Middle East;¹³⁴ and evidence on food security interventions targeting the most vulnerable populations (including women, refugees, internally displaced people and people living with disabilities) was limited.¹³⁵ ALNAP’s 2024 synthesis of evidence and learning for people-centred action concluded that ‘outcome-level evidence is scarce’ – both for inclusion, accountability and localisation specifically and for overall response effectiveness more broadly.¹³⁶ Some efforts to address this emerged during the period, including research agendas within the WASH cluster, but these remained small relative to the size of the gap.¹³⁷

At the response level, evaluations relied on assumed-benefit arguments, which held that if food was delivered at scale and targets were met, then planned outcomes could be inferred.¹³⁸ The strongest of the evaluations used data from IPC trend analysis,¹³⁹ but this data was not always available. An evaluation of WFP targeting in seven contexts found that only Jordan systematically compared food security outcomes between people who participated in the programme and those who did not; in the other contexts monitoring tools had not been designed to assess whether targeting worked.¹⁴⁰ The 2026 IAHE synthesis concluded that the humanitarian system 'played a crucial role in averting the worst potential outcomes of crisis situations, even while it has sometimes struggled to address the wider humanitarian agenda short of this catastrophic level'.¹⁴¹ However, it found that coverage and programme reach fell well short of priority needs, key sectors (including WASH, protection and livelihoods) were routinely underfunded, and families in protracted crisis remained caught in cycles of vulnerability.¹⁴²

IAHE concluded that the humanitarian system 'played a crucial role in averting the worst potential outcomes of crisis situations, even while it has sometimes struggled to address the wider humanitarian agenda'

Conclusion

The humanitarian system delivered important documented results in the period: in Somalia's 2022–23 drought where assistance averted tens of thousands of deaths, through nutrition programmes in northern Ethiopia, in Gaza's polio vaccinations and DRC's mpox response. There was also growing evidence around the effectiveness of cash transfers and successes in mine action and integrated programming. However, in the crises that defined the period, deliberate obstruction and denial of access constrained the system. While the worst outcomes could often be avoided, people affected by crisis wanted more support for longer-term outcomes like education and livelihoods. Innovations such as the Somalia Mortality Estimation Database show that more investment in measurement infrastructure would allow the system to better demonstrate results.

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

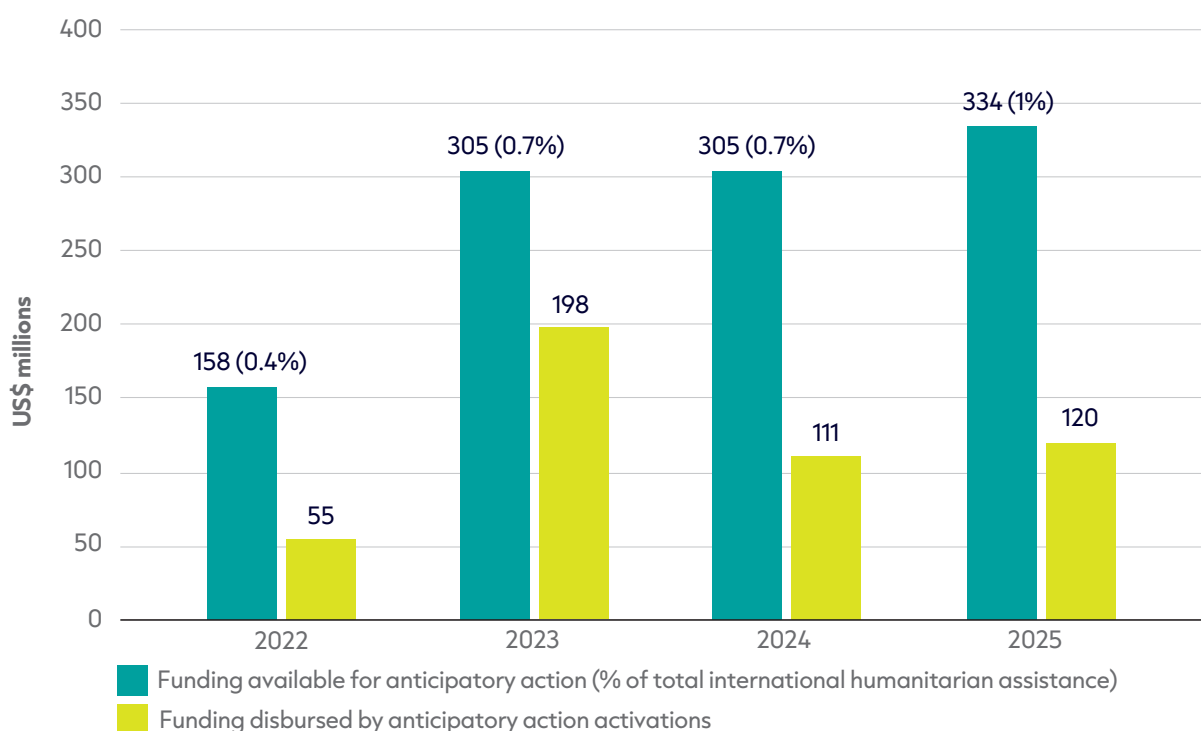
Many organisations showed substantial interest in anticipatory action, and there was new evidence that it was a driver for timeliness and effectiveness.¹⁵⁵ For example, a World Food Programme (WFP) synthesis noted that eight of 10 studies measuring food consumption found a positive effect from anticipatory 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.



65% of respondents said they were satisfied with the quality of aid received



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](#)).

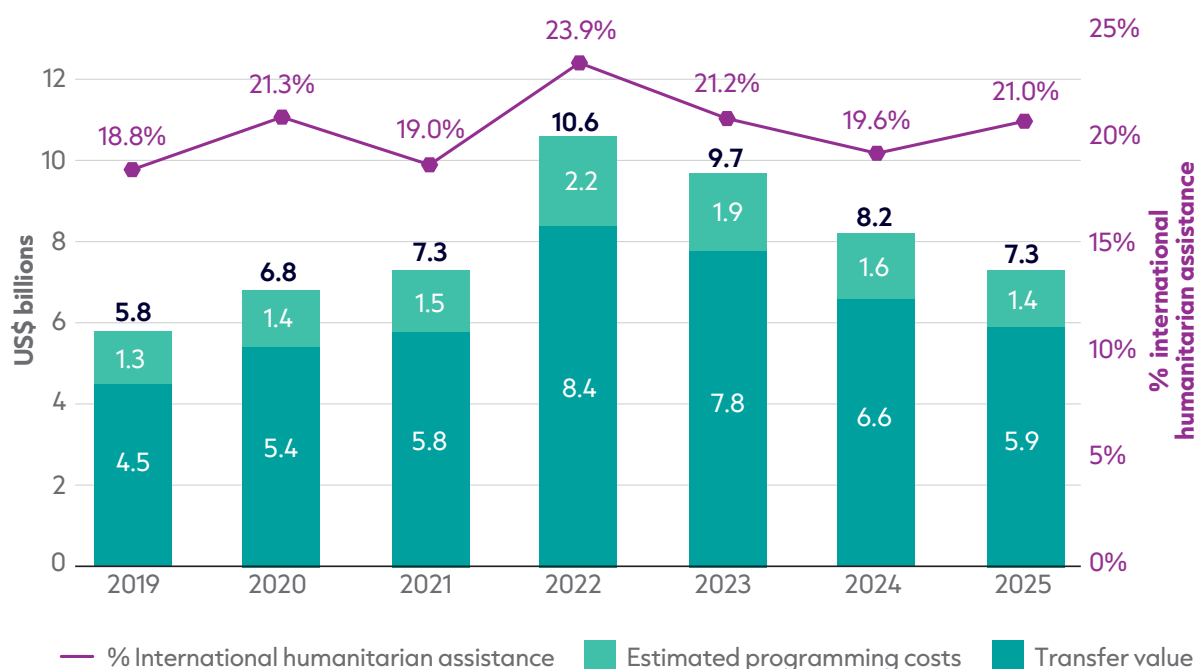
Cash

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

On average, 71–77% of a cash or voucher budget reached recipients directly, compared to just 54–56% for in-kind food aid



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.

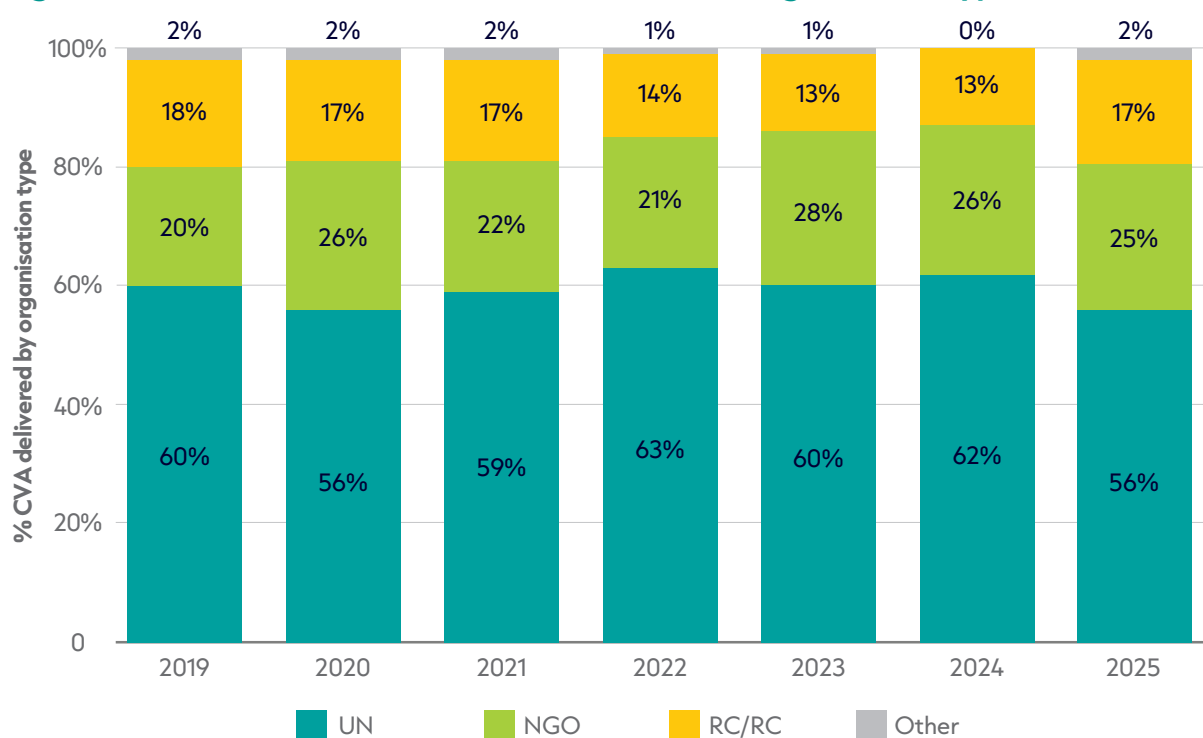


Group-based cash modalities shifted power dynamics by placing communities in control of resource allocation



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

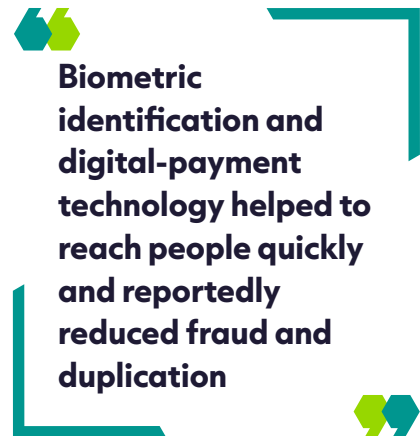
Only 41% of people that we surveyed said they understood how their data was used

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}

With 95% of the global population living within range of a mobile signal, mobile phones were often the primary early warning modality

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

Concerns also grew over the sector's deepening reliance on a small number of private technology firms

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’.



As the ERC acknowledged in June 2025: ‘Our problem historically is not lack of ideas for reform, but lack of execution’



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



What will it take to shift investment towards approaches with the strongest evidence base – and is there enough political will to do so?



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?

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

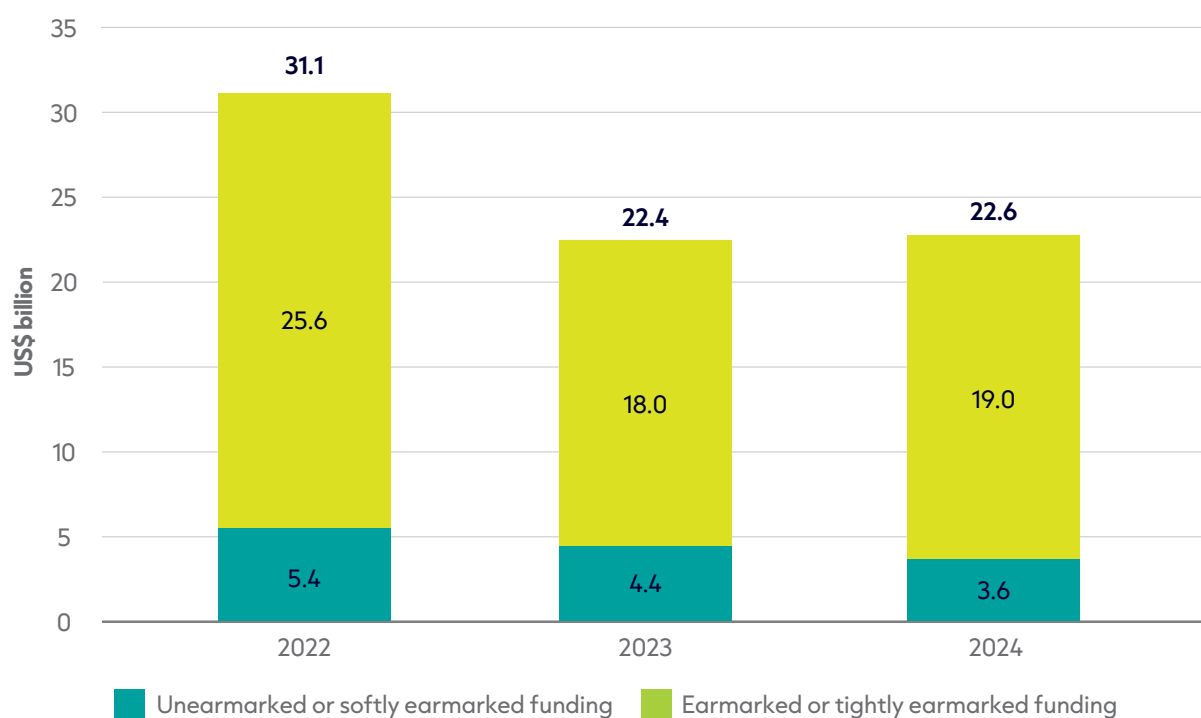
The Grand Bargain

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](#)).

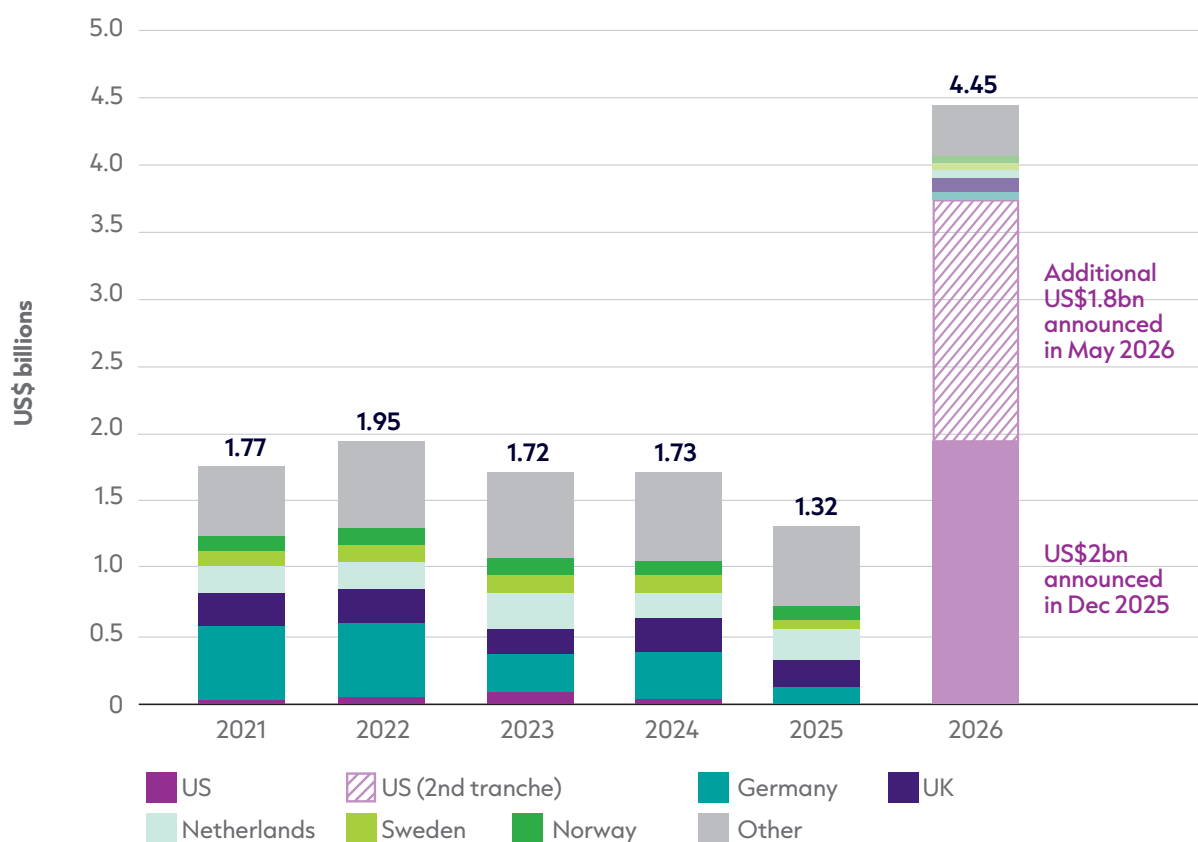


In terms of funding quality, the total amount of funding that was flexible (softly earmarked or unearmarked) reduced over 2022–24



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](#)).

Effective pooled funds should allow implementers to quickly and easily move funding between budget lines, geographical borders or years

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

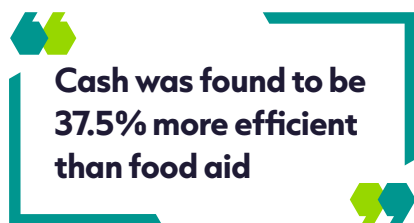
The efficiency of limited assistance matters enormously: a dollar spent on overheads, duplication or ineffective interventions is a dollar that does not reach someone in need. While this period saw investment in cost measurement – new tools, new metrics and growing donor interest²⁹⁷ – the link between 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

Cheap does not necessarily equal cost effective if it does not deliver the same level or quality of outcomes

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).



The system must rethink the cost equation to measure not only the cost per recipient but also the cost to the recipient



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:

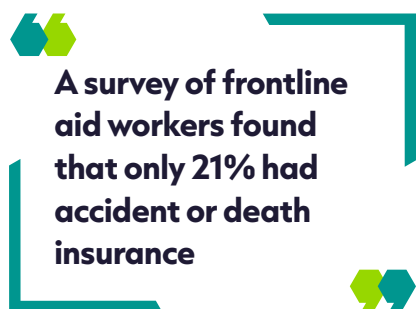
In the context of the funding crisis, organisations tended to push back climate commitments in day-to-day arbitrations as less urgent than immediate crisis response



‘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



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CHAPTER 3

PROTECTION AND PRINCIPLES IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

>	SUMMARY
>	CHAPTER 3.1 GROWING THREATS TO CIVILIANS AND AID WORKERS
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CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY

Escalating violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), shrinking humanitarian space and increasingly politicised donor behaviour made it harder to deliver principled assistance and protect civilians. Humanitarians adapted their security practices, worked with community-protection mechanisms and strengthened their focus on humanitarian diplomacy. Their efforts, however, were insufficient to offset the scale of external pressures and lack of accountability for IHL violations.

The global political environment created high protection risks for people affected by crisis and for humanitarian staff. Conflict escalated and combatants' approaches increasingly violated IHL. Evidence of genocide was found against Israel's actions in Gaza and against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan. This period represented the deadliest time in 25 years to be an aid worker. There were 1,187 aid workers affected by major security incidents and 350 deaths among humanitarian personnel in 2025, with local staff most at risk. States became the largest source of attacks on both aid and health workers. These threats stymied humanitarians' ability to assist and protect people affected by crisis.



2022



2025

In 2025, 1187 aid workers were attacked or detained and 350 killed, more than double 2022 rates.

Humanitarians used advocacy and operational shifts to strengthen security for staff and volunteers. The United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted Resolution 2730 in 2024 to protect humanitarian personnel and infrastructure, and some organisations began to invest more in security for local staff and insurance schemes, although pockets of good practice in contexts like Ukraine and Sudan did not always translate widely. Humanitarian actors engaged more with private security and technology firms to obtain access in insecure contexts. However, these partnerships revealed a need for greater shared learning and guardrails to avoid harm to people affected by crisis and threats to humanitarian principles. Funding cuts threatened the increased professionalisation of security, catalysing losses to joint information and training services and staff.

Humanitarians struggled against strong governments and de facto authorities to provide impartial support and protection for people affected by crisis. In contexts like Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar and Sudan, this

challenged independent and impartial assistance and required effective negotiation skills and stronger direction from leadership and donors on what was permissible. Strict government regulations for civil society organisations also threatened humanitarians' ability to protect people from human rights abuses in multiple contexts, including Afghanistan and Gaza. Donor government priorities around security, migration and anti-terrorism also threatened the independence of humanitarian assistance.

For local actors in contexts like Gaza, Myanmar and Ukraine, politically driven crises fuelled existing debates over the appropriateness of neutrality and independence as humanitarian principles. There were growing calls to consider humanitarian solidarity or justice as principles to tackle root causes of oppression. However, for other actors, maintaining neutrality and independence remained essential to both their effectiveness and the safety of their staff. The system will increasingly need to ask what it means for organisations that rely on commitments to neutrality and independence for access, security and influence to coexist alongside other organisations who use more explicitly political approaches to upholding humanity.

Advocates pushed hard for protection to be considered 'lifesaving' within the Humanitarian Reset and worked to improve the focus on the 'Centrality of Protection' in response planning and operations. Cross-sector engagement on protection and leadership from Humanitarian Coordinators, however, required strengthening. Operational actors and donors stepped up humanitarian diplomacy, influencing political decision-makers to strengthen adherence to IHL and humanitarian access. The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) launched a Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, given accountability for IHL violations had been sorely lacking in this period. Humanitarians recognised a need for greater transparency and accountability if patterns of impunity are to be broken.



395
MILLION

**395m people faced
serious protection risk in
2025, with women and
children disproportionately
affected.**

CHAPTER 3.1

GROWING THREATS TO CIVILIANS AND AID WORKERS

'UN institutions were not spared, schools were not spared and staff members of UN agencies were not spared. So how can I protect civilians when I cannot even protect myself?'

– *National NGO worker, Palestine*

The State of the Humanitarian System 2022 (SOHS) Report 2022 showed an uptick in conflict and reduced humanitarian space, both longstanding barriers to humanitarians being able to access and protect people from crisis. The scale of these challenges grew starkly in the 2022–25 period, which was characterised by multiple infringements of international humanitarian law (IHL), including increased attacks against civilians, infrastructure, hospitals and humanitarian workers. The use of indiscriminate weapons, famine and sexual violence also grew, and evidence of genocide was found in Gaza and Sudan. Record numbers of frontline humanitarian staff lost their lives in the pursuit of providing assistance; state actors became the main perpetrators of attacks, while national staff faced the highest risks of attacks and fatalities. Against this backdrop, funding cuts reduced security information, staffing and training resources, which particularly affected national and local actors. Security experts identified some areas where services could be shared and recommended supporting local non-governmental organisation (NGO) forums to retain core functions. A sense of impunity around IHL violations, including for accused United Nations (UN) member states, galvanised calls from humanitarian operational and donor agencies for greater commitment to upholding IHL and stronger international accountability mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account.

Growing protection risks to civilians

Multiple crises presented large-scale threats to civilians: in 2025, an estimated 395 million people were exposed to serious protection risks, which

disproportionately affected women and children.² The most significant threats to civilians were in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Myanmar, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Sudan and Ukraine.³ The number of global civilian fatalities in events that Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED)ⁱ coded as directly targeting civilians rose from over 44,000 in 2021 to over 71,000 in 2025, having peaked at nearly 78,000 in 2024.⁴ In 2025, the UN recorded more than 37,000 civilians killed in conflict.⁵ The Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) identified conflict-induced displacement as a key protection risk, with varied effects depending on gender, age and other identity markers.⁶ One Palestinian woman described her experience:

**In 2025,
an estimated
395 million people
were exposed to
serious protection
risks**

'I was displaced about six times ... Around 120 people were crammed into one classroom of about 6 × 8 metres ... The classrooms were for women and children, while the men had to sleep outside in the schoolyard, under the open sky, exposed to shrapnel from shelling, the danger from drones and bombardment, and the freezing cold and rain.'

**In 2025, there were
2,546 recorded
incidents of violence
and obstruction of
healthcare across
33 countries**

Violations of IHL by states and non-state actors caused widespread and deliberate harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure, including medical, communication, agriculture and food facilities. An International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) report noted growing use of cyber operations on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and humanitarian organisations.⁷ In 2025, there were 2,546 recorded incidents of

violence and obstruction of healthcare across 33 countries, with hospitals damaged in 790 incidents and 455 health workers killed.⁸ The UN reported high levels of physical damage to civilian infrastructure in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen.⁹ By the end of 2025, almost 80% of structures in Gaza were reportedly damaged or destroyed¹⁰ and an estimated 96% of cropland was damaged and inaccessible.¹¹ One local authority representative in Gaza told us:

'Nowhere was protected – not homes, not hospitals, not shelters.'

Trends in weapon use in this period meant more civilians needed protection in conflict but it was harder for humanitarian actors to access them safely. The

ⁱ ACLED is an independent global monitor that collects, analyses and maps data on conflict and protest (see <https://acleddata.com/about-acleddata/>).



escalating use of armed drones by combatants increasingly caused harm to aid structures, healthcare and civilians.¹² Growing use of artificial intelligence to inform weapon targets heightened risks to civilians and raised ethical concerns for human accountability over life-and-death decisions.¹³ Overt and covert flows of vast amounts of weapons – including to Israel and OPT, Mali, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen – continued to fuel war and violence.¹⁴

Several European countries withdrew from the Mine Ban Treaty, setting a dangerous precedent and raising long-term protection concerns for civilians.¹⁵ The use of anti-personnel mines was reported in Colombia, India, Myanmar, Ukraine and the Sahel region.¹⁶ As well as the use of indiscriminate weapons, combatant targeting of explosive weapons in cities and populated areas was a leading cause of harm to civilians in 2025.¹⁷ Combatant use of explosive weapons reportedly caused high civilian fatalities in DRC, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen and OPT.¹⁸ Attacks on population centres in the war started by the United States and Israel with Iran in early 2026 suggested that such trends may continue beyond the study period.

Despite the creation of the UN Framework for the Prevention of Conflict-related Sexual Violence in 2022, sexual violence was used as a weapon of war in multiple conflicts, with reporting rates in conflict zones rising by over a quarter between 2023 and 2024.¹⁹ The UN reported over 9,300 cases of conflict-related sexual violence in 2025, with high rates in Colombia, DRC, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, OPT, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen. Women and girls were the victims in 95% of these cases,²⁰ although men and boys were reportedly subject to rape and sexual torture, especially in detention.²¹ As discussed in [Chapter 3.3](#), these high protection needs came at a time when funding and the presence of international protection resources were increasingly under threat.

Sexual violence was used as a weapon of war in multiple conflicts, with reporting rates in conflict zones rising by over a quarter between 2023 and 2024

Violations of the 2018 UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2417 were flagged in the 2022 SOHS and these increased in the 2022–25 period. Parties to conflict deliberately blockaded and sieged population centres. The world's largest hunger crisis took place in Sudan, with famine conditions reported in El Fasher and Kadugli, cities besieged by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).²² In August 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) confirmed a famine in Gaza, caused by Israel's blockade of food supplies.²³ This affected more than half a million people,²⁴ and by September 2025 the Gaza Health



Ministry estimated that starvation had killed at least 440 people.²⁵ [Chapter 2.1](#) describes the challenges humanitarian workers faced in addressing hunger under politically imposed constraints.



In a chilling shift from the last SOHS period, violations of IHL went as far as genocide



In a chilling shift from the last SOHS period, violations of IHL went as far as genocide. In September 2025, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, declared a genocide in Gaza perpetrated by the State of Israel.²⁶ By January 2026, the Gaza Health Ministry estimated that at

least 71,662 people had been killed since 7 October 2023, with 488 killed since the ceasefire declaration in October 2025 and potentially another 10,000 people missing, according to the National Committee for Missing Persons.²⁷ *The Lancet* found that 42,200 women, children and elderly people were killed in the first 16 months of the war.²⁸ Israeli violence and illegal settlements expanded in the West Bank throughout the period.²⁹

In Sudan in late 2025, a team at Yale University found satellite evidence indicating that the RSF may have disposed of thousands of bodies around El Fasher,³⁰ and UN investigations into violence by the RSF found ‘hallmarks of genocide’ in early 2026.³¹ The UN reported that, following 18 months of sustained siege of El Fasher, the RSF offensive between 24 and 30 October 2025 killed over 6,000 people in the first three days, and it found widespread use of rape – including gang rape – as a weapon.³²

The deadly constraints of the humanitarian space

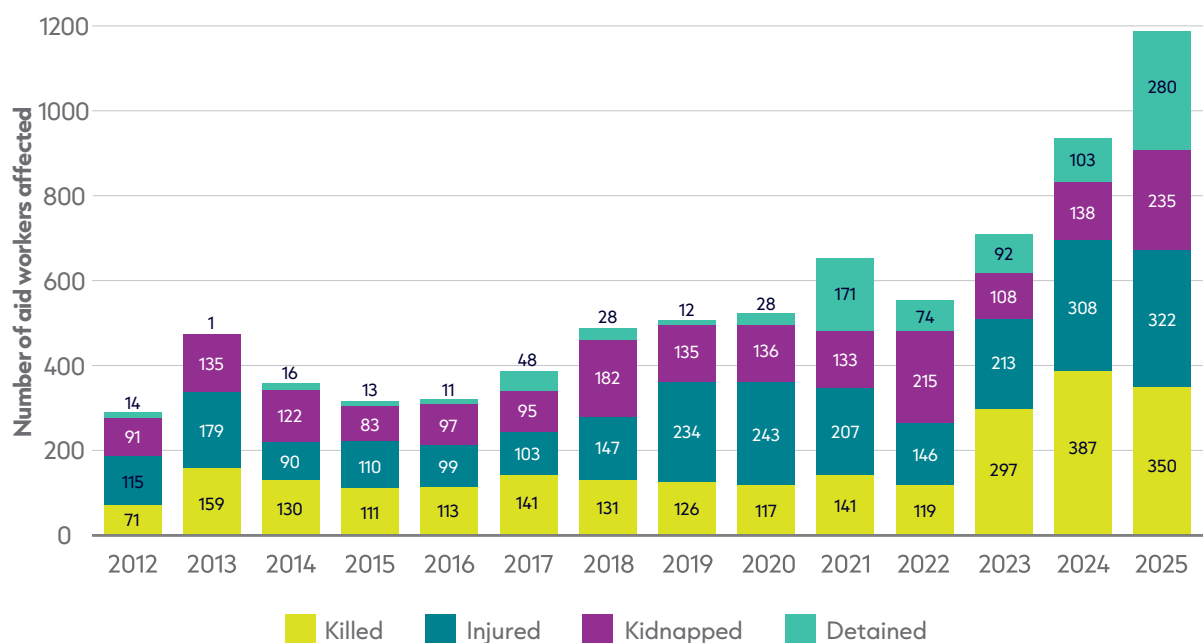
The changing conflict environment and IHL violations also threatened the safety of humanitarian staff. In addition to weapons threats, growing use of digital technology and artificial intelligence fuelled the widespread sharing of harmful information about humanitarian assistance, which contributed to the insecurity of humanitarian personnel, vehicles and offices.³³ Surveyed practitioners cited insecurity as the top obstacle to accessing all populations in need;ⁱⁱ 48% told us that humanitarian space had declined in their operating contexts between 2022 and 2025, while only 29% had seen an improvement.



48% of aid practitioners said humanitarian space had declined in their operating contexts between 2022 and 2025



ii 45.84% chose insecurity in the form of active fighting or attacks on aid operations.

Figure 3.1: Number of affected aid workers by incident outcome, 2012–2025

Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.

ALNAP

These concerns were reflected in the distressing growth in attacks on aid workers and resultant deaths. The Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD)ⁱⁱⁱ recorded 1,187 aid workers affected by major security incidents from 712 incidents in 2025: a record high. Of these, 350 aid workers were killed. Deaths peaked at 387 people in 2024 – nearly three times as many as in 2014. Between 2012 and 2025, annual fatality rates grew on average by 22%. They rose from 9.5 deaths per 100,000 aid workers in 2012 to 54.6 deaths per 100,000 aid workers in 2025.

National staff continued to comprise the highest percentage of aid-worker victims of violence and detention

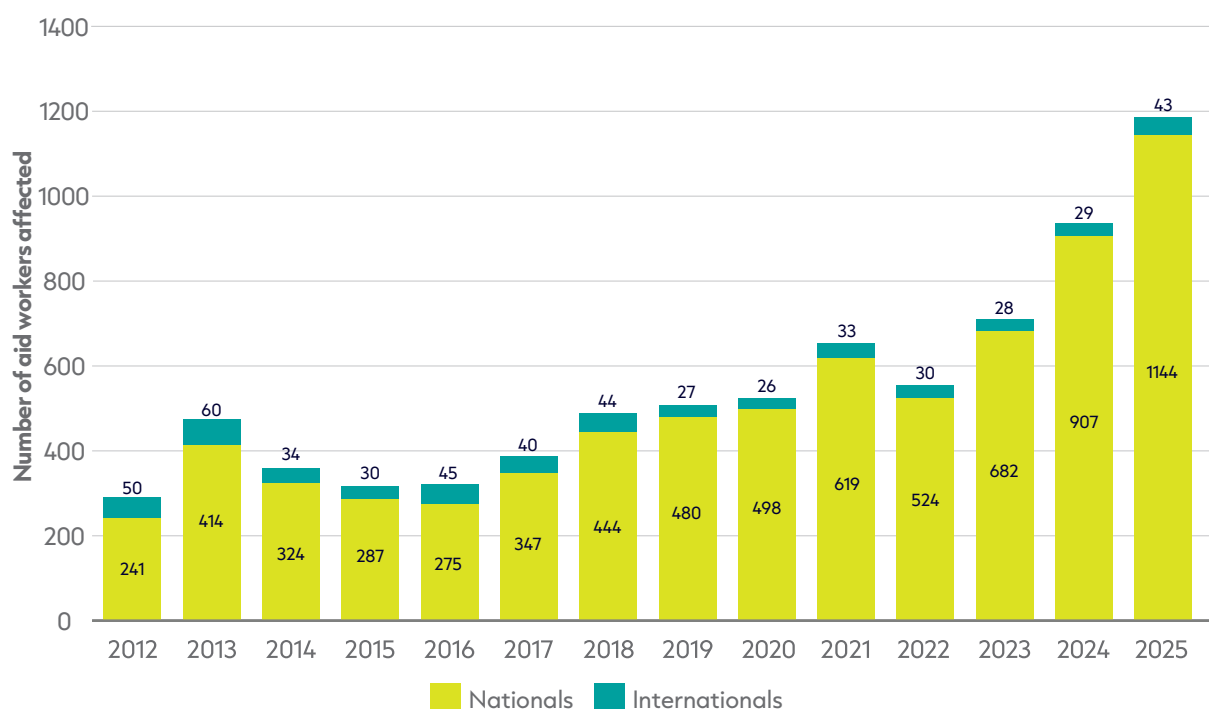
National staff continued to comprise the highest percentage of aid-worker victims of violence and detention: accounting for 96% in 2025 and a high of 97% in 2024. Fatality rates for national staff were vastly higher than for international staff in 2025: 58.1 deaths per 100,000 national staff compared to 2.5 deaths per 100,000 international staff. All but one of the 350 aid workers killed in 2025 were national staff.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/>.



Between 2021 and 2025 there was a sharp rise in the number of national NGO staff who experienced major security incidents (396 in 2025). UN staff also constituted a high number of affected staff in 2025 (364), and the majority of those were national staff of UN agencies, including casualties in Gaza and staff detained in Yemen. Several senior humanitarian security experts we spoke to raised concerns that growing insecurity and funding cuts could exacerbate a trend of international humanitarian organisations working in more secure areas, placing even higher risk burdens on national and local actors to reach people in need of assistance in less secure settings.

Figure 3.2: National and international aid workers affected by major security incidents, 2012–2025



Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.



Both the means and perpetrators of attacks shifted in this period. Aerial bombardment became both increasingly common and the leading cause of fatalities over 2023–25. Aerial attacks mainly took place in Gaza, Lebanon and Ukraine and Sudan, reflecting the intensity of state-conducted military operations and deterioration in IHL compliance.³⁴

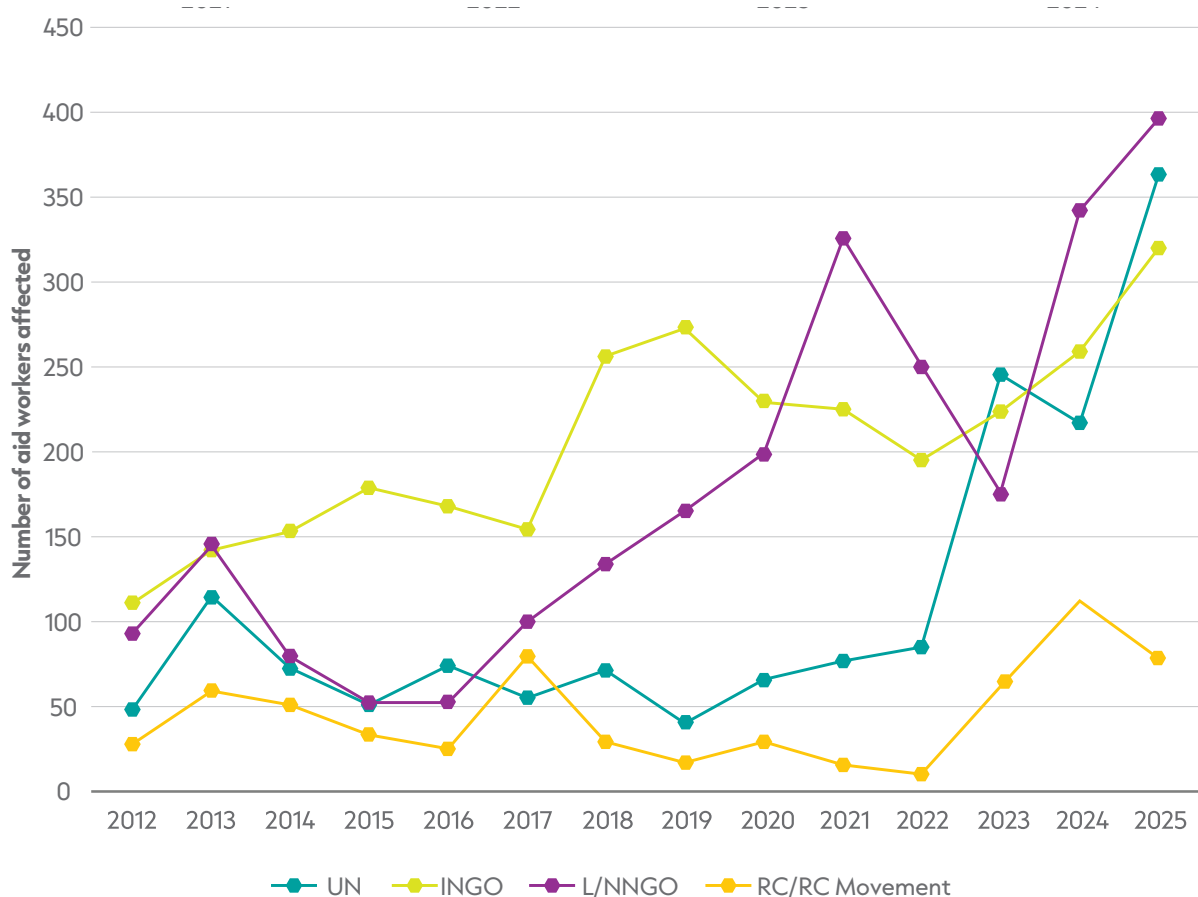
In contrast to the last SOHS period, state actors^{iv} rather than non-state armed groups became the main perpetrators of attacks on aid workers. They also committed 64% of incidents of violence and obstruction of healthcare in 2025, reflecting the scale of state military operations in populated areas,

^{iv} Including national militaries, host-government authorities, police and paramilitary forces.

particularly in Myanmar, OPT, Sudan and Ukraine.³⁵ Beyond direct violence, state actors increasingly deployed detention and administrative obstruction as tools of interference and control, with 280 aid-worker detentions recorded in 2025. In Yemen, Houthi authorities conducted systematic detention campaigns, targeting humanitarian staff at their workplaces.³⁶ Detention by state actors created new legal and diplomatic challenges for humanitarian organisations, whose protocols were developed for kidnapping by armed groups, requiring new skills and shared learning across organisations. Kidnapping remained, however, a key challenge: the number of kidnappings rose steeply from 138 in 2024 to 235 in 2025.

In contrast to the last SOHS period, state actors rather than non-state armed groups became the main perpetrators of attacks on aid workers

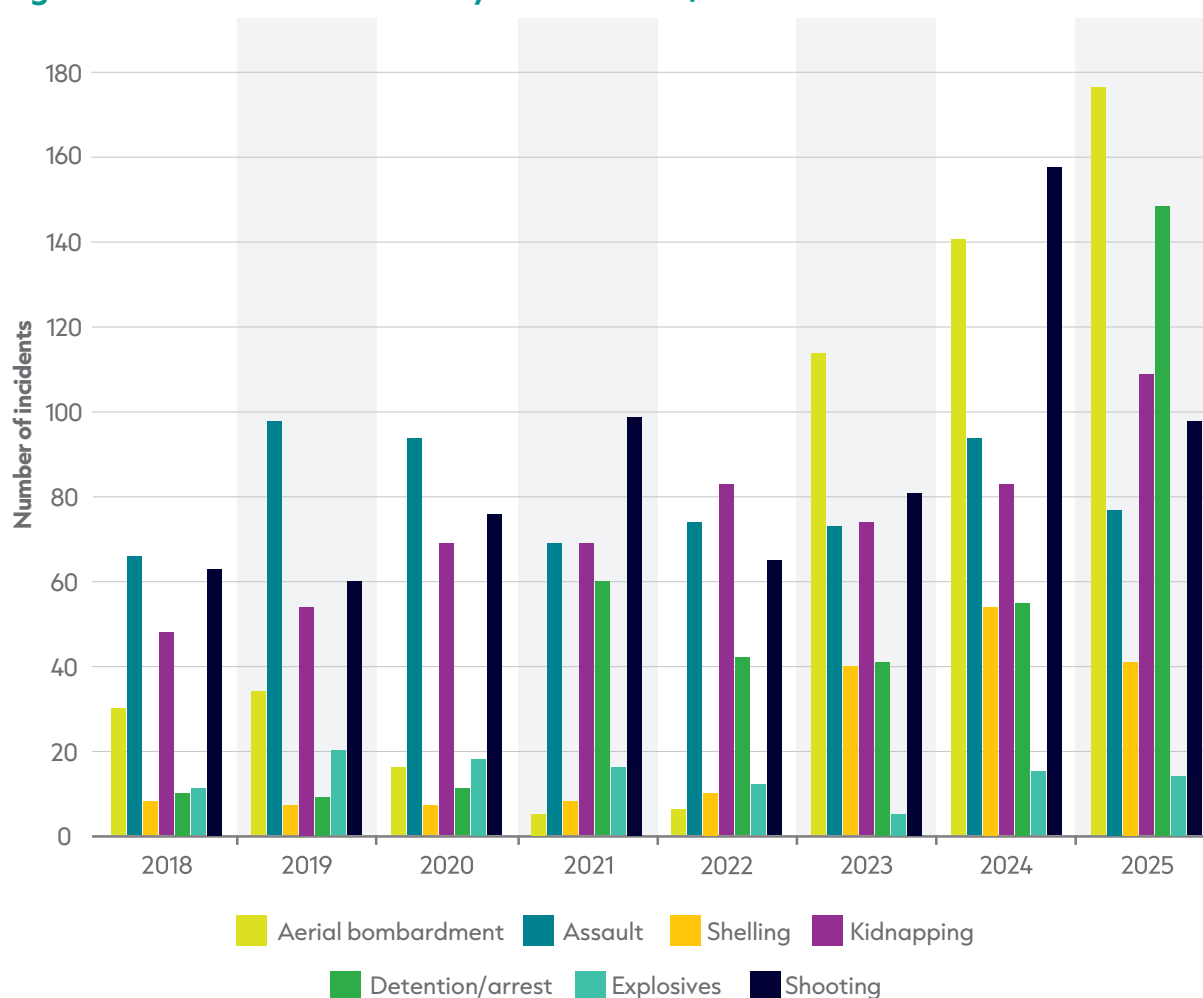
Figure 3.3: Affiliation of aid workers affected by major security incidents, 2012–2025



Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: INGO = international NGO; L/NNGO = Local and national NGO; RC/RC = Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.

Figure 3.4: Number of incidents by known means, 2018–2025



Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Explosives includes landmines; stationary, and vehicle- and body-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs), grenades, shelling and complex attacks. Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years. Assault includes bodily assault and rape.

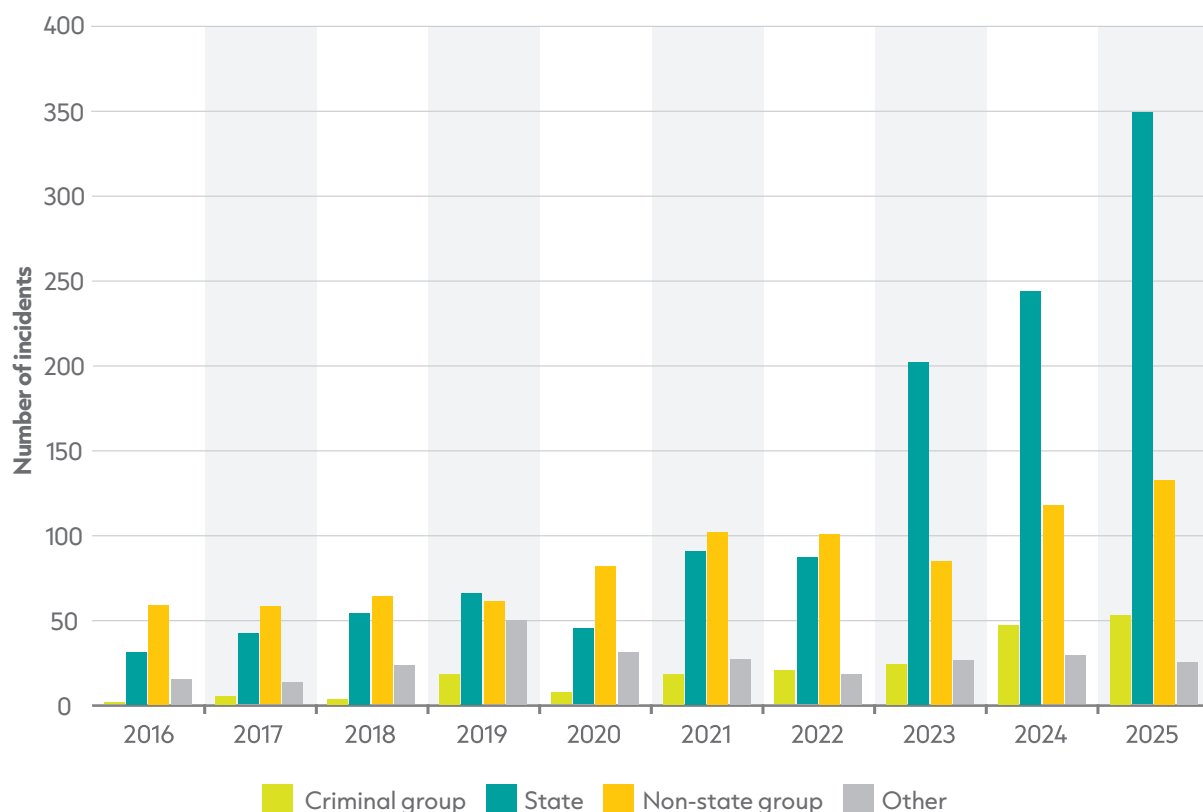


State-actor violence was also reflected in continued deconfliction failures, where military attacks struck aid actors, movements and facilities, despite formal notification or clearly visible markings of their humanitarian status. Between 2012 and 2025, the AWSD recorded 521 'deconflicted' incidents in which aid workers were injured or killed, 162 of which occurred in 2025 alone.^v One aid worker in Gaza told us:



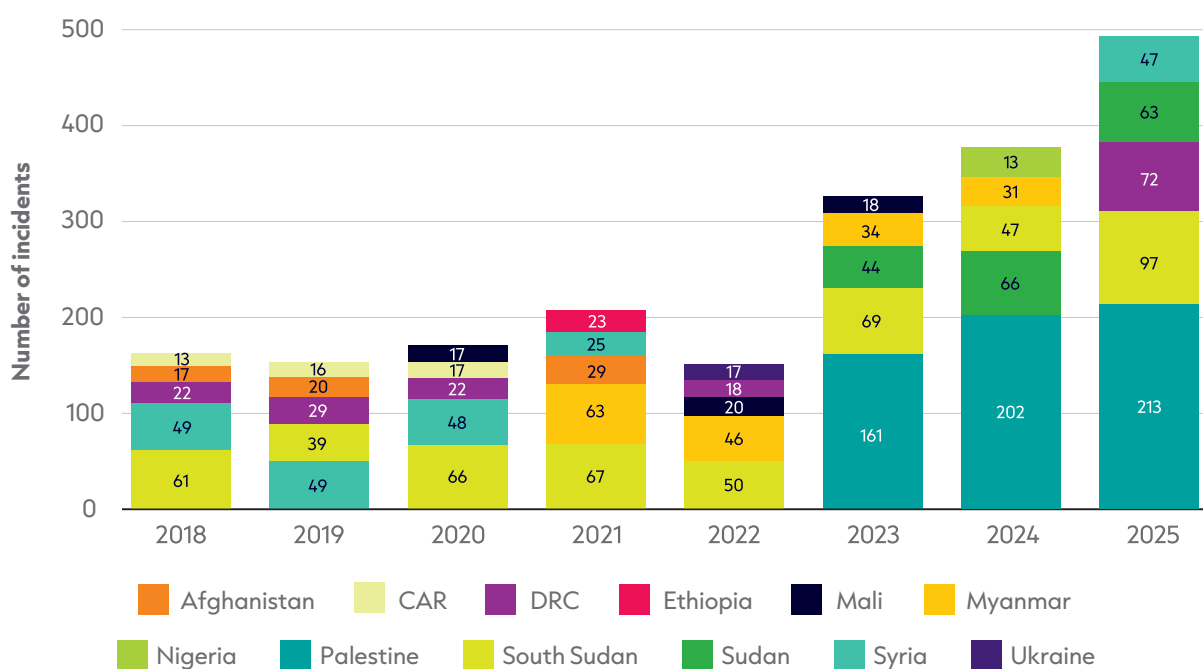
'After coordinating with the Red Cross to retrieve bodies, even though they had sent them our names and photos, the ambulance was struck as soon as we arrived, before we could begin. One of my colleagues was killed. Personally, I survived only by curling up beside the ambulance because of my small frame, staying hidden until the planes left – and then I ran for my life.'

^v Based on AWSD data (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Figure 3.5: Known perpetrators of incidents against aid workers, 2016–2025

Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.

**Figure 3.6: Contexts with highest number of major security incidents involving aid workers, 2018–2025**

Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.



There were some significant shifts in the most dangerous contexts for aid workers since the last SOHS period.^{vi} Gaza became the deadliest operating context: 186 aid workers were killed in 2025 alone, with a total of 545 deaths between October 2023 and December 2025.^{vii} From L/NNGOs to the private sector, and from volunteers to paid staff, the aid workers we interviewed in Gaza told the same deadly story:

Gaza became the deadliest operating context with 545 aid workers killed between October 2023 and December 2025



'I had about 10 young people martyred.'



'We had 58 martyrs from the crews without counting injuries.'



'We lost 240 of our employees. These are the ones for whom we managed to obtain information, but I believe the number is much higher.'

Sudan recorded the second highest number of aid workers affected in 2025, with 147 affected and 71 killed. Across the study period, other high-incident contexts included DRC, South Sudan, Yemen, Ukraine, and Myanmar.^{viii}

Beyond the physical toll of violence, these conditions reduced humanitarian mobility and negatively affected the mental health of national and international humanitarian staff. One Palestinian aid worker in Gaza told us:



'UN institutions were not spared, schools were not spared and staff members of UN agencies were not spared. So how can I protect civilians when I cannot even protect myself?'

Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that aid practitioners reported that their biggest concerns about working conditions in this period were safety risks, excessive work and burnout – a harmful combination. In Myanmar, an aid worker said:



'Many aid agencies were forced to suspend ... due to security concerns, staff relocation and closure of field offices ... We were constantly worried about the risk of sudden fighting or crossfire during field visits.'

A local authority representative in Gaza said:



'Every kilometre feels like crossing a frontline.'

vi In 2022 SOHS, the top-10 most dangerous contexts for the whole period were: South Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Mali, Yemen, Sudan, Nigeria, DRC, CAR and Somali.

vii AWSD estimates.

viii Based on AWSD data (www.aidworkersecurity.org).



Improving aid-worker security

In response to growing threats facing staff in this period, efforts were made to improve security at policy and implementation levels. Multidonor advocacy efforts influenced states to adopt UNSC Resolution 2730 in May 2024 to protect humanitarian personnel, premises and assets.³⁷ While this drew international attention to the problem, greater practical upholding of the Resolution was sorely needed. [Chapter 3.3](#) describes some of the nascent steps different humanitarian actors took to increase humanitarian diplomacy and IHL accountability efforts. As a local authority representative in Gaza cautioned:



'If the Red Cross is not respected in Gaza, then the whole humanitarian order is at risk. What happens here reverberates far beyond these borders. Leaders must act as if Gaza is a precedent, not an exception.'

To mitigate the increased dangers facing aid workers, humanitarians made some attempts to strengthen their practical security capacities but faced several barriers. Key capacity challenges included the changing nature of threats, funding cuts and risk transfer to local organisations. Research highlighted that humanitarian actors struggled to keep up with evolving technology and weapons, such as drone deconfliction, cyber threats and disinformation.³⁸ Some donors responded by investing more in research on protection from evolving threats. Insecurity Insight provided guidance on how aid workers and organisations could mitigate risks associated with drones,³⁹ and the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) sought to help its members navigate the changing environment and improve engagement with private-sector security actors. As discussed in [Chapter 3.3](#), alongside technical challenges, this engagement sometimes raised challenges with regards to ethics and humanitarian principles.

The closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) impacted security: experienced USAID security staff were lost, partner-liaison security offices were closed and funding to security-enabling structures fell significantly. For example, the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) lost approximately 37% of its funding⁴⁰ and US funding to the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) was projected to fall from US\$20 million annually to US\$1 million.⁴¹ Reduced USAID support affected several other structures, including the AWSD, GISF and Insecurity Insight. While several donors – such as the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and IrishAid – told us of their continued commitments to funding the system's security-enabling



organisations and structures, security experts raised concerns about the overall loss of security data and professional expertise at a time of high insecurity. Beyond dedicated enabling structures, the *2025 Aid Worker Security Report* indicated losses among individual organisations: 'Every organisation interviewed reported cutting security positions, and at least one lost the entire regional layer of its global security risk management team'.⁴²

In the face of funding cuts, several interviewees suggested that efficiencies could be gained through greater collaboration between individual organisations on shared security services. But they recognised that more work needed to be done around allocating responsibility and 'swallowing institutional egos'. Cuts induced losses of INSO's in-person training programmes and free training for L/NNGOs.⁴³ Security experts indicated this as one gap that could be potentially filled by a centralised training service beyond UNDSS (which primarily served UN staff), while research by the Centre on Armed Groups identified other promising practices in a constrained funding environment. One option was to work more with national NGO forums and L/NNGOs in area-based security coordination to support contextualised approaches.⁴⁴

However, some interviewees expressed concerns that relying on L/NNGOs or civil society networks, in the absence of strengthening their security infrastructure, could just transfer more risk. Indeed, despite the disproportionate risk to national staff, security for L/NNGO staff remained limited.⁴⁵

Relying on L/NNGOs or civil society networks, in the absence of strengthening their security infrastructure, could just transfer more risk

There were some pockets of progress: INTERSOS and partners launched a project to support civil society actors on security risk management in the Sahel;⁴⁶ FCDO and the Nonviolent Peaceforce supported the Haven Consortium in Ukraine with analysis, helmets and flak jackets for local organisations and their volunteers;⁴⁷ and several donors, such as Belgium, the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), FCDO and IrishAid, encouraged intermediary partners to pass on security funds to L/NNGOs or include them as direct programme costs (although one donor reported that partners did not always take up these opportunities).

Interviewees also reported that donors and agencies were increasingly willing to provide insurance if local responders were injured or killed. For example, FCDO and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) explored duty-



of-care packages for Ukrainian local staff, DG ECHO's Protect Aid Workers mechanism allowed local actors to apply for grants and legal support, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement ran benevolent funds for staff. Several international interviewees noted greatest movement on these issues in Ukraine – and, to some extent, with Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan – but without broader expansion to local partners working in other insecure contexts.

Accountability for IHL violations

The protective promise of IHL was brought into question by widespread violations, broad interpretations and a lack of accountability for perpetrators.⁴⁸ A 2025 report from the UN Secretary-General declared that: 'Parties have also distorted the rules of war to the point of justifying immense civilian harm instead of minimizing it ... States and other actors assert which attacks are lawful or unlawful not on the basis of detailed evidence or formal legal judgements but on the basis of whether the party in question was an adversary or not.'⁴⁹

Multilateral structures struggled to curb these multiple attacks on IHL. Key UNSC votes were blocked by permanent members with competing interests, preventing action to reduce suffering in Gaza, Syria and Ukraine.⁵⁰ International courts took some concrete steps:⁵¹ the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas officials for crimes against humanity and war crimes, and the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion that Israel's presence in OPT was illegal and ordered measures to prevent genocide.⁵² However, enacting accountability largely depended on UN member states, who demonstrated limited ability – and perhaps will – to hold perpetrators to account. For example, civil society actors criticised the UK Government for meeting with the Israeli President in 2025 amid calls to uphold the arrest warrant against him,⁵³ and several Western states continued to sell weapons to Israel.



IHL remained an important protective tool but accountability for violations was often a missing lever



Despite widespread challenges in this period, key sector publications and multiple senior humanitarians interviewed for this 2026 SOHS underscored that IHL remained an important protective tool – but that UN member states, plus other actors with the power to influence parties to conflict, must promote respect for IHL as a pressing future priority. Accountability for violations was often a missing lever.⁵⁴



Conclusion

The increase in large-scale armed conflict and attacks on IHL, by both state and non-state actors, increased protection risks for people affected by crisis in this period. Record numbers of attacks against and deaths among aid workers – of which state actors became the gravest perpetrators – made the operating environment for humanitarians markedly more dangerous. National staff consistently paid the heaviest price for attempting to do their job in increasingly dangerous conditions. The humanitarian system recognised the necessity to adapt its security approaches to meet the needs of a changing environment, but progress was hindered by funding cuts as well as a lack of scaling of nascent efforts to invest in local partners' security. Discussions around shared security services and strengthening the role of national NGO forums presented some options to better protect aid workers in financially constrained times. Beyond humanitarian organisations' role in mitigating risks, the period underscored the need for greater political will among UN member states to respect IHL and hold violators accountable. As one humanitarian leader said:



'I think we have to be a little bit more than sad. We have to focus in on its accountability.'

CHAPTER 3.2

UPHOLDING HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

'If this is humanity, then the word has lost its meaning.'

— Palestinian elder, Gaza

*The State of the Humanitarian System 2022 (SOHS)*⁵⁵ warned that the system was in 'a fight for core norms'. That fight was only the beginning of the struggle to conduct principled humanitarian action against the onslaught of intensified challenges in this period. Despite the commitment of frontline staff and volunteers, and the risks they took to adapt in insecure environments, humanitarian efforts struggled to protect lives and human rights on a meaningful scale in several key contexts (including Afghanistan, Gaza, Myanmar and Sudan) and to remain independent from the political interests of powerful actors (including donor governments). Debates over the validity of existing humanitarian principles raised tensions between neutrality and more explicitly political approaches to humanitarian action. The system's inability to effectively uphold its principles amid sharp withdrawal of assistance from people in need and attacks on international humanitarian law (IHL) risked undermining its legitimacy in the eyes of people affected by crisis. This underscored the need for more support for frontline actors and strengthened leadership to meaningfully grapple with the structural and political barriers threatening humanitarian mandates.

Intensified debates on humanitarian principles

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly looked to the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement when it created a set of guiding principles for humanitarian assistance in 1991.⁵⁶ The international humanitarian system continues to formally hold four humanitarian principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence (see [Box 2](#)) – as core standards. In this period, however, debates intensified around their moral value, relevance and practical utility.



Box 2: The humanitarian principles

- **Humanity:** Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.
- **Impartiality:** Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.
- **Neutrality:** Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.
- **Independence:** Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

Source: OCHA (2022), <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/ocha-message-humanitarian-principles-enar>.



61% of survey respondents said that the four principles largely capture what 'principled humanitarian action' meant to them

When we asked local and international humanitarian practitioners whether these four principles capture what 'principled humanitarian action' meant to them, 61% of survey respondents said they 'largely did'.^{ix} This reflects the varied perceptions on principles in this period across our research.

Protecting the four traditional principles has remained core for many humanitarian organisations, particularly those like the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, whose mandates and identity have

historical roots in those principles. As the changing methods of warfare (including cyberattacks) and misinformation have created increased security threats, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) sought to strengthen external perceptions of their neutrality and independence to protect the security of staff and the efficacy of their operations.⁵⁷ Chapter 3.1 underscores the dangers that arise when combatants view humanitarian actors and infrastructure as targets. ICRC viewed the traditional principles as key to securing access, particularly when requiring sovereign governments' permissions in an 'increasingly polarized' world,⁵⁸ and to performing some of its key functions. The ICRC Director-General claimed neutrality enabled the organisation to act as a trusted intermediary in the exchange of detainees and hostages between Israel and Palestine: 'Neutrality does not mean silence; it meant presence, persistence, and an unwavering focus on the people caught between forces beyond their control.'⁵⁹

ix 31% said partially; only 8% said 'not at all'. Results were comparable between international and local actors: 56% of both 'largely' agreed and (4% of local actors said 'not at all', compared to 2% of international actors).



The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has also asserted the continued importance of the four principles for the broader humanitarian system by highlighting them in the 'Defend' pillar of the Humanitarian Reset, which focuses on principles, civilians and humanitarian space.

Some humanitarian organisations with different mandates that work in contested political contexts found the traditional principles more problematic. For some local staff, the top-down nature of the principles made them feel less like fundamental values and more like compliance 'imposed' by their international partners and donors.⁶⁰ For example, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society actors in Ukraine applying for humanitarian funding for the first time reported having to adopt new principles that changed their mandates, including dropping their existing support for military actors.⁶¹ Humanitarian staff in Gaza, Myanmar and Ukraine said it was impractical for humanitarian actors to remain neutral or independent against entities they saw as clear aggressors of conflict or perpetrators of atrocities. A national NGO representative in Ukraine explained:



Humanitarian staff in Gaza, Myanmar and Ukraine said it was impractical for humanitarian actors to remain neutral or independent against entities they saw as clear aggressors



'We are already biased by the fact that we know exactly who our enemy is.'

Another explained that being neutral after Russia's invasion could alienate the people they tried to assist. One local humanitarian actor in Myanmar described assisting members of an armed group:



'Sometimes People's Defence Forces asked for food; we did give, because they are our brothers.'

People affected by crisis did not always agree with international perceptions of principled humanitarian action. They sometimes disagreed with international approaches to 'impartiality' and data-driven methods for targeting assistance to individual households, which could contradict their practices of collective sharing and perceptions of who in their community was vulnerable.⁶² For some communities affected by the climate crisis, principles protecting humanity missed out the environmental ecosystems their lives depended on.⁶³ Local political actors and people affected by crisis were also sometimes suspicious that 'Western' liberalism or other external agendas influenced the neutrality and independence of international humanitarian assistance.⁶⁴ People affected by crisis in Gaza



and Myanmar told us they wanted humanitarian actors to more actively resist oppressive political forces to stop longer-term harm.



The last few years saw greater calls at the policy level for the system to be more politically engaged



While tensions around neutrality and independence among local humanitarian organisations existed in previous SOHS periods, the last few years saw greater calls at the policy level for the system to be more politically engaged. For example, there were debates about whether activist approaches should be considered humanitarian and how organisations should approach publicly naming perpetrators of atrocities.⁶⁵ One commentator said:



'to say something about genocide in the middle of bloody genocide seems to be a breach of [some international actors'] humanitarian principles.'

There were some calls to think about explicitly moving the system away from neutral and independent positions. For example, an ODI Global and Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) advisory panel recommended a stronger focus on justice to support humanity and face growing challenges,⁶⁶ while a *Lancet Commission* report called for the formal adoption of solidarity as a principle, highlighting its links with existing commitments on localisation and accountability.⁶⁷

In practice, applying the existing principles has always required a level of judgement. A Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation review cautioned that, without space for effective judgement and interpretation in context, 'principles risk becoming rigid formulations or performative assertions, rather than practical tools for achieving humanitarian outcomes'.⁶⁸ However, this period saw growing calls for a rethink of the principles, raising questions for what it might mean for organisations that rely on commitments to neutrality and independence for access, safety and influence to coexist alongside actors using more explicitly political approaches to upholding humanity. These may be challenging tensions for the system to navigate in an operating environment increasingly driven by politically complex crises.

Practical progress on principled humanitarian action

Mirroring these debates, survey data indicated uneven upholding of the principles in practice. When asked to rate implementation of the principles in their operating contexts, 78% of surveyed practitioners said implementation of *humanity* was 'excellent' or 'good'; 73% said the same for *impartiality*; 64%

for *neutrality*; and only 54% for *independence* – indeed, 20% rated implementation of *independence* as ‘poor’. Other research also indicated challenges translating the principles into practice: a 2025 review found that international NGOs (INGOs) in Sudan saw the principles as more of a ‘theoretical framework’ than practical operational support,⁶⁹ while a global survey the same year found that, when tested, humanitarians scored substantially higher on *defining* the principles than on questions that required *applying* the principles to real-world scenarios.⁷⁰

When tested, humanitarians scored substantially higher on *defining* the principles than on questions that required *applying* the principles to real-world scenarios

Several guides and trainings aimed to help move the principles from theory to practice, including by Humanitarian Outcomes and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA),⁷¹ but we found relatively few assessments evaluating how organisations integrated or followed them. Those we did find indicated constraints. Evaluations reported that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) lacked systems to monitor how staff understood or adhered to the principles and limited evidence that they informed decision-making by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Yemen.⁷² A HERE–Geneva evaluation found humanitarian actors in Ukraine largely treated the principles as a tick-box exercise to obtain funding, and that international organisations did not meaningfully discuss their contextual relevance with partners. The evaluation stated: ‘Settling for reasonable compromises and sharing these decisions is not a weakness, but a crucial reflection of the principles having been taken into account.’⁷³ A review by the Centre for Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation found that, across agencies, gaps in organisational governance, leadership incentivisation and board oversight negatively influenced the practical operationalisation of the principles.⁷⁴

Given limited available assessments aggregating practical implementation of the principles, we continued to track practical performance over three key areas, discussed in turn.

1. Upholding principles while negotiating access

Domestic political actors were a strong influence on access patterns, sometimes with devastating effects on reaching people in great humanitarian need. Across all six of our country case-study contexts, local and international aid practitioners cited influence from government or de facto authorities. Local staff in Rakhine, Myanmar, contended with influence from the State Administrative Council (SAC) and the Arakan Army, while blockades by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan



and the Israeli government in Gaza severely hindered humanitarian actors' ability to reach large populations. The 2024 International Court of Justice (ICJ) declaration to allow aid into Gaza had limited effect: all 35 agencies that responded to an Oxfam survey in early January 2025 agreed that Israeli procedures continued to impede the response, and 95% of importing agencies reported regular delays to their supplies.⁷⁵ Evaluations also highlighted restrictive domestic influence in Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, the Philippines, Türkiye and Yemen.⁷⁶

Across responses, compromises on impartiality, independence and neutrality were often made to preserve access – what one review called 'principled pragmatism'.⁷⁷ International actors sometimes cooperated with regimes and structures that oppressed parts of the population to gain access in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan and Syria;⁷⁸ their ability to push back varied by actor and context. In Afghanistan, smaller national organisations faced greater challenges in navigating



Compromises on impartiality, independence and neutrality were often made to preserve access – what one review called 'principled pragmatism'



administrative requirements set by the authorities, particularly when they did not have international partners to facilitate registration processes and interactions with relevant authorities. In Sudan, local Emergency Response Rooms stood firm against government pressure to absorb them into a state-run structure that might impede their access to people in non-Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) areas.⁷⁹ In contrast, local humanitarian actors accused international actors of being too aligned with the SAF and of legitimising its governance through their selective engagement at the start of the conflict.⁸⁰

Humanitarian organisations commonly negotiated with de facto authorities or armed actors to secure access, often without clear guidance from donors on whether such engagement was permissible and on their level of organisational protection.⁸¹ Local humanitarian actors in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar and Sudan told us that negotiating – and sometimes cooperating – with armed groups was the only way to reach people in need of assistance and protection in contested contexts. Beyond government authorities, humanitarian organisations operating in Latin America and the Caribbean gained experience of negotiating access with gangs and criminal armed groups.⁸² Research on Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti and Mexico found a range of successful strategies, including passing information or messages through community intermediaries or training staff on how to answer gang leaders' questions about their mandates and activities.⁸³



Engagement with armed groups was not, however, a guarantee to access and acceptance. For example, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) coordination with the government and with the Tigray People's Liberation Front in Ethiopia aroused suspicion from Eritrean refugees, who had been targeted by both in the conflict.⁸⁴ Further, members of the Sudanese Emergency Response Room were concerned that accompaniment by armed groups would limit communities' acceptance of their presence. These examples stress the need for contextually tailored approaches.



Frontline staff, who typically shouldered the burden of negotiation, required more training on navigating tensions over access and principles, more political backing and clearer organisational guidance



Frontline staff, who typically shouldered the burden of negotiation, required more training on navigating tensions over access and principles, more political backing and clearer organisational guidance on 'acceptable levels of compromise'.⁸⁵ In some cases, however, negotiation was constrained by force. One national NGO staff member in Goma said:



'A responsible of an armed group, who was at the distribution site, requested for something from the aid. He was not on the list, so you can imagine you, as [a] humanitarian actor – guns are there – what can you do?'

While pressures on staff often stemmed from the environment, they were sometimes exerted by their own organisations, with negotiators requiring skills but also more space to exercise their judgement and balance competing priorities.⁸⁶ In one study, negotiators reported that new technologies enabled constant communication and demands from multiple layers of internal management that made 'counterparts more entrenched, negotiators more cautious, managers more burnt out, headquarters antsy, and donors more demanding'.⁸⁷

Collective access structures provided some support to individual humanitarian staff and organisations in this period. As discussed in [Chapter 3.3](#), several enabling agencies^x provided guidance and training to international and local actors to strengthen access-negotiation skills. In 2024, Humanitarian Access Working Groups (HAWGs) were active in 25 responses.⁸⁸ Research by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) indicated that, while HAWGs had some positive influence on humanitarian engagement with non-state armed groups and de facto authorities, their overall

^x For example, actors like the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva Call, Centre on Armed Groups and the Centre for Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation.



impact on access was constrained by limited resources to train frontline staff, high turnover of Chairs, lack of local and national NGO (L/NNGO) membership and varying support from humanitarian leadership, including Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs).⁸⁹ Political environments also hindered engagement. For example, several national NGO actors in Afghanistan were uncertain about the level of confidentiality of HAWG mechanisms. Beyond HAWGs, research highlighted national NGO forums as key actors in supporting access in multiple contexts; for example, the Northeast Syria NGO Forum produced analysis and provided training at the area level.⁹⁰

The 2025 funding cuts raised concerns about defunding these access-support structures. Interviewees told us there had already been a reduction in conflict-sensitive resource centres in Sudan and South Sudan, and they noted a growing tendency for organisations to subsume access-support staff and functions under security roles when making reductions. Reflecting on 20 years of working on access that could be relevant for the new constrained system, the Centre on Armed Groups highlighted the role of local NGOs and community-based



It is important to recognise that committed frontline humanitarians adapted, innovated and risked their lives to maintain access to some of the people most in need of assistance

organisations – who have contextual knowledge and trusting relationships with communities. It recommended that international actors move from capacity-building to providing security and political cover for these organisations: ‘Stand behind them when agreements collapse or retaliation occurs.’⁹¹

Despite challenges to the system’s funding and legitimacy in this period, it is important to recognise that committed frontline humanitarians adapted, innovated and risked their lives to maintain access to some of the people most in need of assistance. In Ethiopia and Somalia, L/NNGOs and civil society organisations provided a lifeline to communities

in conflict, even while experiencing trauma themselves.⁹² In Gaza, a local aid coordinator explained the critical contributions of humanitarian staff:



‘[They] assumed roles as negotiators, crisis communicators and on-the-ground protectors, improvising in real time to deliver life-saving aid.’

Humanitarian actors in several contexts maintained access by switching their mode of delivery, including breaking up distribution into smaller batches, employing vendors to conduct difficult deliveries or using cash – rather than convoys of trucks – to reduce physical protection risks. From Myanmar to Palestine to Ukraine, humanitarian actors talked of ‘zero profile strategies’ and pushing



back on donor requests to make their assistance publicly visible. One UN staff member told us:



'We made aid invisible to keep it possible.'

Despite stringent efforts to continue protecting and assisting people affected by crisis in multiple insecure contexts though, the impact of frontline staff was ultimately constrained by factors outside their control. As one local authority in Gaza said:



'Adaptation cannot overcome a political wall.'

2. Maintaining presence while protecting human rights

Successive SOHS reports have documented the humanitarian dilemma of staying quiet to deliver humanitarian assistance versus standing up to protect people's human rights and risking ejection by sovereign states. These risks loomed large in this period, and collective or leadership structures to support individual international and local humanitarian organisations were limited in their presence or effectiveness. Our in-country research highlighted strong failures of human rights protections for people affected by crisis, particularly in Afghanistan, Gaza, Myanmar and Sudan. Evaluations indicated that international actors in contexts like Afghanistan, Northern Ethiopia, Türkiye and Yemen struggled to agree collective 'red lines' for engaging with governments, de facto regimes and parties to conflict accused of oppressing populations,⁹³ while in Yemen agencies that took more vocal stances 'found themselves exposed and alone'.⁹⁴

Local humanitarian staff and people affected by crisis continued to criticise international humanitarian actors for not taking a sufficiently vocal or political stance to protect human rights in several contexts. The state-centric or depoliticised responses of international actors in Gaza, Myanmar and Sudan were criticised for 'propping up systems of injustice and overall suffering of the people'.⁹⁵ Indeed, some internally displaced people in Karenni told us what they needed most from international humanitarian assistance was an arrest warrant for the military junta leader and for countries to stop selling fuel to Myanmar.

International humanitarian actors often struggled to navigate government policies while respecting displaced people's human rights. A review of the



The state-centric or depoliticised responses of international actors in Gaza, Myanmar and Sudan were criticised for 'propping up systems of injustice and overall suffering of the people'





Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) work on internally displaced people indicated that humanitarians required more high-level support from the Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator, through strengthened accountability structures, to push back on states' coercive strategies.⁹⁶ This was echoed in our in-country research. Sudanese NGOs reported international actors staying silent as police used tear gas to clear internally displaced people from schools, and of these actors complying with directives to stop assisting those people, so as to encourage them into camps. One internally displaced man explained:



'The camps were not ready yet, they still had trees and bushes, snakes and insects ... For three months, nothing was given to schools to push people out.'

Local civil society actors in Poland experienced some success having advocated for the government and international partners to extend assistance for Ukrainian refugees to non-Ukrainian people in need. However, there were limits: while non-Ukrainian nationals who had left Ukraine were subsequently included in international humanitarian assistance, Polish government policy restricted support for people fleeing from Belarus to Poland. Several local civil society actors saw this as a double standard. One local NGO staff member said:



'Discussion about principles is just weak, we see it as weak when we think about [the] Belarusian border.'

Humanitarians' inability to protect the rights of large parts of the population was particularly stark in some politically restricted contexts. For example, international actors took varied approaches in Afghanistan as restrictions on women's and girls' rights intensified. While leadership engagement by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, IASC principals and Emergency Directors Group enabled a collective stance on protecting female Afghan staff, agencies largely had to navigate other positions vis-a-vis engaging with the De Facto Authorities (DFA) alone.⁹⁷ As discussed in [Chapter 1.2](#), humanitarians' ability to serve women and girls was limited, while the restrictions imposed by the authorities, funding cuts and a strict NGO re-registration process in 2024 stifled the advocacy – and very presence – of local women-led organisations. Some of these organisations were able to continue programming on women's empowerment through DFA-friendly blended food security and livelihood programmes. Data presented in an Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) report suggested that many women supported the continued presence of international assistance but opposed the DFA policies that affected women and girls.⁹⁸ Some observers questioned whether continued humanitarian engagement – particularly in the absence of stronger public advocacy on issues affecting women – would contribute to the continuity of existing governance structures and policies.⁹⁹



Blockades and sieges represented one of the starkest human rights challenges in this period, with humanitarian advocacy varying by context. UN agencies had no collective access strategy for the Government of Ethiopia's blockade of Northern Ethiopia,¹⁰⁰ while 29 donors made a joint appeal to the RSF to provide access to El Fasher in Sudan.¹⁰¹

Israel's blockade on Gaza elicited a range of advocacy responses. While ICRC maintained its neutrality with the aim of enabling its operations and keeping doors open and dialogue possible,¹⁰² several entities were more vocal – including INGOs (like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), NRC and Oxfam) and other networks and coalitions of civil society actors, for example some Israeli human rights actors.^{xi} However, interviewees said it was local voices from Gaza (including the Palestinian NGO Network) who drove much reporting on famine, water shortages and destruction so:

Blockades and sieges represented one of the starkest human rights challenges in this period

'... the Palestinian narrative during the war reached the entire world.'

For many organisations, being more vocal about human rights came at a cost. Governments and de facto authorities increasingly used bureaucratic and administrative impediments (BAI) to restrict human rights work, affecting timely access and continued presence through technical confusion, insecurity, harassment, intimidation and violence.¹⁰³ These restrictions affected both local and international organisations in multiple contexts. For example, in Afghanistan, in-person re-registration requirements presented challenges for some women leaders who were outside the country, as well as for women-led organisations operating within the existing regulatory environment. In some cases, organisations adapted their leadership and representation arrangements, with men assuming public-facing roles while women continued to contribute to organisational leadership and decision-making.

There were some increased efforts to help humanitarians navigate bureaucratic challenges, including peer-engagement sessions for Myanmar organisations (led by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation)¹⁰⁴ and the IASC Framework for a System-wide Approach on Understanding and Addressing BAI,¹⁰⁵ although research indicated that socialisation of the latter was limited and humanitarians wanted more support from HCTs and HAWGs.¹⁰⁶ Other locally led initiatives emerged, including work by Community World Service Asia to support agencies in Pakistan and the broader region against closing civic space.¹⁰⁷

xi Networks and coalitions of NGOs made joint advocacy statements in favour of ceasefires or against mass starvation (see Aloudat (2025) <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2025/07/28/why-humanitarians-must-act-end-israels-genocide-gaza>; Van Ho (2023) <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2023/11/understanding-the-basics-of-international-humanitarian-law/>; Action Against Hunger et al. (2025) <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/ngos-statement-non-un-document-23jul25/>). Human rights actors in Israel also sought to pressure their government to curb its attacks on Palestinians, with both B'Tselem and Physicians for Human Rights Israel publishing reports that called out the genocide in 2025 (see B'Tselem (2025) https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/publications/202507_our_genocide_eng.pdf; PHR (2025) <https://www.phr.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Genocide-in-Gaza-PHRI-English.pdf>).



One INGO reported being expelled from at least three contexts in this period because they felt a responsibility to speak on human rights abuses when others could not



Israeli bureaucratic and administrative restrictions placed large constraints on international actors in Gaza. The government denied the visas of senior international humanitarians from INGOs and UN agencies; it continually attacked staff of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), its offices and operations; and, in December 2025, issued a notice for all international agencies to re-register and provide detailed information about Palestinian staff – or cease operations.¹⁰⁸ NGOs jointly argued that the level of rejected registrations would collapse

systems already stretched to the brink.^{xii} Fears of such system collapse sometimes tempered the actions of more vocal organisations in different humanitarian contexts. One INGO reported being expelled from at least three contexts in this period because they felt a responsibility to speak on human rights abuses when others could not, but they were quieter in contexts where few other INGOs were present to deliver assistance.

The 2022 SOHS found that high-level advocacy for respecting international norms appeared to be at a low point. The 2022–25 period revealed an even greater need to shore up not only advocacy but the political levers that could add more tangible pressure and accountability on human rights violators. Some donors continued to invest in operational partners' protection advocacy, such as the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations' (DG ECHO) support for UN agencies and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, while an IASC Principals Collective Advocacy pilot was launched in 2023.¹⁰⁹ UN advocacy against atrocities in contexts like Gaza and Sudan was particularly scrutinised. While UN processes were slower to recognise the genocide in Gaza than civil society groups, some UN leaders made strong public statements against growing atrocities.¹¹⁰ For example, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher delivered a speech to the UN Security Council in May 2025 that marked a step-change in language: 'Israel denies us access, placing the objective of depopulating Gaza before the lives of civilians. It is bad enough that the blockade continues. How do you react when Israeli Ministers boast of it? ... Will you act – decisively – to prevent genocide and to ensure respect for international humanitarian law?'¹¹¹

Humanitarian actors, however, are not solely responsible for upholding human rights in contexts affected by crisis. The Commissioner General of the UNRWA underscored the limits of individual agencies' efforts to protect staff and

xii Israel's suspension of Gaza aid NGOs will have deadly consequences. While outside the study period, there were some signs in 2026 that the Israeli High Court would push back on expulsion attempts (see Oxfam (2026) <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/reaction-israeli-high-court-grants-urgent-request-19-humanitarian-organisations>; see also ACF et al. (2026) <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/53-international-ngos-warn-israels-recent-registration-measures-will-impede-critical-humanitarian-action>).



mandates without member states holding perpetrators accountable.¹¹² In this period, Global-Majority governments played some of the strongest roles in standing up against such abuses.¹¹³ For example, in December 2023 South Africa submitted the case to the ICJ that Israel was acting with intent to commit genocide in Gaza,¹¹⁴ and in January 2025 several states created the Hague Group (with South Africa and Colombia as co-chairs) to defend international law and solidarity with the people of Palestine.^{xiii} It is also notable that an ICRC Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law was jointly launched in 2024, with representation from Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan and South Africa.¹¹⁵

3. Preserving independence from donor interests

Beyond in-country conditions and local political influence, the domestic politics and foreign-policy goals of humanitarian donor governments continued to influence both allocations of assistance and the humanitarian actors who delivered it.

Reductions in government donor funding forced humanitarians to make tough decisions over who to support, which made it difficult to fulfil commitments to humanity and impartiality. Meanwhile, donor countries' self-interested approach to assistance (identified in previous SOHS reports as a barrier to neutral and independent humanitarian action) became more overt. Early in the period, disproportionate funding for the Ukraine crisis over larger-scale humanitarian crises like Sudan underscored the interests of Western parliaments and publics in crises that were directly tied to their own security or felt close to home. Despite the broader cuts, several European donors told us that parliamentary pressures meant their budgets for Ukraine would remain high in 2026.

Donor countries' self-interested approach to assistance became more overt

New foreign policy from the United States raised concerns among commentators and many senior humanitarians we spoke to that new pledges would be skewed towards US interests and subject to strong geographic and diversity, equity and inclusion restrictions, potentially threatening the impartiality of assistance.¹¹⁶ However, at the time of writing, new US funding pledged to OCHA has been exempt from the restrictive Protecting Human Flourishing in Foreign Assistance policy.¹¹⁷

As discussed in [Chapter 1.1](#), Gulf donors in this period often targeted their funding to humanitarian crises in their close geographical region rather than addressing broader humanitarian needs. They also tended to channel funding through governments rather than civil society. Some people affected by crisis in Sudan told

xiii See <https://thehaguegroup.org/home/>



us of their suspicions that funds from Qatar and Saudi Arabia that flowed through the government were not always used impartially to support humanitarian needs. Chinese humanitarian funding has been harder to track; some research suggests that, while there have been recent evolutions in China's humanitarian approaches, its efforts remain tied to diplomatic objectives.¹¹⁸ When China responded rapidly to the 2025 earthquake in Myanmar, the reactions of other humanitarian actors in the country were mixed. Some NGO staff told us China's support was directed to areas with a higher population of Chinese speakers, but they recognised that this may have been directed more by the State Administrative Council than by China itself. One INGO respondent said:



'China was quite proactive in the earthquake situation. I think we also need to give them some credit at this part. Of course, they also have their own interests.'

While the self-interested nature of some donor states may have become more overt, political interests around security remained an obstacle to both the independence of assistance and the protection of people affected by crisis. At the UN Security Council, Russia continued to veto access to Syria and resolutions on Ukraine, the US consistently vetoed ceasefire resolutions for Gaza,¹¹⁹ and other protracted crises (like Myanmar, Ethiopia and Venezuela) received little attention. Donor governments were also implicated in funding armed actors that perpetuated conflict: Russia was the leading supplier of weapons to the Assad regime in Syria;¹²⁰ China provided economic support to Russia's war in Ukraine;¹²¹ Iran and Russia provided weapons to the Sudanese Armed Forces;¹²² Saudi Arabia continued to channel weapons to the RSF in Sudan and armed groups in Yemen;¹²³ British-manufactured weapons were discovered in RSF hands;¹²⁴ and the US and several European states continued to sell weapons to Israel following the ICJ ruling on provisional measures to protect Palestinians from genocide. While some countries have since stopped, the US continued to support Israel with arms supplies and deployment of forces throughout 2025.¹²⁵ The provision of arms and weapons with high risk of harm to civilians was a growing concern, including with regards to Ukraine's use of cluster bombs supplied by Germany.¹²⁶ There were concerns in this period from human rights scholars that the power of the 'responsibility to protect' norm to protect civilians from atrocity was being hollowed out, with a greater focus on state sovereignty.¹²⁷

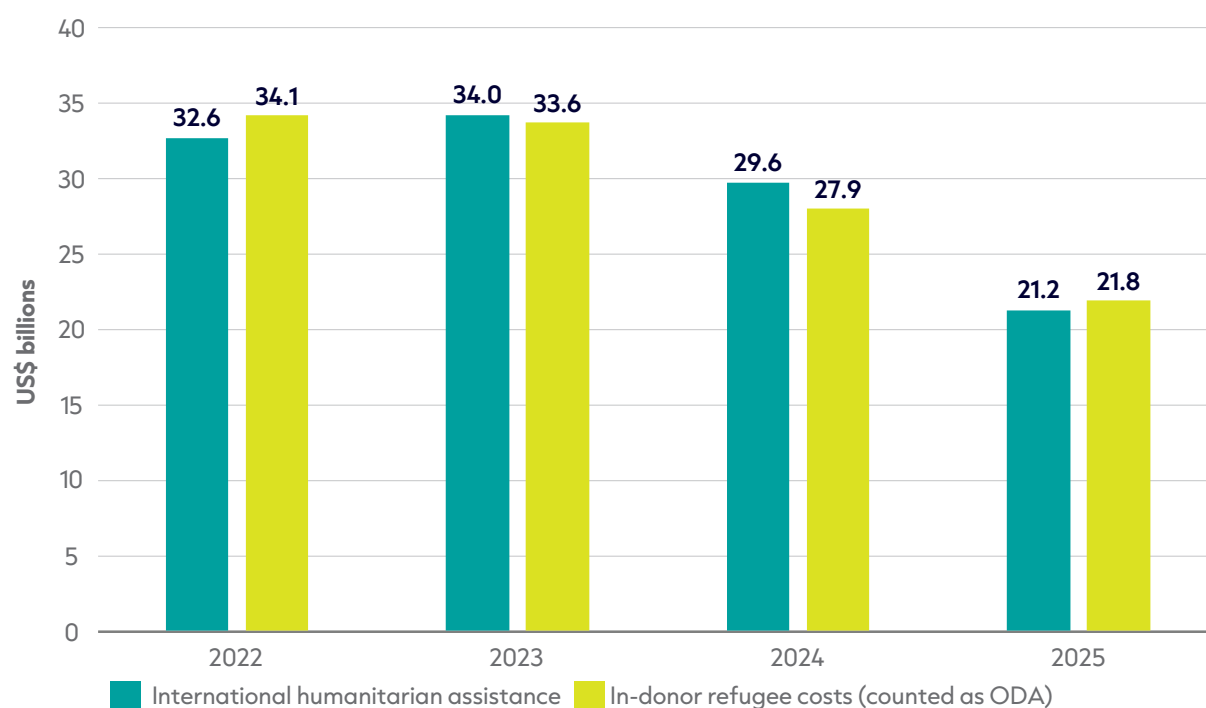
Donor strategies also remained tied to domestic migration concerns.¹²⁸ Research highlighted increasingly blurred lines between assistance from donors, military support and border management.¹²⁹ While 'whole of government approaches' could be consistent with cohesion across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, they could risk tying humanitarian work too closely with domestic migration



objectives.¹³⁰ For example, the US Collaborative Migration Management Strategy provided assistance to Central American countries while also providing UNHCR with funding to support Guatemala and Mexico's asylum systems.¹³¹

In this study period, donors also classed a significant amount of their in-donor refugee costs (IDRC) as official development assistance (ODA), crowding out additional international assistance. While aggregate amounts for international humanitarian assistance (IHA) were slightly higher than IDRC, IDRC consistently exceeded total IHA from 32 Development Assistant Committee (DAC) donors each year from 2022 to 2025 (see Figure 3.7). The three largest reporters of IDRC were the US, Germany and the United Kingdom. For Germany, Canada and Italy, the IDRC spent domestically was at least double the amount of IHA these countries provided in 2025.

Figure 3.7: In-country refugee costs (IDRC) counted as ODA compared to IHA for DAC donors, 2022–2025



Source: ALNAP analysis, based on data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) DAC, OCHA's Financial Tracking Services (FTS) and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).

Notes: 2025 data is preliminary. European Union (EU) institutions and Australia are excluded from the calculations and from this graph as both are the only DAC members that do not report any in-country refugee costs as ODA. Data is in constant 2024 prices.



Evaluations and studies found that donor states' counterterrorism policies and finance or trade sanctions had negative effects on NGOs in this period. Global Interagency Security Forum research concluded that donors had shifted 'the burden of responsibility on[to] the humanitarian sector to demonstrate compliance and reliability primarily as allies in counterterrorism efforts, rather than as neutral and principled partners'.¹³² Effects included reduced efficiency

due to delays, inability to import dual-use items and interrupted funding and programming for people affected by crisis.¹³³ Restrictions disproportionately fell on organisations representing women and girls; religious or ethnic minorities; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex or other gender identities (LGBTQI+).¹³⁴ Examples from our in-country research described these impacts and the lack of uniform approaches to compliance.

A nutrition-cluster representative in Afghanistan told us of donor reluctance to fund Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis if the DFA were involved, and a local NGO representative in Palestine recounted donor reactions following Hamas's attacks on Israel on 7 October:



'A major shock is that we began receiving messages from some donors informing us that they were suspending their funding ... Direct sanctions [were] imposed on people.'



Donors also classed a significant amount of their in-donor refugee costs as official development assistance



Some progress was made in this period to relieve some regulatory restrictions associated with counter-terrorism policies and sanctions, including the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2664 in 2022,^{xiv} changes to the Financial Action Task Force Recommendation 8 for non-profit organisations^{xv} and new EU Council exemptions.¹³⁵ While some organisations saw these steps as helpful, problems remained due to inconsistency between international and domestic approaches and limited understanding – among both humanitarians and financial institutions – on navigating these challenges.¹³⁶ Donors and agencies made some efforts to make sense of these processes: NRC produced a toolkit on managing sanctions and counterterrorism risks;¹³⁷ the Dutch government continued to convene a successful roundtable initiative on financial access for non-profit organisations;¹³⁸ the demining sector shared learning on importing equipment that could be considered military and dual-use;¹³⁹ and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) guidance on Syria brought together and clarified restrictions and safeguards under sanctions, counterterrorism and export controls.¹⁴⁰ To build on emerging good practice, however, more cross-sector dialogue and trust-building between financial and humanitarian actors are needed.¹⁴¹

Donors tried to reduce the impact of some of these influences for operational agencies, including around sanctions, but more collaboration is required to support principled humanitarian action. Existing donor coordination structures held limited promise. For example, a 20-year review of the Good Humanitarian

xiv Known as the 'humanitarian carve out' (see UN (2022) <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/sres2664-2022>).

xv Recommendation 8 stated that 'countries should identify the organisations which fall within the [Financial Action Task Force] definition of non-profit organisations (NPOs) and assess their terrorist financing risks'. The amendments were designed to address the misapplication and misinterpretation of Recommendation 8, which had led countries to apply disproportionate measures on non-profit organisations.

Donorship Initiative (GHDI) highlighted strengthening adherence to humanitarian principles and IHL as a common future goal, but it found a lack of direction within the GHDI's purpose and activities, and difficulty maintaining consensus and momentum in an increasingly diverse group. Donors saw smaller informal gatherings on specific common issues as more effective vehicles for progressing issues than the GHDI.¹⁴² Such spaces are now particularly important for donors to collectively reflect on changes caused by the cuts and the Humanitarian Reset and how they can drive forward a more principled system in a challenging context.

In practice, the system came up against huge challenges in upholding its principles

Conclusion

At the policy level, the 2022–25 period was characterised by debates on whether humanitarian principles were fit for purpose and whether – and how – to employ varying levels of neutrality, independence, solidarity or justice in pursuit of humanity. Tensions were exposed between organisations dependent on neutrality for their operations and those calling for a greater focus on solidarity and justice as humanitarian principles. In practice, the system came up against huge challenges in upholding its principles. Operational organisations' efforts to support people with humanity and impartiality were undermined by governments' and de facto regimes' increasingly repressive policies, their political blockades of large numbers of people experiencing vulnerability and their growing responsibility for attacks on aid workers, as well donor states' drive towards greater self-interest.

Frontline staff, volunteers and operational agencies proved their ability to adapt and evolve to reach people, system support structures sought to ease access, and several local and international humanitarian organisations publicly advocated for the rights and lives of people affected by crisis. But accountability for supporting humanitarian principles was missing at the structural level: powerful states exerted little pressure on perpetrators of human rights abuses and atrocities.

The gaps in this period indicate that the humanitarian system requires stronger leadership at country, UN and donor levels to support individual humanitarian actors to determine and navigate red lines of engagement – and to provide political backing when attempts to uphold their principles put them at risk. Progressing on these issues is important if humanitarians are to repair the system's dented legitimacy in the eyes of people affected by crisis. As one Palestinian elder in Gaza told us:



'If this is humanity, then the word has lost its meaning.'

CHAPTER 3.3

PARTNERSHIPS FOR PRINCIPLES AND PROTECTION

'Humanitarian work, civilian protection, and local governance are inherently interconnected ... donor mandates keep these sectors isolated.'

— *Local humanitarian actor, Myanmar*

The scale of protection and access challenges in this period highlighted the need for the humanitarian system to build partnerships across its own sectors and with local structures, diplomatic functions, peace actors and the private sector. Some promising approaches gained more traction, such as community-based protection; other relationships, particularly with private security actors, created additional risks that required humanitarians to develop new knowledge and guardrails. Protection actors advocated for the system to focus on protection in the Humanitarian Reset and to work not only on response but on threats – an important strategy in the face of sectoral funding cuts and reduced international presence. Operational agencies and donors heightened their focus on humanitarian diplomacy, with the aim of improving armed actors' respect for protective norms and access, which required stronger collaboration and shared learning for several actors. At the end of the study period, humanitarians contemplated new mechanisms to measure adherence to international humanitarian law (IHL) and hold states accountable for violations to reduce impunity.

Collaborating for protection

[Chapter 2.1](#) highlights some outcomes of protection programming in this period. However, protection is not the role of a single sector. Since 2013, the international humanitarian system has committed to the 'Centrality of Protection'; that is, making protection the 'purpose and intended outcome of humanitarian action'.¹⁴³ Despite progress since the last *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS)¹⁴⁴ and the work of strong advocates, significant progress is still required to achieve that goal.



The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force One on Centrality of Protection and a subsequent Community of Practice progressed several recommendations¹⁴⁵ of the IASC's critical report, *The Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action 2022*.¹⁴⁶ This included communicating the meaning and importance of the Centrality of Protection to country coordination structures, with the aim of ensuring that country-level planning and response implementation better considered protection. Under the leadership of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and InterAction, the group produced an action plan, toolkit, *aide memoire* and benchmarks for Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) Centrality of Protection implementation, including a measurement framework to encourage outcome-oriented strategies at the country level.¹⁴⁷ The Global Protection Cluster also stepped up its focus on analysis capabilities and advocacy to enable HCTs to identify and plan for protection risks.

Available evaluations, which did not capture the effects of those recent efforts, showed continued gaps. A recent Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) synthesis indicated that the Centrality of Protection principle remained 'widely misunderstood',¹⁴⁸ while its evaluation of the collective response in Northern Ethiopia showed that a focus on food security resulted in a failure to address high levels of gender-based violence (GBV).¹⁴⁹ There were also challenges translating analysis into practice. In Somalia, biannual Centrality of Protection strategies and formal intersectoral risk analysis failed to translate into people affected by crisis reporting improved protection outcomes.¹⁵⁰ Evaluations also indicated that the lack of country-level leadership on protection highlighted in the last SOHS study period continued.¹⁵¹ Indeed, multiple protection experts told us that Humanitarian Coordinators prioritised other issues or shied away from tackling protection due to either lack of understanding or a sense that there were too many components to address.

Some experts were hopeful that the tools created in this period might make planning and tracking less daunting, but they were unsure whether Humanitarian Reset plans for more empowered Humanitarian Coordinators would help or hinder a focus on the Centrality of Protection. One interviewee suggested that more pressure from the Emergency Relief Coordinator and donors could be required to ensure Humanitarian Coordinators are held accountable for prioritising the Centrality of Protection.

Protection actors continued to stress that other sectors needed to take responsibility for protection. This became more pressing in this period due to large-scale funding cuts – which, in a traditionally poorly funded sector, could reduce humanitarian agencies' operating footprint and funding for protection-specific activities.¹⁵² In late 2025, the United States announced cuts to UN protection architecture, including (among others) UN Women and the Special Representative



on Children and Armed Conflict.¹⁵³ Aid practitioners and people affected by crisis in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Palestine, Sudan and Ukraine all reported the effects of cuts to protection programming.

This was disappointing in comparison to some progress that had been made. Aid practitioners in DRC and Sudan, for example, told us that protection programming had become more central to the humanitarian response in recent years and that a growing number of organisations were working on psychosocial support, GBV case identification and child-friendly spaces, or on integrated protection and livelihoods programming. Several of these programmes had been linked to community structures or, in the case of Sudan, to government services.

Pockets of progress were made on cross-sector work at the coordination level in this period. For example, a multi-actor initiative developed a resource pack to support protection risk analysis in food security and livelihoods,¹⁵⁴ the Global Protection Cluster and Global Health Cluster created a Joint Operational Framework linking health and protection outcomes,¹⁵⁵ and the Food Security and Protection Clusters held joint workshops in Sudan and Syria throughout 2025 to explore how to operationalise protection in their work.

There were also organisational attempts to mainstream protection: the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action developed guidance on cash and voucher assistance in child protection,¹⁵⁶ while an evaluation of UNHCR found that it successfully mitigated GBV risks and mainstreamed GBV work in sectors like shelter, water and sanitation – especially when using multifunctional sector teams.¹⁵⁷ However, our evaluation synthesis indicated that, on the whole, successful mainstreaming was uneven and influenced by context, leadership communication, resources and accountability.^{xvi} A review of the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans (HNRPs) also found that protection risks were not sufficiently integrated into priority lifesaving strategic objectives, noting that ‘many key activities to address protection risks are either in the protection-specific [strategic objectives] or fall outside the scope of HNRPs’.¹⁵⁸

Some protection experts noted a particular need to integrate protection concerns into food security, given that it will likely continue to be the best-funded and most present sector in a system increasingly focused on lifesaving. At the end of 2025, the World Food Programme (WFP) began more seriously grappling with how, in places of high needs, providing less assistance to fewer people may pose risks to protection and social cohesion.¹⁵⁹ Ad hoc examples in this period also indicated that, in constrained circumstances, food provision was naturally becoming a site of protection activities; for example, interviewees reported that frontline staff at food-distribution points in Gaza were identifying vulnerabilities and trying to provide support.

xvi ALNAP commissioned evaluation synthesis. See [Methodology](#).



In the face of the 2025 funding cuts, humanitarian operational, research and donor actors conducted strong collective advocacy for protection to be included as a key lifesaving function in the Humanitarian Reset. While protection issues are now included in the 'Defend' pillar, protection advocates remained concerned about practical commitments. A coalition of academic, practitioner and policy actors offered three main recommendations in a policy brief to achieve the best protection outcomes in a reduced sector: 'ensure it is proactively focused on reducing civilian harm; demonstrate the impact of limited resources for preventing abuses on reducing civilian harm and need; focus on the most relevant actions that communities are requesting to improve their safety and security.'¹⁶⁰

These suggestions require protection actors, their partners and their funders to act differently and navigate some potential tensions. As the policy brief put it, focusing on reducing and preventing harm 'requires overcoming barriers within the humanitarian business model, including the obsession with "numbers reached" (regardless of little to no impact), rigid programme design norms, and high levels of risk aversion.'¹⁶¹

Indeed, reviewed evaluations found that the prominent approach was remedial (responding after the protection issue has occurred), apart from limited exceptions in unexploded-ordnance clearance and some child- and refugee-protection programmes.¹⁶² Some promising preventative examples included Start Network's anticipatory-funding mechanisms for conflict and displacement crises, which the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs funded,¹⁶³ and a Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Nonviolent Peaceforce Alliance for Peacebuilding analytical framework, which aimed to proactively reduce risks and interrupt violence through community-based approaches.¹⁶⁴

New approaches also required stronger engagement with how communities perceive protection risks and strategies. It was clear from our in-country research that communities found ways to protect themselves beyond what the humanitarian system could offer. In Myanmar, for example, communities dug bunkers near schools to mitigate against airstrike risks. In Sudan, internally displaced people formed voluntary community-based protection networks within camps to report threats, facilitate confidential referrals and offer round-the-clock psychosocial support.



It was clear from our in-country research that communities found ways to protect themselves beyond what the humanitarian system could offer



Funding cuts illuminated the importance of collaborating with sustainable, locally based structures; indeed, one protection expert suggested that loss of access could make supporting community-based protection the *only* way to maintain



a protection response. Evaluations and literature highlighted several promising community-based protection approaches where international actors (including Islamic Relief, NRC, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and Oxfam) offered support, such as negotiation training or establishing early-warning mechanisms, in contexts like Colombia, DRC, Syria, South Sudan and Yemen.¹⁶⁵ One internally displaced person in Gedaref, Sudan, highlighted the role of camp-based protection networks:



'Everyone in the camp knows that these people are part of the protection network ... they train them on how to report ... some organisation personnel give the [internally displaced people] their own personal phone numbers to contact them in cases of emergency.'

However, a member of an Emergency Response Room explained that working through communities also held risks:



'They have to deal with the critical situation in a very diplomatic and delicate way ... members of the [protection] committees were harassed and sometime arrested by the [Rapid Support Forces].'

While supporting community structures is important, protection experts warned that a lack of international presence had already undermined some protection strategies and points of leverage that communities did not have at their disposal. Reduced funding and increased conflict in this period also undermined state referral systems for GBV and child protection that had been important for integrated and sustained support in some of our case-study contexts, like Sudan. These changes underscored the need for humanitarians to work better with not only communities but also across the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus.

Donors continue to have an important role in upholding protection in a constrained environment, including by encouraging partners to consider protection and risk reduction in all aspects of programming. The Protection Donor Group has already been important in driving forward more cohesive messaging on protection among a subset of donors, and it could also be important in maintaining pressure to practically integrate protection into the Humanitarian Reset – both at the programming and IHL advocacy levels.¹⁶⁶ For example, some donors we spoke to were considering how best to support newly empowered Humanitarian Coordinators to overcome identified gaps on protection leadership at the response level.



Diplomacy and political engagement

At its core, humanitarian diplomacy aims to influence key decision-makers to act in the interests of people in (or vulnerable to) crisis and to respect humanitarian principles.¹⁶⁷ Driven by the scale of IHL violations and access restrictions in this period, humanitarian diplomacy gained prominence as a topic in conferences, panel discussions and strategy documents;¹⁶⁸ yet there were varied interpretations of what the term meant, its objectives and the actors and methods involved.

At the operational level, [Chapter 3.2](#) outlines multiple instances of frontline staff, civil society groups, non-governmental organisation (NGO) leadership and HCTs practising humanitarian diplomacy by engaging with governments, de facto authorities and armed groups, with the aim of influencing access and human rights outcomes. System support organisations like the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva Call, the Centre on Armed Groups and the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (among others) provided advice, guidance and convening opportunities to support humanitarian diplomacy efforts in this period. One leader of a support organisation reported an uptick in requests for their support, from both operational agencies and donors, in response to growing access restrictions and IHL violations.

NGOs were also active in advocacy in IHL violations in contexts like Gaza, Myanmar and Sudan and provided contextual information to political actors. For example, a group of NGO and human rights actors monitored movements around Al Fasher, Sudan, and acted as an early-warning advocacy system for international governments, including to the US during President Biden's administration, to bring greater pressure on abuses through engagement with the United Arab Emirates. Meanwhile, ICRC's negotiations supported the release of people detained (by state and non-state actors) in multiple contexts, such as Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Thailand and Yemen.¹⁶⁹

Despite attacks on their power and legitimacy in this period, the UN was also active in humanitarian diplomacy. For example, the 2022 UN-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative brought humanitarian and commercial interests together to enable the export of grain from Ukraine,¹⁷⁰ although diplomacy was unable to prevent Russia from withdrawing from the agreement in 2023.¹⁷¹ Other collective wins for humanitarian access included the adoption of UN Security Council Resolutions 2664 on sanctions^{xvii} and 2730 on protecting humanitarians in May

xvii This Resolution emphasised that sanctions measures are not intended to have adverse humanitarian consequences for civilian populations or humanitarian activities, nor for those carrying out the latter (see UN (2022) <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/sres2664-2022>).



2024.^{xviii} The two Emergency Relief Coordinators in this period were vocal and negotiated on multiple issues, including with the Taliban to lift bans on female humanitarian staff in Afghanistan, with Israel to maintain access by international NGOs (INGOs) and with UN member states on preventing genocide in Gaza.¹⁷² The Humanitarian Reset included respect for IHL under its 'Defend' pillar and the UN80 reforms created the Collaborative Humanitarian Diplomacy Initiative. However, at the time of writing, questions remain over how these initiatives will implement commitments and contribute to greater accountability for upholding IHL and to enabling humanitarian action.



**This was a period
of humanitarian
diplomacy failures**

Overall, this was a period of humanitarian diplomacy failures: parties to conflict remained unwilling to concede to humanitarian access, including in the face of famine in Gaza and in Al Fasher, and they continued to perpetrate IHL violations against civilians and aid workers.

The outcomes of humanitarian diplomacy ultimately rely on the actions of political decision-makers and the willingness of parties to conflict to adhere to IHL, enable access or pause hostilities. While not directly responsible for the retrenchment of norms, the legitimacy of the humanitarian system and its ability to operate were dented, requiring humanitarians to more effectively engage in advocacy and political influence to create stronger levers of accountability.¹⁷³

Many operational actors looked to humanitarian donors to influence their countries' political apparatus to better support IHL and access – and many donors did make efforts to engage. For example, while donors like Ireland and Spain already had a strong humanitarian diplomacy focus, Belgium and Sweden introduced humanitarian diplomacy as a priority in their new humanitarian strategies launched in 2025.¹⁷⁴ Several donors told us about their renewed commitments to funding system-support actors who specialise in building the humanitarian diplomacy capacity of operational partners. Others more directly supported their operational partners. For example, the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) produced a practitioner guide on food security and IHL,¹⁷⁵ and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) began funding a hub with the Swiss Red Cross that supported the Red Cross movement on mis-, dis- and false information.

To strengthen support for humanitarian diplomacy initiatives, research highlighted the value of convening multiple government actors in a coalition of diplomatic colleagues, the military and relevant thematic ministries – such as agriculture to tackle hunger as a weapon of war.¹⁷⁶ Some actors focused their

^{xviii} This Resolution concerned the protection of humanitarian, UN and associated personnel, as well as their premises and assets (see Security Council Report (2025) <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-04/protection-of-humanitarian-and-un-personnel-2.php>).



efforts on training and providing context updates to diplomatic counterparts. For example, the British Red Cross worked with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to update an IHL handbook for parliamentarians,¹⁷⁷ and FCDO trained diplomats on humanitarian principles. The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) told us they found that creating a cross-stakeholder working group – including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the UN directorate, the Ministry of Defence, NGOs and Red Cross members – helped to operationalise Spain's 2023–26 humanitarian diplomacy strategy,¹⁷⁸ and they have since shared lessons learned with donors who are newer to humanitarian diplomacy.

We found significant gaps in collective learning because several humanitarian donors and operational agencies we spoke to were grappling with strategic humanitarian diplomacy for the first time. Research provided few clear indications of which methods worked best – partly because strategies can encompass a wide range of approaches at different levels, but also because diplomatic efforts often happened behind closed doors.¹⁷⁹ A study by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation found that common enablers of effective diplomacy included compromise, flexibility, trust-building and creating networks of diverse actors,¹⁸⁰ while an NRC review found that barriers included gaps in Humanitarian Coordinator leadership and a lack of understanding of humanitarian principles among humanitarian staff.¹⁸¹ Given that implementing the Humanitarian Reset will empower Humanitarian Coordinators as leaders, it will be important to support them to better engage with diplomacy and protection.

Interviewees and commentary also highlighted a need for humanitarians to better adapt to the shifting geopolitical landscape and players, raising the question of how more explicitly transactional approaches to ending conflict may affect humanitarian diplomacy.¹⁸² Humanitarians seeking greater influence over outcomes may also need to consider that those who exert the most influence over parties to conflict or who engage directly in peace negotiations may not be the 'Western' states they most commonly interact with; research highlighted the negotiating roles played by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Türkiye and Qatar in this period.¹⁸³ Research also underscored a growing role for non-state actors – including civil society, transnational advocacy networks and diaspora groups



There were missed opportunities for making humanitarian diplomacy efforts and objectives more grounded in the voices, experiences and capacities of communities affected by conflict





– in putting pressure on parties to conflict.¹⁸⁴ But at both country and global levels, there were missed opportunities for making humanitarian diplomacy efforts and objectives more grounded in the voices, experiences and capacities of communities affected by conflict.¹⁸⁵

One of the biggest missing levers in this period (and discussed in [Chapters 3.1](#) and [3.2](#)) was the lack of political accountability for perpetrators of IHL violations and atrocities. The *Lancet Commission* report, analysis by Researching the Impact of Attacks on Healthcare (RIAH) and several senior humanitarians we spoke to all underscored the need for stronger measurement and reporting structures to increase states' accountability and ensure consequences for perpetrators.¹⁸⁶ While some states already publish voluntary reports on IHL compliance, the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, launched in 2024, has sought to introduce more concrete commitments and transparency. At the time of writing, it had 111 state participants, engaged over 130 states in discussions and had created a set of working groups to develop concrete and practical recommendations to strengthen respect for IHL.¹⁸⁷ Beyond self-reporting, state action is needed to take political action against perpetrators. As an Oxfam report warned, 'Unless there are consequences for violations, humanitarian diplomacy risks reinforcing cycles of impunity rather than halting them'.¹⁸⁸

Engagement with peace and security actors

Humanitarians are not the only actors involved in diplomatic efforts to protect people affected by conflict. Over this period, continued deteriorations in the Global Peace Index and growth in new and protracted conflicts highlighted the need for humanitarians and peace actors to work more collaboratively and effectively.¹⁸⁹ In the words of one senior adviser: 'The solution to a protracted humanitarian crisis in an unresolved conflict is not just more aid. It has to also include more peace.'¹⁹⁰

As conflict increased, international peace funding decreased. Even before the 2025 cuts, data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recorded a reduction of peace spending to countries included in the *Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) 2025*: from US\$16.9 billion in 2023 to US\$14.7 billion in 2024.^{xix} Funding for countries in the *GHO 2025* was highly concentrated in Ukraine, which accounted for 63.5% of all peace finance to those countries.^{xx} Most peace funding supported the public sector, governance and civic

xix ALNAP commissioned thematic analysis on humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus and climate financing. See [Methodology](#). Calculated using OECD Common Reporting Standard data in 2023 constant prices.

xx After Ukraine, the largest recipients were Bangladesh, DRC, Colombia, Nigeria and Somalia. Together, with Ukraine, these six countries accounted for 75.9% of all peace finance captured here.



participation; just 14.5% was spent on 'core' peace activities like peace-building, conflict and security-related interventions.^{xxi} Peace funding also remained largely siloed from humanitarian streams,¹⁹¹ as a local humanitarian actor in Myanmar explained:



'Humanitarian work, civilian protection, and local governance are inherently interconnected ... donor mandates keep these sectors isolated.'

These separations can limit the transformative potential of HDP nexus approaches by reducing flexibility, joint planning and strategic multiphase approaches (see [Chapter 5.1](#) for a broader discussion of the HDP nexus).¹⁹²



There was a disconnect between how international structures coordinated peace and humanitarian work versus more organic community-based programming

Other barriers to joint peace and humanitarian work stubbornly persisted in this period, with peace remaining the least-integrated pillar of the HDP nexus.¹⁹³ There was a continued disconnect between how international structures coordinated peace and humanitarian work versus the more organic programming of local community-based actors.¹⁹⁴ In an IASC mapping of HDP nexus good practice, HCT actors cited few examples of practical peace programming, while local and national actors frequently cited peace and governance programmes they were implementing

as connecting with humanitarian aims.¹⁹⁵ Practical examples included early-warning systems for disasters and conflict in Burundi, social cohesion in displacement programming in Pakistan, and mental-health and psychosocial support programmes in Ukraine.¹⁹⁶ A national NGO in Goma, DRC, described one programme:



'Children from different tribes who were maybe fighting, they find themselves in the same peace club, where they sensitised and they become actors, now they hold the same message of peace in the families, meaning behind humanitarian assistance, behind development programm[ing], peace sections are also included in the community.'

Several international NGOs also reported engaging in community-focused joint humanitarian–peace programming in this period.¹⁹⁷ For example, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue supported collaborations between community

xxi ALNAP commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing. Calculated using OECD Common Reporting Standard data.



leaders and faith-based organisations in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to reduce intercommunal tensions.¹⁹⁸ To build acceptance and sustainability, the Nonviolent Peaceforce designed programmes built on approaches that communities already used to protect themselves: their Myanmar staff worked with local civilian networks to negotiate ceasefires and support the evacuation of over 6,200 people, while their Unarmed Civilian Protection programming achieved successes in Ukraine, the Philippines and South Sudan by addressing conflict as it emerged, rather than trying to build peace after a period of instability. These approaches were in line with the proactive and community-based engagement that humanitarian protection actors have promoted.^{xxii} Some new initiatives also emerged to strengthen humanitarian–peace connections; for example, NORCAP, the Humanitarian Policy Group and the Network on Humanitarian Action launched a Belgian-funded Consortium for Civilian Safety and Security to improve how humanitarian, peace-building and community actors work together on protection.¹⁹⁹

Conflict sensitivity, however, remained a challenge for many humanitarian responses. While 2024 IASC mapping found increased use of conflict sensitivity and ‘do no harm’ analysis in planning across a sample of 11 HCTs, its adoption was not systematic; the IAHE of the Yemen response, for example, found no evidence that conflict-sensitive approaches informed programming.²⁰⁰ Some

initiatives tried to bridge gaps; for example, International Alert created guidance to help humanitarian actors better integrate conflict sensitivity and peace into their work,²⁰¹ and Saferworld’s research and information facilities in South Sudan and Sudan provided conflict-sensitivity support for humanitarian actors.²⁰²



Social-cohesion programming grew in this period, but yielded mixed results



Social-cohesion programming grew in this period, with the aim of addressing some of the negative effects of humanitarian action on conflict (discussed in the 2022 SOHS), but it yielded mixed results. Some randomised controlled trials found that humanitarian action had positive social-cohesion effects. For example, in Uganda, Young African Refugees for Integral Development provided a cash grant that – coupled with education messages about how aid-sharing meant that funding refugees helped to fund local services – reportedly led to improvements on a range of indicators (including an 11–18% increase in supporting refugees’ right to work) which lasted for over two years.²⁰³ In contrast, a two-year ODI Global research project advised that ‘aid actors avoid addressing social cohesion as a primary objective unless their interventions meet four requirements’, namely

xxii Nonviolent Peaceforce has collaborated with Safer Space to launch the Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) Academy to share learning on this practice (see Nonviolent Peaceforce (2025) <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/UCP-x-Peacebuilding.pdf> and <https://www.ucpacademy.org/post/nonviolent-peaceforce-and-creating-safer-space-launch-ucpacademy-a-global-hub-for-learning-in-unarm>).



clarity of thought and purpose, pragmatism about the limitations and risks, equity and transparency, and political coherence. The research warned that, if social-cohesion programming is not done well, humanitarians could do more harm than good.²⁰⁴

One of the persistent challenges to sustained social cohesion in displacement contexts was ineffective connections with state and development actors that play strong roles in durable solutions (discussed further in [Chapter 5.1](#)). While guidance like the Shelter Cluster's *Housing, Land and Property Rights Toolkit* usefully set out due-diligence requirements for shelter actors to identify and avoid land-rights violations, challenges remained in practice. For example, people affected by crisis in Goma told us of conflicts between internally displaced people and host communities over land and environmental resources. Solutions offered by communities went beyond what humanitarians could deliver. One local chief said:



'I think they should be providing or buying land to receive [internally displaced people] in our regions. Because this has led to so many problems like fight[ing], houses' destruction, and so on between landowners and [internally displaced people].'

Some collaborations were important for protecting staff and civilians, but humanitarian principles and institutional cultures remained barriers to humanitarians engaging effectively with security actors. The 2024 IASC mapping found that most humanitarians did not think integrating peace objectives compromised their principles, but several found the pursuit of security and stabilisation policies alongside humanitarian objectives concerning for neutrality.²⁰⁵

An Oxfam study in the Central African Republic, DRC, Mali and South Sudan revealed limited trust among communities for UN peacekeeping operations, despite the range of broader humanitarian activities the latter may engage in (including water provision, constructing health centres and GBV sensitisation).²⁰⁶ Such activities could further blur the line between armed actors and humanitarians, raising questions for principles and safety; yet the protective function of peacekeeping forces, including providing infrastructure (such as medical facilities and situational analysis), as well as physical protection for civilians, also benefited humanitarians.²⁰⁷ Peacekeeping spending fell from US\$5.80 billion in 2022 to US\$4.82 billion in 2024 (a drop of approximately 16.8%), which was a concern for several protection experts.^{xxiii} And the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported that, by the end of 2025, the number of personnel in peace operations had fallen to a 25-year low.²⁰⁸

xxiii ALNAP commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing. See [Methodology](#). Calculated using Peace Security Data Hub available at <https://psdata.un.org/dataset/DPO-PKOAppropriation>, accessed 22 April 2026.



Increased conflict meant humanitarians needed to engage more directly with the military for deconfliction, including coordinating on parallel interventions with humanitarian aims in crises, or on security and logistics.²⁰⁹ Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination units sometimes helped to navigate mandates and uphold humanitarian principles in those interactions, but evaluations indicated gaps in their effectiveness. In the Somalia response, for example, a lack of civilian contacts in the army and limited engagement with armed groups hindered civil–military coordination.²¹⁰

Some efforts to strengthen cross-institutional understanding and collaboration included multifunction training and exercise sessions at the Regional Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific;²¹¹ a 2023 update to the Australian Civil Military Centre guide to support collective understanding of civil, military and police stakeholders engaged in international disaster response;²¹² and a new Humanitarian Advisory Group guide for civil–military coordination in the Pacific.²¹³ Despite some improved connections, however, Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination actors noted continued gaps in dialogue and engagement with new actors – including organisations led by former military personnel who had less experience with humanitarian accountability and principles, but who offered skills in logistics, new technologies and volatile contexts.²¹⁴

Principles in private security and technology partnerships

Humanitarians increased their partnerships with companies that provided logistical or technological support in insecure contexts, but they had trouble negotiating their principles with them. A 2024 mapping found that at least 220 private technology companies engaged in over 50 major humanitarian partnerships.²¹⁵ They often provided digital infrastructure and services to humanitarians and militaries – simultaneously – in conflict though,²¹⁶ raising ethical dilemmas about their use of experimental emerging technologies with both sectors²¹⁷ and the risk of satellite or personal data being shared or humanitarian funding indirectly contributing to building military capabilities.

Literature highlighted Ukraine as a microcosm of interacting interests between humanitarians, private companies and the military. For example, digital infrastructure served both civilian medical centres and military cyber defence,²¹⁸ and a partnership between the Ukraine Government and Palantir reportedly included support for both military intelligence and the ability to evidence war crimes, clear land mines and resettle displaced refugees.²¹⁹ Local logistics companies also blurred those lines; the biggest Ukrainian mail and delivery service, Nova Poshta, provided free deliveries and cargo support for displaced people and medical facilities, *and* frontline deliveries to the military.



If private companies are not sensitive to boundaries and contribute too directly to military objectives, they could lose their own legal protections as civilian entities



If private companies are not sensitive to boundaries and contribute too directly to military objectives, they could lose their own legal protections as civilian entities, potentially putting people affected by crisis, their own staff and humanitarian partners at risk.²²⁰ In an effort to address this, ICRC has presented its legal views on some of the current challenges in applying IHL rules and principles to new technologies of warfare.²²¹ Innovation funding at ICRC also supported feasibility testing for creating a 'digital emblem' that could be used online to help

demarcate and, hopefully, protect humanitarian digital infrastructure from cyber operations during armed conflict. The aim was to extend the protective function of the physical Red Cross/Red Crescent and Red Crystal emblems used by staff and volunteers on uniforms, cars and infrastructure into cyberspace.²²²

In this period, there were also some nuanced conversations about what type of digital dual-use capabilities humanitarian agencies can use while protecting staff and civilians. For example, FCDO agreed to support Nonviolent Peaceforce work in Ukraine, which used frequency analysers for drones to help civilian volunteers decide whether it was safe to move with humanitarian assistance. In Ukraine, local NGOs' advocacy prompted a review into whether humanitarian use of drone-jamming equipment was permissible to protect staff; the review found this incompatible with neutrality because diverting the course of drones interfered with military objectives.²²³

Beyond technology companies, humanitarians increasingly partnered with security companies or private vendors to enable access in insecure contexts. A UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP) survey found that the use of armed actors was common – and, indeed, a security requirement in some contexts – despite it often being termed a 'last resort'.²²⁴ Several non-UN entities we spoke to were engaging in these partnerships for the first time in response to increased access restrictions and insecurity. While collective reflection and research on use of armed escorts remained limited,²²⁵ policy debates questioned whether armed escorts brought greater safety or risk, whether they undermined the perceived neutrality of humanitarian actors and whether humanitarians understood the conditions in which their escorts would use force.²²⁶

Our in-country research in DRC, Gaza and Sudan highlighted some of these dilemmas regarding the use of armed escorts or private contractors. In Gaza, the practice grew as theft of assistance increased due to scarcity, driven by





the Government of Israel's blockades and attacks on Gaza's police force that undermined the rule of law.²²⁷ One private-sector actor explained their contribution:



'An institution ... asked me every day to bring in 10 cars without anyone knowing ... because if [people affected by crisis] knew that it was aid, they would steal it, because they would consider it to be theirs.'

Similar challenges were noted in Sudan. One UN representative explained:



'If we were to go out with large quantities of aid, people in desperate need might overwhelm us, putting both staff and supplies at risk ... We cannot take the risk of moving independently, as we are unarmed and unable to defend ourselves.'

In Gaza, humanitarian actors and private logistics companies made some efforts to train employees on how to manage crowds; however, humanitarian actors noted there was no real control over how these companies delivered assistance and stressed the need for more regulations and protection training. A private company told us individual staff were often left to their own judgement, which led to some incidents of people using sticks to control crowds of people left desperate by extreme need.

Some private contractors funded by humanitarian donors used highly questionable delivery methods. An article in *The New Humanitarian* criticised the private company Fogbow for its air drops in Nasir, Sudan – which local communities reportedly claimed was largely occupied by government officials and soldiers, meaning people affected by crisis were scared to return to access the food. The company was also criticised for blurring the line with military engagement by using a Ugandan aviation company linked to the military.²²⁸ Several humanitarian actors warned against focusing on air and sea deliveries, instead advocating for action to remove political barriers to land access. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) declared air drops in Gaza to be a 'distraction' and 'smokescreen';²²⁹ other humanitarian actors and activists criticised NGOs and the private sector for constructing the ill-fated 'Joint Logistics Over-The-Shore' port in Gaza instead of focusing on political pressure to move large amounts of blocked assistance on the border.²³⁰

Humanitarian actors and people affected by crisis widely condemned the creation of the private Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) created in February 2026 by Israel and supported by the US.²³¹ Between 27 May and 1 August 2025, the UN reported that at least 1,373 Palestinians were killed 'seeking food', '859 in the



vicinity of the GHF sites and 514 along the routes of food convoys'.²³² The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) indicated that the Israeli military killed most of these people, and that OHCHR had no evidence to indicate that 'these Palestinians were directly participating in hostilities or posed any threat to Israeli security forces or other individuals. Each person killed or injured had been desperately struggling for survival.'²³³ People affected by crisis told us of the threats they faced accessing GHF assistance, which transformed aid from a source of 'relief' to one of 'danger' – even 'a death trap'. They described late-night delivery of assistance – in limited quantities – via disorganised, 'chaotic' and 'violent' processes. One displaced woman explained:



'We do not support [GHF assistance], it's a trap for the Palestinian people, and it has caused many injuries and deaths. It does not represent the Palestinian people. It is a great injustice and humiliation. It is very dangerous, as it spreads thieves and armed men.'

Some humanitarian agencies reportedly met with actors involved in the GHF in the hope that engagement may improve the dangerous systems deployed in the only structures that Israel and the US supported. Some, including Samaritan's Purse, worked in partnership with the GHF.²³⁴ Others refused to engage with the GHF or with actors including the Boston Consulting Group who helped to create it.²³⁵ Over 200 NGOs coordinated to strongly push back against the GHF, which one INGO representative called 'a blatant militarisation of humanitarian assistance'.²³⁶ Another INGO representative spoke of what they saw as the collective rejection of the GHF by the humanitarian community in Gaza:



'Our rejection of them has been one of the deciding factors in why we've maintained community acceptance as long as we have, despite not being able to deliver at the scale that's needed ... if there's anything we can be proud of, it's the fact that we have – if we're going to go out as an industry and this is the last response and khalas [the end] for humanitarianism – at least we went down with a fight.'

Private-sector actors who engaged in humanitarian partnerships or delivered aid in lieu of humanitarian sometimes lacked understanding of humanitarian principles and accountability frameworks. Multiple research papers and people we spoke to emphasised the need for greater training and exchange between humanitarian agencies and the private sector, including training for corporate decision-makers, to uphold principled humanitarian action and protect people affected by crisis from harm.²³⁷ Following the GHF experience in Gaza, one INGO representative also underscored the need for the humanitarian system to adopt clearer boundaries regarding who should even qualify as a legitimate partner to work with – or fund.



These kinds of regulations are needed quickly; in the current funding environment, a greater number of humanitarians are accepting a need to engage more with the private sector (whether for logistics, communications, delivery or financing). As Save the Children explained: 'The scale of need has outgrown the architecture on which it was built ... the role of the private sector is no longer optional but essential'.²³⁸

Conclusion

This period of grave IHL infringements and reduced funding underscored the need for humanitarians to partner with a wide range of actors to improve protection outcomes for people affected by crisis. There was some nascent progress in embedding the 'Centrality of Protection' across responses and sectors, engaging political actors to better defend IHL, collaborating with peace actors, and navigating humanitarian principles with private-sector technology and security firms.

Further work is needed to build on pockets of good practice, to create collective ways of principled working with diverse partners, and, in some cases, to implement strong boundaries for when *not* to engage. As one international actor working on protection and conflict told us, this must be done:



'in a way that is responsible, sustainable and meets needs' – a process that, despite a funding environment that prioritises quick fixes, 'kind of moves at the speed of trust'.



Further work is needed to build on pockets of good practice, to create collective ways of principled working with diverse partners



Donors and operational agencies increasingly looked to humanitarian diplomacy to stem disrespect for IHL and growing impunity for violations, but there remained space for greater shared learning on effective strategies and a need to provide newly empowered Humanitarian Coordinators with the tools and political backing required to support protection at a response level. Gaps in transparent measurement and accountability mechanisms demand concerted attention to incentivise progress on respect for IHL among UN member states and sanction violators.

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CHAPTER 4

POWER IMBALANCES AND IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY

>	SUMMARY
>	CHAPTER 4.1 BEYOND LOCALISATION AND THE POLITICS OF POWER
>	CHAPTER 4.2 ACCOUNTABILITY IN PRACTICE

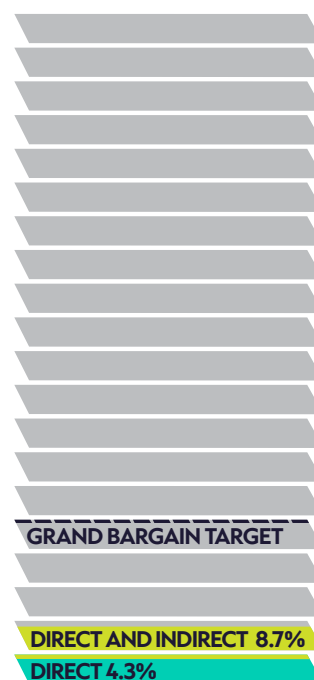
CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY

Despite decades of investment in localisation and accountability, there remained remarkably little rigorous evidence on the comparative costs and benefits of different approaches. As a result, the humanitarian system still has a limited understanding of the returns on these investments, the value they have generated, or the opportunities lost through failing to implement commitments to make humanitarian action more locally led and people-centred. Where evidence did exist, it consistently pointed to the importance of addressing underlying power dynamics, institutional incentives and organisational behaviour, while engaging more meaningfully with existing local response ecosystems.

A decade after the Grand Bargain, localisation remained far from transformational. Local and national actors (LNAs) received only 4.3% of direct humanitarian funding in 2025.¹ Representation was similarly unequal: national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) held only 11% of seats on Humanitarian Country Teams in 2024, whereas United Nations (UN) agencies, international NGOs (INGOs) and donors held 79%. Across contexts, persistent structural, financial, political, legal and organisational barriers to localisation endured, including heavy compliance requirements, high donor risk perceptions, limited funding flexibility, unequal partnerships and little shared decision-making.

There was growing recognition of the need for a diverse ecosystem of funding models and intermediary actors that could serve different purposes, contexts and types of local actors. At the same time, tensions emerged around the growing number of INGO-managed 'locally led' pooled funds. While mutual aid and support for community-led responses received greater attention in policy and practice, there were warnings that these approaches could become co-opted by the formal humanitarian system.

Accountability remained largely technical and siloed. Investment continued in frameworks, strategies and tools, but considerably less attention was given to ensuring that feedback informed decision-making, programme adaptation and organisational



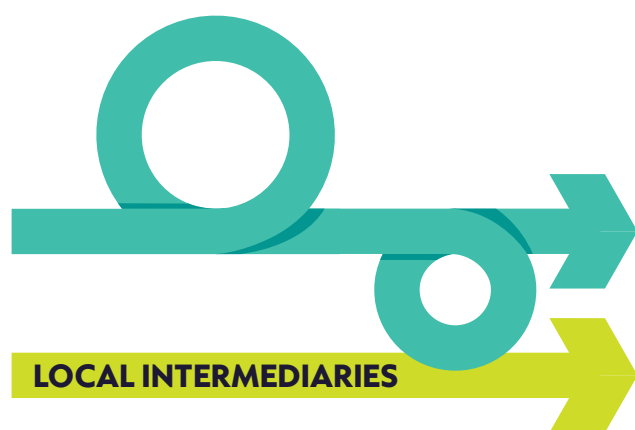
Only 4.3% of all reported humanitarian funding flows were directly allocated to local and national actors

accountability. Community engagement and involvement remained limited, including in key decisions on priorities and response modalities.

The humanitarian system ended the 2022–25 study period facing what Emergency Response Coordinator Tom Fletcher described as a ‘profound crisis of legitimacy, morale and funding’, alongside renewed calls to prioritise people experiencing crises. The Humanitarian Reset Roadmap envisioned a more locally led, ‘people-centred’, community-rooted system, but what this meant in practice – and how it would be achieved – remained unclear.

The coming period may present an opportunity to build on decades of experience, existing practical recommendations and accumulated lessons on participation, accountability and locally led action. Doing so will require humanitarian leaders and donors to change institutional cultures, political and economic incentives, and organisational behaviours. Rebuilding trust will depend less on new commitments and paying lip service to the inclusion of local actors and people affected by crisis, and more on demonstrating that existing commitments are fulfilled – and, where they are not, that those responsible are held accountable.

The evidence suggests that meaningful reform will also require humanitarian leaders and donors to confront uncomfortable questions about the system’s colonial legacies, power dynamics (including whose knowledge is recognised and acted on), racism and a predominantly top-down, supply-driven business model in which flexible, long-term funding is rare. It will also require looking beyond linear delivery chains and towards wider humanitarian ecosystems, as well as working more equitably with existing national, local and community governance structures, rather than treating them primarily as implementing partners.



Studies estimated that local intermediaries could deliver programming 32% more cost-efficiently than international intermediaries.

CHAPTER 4.1

BEYOND LOCALISATION AND THE POLITICS OF POWER

'Everyone talks about localisation. Last week we had an event on localisation, today I am speaking at an event on localisation, next week I am participating as a respondent in a study on localisation ... a lot of money is allocated for it because it is currently fashionable. But mostly what is being done is research.'

– *Ukrainian aid worker*

Localisation remained a hot topic throughout this period, which saw a proliferation of pilots, frameworks and initiatives on the subject – as well as enduring critiques and tensions. A decade after the Grand Bargain, however, many saw it as either having failed or remaining an 'unfinished project'. The same barriers to localisation repeatedly showed up in this period: limited funding, influence and flexibility for local and national actors (LNAs), as well as transactional partnerships with international humanitarian actors. In 2025, the rapid expansion of pooled funds managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as a mechanism for localisation heightened these tensions and contributed to a more explicit consideration of the wider funding ecosystem, including locally led pooled funds, intermediary models and governance restructuring. Mutual aid and approaches to strengthen it such as support to community-led responses (sclr) similarly moved from being treated as niche to being discussed more seriously and with more nuance, alongside warnings that mainstreaming could turn support into compliance and control. Power also continued to operate via knowledge systems and narratives, with international actors often extracting data, stories and expertise from local actors when it suited their own goals but rarely allowing it to meaningfully inform their decisions.



An unfinished project

Interpretations of 'localisation' varied significantly across contexts, sectors and Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHEs) over the study period. ACAPS research in Ukraine found that no two organisations surveyed (including United Nations (UN) agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs)) shared the same definition of what localisation is or what it should look like – and some definitions contradicted each other.² Evaluation evidence similarly found a spectrum of meanings: from narrow interpretations, which focused on directly funding LNAs, to broader interpretations regarding the international system working with (rather than through) local actors to deliver assistance and protection.

There was continued debate around distinguishing more clearly between 'localisation' and 'supporting locally led action', reflecting different understandings of where change should occur and how it should be achieved.³ ALNAP, for example, frames localisation as efforts to bring the international aid system closer to LNAs through changes in funding, coordination and decision-making, often while retaining many of the system's existing processes, norms and structures.⁴ Supporting locally led action, in contrast, focuses on recognising, resourcing and connecting with initiatives that are already locally driven, often outside formal aid structures.⁵

While these terms are defined differently and are sometimes used interchangeably across organisations, reports and practitioners, here we use *localisation* to refer primarily to efforts within the formal humanitarian system; we use *supporting locally led action* to refer to efforts that engage with and strengthen existing locally led initiatives, often outside that system; and we use *locally led ecosystems* to describe the broader relationships between formal and informal systems of response and solidarity, including mutual aid.

Interviewees described an ongoing tension around the importance of defining localisation and differentiating it from locally led action (among other terms). Some viewed the debate as increasingly 'overdone' and a contributor to the lack of substantive progress, arguing that localisation continued to be approached through the international system's so-called 'Global North' mindset of 'we need to define this before we do anything about it'. This focus on language was seen by some as a way of obscuring limited progress while still centring the international system within humanitarian discourse. As one humanitarian put it:



'We're so tangled in the language, especially within the localisation, locally led piece, that the discourse is moving faster than the progress.'



Others, however, argued that conceptual clarity remained important because terms such as localisation and locally led action are increasingly applied to wide-ranging approaches and activities. In their view, without clearer distinctions, these concepts risk becoming depoliticised or diluted, allowing limited or tokenistic reforms within largely unchanged power structures to be presented as transformative change.⁶

The last *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS) noted that, despite the momentum of 'localisation debates', change had been incremental and uneven and there had been no real increase in funding for L/NNGOs, which largely continued to operate as subcontractors with limited influence.⁷ During this 2022–25 study period, a decade after the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain, localisation had still not proven to be transformational; critical voices were increasingly calling on humanitarian leaders to bite the bullet and acknowledge that localisation had, in many respects, failed – or, as one humanitarian put it, remained an 'unfinished project'.



A decade after the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain, localisation had still not proven to be transformational



The same constraints persisted around funding levels, flexibility and equitable partnerships in this period as in the last one, while the gap between formal commitments and risk-averse bureaucratic practices remained unresolved.⁸ The Network for Empowered Aid Response's (NEAR) 2026 flagship report on locally led ecosystems echoed this assessment,⁹ as did Oxfam's 10-year Grand Bargain review, which found that progress was often stronger in rhetoric and organisational positioning than in sustained, system-wide change – and that impact and power shifts remained patchy and hard to evidence.¹⁰ One senior humanitarian leader with first-hand experience of the Grand Bargain process told us:



'We actually were not able to accelerate localisation. Talked about it in a million seminars in Geneva and not much changed.'

Our in-country research across six contexts similarly found that, despite its ubiquity, localisation discourse continued to eclipse action.

A growing body of frameworks and guidance attempted to translate commitments into practice in the period. Between 2024 and 2026, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other entities issued guidance



on equitable partnerships and expanding direct and intermediary funding to LNAs.¹¹ However, evidence on how far these frameworks translated into meaningful institutional change remained limited.

An evaluation of IOM's localisation agenda in May 2026 showed that its localisation framework was not mandatory and its content was limited to treating localisation as an operational approach, rather than a strategic one.¹² At the donor level, the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations' (DG ECHO) 2023 guidance note stated that Programmatic Partnerships – one of DG ECHO's tools to provide high-quality, long-term funding – should be designed to promote certain aspects of the Grand Bargain, such as localisation.¹³ DG ECHO launched nine Pilot Programmatic Partnerships (PPPs),¹⁴ with plans to extend flexibility and predictability to LNAs, including 'potentially' sharing indirect support costs with LNAs.¹⁵ The DG ECHO–IFRC Final Evaluation (December 2025) found



Humanitarians critiqued requests for more evidence on effective localisation approaches as reflecting a lack of political will to act on existing learning



that the PPP both conveyed and operationalised a strong commitment to localisation, meeting or exceeding its benchmark for 70% of funding to be managed or implemented by national societies in most contexts, including South Sudan, Lebanon and Ecuador. However, national societies often lacked full decision-making autonomy, partners retained key approvals, complex and fragmented compliance systems absorbed staff time and constrained flexibility, and community participation remained uneven in terms of depth and level of influence.¹⁶

Humanitarians critiqued requests for more evidence on effective localisation approaches as reflecting a lack of political will to act on existing learning.¹⁷ Oxfam argued that appeals for 'context specificity' were too often the default justification for not pursuing system-wide changes, and that they masked an absence of political will to do so.¹⁸ L/NGOs continued to carry the burden of advocating for commitments that were promised but not delivered. Senior humanitarians in Indonesia told us civil society repeatedly attempted to operationalise localisation commitments by convening in-country donor dialogues and urging signatories and donors to mobilise their country offices.¹⁹ However, donor participation remained minimal – only one donor very briefly attended their first dialogue, and only one junior representative the second – which they viewed 'as indicative of the gap between stated commitments and practical follow-through'.



A Start Network brief, drawing on a recent external evaluation of the Start Fund, found that communities affected by crisis rated L/NNGO-led projects higher than INGO-led projects across several measures, including for assistance arriving at the right time (95% vs 53%, respectively), for responses rated 'excellent' (87% vs 49%) and for assistance rated 'very fair' (98% vs 46%).²⁰ Cost data also pointed to gaps in efficiency: between 2023 and 2024, the median cost per person of L/NNGO-led projects fell from £22.37 (approximately US\$27.70)ⁱ to £10.16 (approximately US\$13.00), while the median cost for INGO-led projects increased from £15.48 (approximately US\$19.20) to £19.27 (approximately US\$24.70).²¹

Evidence found that communities affected by crisis rated L/NNGO-led projects higher than INGO-led projects across several measures

Arguments that localisation improves efficiency and effectiveness of aid are common; indeed, cost-efficiency formed a core premise of the Grand Bargain (see [Chapter 2.3](#)). However, a 2024 Start Network/Humanitarian Advisory Group literature review cautioned against reducing localisation to economics, warned that focusing exclusively on metrics risked compromising the quality of aid and accountability to populations, and highlighted tensions between efficiency, equity and the broader challenge of rebalancing power.²² Some of our interviewees, humanitarians working globally, said:



'Rather than giving autonomy, ...[localisation is] using cheap labour.'

One interviewee even commented that localisation:



'Led to a modern-day slavery.'

Despite the lack of clear criteria to judge when evidence is 'good enough',²³ LNAs were expected to prove they were 'better placed' than international actors to respond, and their performance was largely judged through compliance and risk management.²⁴ Meanwhile, the humanitarian system did not treat the perspectives of people affected by crises, the expertise of local actors, or locally led knowledge as central forms of evidence, revealing the political nature of evidence and the way in which it is influenced by positionality.²⁵ One senior humanitarian told us:



'What counts as evidence is decided elsewhere. A community knows exactly who to call and who to trust in a flood does not count. An attendance sheet does. What passes as evidence are "beneficiary" lists, photos and tarpaulins.'

ⁱ Approximate US dollar equivalents were calculated using the European Central Bank (ECB) annual average exchange rates for the relevant currency and year. For figures covering multiple years, the annual average exchange rate for the midpoint year was used as an approximation. Where a full-year average was not yet available, the ECB year-to-date average exchange rate was used (<https://data.ecb.europa.eu/currency-converter>; <https://data.ecb.europa.eu/publications/ecbeurosystem-policy-and-exchange-rates/3030624>).



A Humanitarian Advisory Group learning series highlighted why localisation initiatives were hard to scale: project-level steps towards localisation were short-term and often conflicted with larger INGOs' standard ways of working. The series documented promising examples – including emergency financing mechanisms (such as New Zealand's High Commission Emergency Fund and the Change Fund); advocacy by Bangladesh's National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors (NAHAB) for a pooled fund; and partnership transition models in Myanmar, where Trócaire shifted from prime recipient to grant-management support, while Karuna Mission Social Solidarity (KMSS) became the primary recipient – but instances of more sustained and integrated initiatives were scarce.²⁶ Promising practicesⁱⁱ were rarely documented, researched or evaluated – and when evaluations did find improved outcomes, there was little additional funding to investigate what enabled this improvement.²⁷ This created a self-reinforcing cycle: lack of evidence justified limited implementation, yet robust but limited implementation prevented evidence from being generated.

Funding pathways and the politics behind the numbers

Localisation became heavily focused on funding flows to LNAs and the Grand Bargain's 25% funding target in this period. Broader questions around the politics and tensions underpinning those figures received comparatively less attention, even as sharper and more contested debates emerged following funding cuts, the Humanitarian Reset and the US\$2 billion humanitarian funding allocation.



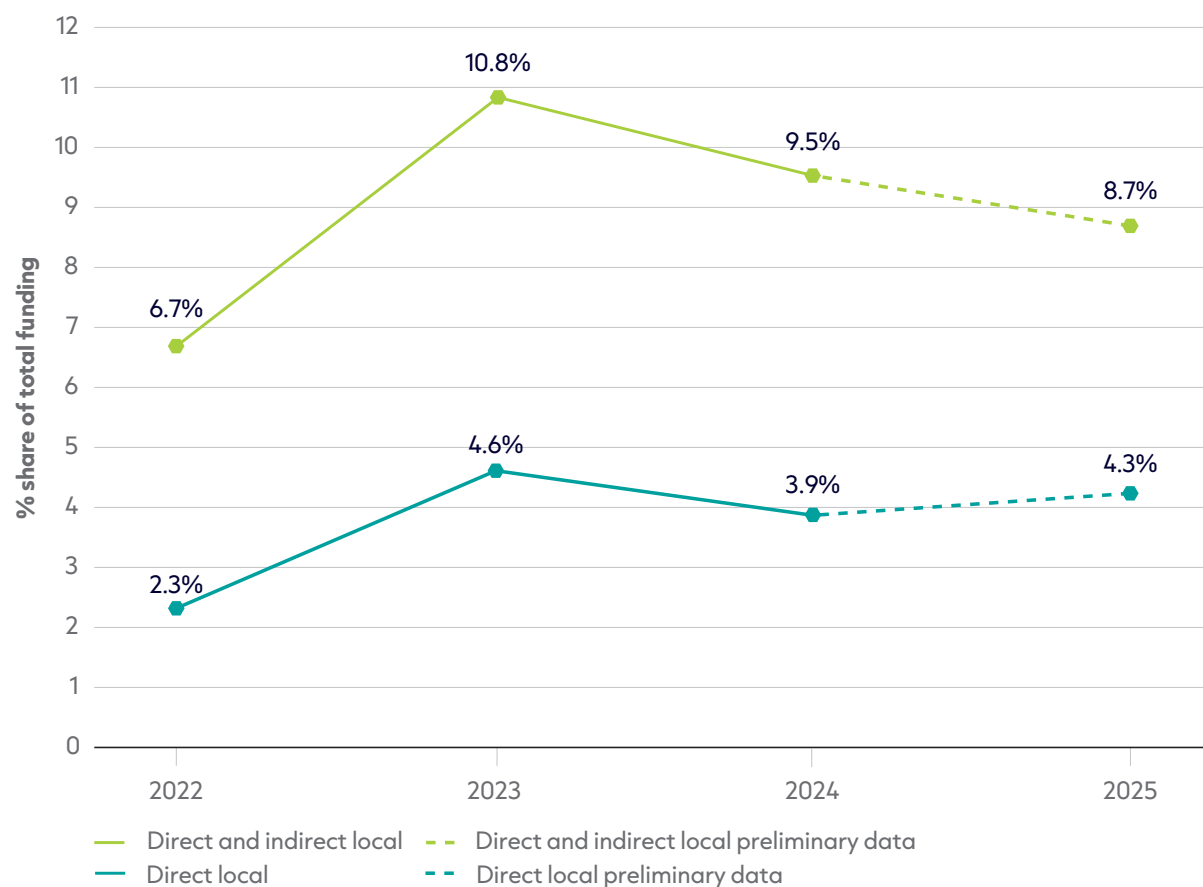
Only 8.7% of all reported humanitarian flows were directly and indirectly allocated to LNAs in 2025 – a fall from 9.5% in 2024



Only 8.7% of all reported humanitarian flows were directly and indirectly allocated to LNAs in 2025 – a fall from 9.5% in 2024 – while direct funding flows to LNAs increased slightly from 3.9% in 2024 to 4.3% in 2025.²⁸ This was marginally better than the last SOHS period, when direct funding to LNAs was also extremely low, ranging from a high of 3.3% (in 2018 and 2020) to a low of 1.2% (in 2021).²⁹

Our aid-practitioner survey indicated a slight improvement in perceptions of L/NNGOs' ability to access direct funding from international donors, with 5% of

ii Given the limits of the existing evidence, Barbelet et al. 'describe promising practices, rather than good or best practices'. They add: 'For a practice to be considered "good" it must have strong evidence based on a high quality methodology, evidence of intermediate and higher level performance outcomes, replicability across multiple geographical contexts or crises, and verification through independent research or evaluation.' They also note that: 'Donor measurements of success and outcomes do not necessarily match the measures of success held by local and national actors or communities', and that: 'The question of who decides what outcomes to pursue, and therefore what evidence counts, is a critical one for localisation' (see Barbelet et al. (2024) <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/harnessing-evidence-and-learning-for-people-centred-humanitarian-action/>).

Figure 4.1: Direct and indirect funding to local actors, 2022–2025

Source: OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS), IFRC Network Databank, IOM grant awards data, OCHA Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) Data Hub, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Transparency Portal, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) collaboration with funded partners, and World Food Programme (WFP) field-level expenditures data.

Notes: Partner data for IFRC and WFP is not yet available for 2025; IOM data for 2025 is partial. Funding allocated by UN agencies with partner data (IOM, UNICEF, WFP and UNHCR) in each year are taken from their own reports where available. Sub-grants on CBPF projects are excluded from the percentage calculation as these include more than one intermediary before funding reaches local and national actors.



practitioners rating it 'excellent' and 23% 'good' during this period, compared to 3% and 18% in the previous SOHS period. However, respondents said that direct funding opportunities remained very rare. They attributed this to stringent donor eligibility and compliance requirements, and a funding system that continued to monopolise resources within UN agencies and large INGOs through intermediary arrangements and high operating costs, rather than investing in local organisations. As one respondent put it:



'It's like giving a poor person who doesn't have food a dozen of eco-friendly spoons and plates according to the best sustainability standards but not giving them food or the means for a decent life!'

Ukraine showed how quickly commitments could be sidelined in complex contexts: only an estimated 0.003% of tracked humanitarian funding went directly to LNAs in the first three months after Russia's invasion, which rose to 1.2% by the end of



2022 before dropping to 0.3% by July 2023.³⁰ Our in-country teams highlighted the continuous lack of funding reaching L/NNGOs. One Palestinian local actor in the West Bank with direct oversight on Gaza said:



'Localisation was indispensable in practice, invisible in structure and undervalued in funding.'

A local actor from Sudan was similarly direct:



'Donors don't trust us directly, they trust the international organisations more.'

In June 2025, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher called for significant expansion of CBPFs and aspired to 70% of pooled funding being channelled to local actors, particularly women-led organisations.³¹ He proposed expanding CBPFs to manage at least one-third of global humanitarian funding 'to make this the electric shock the system needs'.³² This growing concentration around a single mechanism raised concerns about over-centralisation, funding diversity, governance, dual mandates for Humanitarian Coordinators and Resident Coordinators, and impartiality.³³

These concerns intensified for some following a United States–UN agreement, in December 2025, to provide US\$2 billion to OCHA-managed pooled funds. An analysis in early 2026 found that the funds were initially covering 18 countries, with only six months for implementation and 98% of funding slated for UN agencies and INGOs.³⁴ A further US\$1.8 billion was announced in May 2026, bringing total funding to US\$3.8 billion across 21 countries and extending implementation timelines to 12 months.³⁵ Some saw benefit with the US channelling funding to the coordinated international system rather than private contractors. Fletcher stated that 'millions, millions more will get that support',³⁶ but some interviewees viewed the rapid scale differently:



'it's like a patient who is starving, and you give them a huge heavy meal.'

Civil society actors, who felt excluded, described early CBPF allocations as 'predetermined' and again skewed towards large agencies.³⁷ The scale and speed of the expansion was perceived by some as a setback for localisation; multiple INGOs reported that the allocation's design, and OCHA's discouragement of subgranting, led them to abandon their usual practice of partnering with local actors.

In 2025, 46% of CBPF funding reached LNAs directly (compared to 35% in 2021), rising to 55% when including subgrants;³⁸ some localised over 70% (Ethiopia,



Venezuela, Syria and Somalia), others below 5%.³⁹ Somalia represented a particular success story with a sustained improvement in allocations to LNAs over the last decade. However, it also reflected 'low quality localisation' out of necessity, driven by access constraints for international actors rather than a genuine commitment to localisation.⁴⁰ The Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF) illustrated the complexity of measuring localisation. While a Humanitarian Policy Group report found that direct SHF allocations to local actors had fallen to just 1% in 2024,⁴¹ a Share Trust report found that the overall proportion of SHF funding reaching local actors increased from 12% in 2020 to 35% in 2025, largely through intermediary arrangements. The SHF also introduced multiple innovative funding windows, such as Area-Based Coordination (ABC), 48-hour response and mutual-aid groups, to provide more flexible and targeted funding to local actors.⁴²

OCHA expanded Regional Humanitarian Pooled Funds (RHPFs) in this period.ⁱⁱⁱ These remained relatively new and small-scale; however, the recent surge in largely US funding (from US\$39 million disbursed in 2025 to US\$841 million contributed by March 2026) highlighted questions about whether RHPFs can absorb much larger volumes while sustaining localisation outcomes over time.⁴³ Subgrants from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)^{iv} to LNAs via UN agencies remained low: 15% in 2022 and 12% in 2023 (the latest available data at the time of writing). LNAs received 69% of all subgrants in both years.⁴⁴ The CERF's localisation efforts in 2025, including for Under-Funded Emergencies (UFE), were inconsistently applied across countries and had limited impact on enhancing LNAs' participation and leadership in coordination mechanisms.⁴⁵

Tensions over funding to L/NGOs surfaced across all our in-country research. One local NGO worker in Gaza reflected on the Occupied Palestinian Territory Humanitarian Fund⁴⁶ disbursed at the beginning of the response in 2023:



'When the first localisation standard [commitment] was applied, more than 80% of the funds went to UN agencies and INGOs. This was a catastrophe, a shock for me. We, who were working on the ground, were left behind, while those who had left the country received the funding.'

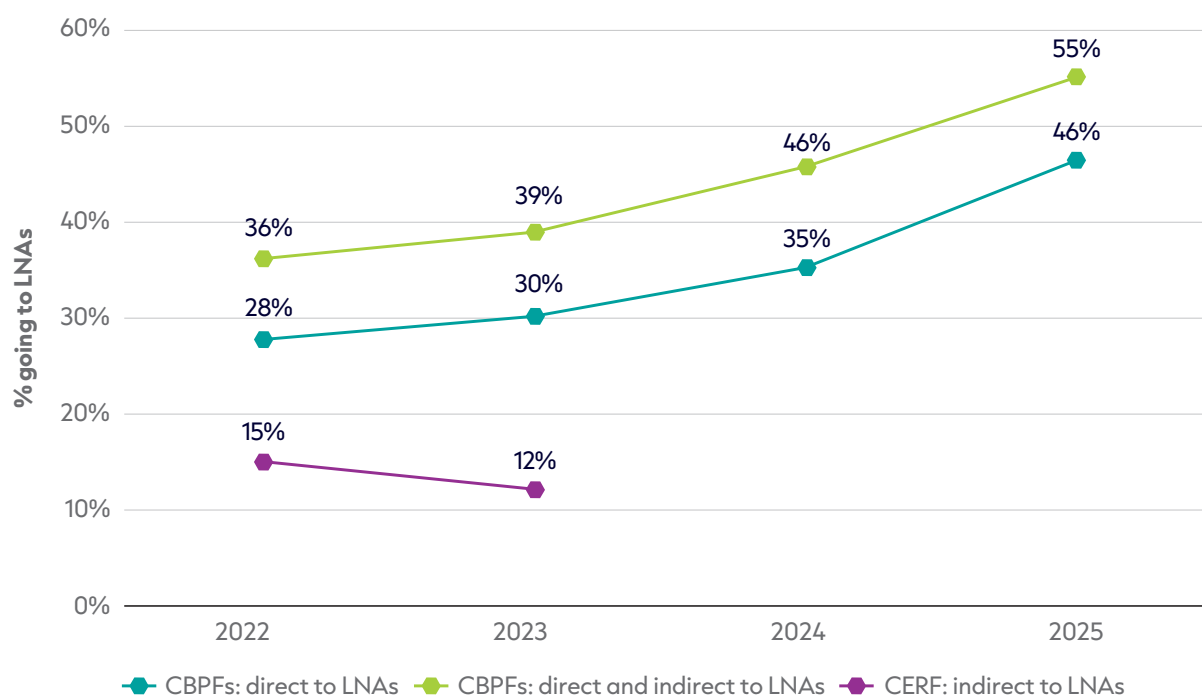
Pooled funding increasingly re-centred attention on raw financial figures and the UN-led system, often making the human and political dimensions of funding less visible. Our interviewees and the literature highlighted the importance of

iii Three RHPFs were established in 2024: Latin America and the Caribbean (RHPF LAC), the Asia-Pacific Humanitarian Fund (AP HF) and the Eastern and Southern Africa Humanitarian Fund (ESA HF). The Regional Fund for West and Central Africa (RHPF WCA), established in 2021, started operating in Chad in 2024. The RHPF LAC allocated US\$7 million through three funding rounds (two in Colombia and one in Haiti) during its first year and applied a community-based approach through micro-grants, directing US\$132,000 to 25 community-based and civil society organisations, including Indigenous groups. In Niger, partners conducted participatory community consultations and invited communities affected by crisis to join the strategic review process, so proposals reflected their priorities (see OCHA (2025) <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/country-based-pooled-funds-and-regional-humanitarian-pooled-funds-2024-review>; OCHA (2025) <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/colombia/regional-humanitarian-pooled-fund-latin-america-and-caribbean-annual-report-2024>).

iv CERF is a pooled fund mechanism that only directly supports UN agencies (as per its General Assembly mandate); as such LNAs only receive funding from the CERF via an intermediary UN agency.

maintaining an ecosystem of complementary funding models and intermediary actors that reflected the diversity and complexity of funding routes and mechanisms, and that was able to serve different goals, audiences and specific contextual needs. Outside UN-led structures, several NGO-led and locally led funding modalities emerged and were increasingly documented, which attracted investment by both government and philanthropic donors.

Figure 4.2: Share of CERF and CBPF allocations to LNAs, 2022–2025



Source: OCHA.

Notes: Data on funding direct from CBPFs from the CBPF Data Hub, indirect funding data to CBPFs provided by OCHA directly. CERF data from the CERF Annual Results reports. CERF data missing for 2024 and 2025 due to time lag in the publishing of data.



Development Initiatives and the Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) catalogue documented a growing range of funding approaches, including locally led humanitarian funds and NGO-led crisis-response mechanisms.⁴⁷ The Community Resilience Fund (CORE) in Nepal, launched in 2023, was one of the country's first locally led pooled-fund mechanisms and was governed by a consortium of Nepali NGOs.⁴⁸ The Human Mobility Hub, established by NRC in 2023, supported and connected a range of local partners in Tunisia and Egypt, including refugee and migrant-led organisations. As of 2024, its budget was US\$3.5 million, 70–75% of which it passes onto its local and national partners.⁴⁹

The Danish Refugee Council hosts the Sahel Regional Fund, which was launched in 2023 with an initial £33 million (approximately US\$42 million) commitment from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Within its first 24 months of operation, 31.21% of its total investments supported



L/NGOs.⁵⁰ Trócaire piloted a pre-positioned funding mechanism that provided small grants of €10,000–30,000 (approximately US\$10,800–32,400)⁵¹ to local partners in Malawi, Myanmar, Nicaragua and Rwanda.⁵² Between 2020 and 2026, Trócaire allocated 29 pre-positioned funds to local and national organisations – of which 25 have been activated supporting locally led emergency responses – with a simplified documentation process, allowing partners to initiate responses immediately and report back within two months. Charter4Change (C4C) also highlighted intermediary models, such as the Call to Action Field Implementation (CAFI) project: funded by Germany and facilitated by CARE Deutschland, in equitable partnership with 11 women-led organisations from nine countries, with a budget of €6.11 million (approximately US\$6.6 million)⁵³ for 2023–25 across the Middle East and North Africa, West and Central Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Ukraine. These partners, in turn, supported a broader network of 205 women-led organisations across these regions.⁵⁴

ICVA's Interactive Directory mapped humanitarian pooled funds led by NGOs, civil society organisations, networks and the UN, supporting humanitarian action globally. At the time of writing, the Directory listed 90 active pooled funds, including 20 locally led funds.^v NEAR Change Fund, launched in 2025, established three financing streams – Emergency Response, Displacement Window and the Bridging Fund – of unrestricted funding grants (up to US\$25,000) for members most affected by aid suspension.⁵⁵ Start Fund provided fast, collaborative, proactive, needs-based funding through five mechanisms: Global Start Funds, National Start Funds, Start Ready, Disaster Risk Financing and Support Grants.^{vi}

Several pooled funds and intermediary mechanisms also underwent governance restructuring. The Sudan Local Response Pooled Fund transitioned to become fully independent and nationally registered and governed.^{vii} Through the multiphase ENHANCE programme (2015–25), the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and partners in Myanmar supported a long-term journey from INGO-led humanitarian response towards nationally led and networked humanitarian leadership. The lead partner – which scaled from managing approximately US\$3 million in humanitarian funding in 2015 to over US\$30 million by 2025 – now operates as a national intermediary, sub-granting to local CSOs and CBOs, and leading national coordination platforms.⁵⁶

ICVA, among others, highlighted the experience, evolution and governance structure of Aid Fund for Syria (AFS),⁵⁷ including its integrated programming, multiyear grants and Anchor Organisation approach, as practices worth documenting and supporting.⁵⁸ In December 2024, following the fall of the

v See <https://www.icvanetwork.org/page/pooled-fund-mapping>

vi See <https://startnetwork.org/funds>

vii Another example of locally led governance structures is the NEAR Change Fund, which is largely supported by philanthropic funds, has a governance committee comprising 12 NEAR members (local organisations) chosen by members in each geographic region (see Swithern and Poole (2025) <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/financing-locally-led-action-framework-understanding-options-and-accelerating-impact>).



Syrian regime, AFS allocated US\$7.5 million within four days to support locally led, multisectoral assistance in newly accessible frontline areas with grants for interventions of up to 24 months. AFS also completed a comprehensive reform process to become a permanent, locally led governance structure.

Analysis by the Share Trust estimated that local intermediaries could deliver humanitarian programming 32% more cost-efficiently than international intermediaries by reducing inflated international overheads and salary costs (see [Chapter 2.3](#)).⁵⁹ However, tensions and uncertainties emerged regarding the growing number of INGO-managed 'locally led' pooled funds and the extent to which governance and decision-making were truly locally led. One consultant working on locally led pooled funding in the Middle East and North Africa region noted that INGOs needed to ask themselves:



'What do [INGOs] bring to the table? What is their added value? How can they still be relevant and present in the new setup and survival mode? How can they genuinely be of use to the local decision-makers?'

Competition over funding and institutional survival also pushed several INGOs to nationalise or rebrand their country offices – a trend that was itself criticised. One senior representative of a Syria-focused locally led pooled fund said:

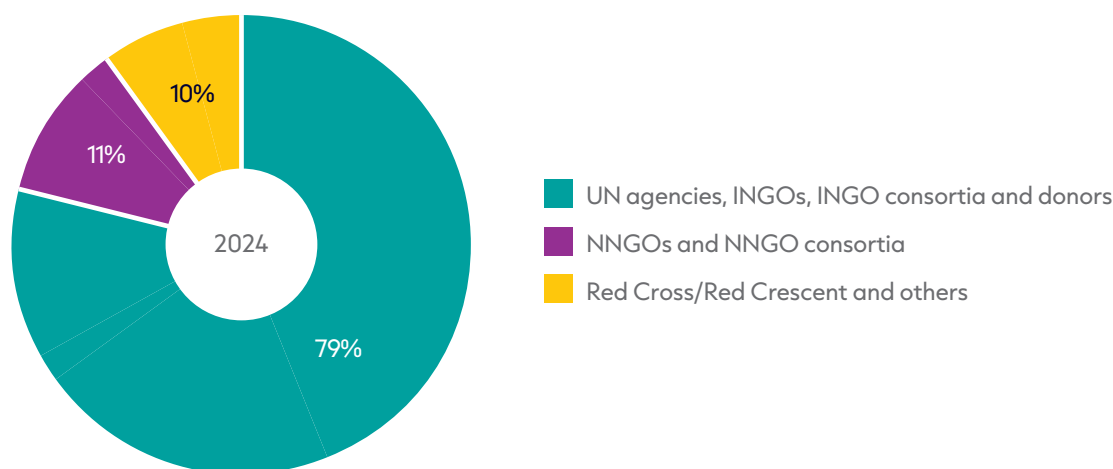


'When the transition in Syria happened, all of a sudden INGOs, including some that had been at the forefront of localisation, started direct implementation. They came into Syria, started setting up offices, and the work they had done before on partnerships and localisation was gone. International organisations tried everything to stay alive, stay present to the detriment of the localisation agenda.'

Leadership and decision-making without power

The Grand Bargain 3.0 Implementation Agenda called for a 'greater participation of local actors in coordination and decision-making fora'.⁶⁰ This was complemented by a commitment, under the Grand Bargain Caucus on Efficiency Measures, to 'promote coordination structures that enable co-leadership of local actors'.⁶¹ However, L/NNGOs' representation in Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) stood at only 11% in 2024, compared with 44% for UN agencies, 23% for INGOs, 12% for donors and 10% for the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and others.⁶² Drawing on research across Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Colombia and Venezuela, ICVA quoted one L/NNGO representative who described these dynamics: '3 or 4 national NGOs, with much less resources, are sitting in front of 12 UN agencies which are your donors ... do you really have a voice?'.⁶³

Figure 4.3: Representation by organisation type in HCTs, 2024



Source: Humanitarian Action (2025) <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/pulse-humanitarian-coordination-2024/article/national-level-humanitarian-country-teams-hcts-0>



ICVA's *Cracks in Coordination* report found an overarching sense among NGO Forum Coordinators that HCTs and UN-led coordination bodies were broadly information-sharing platforms rather than strategic decision-making bodies, with some participants feeling frustrated, excluded, underrepresented and demotivated – leading some NNGO leaders to give up participating altogether.⁶⁴ Beyond the figures, L/NNGOs' inclusion remained limited to their presence rather



L/NNGOs' inclusion remained limited to their presence rather than their participation, influence, leadership or decision-making

than their participation, influence, leadership or decision-making.⁶⁵ The IAHE of the Covid-19 Humanitarian Response cited that Syrians working on the ground were unable to convince the HCT or Covid-19 Task Force that risk communication and community engagement was not working. Referring to messaging around face masks and social distancing, one IAHE interviewee said: 'you can't go to the local community thinking that you're in Geneva'.⁶⁶

LNAs' lack of decision-making power was underscored by the Humanitarian Reset and UN80 processes. LNAs reported little contact with the Reset process and limited information about it.⁶⁷ A joint statement from civil society representatives worldwide called for a 'true Reset' to fundamentally change longstanding power structures,⁶⁸ and an open letter warned that UN80 had excluded LNAs.⁶⁹ Our interviewees in Poland similarly described these reforms as:



'[moving] in completely [the] opposite direction [from localisation], with UN agencies taking full control of the process, without taking into consideration suggestions from NGO groups.'

Our team in Palestine found that the response in Gaza exposed a longstanding structural imbalance: L/NNGOs remained and international staff withdrew, while INGOs retained control over strategic decision-making, access negotiations and resource allocation. L/NNGOs perceived this as marginalising their local agency and operational leadership, and reinforcing dependency. One local actor in the West Bank, with direct oversight on the situation in Gaza stated:



'Local actors were the backbone of the response. But structurally, their role was marginalised. They had no seat at the decision-making table, no direct line to donors and no sustained funding. They were seen as implementers, not as equal partners.'



The response in Gaza exposed a longstanding structural imbalance: L/NNGOs remained and international staff withdrew, while INGOs retained control over strategic decision-making, access negotiations and resource allocation



Evaluation evidence on power and decision-making was largely anecdotal; where more systematic analysis was available, it suggested that decision-making power shifted only to a very limited extent, linked to both constrained direct funding and tangential involvement of L/NNGOs in coordination mechanisms. Our team in Ukraine cited relative progress and a similar conclusion: Ukrainian NGOs gained formal representation in the HCT, but power imbalances persisted in decision-making and resource allocation. One national NGO said:



'Donors still have a fixed vision of humanitarian response. From what I observe, no structures or consortiums can change this approach yet.'

Even where positive examples emerged, they often remained contested, tokenistic or ambiguous. The transition from the UN-led HCT to the new Indonesian Humanitarian Coordination Platform in August 2025 was considered a historic moment. This platform, co-chaired by local civil society organisations and OCHA, intended to operate through a six-month transition before becoming fully locally led; but transfer of power with no significant transfer of financial and technical resources, no capacity strengthening and no strong donor message felt 'more like a handshake than a proper handover'.⁷⁰

The power dynamics that localisation sought to address remained deeply embedded within the humanitarian system, including in persistent inequities in pay and working conditions. A Share Trust study, which analysed staff costs across 51 Ukraine humanitarian projects in 2023 (US\$55 million total), revealed that international UN staff earned 17 times more than national L/NNGO staff – and



The power dynamics that localisation sought to address remained deeply embedded within the humanitarian system, including in persistent inequities in pay and working conditions



5 times more than the UN's own national staff.⁷¹ Another study showed that inequity also featured in recruitment: one of 64 positions aimed at national staff disclosed the salary, compared to 25 of 34 positions for expatriate staff; furthermore, only 20% of frontline workers said their contract was permanent – and 19% reported having no formal contract at all – while 94% of INGO staff had a formal contract.^{viii} National staff also usually had weaker benefits and medical coverage, limited access to equipment and protective resources, fewer evacuation options and greater exposure to

security risks. These conditions, some argued, related to structural inequities visible in everyday practices; for example, national staff were expected to take public transport in high-risk settings, while international staff were provided with private vehicles and drivers.⁷²

Knowledge systems and narratives

Questions of power extended to knowledge and narratives. A Global Change Center analysis of evaluation practices argued that Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) criteria were imposed with minimal consultation with 'Global South' actors, and evaluations remained focused on efficiency and effectiveness rather than transformation.⁷³ This left the system measuring its progress through operational and technical metrics that were far removed from the lived realities of the communities they intended to serve. In 2025, ALNAP updated its guide on adapting the OECD evaluation criteria to humanitarian contexts through an extensive consultation process. ALNAP added three priority themes to the evaluation criteria to make evaluations more transformative: locally led humanitarian action, centring people affected by crisis, and the environment and climate.⁷⁴ IAHE evidence found that local knowledge and understanding of varying needs in different communities were neither valued nor used to select which projects were implemented.⁷⁵

Some organisations described their efforts to decolonise their evaluation processes by proactively seeking out other forms of knowledge (such as practice-based knowledge, stories and oral history) and prioritising people's lived experiences.⁷⁶ Evidence showed that local evaluators from the 'Global South' were often relegated to data-collection or field roles, excluded from analysis and dissemination, and denied lead-authorship opportunities.⁷⁷ Findings were disseminated primarily in English, without translations in local languages, rendering communities unable

viii The study surveyed 734 frontline humanitarian workers across over 60 countries and reviewed 208 INGO job advertisements (see Greenaway et al. (2024) <https://alnnap.org/help-library/resources/the-status-of-frontline-humanitarian-workers/>).



to access learning from evaluations about their own contexts. Local actors from the 'Global South' were rarely offered the opportunity to document their ways of working and methodologies in their languages, nor to share knowledge and impacts with donors and organisations in different continents.⁷⁸ Initiatives like Made in Africa Evaluation suggested that evaluation practice should centre African contexts, culture, history, beliefs, values and ways of knowing, challenging the ways 'Global North' methods are treated as universal to the exclusion of other knowledge.⁷⁹

Similarly, our in-country team in Ukraine told us that some UN agencies demanded fixed numerical targets and offered local partners minimal ability to contribute or negotiate justified deviations; they cited an example in which UNICEF decided that 15,000 children in one area must receive psychological support, despite local partners' doubts about whether such numbers reflected needs in that region. In Myanmar and Sudan, local actors highlighted that UN agencies routinely collected data and made decisions unilaterally, while local actors – despite being used as a source of data – were not able to see whether the data was used or how it informed decision-making. One study on the refugee response in Jordan found that INGOs only included local aid workers' perspectives when they aligned with an INGO's perspectives or goals, disregarding local expertise and contextual knowledge because they did not contribute to meeting targets swiftly. A female Jordanian interviewee said:



'[My] expertise and moral understanding are neglected and undervalued, even though this compromises both staff safety and the success of the project.'

Our in-country teams revealed that knowledge and narrative framing were barriers to localisation. Local actors in Gaza said that their knowledge and expertise were 'used for data, not for decisions':



'Our intelligence was exploited without recognition, decision-making power or corresponding funding.'

One Palestinian local actor said:



'The humanitarian story of Gaza is still largely written in Geneva, New York and Amman. Palestinians provide the facts, but internationals frame the narrative. Even our daily situation reports are written in English, formatted for donor capitals and distributed globally before communities see them.'

Our teams in Ukraine and Poland highlighted that INGOs continued to operate extractive research practices and were often unwilling to share data, knowledge and experience with local actors. Interviewees who had transitioned from decision-



making positions in L/NNGOs to managerial positions in INGOs reported that only after this shift did they gain understanding of organisational decision-making, including the dynamics shaping entry and exit strategies.

The formal humanitarian system, operating under enduring power dynamics and legacies, often failed – intentionally or not – to recognise the diversity and value of existing local knowledge systems. However, our in-country team in Gaza found that the crisis during this period prompted a shift: although international actors historically dominated the framing of Gaza’s humanitarian narrative, since 2023, Palestinian civil society increasingly challenged international narratives – producing their own data, contradicting international officials’ political claims and public statements, and grounding their assessments in direct community observation. One respondent described no longer relying on UN figures but instead on their own organisations’ data to expose violations and correct misinformation.



The formal humanitarian system, operating under enduring power dynamics and legacies, often failed to recognise the diversity and value of existing local knowledge systems



Compliance, risk and operational realities

L/NNGOs have cited the same pressures for years, which often result in them doing much of the frontline work with little room to breathe. Our in-country research and wider evidence similarly found that persistent structural, financial, political, legal and organisational barriers to localisation – alongside heavy compliance requirements, donors’ risk perceptions and cultural constraints – shaped the space in which L/NNGOs operate. This is despite years of advocacy. A local actor in the Democratic Republic of the Congo described these challenges as:



‘enabling international actors to avoid fully honouring localisation commitments as there is no pressure to do so. They operate in an environment of limited accountability.’

In Gaza, a local actor said:



‘Donors were not set up to fund local actors directly at the scale of the emergency, leaving local organisations as subcontractors. When local actors pushed for more direct involvement, donors and intermediaries reportedly cited due diligence, fiduciary risk and neutrality concerns, with the practical outcome that Palestinian NGOs were left competing for short-term grants while international actors controlled the pipeline.’



Evaluation syntheses repeatedly highlighted ‘service-provision’ partnerships between UN agencies or INGOs and L/NNGOs and consistently found unequal or ‘transactional’ partnerships.^{ix} Our in-country teams across six contexts noted that modest improvements in partnerships tended to occur where access constraints limited the presence of INGOs, resulting in a form of ‘forced localisation’ rather than a deliberate equal partnership.



The quality of partnerships also depended on the extent to which funding arrangements were flexible, multiyear and adaptive to partners’ priorities

The quality of partnerships also depended on the extent to which funding arrangements were flexible, multiyear and adaptive to partners’ priorities. The 2024 Pledge for Change partners’ survey gathered feedback from 342 local and national partner organisations across 61 countries on five INGO signatories. It found that, while 82% of partners reported involvement in defining project scope and success indicators, 56% rated signatories as not flexible in funding reallocation, and 50% said funding did not adequately cover all costs.⁸⁰ The NRC argued that INGOs can play

a role by critically reviewing their partnership approaches and sharing the benefits of multiyear and flexible arrangements across partners, including LNAs.

⁸¹ Oxfam’s Partners’ Investment Fund tested multiyear, fully flexible funding by allocating £1.5 million (approximately US\$2 million) across five locations – Myanmar, Nepal, Yemen, Palestine and Southern Africa – with £300,000 (approximately US\$400,000) over three years per location, distributed as grants to 42 partners. Partners set their own priorities and adapted spending, reporting requirements were minimal and due diligence was tailored.⁸² Through its commitment to the principle ‘Why us? Why not local?’, Christian Aid similarly increased its proportion of projects that provided partners with flexible core funding – from 6% in 2024 to 12% in 2025.⁸³

Despite a proliferation of overheads policies and guidance, most donors did not mandate to pass overheads on to subgrantees; nor did they systematically monitor whether LNAs received what they should. An overheads ceiling of 7% became a default, yet it remained ‘a woefully inadequate and outdated allocation that reflects historical budgeting norms and is a relic from the 1990s’.⁸⁴ LNAs’ overheads needs can be far higher: some studies estimated 27–30%, especially for smaller organisations and those operating in high-risk, complex contexts. In practice, even where a 7% rate existed, evidence suggested intermediaries may pass on only around 4–5% in some settings, leaving LNAs under-resourced for the organisational infrastructure required to operate safely and sustainably.⁸⁵ This was compounded by a ‘double financial shock’ linked

ix ALNAP commissioned evaluation synthesis. See [Methodology](#).



to the effective withdrawal of the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) protected overhead funding for LNAs at the same time as overall funding volumes contracted.⁸⁶ A national NGO staff member in Ukraine said:



'We know that a programme has money for indirect costs, but when we fill in the application, we are told that for us, as a local partner, indirect costs are not provided for. This is truly painful.'

The lack of adequate and quality financing for LNAs left many highly exposed when funding cuts arrived. Without sustained investment in organisational infrastructure, overheads and reserves, they lacked the financial resilience needed to absorb the shock. The impact was particularly severe for women-led organisations, refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and small organisations. A March 2025 UN Women rapid survey of 411 women-led organisations across 44 humanitarian settings found that 90% had been financially impacted, 72% had laid off staff, 51% had suspended programming and 47% expected to shut down within six months.⁸⁷ RLOs were already underfunded and sidelined before the cuts, receiving only US\$49 million in 2024 (compared to US\$4.7 billion for nine UN Refugee Response Plans), with average grants of just US\$35,000.⁸⁸ The funding cuts further deepened the gap between commitments to refugee leadership and the resources provided to RLOs, leaving 'the humanitarian system celebrating RLOs, then starving them'.⁸⁹

Over this study period, the conversation on 'harmonisation' processes expanded to due-diligence passporting^x but did not progress significantly, since most efforts remained at the level of pilots – although there was a tangible example in Ukraine.⁹⁰ ICVA analysis cautioned that attempts to solve donor-driven inefficiencies, through mechanisms such as due-diligence passporting and shared-reporting formats, proliferated to the point that they could create new inefficiencies through duplication or overlap. ICVA underscored the need for donors to collaborate rather than multiply parallel compliance schemes.⁹¹ Similarly, the review of the Ukraine Local Pooled Fund noted that, while several organisations cited due-diligence passporting as a best practice, it remained largely exceptional – and was not realised.⁹²

x Due-diligence passporting has been piloted primarily by networks of INGOs/NNGOs, including TechSoup, Start Network, NEAR Network and a scheme developed by Humentum for signatories of Charter4Change. Several initiatives sought to harmonise due diligence and reduce duplication, ranging from common assessment and passporting tools to shared verification platforms and joint partnership models. These included the Collaborative Cash Delivery Network's common assessment tool across Türkiye, northwest Syria and Ukraine; the Charter4Change–Humentum Due Diligence Passporting Tool; Alliance2015's passporting initiative; PhilinUA's verification platform; the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund's pilot Contextualised Capacity Assessment; and the Joint Emergency Response Ukraine, which adopted shared due diligence and partnership processes across its members (see: BDO (2025) <https://voiceeu.org/publications/due-diligence-harmonisation-in-ukraine-local-organisation-focused-learning-report.pdf>; Alliance2015 (n.d.) <https://www.alliance2015.org/project/due-diligence-passporting-advancing-equitable-partnerships/>; Humentum (2024) <https://alnep.org/help-library/resources/charter-for-change-due-diligence-passporting-tool/>).



One senior humanitarian working for an INGO, one of the first INGOs to work on passporting, told us:



'There are now so many passport initiatives that a community of practice on passporting was established, but there seems to be some kind of competition. My passporting, your passporting. Is it passporting? Is it harmonisation? What is the starting point for due-diligence passporting? Is it to increase the efficiency of many INGOs? Then that's a different conversation. Or is it to reduce the burden of LNAs and support them in accessing funding?'

Multiple initiatives tried to move practice towards risk-sharing. Evidence suggested there was limited donor coordination on risk-sharing in this period, however, and that collaboration tended to occur within bilateral chains rather than across donors (or across a single donor's multiple partners).⁹³ The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch Relief Alliance conducted a risk-sharing pilot with L/NGOs in three contexts – Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia – which highlighted good practices. This included conducting risk-sharing dialogues with local partners and other stakeholders, using the Global Risk Sharing Framework developed under the Grand Bargain's Risk Sharing Platform,^{xi} to develop joint action plans on risk management.⁹⁴ But when asked whether institutions took any steps to share risks with partners, 33.9% of Grand Bargain signatories did not respond; those who did reported that donors often framed shared risk management primarily as compliance with their accountability and due-diligence requirements (but see [Chapter 3.1](#) for some positive examples).⁹⁵



Evidence suggested there was limited donor coordination on risk-sharing in this period



Beyond the system: informal response ecosystems

Mutual aid and approaches to supporting it, such as support to community-led responses (sclr), are not emerging concepts.^{xii} Communities began organising, supporting one another and mobilising collectively long before the birth of the formal humanitarian system; indeed, it is 'as old as humans'.

xi The Risk Sharing Platform was established in 2021 and co-led by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and InterAction. It brought together Grand Bargain signatories – including national and international NGOs, Red Cross/Red Crescent actors, UN agencies and government donors – to improve how organisations identify and share risk (see Government of Netherlands et al. (2023) <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/risk-sharing-framework-enhancing-impact-humanitarian-action-through-improved-risk-sharing>).

xii ALNAP defines mutual aid as the self-forming, self-organised and voluntary actions through which individuals, families and communities support one another during crises, rooted in local networks and resources, and often remaining unrecognised and unsupported by the international humanitarian system. Sclr is an approach that connects external funding to community action; it should be treated as a structured method for supporting mutual aid, rather than synonymous with it (see Posada and Ahimbisibwe (2025) <https://alnapp.org/help-library/resources/supporting-mutual-aid-what-the-evidence-tells-us-pdf/>).



Communities began organising, supporting one another and mobilising collectively long before the birth of the formal humanitarian system



Definitions and understandings of mutual aid and sclr differ across contexts, cultures and communities themselves though. They may refer to connectedness, solidarity, reciprocity, collective responsibility or simply the fundamental human instinct to care for one another during times of crisis. These concepts are expressed far more meaningfully by communities themselves, reflecting deeply rooted local histories, values and social ecosystems of support.⁹⁶ However, these approaches received increased attention within formal humanitarian debates during this period – driven partly by growing

frustrations among LNAs and reform-oriented organisations with the limitations, bureaucracy, unequal power dynamics and localisation failures, and partly by a tendency in some international policy debates to frame such approaches as a potential ‘silver bullet’ to widening funding cuts.

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) worked on and documented practical experiences on mutual aid and sclr during this period.⁹⁷ Several organisations like Christian Aid and other peer agencies that are part of L2GP (including Dan Church Aid, Act Church of Sweden, Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits in the Philippines⁹⁸ and East Jerusalem Young Men Christian Association)⁹⁹ have been implementing sclr programming since 2016.¹⁰⁰ Citizen to Citizen Ethiopia (C2C) worked with over 360 mutual-aid groups and funded over 500 community-led initiatives to address local crises.¹⁰¹ Our research team in Gaza noted that localised community structures, including women-led groups, filled coordination gaps. In one Rafah shelter, women organised gender-separated queues, prioritised vulnerable groups (including people living with disabilities and elders) and banned photography to protect privacy: practices described as ‘community efforts, not foreign impositions’. In Idlib, a locally led psychosocial rehabilitation and vocational training initiative led to the establishment of Tawasol Café – Syria’s first café managed by individuals with Down syndrome – which not only strengthened participants’ confidence and independence but also shifted community attitudes and created new support networks among families and caregivers.¹⁰²

In Sudan, Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) expanded from their roots as neighbourhood initiatives in Khartoum in 2023 to more than 700 community-based groups across the country, becoming critical lifelines for highly localised assistance during the conflict. ERRs gained international recognition, including winning the 2025 Chatham House Prize in March 2026.¹⁰³ Our interviewees in Sudan described mutual-aid groups as agile and legitimate, particularly in places international actors found hard to reach and besieged areas, and emphasised that they needed tailored support without forcing them into formal structures. Even where INGOs engaged,





some interviewees explained that donor vetting, compliance requirements and neutrality could limit or prevent their collaboration with informal groups. The UK more than doubled the proportion of funding directly allocated to Sudanese local aid groups from £6 million (approximately US\$8 million) to £15 million (approximately US\$20 million)¹⁰⁴ – including to ERRs – through the Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition (MASC),¹⁰⁵ channelling funding directly to frontline responders. Furthermore, funding ERRs was reportedly highly cost effective (US\$0.95 of every US\$1 reached local actors) and fast (typically reaching communities within two weeks).¹⁰⁶

Lessons and evidence on mutual-aid efforts were increasingly documented across a range of crisis contexts. In Haiti, the Hand in Hand Consortium documented how community-based organisations in the Grand’Anse and Sud regions used microgrants following the 2021 earthquake to support cash-for-work activities, unconditional cash transfers, psychosocial assistance and aid distributions. Participants considered the approach more transparent, participatory, inclusive, efficient and better adapted to community needs than traditional humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁷ Following the 2023 Türkiye earthquakes, an impact study by Diakonie and the Turkish NGO Support to Life documented the scale and perceived effectiveness of sclr approaches: by 2024, the programme had funded 379 community-led projects, reached more than 216,000 people and mobilised over 2,000 community members, and 84% of surveyed participants reported improved disaster preparedness.¹⁰⁸

In Ukraine, Christian Aid’s flexible small grants and sclr programming distributed more than £881,000 (approximately US\$1.1 million)¹⁰⁹ through 221 microgrants during the first six months of Russia’s full-scale invasion, supporting initiatives from emergency relief to greenhouse projects to wellbeing activities. Local groups reported strong ownership and pride in their initiatives; one learning paper reflected that ‘the process was a lesson in humility’ as humanitarian actors ‘let go of control and put their trust in communities’.¹¹⁰ Resilio Fund (still in the startup phase) also supported sclr, according to our interviewees, providing 588 microgrants to 580 community-led responses between August and December 2025.

The IAHE on localisation in the Covid-19 response noted that complementarity often comes with a degree of tension and that the added value of localised mutual aid and solidarity networks stems largely from their anchorage outside of established systems, as well as their ability to achieve a level of operational agility less common among more mainstream actors.¹¹¹ An evaluation synthesis on lessons for future pandemics and global crises highlighted examples where localised mutual aid and solidarity networks worked alongside the international response in Bangladesh, Colombia, Pakistan, Somalia and Syria.¹¹²

ALNAP’s evidence on supporting mutual aid mapped the relationship between the international humanitarian system and mutual-aid initiatives through which



communities support one another. The study found that demand-led, flexible, risk-sharing external support can enhance the impact of mutual aid by strengthening what it already does well. However, it also highlighted that external support could replicate top-down practices when actors revert to established ways of working, putting solidarity and community-led structures at risk. While the study identified important findings, it also emphasised that much of the existing evidence is self-reported. As mutual aid received increasing attention across the humanitarian sector during this SOHS period, additional independent evidence would help strengthen the evidence base and inform decision-making.¹¹³

Interviews and literature also warned that mutual aid and approaches to support it such as sclr may be at a 'critical juncture' in which rapid mainstreaming could lead to dilution rather than genuine transformation. System shocks, including loss of access and a major funding decline that 'slightly humbled the system', reinforced the narrative that international actors should support rather than lead. This opened some space for flexibility and funding diversification. At the same time, questions emerged around whether conventional coordination mechanisms and accountability tools could engage with community-led practices without turning support into control. One humanitarian working for an INGO on sclr reflected:

Sclr may be at a 'critical juncture' in which rapid mainstreaming could lead to dilution rather than genuine transformation

'When does coordination become control? Because when you hear things like "we need to track", "we need to map", "we need to know who's doing what" – it all starts with "we need"... 'we' being the coordination body, which is broadly representative of international actors.'

The impulse to translate community-led practice into tracking and targets also showed up in high-level reform spaces, where progress was often framed in terms of system metrics rather than recognising what communities already do. One senior humanitarian cited an example from the Grand Bargain conference, where a community representative from southern Philippines shared how they used mutual aid to recover after Typhoon Odette:

'That example sat alongside presentations about survey methodologies, donor pillars, INGO percentage targets. One person, one paragraph, one community showing what was already there and already working, while the rest of the conference was the formal [humanitarian] system measuring its own progress toward doing what that community already does naturally. So the system keeps measuring itself.'



Before an external agency arrives to respond to a crisis, communities already know whose house can be used as shelter, who cannot leave because of an elderly parent and who people listen to as leaders. A representative of a philanthropic organisation said:



'The community already had a system. It had a name, a history and trust built into it. It worked.'

Yet humanitarian responses often tried to rebuild these systems from scratch – through community volunteers, feedback mechanisms and mapping exercises – without asking what is already there, sometimes disrupting what was already functioning. The challenge, according to one humanitarian working in the Middle East and North Africa region, is that:



'Supporting grassroots, informal, and unregistered groups requires significant time, proximity, trust, relational work, and lots of unlearning.'

There were warnings that mutual-aid approaches risked becoming easily co-opted and folded back into conventional humanitarian approaches centred on formalisation, legitimisation and scale – even when, as one interviewee said, scale 'is not necessarily the right value for those approaches'. Our interviewees who worked directly on sclr as an approach to support mutual aid emphasised the importance of 'scaling out, not scaling up', warning that scaling up could damage organic approaches. Instead, interviewees reflected on the importance of geographic breadth, horizontal expansion through networks and ecosystems, and moving resources through existing community structures rather than growing individual organisations.



There were warnings that mutual-aid approaches risked becoming easily co-opted and folded back into conventional humanitarian approaches centred on formalisation, legitimisation and scale



Several interviewees stressed that mutual-aid initiatives must retain the agency to decide whether they want to grow, remain informal or dissolve once a specific purpose or crisis has passed. These groups already had their own forms of accountability, trust, communication and social legitimacy within their communities, which did not necessarily align with formal humanitarian systems and compliance. One humanitarian working on sclr said:



'What is most important with mutual aid is the process itself. What happens in that relationship when communities work together and have to take joint decisions on priorities? The democratic space, the equal opportunities, and so on.'



Engagement with broader ecosystems also required complementarity and coherence between the central state, subnational authorities and the humanitarian system. Yet the state often appeared marginal or bypassed in humanitarian analysis and evaluations. Meaningful ecosystem engagement will require the humanitarian system to engage more deliberately with political and governance dynamics,¹¹⁴ while recognising both the role and limitations of existing state structures.¹¹⁵

Evaluation evidence from this period suggested that responses were generally more effective where humanitarian actors complemented, rather than substituted, government leadership.

In the Türkiye–Syria earthquake response, the IAHE concluded that a one-size-fits-all approach predicated on a humanitarian response in a country with limited government capacity is no longer appropriate. For example, the

initial Development Assistant Committee (DAC) coordination structure did not capitalise on existing in-country structures and was not adapted to suit a middle-income country like Türkiye that had a strong government with considerable disaster-response capacity.¹¹⁶ In contrast, in Mozambique, effective partnership with government contributed to the swift containment of a cholera outbreak.¹¹⁷ Evaluations of the Covid-19 response found that governments were in the driving seat, with humanitarian agencies playing a complementary, supporting role, while pre-existing relationships with ministries were essential to good collaboration and coordination.¹¹⁸ In Haiti, UNICEF accompanied the government, rather than acting in its place, creating synergy with line ministries and the Civil Protection Agency.¹¹⁹



Responses were generally more effective where humanitarian actors complemented, rather than substituted, government leadership



Where humanitarian actors substituted for state systems, the outcomes were problematic. In Afghanistan, the parallel role assumed by the international system provided no clear pathway to the recovery of state systems,¹²⁰ while in Yemen, the UN and its partners were at times like a ‘shadow government’, with basic social infrastructure ‘hanging by a thread’.¹²¹ In the Ethiopia drought response, the government’s active leadership role and close integration with the international humanitarian response was widely seen as key to success.¹²² While in Northern Ethiopia, the IAHE found that the UN system did not redefine its terms of engagement as the government became a party to an armed conflict, which contributed to a deeply compromised response.¹²³

Colonial legacies and power dynamics

As discussed throughout this chapter, making progress on sharing power with local actors through the international humanitarian system, or working



Working appropriately with domestic locally led ecosystems of support requires that the coordinated system thinks and works in different ways



appropriately with domestic locally led ecosystems of support, requires that the coordinated system thinks and works in different ways. The 2022 SOHS highlighted growing calls for international actors to think more about the colonial legacies that can influence the structure, functions and cultures of both individual organisations and the coordinated international system.

In this 2022–25 period, several actors argued that localisation commitments rarely went far enough, and that a stronger focus on decolonisation was needed to better grapple with issues of power and racism. For example, Peace Direct warned that localisation was being reduced to a technocratic exercise that almost completely neglected structural racism and colonial legacies, leaving the humanitarian system looking at the inequities in the system with one eye closed.¹²⁴ Organisations and academics also continued to debate definitions of decolonisation and its relationship with localisation. Christian Aid offered the distinction that localisation referred to an operational shift to local actors (but remained constrained by donor priorities), whereas decolonisation was a radical critique of colonial and neocolonial power structures that aimed to dismantle racial capitalism, knowledge hierarchies and dehumanising structures.¹²⁵

Beyond the issues already discussed about inequitable international–local partnerships and the under-recognition of locally led ecosystems of support, research pointed to markers of colonial legacies shaping the international humanitarian system from the top down. For example, ‘Western’ donors largely remained the most active in areas they previously colonised¹²⁶ and provided higher volumes of earmarked funding when their own nationals held executive leadership positions.¹²⁷ The people who held the most senior decision-making positions in the system were typically not from contexts affected by crisis. For example, the position of Emergency Relief Coordinator – the international system’s most senior humanitarian official – was held by six consecutive British nationals over 2007–25.¹²⁸

In this period, several INGOs and NGO networks developed decolonial and anti-racist frameworks and practical tools to assess power at organisational levels. Peace Direct established an internal Decolonising Systems Working Group to advance the decolonisation agenda.¹²⁹ Start Network’s 2025 review of its Anti-Racism and Decolonisation Framework provided lessons on successes, failures and challenges,¹³⁰ noting limited integration of the Framework into organisational processes.¹³¹ Christian Aid critically reflected on its ‘traditional’ top-down evaluation practice and aimed to take a decolonial approach, starting with



community-led priorities, values and knowledge.¹³² Beyond frameworks, there was limited evidence of progress in addressing colonial legacies to move commitments on localisation and accountability to affected populations towards changes in institutional behaviour. Indeed, the evaluation synthesis conducted for this report found little direct evidence on decolonisation in this period, suggesting that the humanitarian system did not systematically aim to address or measure it as a goal or performance marker.



There was limited evidence of progress in addressing colonial legacies to move commitments on localisation and accountability to affected populations towards changes in institutional behaviour



The relationship between localisation and decolonisation remained contested, reflected in the limited progress of key localisation commitments.

The Grand Bargain lacked a clear, enforceable definition of localisation, allowing INGOs to qualify as local partners; Charter4Change recognised power dynamics but fell short on 'Global North' willingness to relinquish power. The Pledge for Change advanced dialogue on power imbalances and established the Pledge for Change Accountability and Learning Mechanism (PALM) in early 2024.¹³³ However, with leadership and resources still concentrated among UN agencies and INGOs, it remained shaped by the hierarchies it sought to dismantle.¹³⁴

Some research in this period suggested ways for the humanitarian system to improve how it puts decolonisation into practice. For example, an ODI Global report recommended several measures: appointing heads of organisations from the communities they are mandated to serve, setting a minimum standard for at least 50% of top leadership executives and advisory boards to represent communities impacted by crisis, championing strategies to transfer power to local organisations led by refugees or internally displaced people, working with local experts to apply decolonial assessments of programming and evaluation, and developing a practice of leadership and middle management centring marginalised and most-impacted voices.¹³⁵

Progress on decolonising support has not proved straightforward, however. Research noted that efforts in this period to challenge existing structures often generated resistance and apprehension towards how such changes were enacted.¹³⁶ Indeed, our primary research suggested that discussions of decolonisation and colonial legacies often became sensitive and politically charged, further narrowing the already limited political will and space for constructive engagement by the UN, donors and humanitarian actors not working on the decolonisation agenda.



There were also concerns that, without political will and meaningful commitments to change, decolonisation aims would stall or be diluted and co-opted. Plan International Belgium acknowledged that superficial use of the term decolonisation allowed 'Western' aid organisations to maintain relevance without making any substantive changes.¹³⁷

Similarly, some of our interviewees argued:



'[Decolonisation] was hijacked by reductionist stuff, like localisation and [diversity, equity and inclusion], as a solution.'



'[The] localisation and decolonisation debate is primarily championed by those who are a barrier to both.'

Some interviewees felt that those who continued to control resources and decision-making were one reason why commitments kept failing around localisation and accountability to affected populations.

The language the international system uses when it talks about decolonisation also risks being exclusive to local actors and people affected by crisis. Definitions of decolonisation, localisation and accountability are framed and debated in English, making them less accessible, engaging and conversational for local actors and communities. For example, the usual Arabic translation of 'localisation' carries connotations similar to 'resettlement programme', while the Arabic translation of 'accountability' carries legal connotations, particularly in relation to transitional justice. In Colombia, challenges that arise from translating terms into Spanish exclude local actors from the debate and, if not properly contextualised, maintain power asymmetries.¹³⁸ This was evident in our in-country research: our teams struggled to engage interviewees – both aid practitioners and recipients – on decolonisation; many were either unfamiliar with the term or found it too abstract, limiting the extent to which their perspectives could be reflected.



Without political will and meaningful commitments to change, decolonisation aims would stall or be diluted and co-opted



Throughout this period, frustration grew around the lack of meaningful progress on localisation and slow recognition of the vital role of locally led structures of support. The system will need to continue to grapple with these questions and tensions in the coming SOHS period.



Conclusion

A decade on from the Grand Bargain, the evidence suggests that the debate has shifted: from whether localisation matters to what kind of localisation the humanitarian system intends to create. Several interviewees reflected that the next wave of reform may emerge under different names but will ultimately continue to grapple with many of the same questions.

If the humanitarian system is to make meaningful progress on its localisation commitments, greater attention will need to be given not only to funding flows and institutional commitments, but also to how international actors engage with, support and learn from the wider ecosystem of local actors, community-led responses, mutual-aid initiatives, intermediary models and state institutions that they already rely upon. This will require shifts in institutional cultures, incentives and political courage to translate commitments into practice, alongside stronger accountability and enforcement mechanisms, including greater transparency, public reporting and clearer consequences for failing to deliver.¹³⁹ Noticeable progress was made through new funding models, partnership approaches and greater recognition of locally led approaches, but enduring questions remained about power, colonial legacies, decision-making, trust and whose knowledge counts.

Enduring questions remained about power, colonial legacies, decision-making, trust and whose knowledge counts

CHAPTER 4.2

ACCOUNTABILITY IN PRACTICE

'Accountability is not just a "nice to have"; in situations of acute crisis and shrinking budgets, community voices must drive decisions more than ever before, or we are failing miserably to fulfil our basic humanitarian mandate.'

— International Council of Voluntary Agencies¹⁴⁰

Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher framed the goal of the Humanitarian Reset as 'cutting red tape and bringing decisions closer to households rather than agency headquarters'.¹⁴¹ To achieve this goal, the humanitarian system needs to put its commitments to accountability to affected populations (AAP) into stronger practice.¹⁴² This means enabling people to influence decisions that affect their lives, protecting their safety, rights and dignity, and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and sexual harassment (PSEAH) by system actors.¹⁴³ During this study period, the system continued to strengthen its accountability architecture, investing in new frameworks, strategies and guidance and technical tools. However, the evidence suggests that these remained overly technical and process-driven. Community-based approaches and independent accountability mechanisms often generated more legitimacy, trust and responsiveness, but they remained peripheral, received comparatively limited investment and were among the initiatives most affected by funding cuts. Consultation with people affected by crisis, and opportunities for them to provide feedback (and receive responses), were consistently associated with more positive perceptions of dignity, relevance, targeting, quality and trust. Investments in PSEAH expanded considerably, yet implementation remained uneven, with persistent challenges around underreporting, weak enforcement, survivor support and organisational follow-through. Similarly, dignity remained the least well-defined element of AAP, despite emerging guidance and increasing recognition of its importance.



Foundations of accountability

Evolving frameworks and guidance

AAP is the commitment and process through which humanitarian actors use power responsibly: to take account of, give account to and be held accountable by people affected by crisis. Over the study period, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) principals reaffirmed AAP as a collective responsibility and committed to delivering on this 'historic commitment' through the implementation and monitoring of collective AAP.^{xiii} Building on the work of the previous Results Group 2 on Accountability and Inclusion,¹⁴⁴ the IASC Task Force 2 on AAP (2022–24)¹⁴⁵ supported efforts to strengthen collective AAP, including through the IASC Collective AAP Framework (developed in December 2023)¹⁴⁶ and other practical tools.^{xiv}

There were additional investments at the operational, agency and country levels.^{xv} The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) leveraged its pooled funds to advance collective AAP, supporting 16 initiatives with US\$8.5 million through Underfunded Window allocations from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). Following the completion of the Task Force's mandate, OCHA established and facilitated a global interagency AAP Working Group to carry forward the work of the Task Force and maintain a focus on collective AAP in operations. However, as highlighted in the *The State of the Humanitarian System 2022* (SOHS), the effectiveness and practical implementation of such tools, initiatives and processes remained difficult to assess.¹⁴⁷

Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) synthesis findings covering 2021–25 noted AAP to be quite narrowly understood and one of the weakest aspects of IASC responses.¹⁴⁸ Evidence highlighted that large aid agencies often treated AAP as a standalone function and continued to 'mark their own homework';¹⁴⁹ efforts also became increasingly technocratic and siloed from broader humanitarian endeavours.¹⁵⁰



Evidence highlighted that large aid agencies often treated AAP as a standalone function and continued to 'mark their own homework'



xiii The Collective AAP Framework is a tool developed by IASC to enable Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators, Humanitarian Country Teams and UN Country Teams to prioritise actions to strengthen response-wide AAP (see IASC (2024) https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/IASC_Collective%20AAP%20Framework.pdf; IASC (2022) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/accountability-and-inclusion/statement-principals-inter-agency-standing-committee-iasc-accountability-affected-people>).

xiv Other tools include the Results Tracker, Standard Operating Procedures for AAP Coordination and Resource Portal (featuring over 700 resources) (see IASC (2024) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/IASC%20Collective%20AAP%20Resources%20-%20overview%203-pager%2013-06-2024%20final.pdf>). IASC's Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility also reflected the increasing integration of AAP with digital systems, data protection and risk management (see OCHA (2023) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/operational-response/iasc-operational-guidance-data-responsibility-humanitarian-action>).

xv At the operational level, see: Global Health Cluster (2023) <https://healthcluster.who.int/resources/accountability-to-affected-populations>; and CERF (2024) https://cerf.un.org/sites/default/files/resources/Guidance%20for%20CERF%20AAP%202024-1%20UFE%20envelope_with%20indicators_FINAL_1.pdf. At the agency and country levels, new frameworks included the UN Population Fund's (UNFPA) AAP and Inclusion Framework in the Philippines and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Yemen's AAP Framework (see UNFPA (2024) <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unfpa-philippines-framework-accountability-affected-people-and-inclusion-version-july-2024>; and IOM (2024) https://crisisresponse.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1481/files/appeal/documents/%5BEN%5D%20IOM%20Yemen%20AAP%202024-2025_1_0.pdf).



Similarly, OCHA's AAP evaluation found that AAP was reduced to its technical aspects, rather than driving strategic decision-making or course corrections based on community input,¹⁵¹ and many staff within the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) understood AAP as a one-off annual participatory exercise.¹⁵²

There was some progress on improving collective strategies for accountability. However, an initial attempt to build a collective AAP strategy in Yemen appeared to have lapsed,¹⁵³ interagency processes that aimed to strengthen AAP in Ethiopia 'had not produced tangible outcomes'¹⁵⁴ and the system 'took too long' to establish robust collective AAP in Afghanistan, which was weak over the period.¹⁵⁵ An interagency group noted that, time after time, the same barriers hindered progress on collective AAP, including colonial mindsets,^{xvi} fear of feedback, threatened mandates, resource competition, power imbalance and tokenism that reduced participation to consultation without influence.¹⁵⁶

Community engagement, communication and transparency

The Flagship Initiative, proposed by the Emergency Relief Coordinator in November 2022 and launched in early 2023, piloted a people-centred, agile, locally driven response^{xvii} and treated community engagement as a core pillar. Our aid-recipient survey found an improvement in aid providers' communication: 67% of respondents said agencies communicated effectively about plans and activities, compared to 36% in the previous survey for the 2022 SOHS. However, evidence from multiple contexts found inconsistent outcomes. Between one-third and half of people consulted in Ethiopia did not know what assistance they would receive, when, what the selection criteria for receiving aid were or how they could complain.¹⁵⁷ In several operations, people remained unclear about both the services UNHCR provided and the complaints mechanisms available to them.¹⁵⁸ In Ground Truth Solutions' aid perceptions survey in Haiti only 2% of respondents felt they knew how humanitarian money was spent in their community and just 13% understood how targeting criteria were decided.¹⁵⁹

The 2025 funding cuts halted progress on initiatives intended to support community engagement. World Food Programme (WFP) country offices delayed sharing information about upcoming prioritisation exercises due to fear of

xvi There is no universally agreed or official definition of 'colonial mindset' in the humanitarian sector. Across the literature, however, the term is commonly used to describe attitudes, assumptions and practices rooted in longstanding colonial power relations that continue to shape humanitarian action. These include paternalistic approaches that privilege international actors, expertise and decision-making over the knowledge, agency and leadership of people affected by crisis and local actors, often resulting in the disempowerment of aid recipients and reinforcing unequal power relations embedded in the language, structures and practices of the aid system (see Boffey (2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/may/07/colonial-mindset-global-aid-agencies-costs-localising-humanitarianism-ngo->; and Magendane and Goris (2021) <https://www.partos.nl/en/news/the-decolonisation-of-aid-a-road-of-responsibility-justice-and-democratisation/>).

xvii In November 2022, Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths proposed an 'initiative to pilot a people-centred, agile, locally-driven response in a number of countries' to the IASC Principals (see IASC (2022) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/accountability-and-inclusion/statement-principals-inter-agency-standing-committee-iasc-accountability-affected-people>). The Flagship Initiative launched in early 2023 as a three-year humanitarian change process in four countries: Niger, South Sudan, the Philippines and Colombia. Somalia also recently joined the process (see Sida et al. (2025) <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/flagship-initiative-second-year-learning-report-april-2025>).



stoking tensions, but this was ‘ultimately unhelpful’.¹⁶⁰ Community World Service Asia’s paper, which drew on the experiences of over 450 aid professionals, found that nearly two-thirds felt uncomfortable with how their organisations handled community communication during transitions, programme closures and staff reductions that resulted from the cuts, leading them to question who was held accountable when communities were left behind, especially in areas affected by conflict.¹⁶¹ The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) also found distrust and incomprehension among communities due to a lack of clear communication and transparency, which led communities to believe that the organisation was stealing the money – they could not understand that a donor could ‘take back’ funding.¹⁶² Over two years, and across 12 countries, Ground Truth Solutions synthesised learning from more than 34,000 conversations and reflected on their findings in light of the Humanitarian Reset. Among many other priorities, people affected by crisis emphasised effective two-way communication, radical transparency and community engagement, and they argued that tokenistic feedback mechanisms and reducing AAP to ‘interagency feedback’ missed the point of letting communities drive tough decisions.¹⁶³

In practice, AAP was frequently reduced to surveys, needs assessments or asking people to choose between pre-designed options with funding already secured.¹⁶⁴ Humanitarian organisations in the Central African Republic (CAR) treated community engagement as an add-on believed to be good practice ‘globally’, rather than practices that made sense for communities.¹⁶⁵ Evidence found a lack of basic infrastructure for aid providers to consistently listen to communities at the simplest level, and that community engagement and participation were not systematically integrated into processes such as Humanitarian Needs Overviews and Humanitarian Response Plans.¹⁶⁶

In practice, AAP was frequently reduced to surveys, needs assessments or asking people to choose between pre-designed options with funding already secured

OCHA took steps to reflect community views in the Humanitarian Programme Cycle, producing guidance to ensure community consultations are part of joint needs assessments; conducting subnational consultations in Afghanistan, CAR and Chad; tracking joint AAP and perception indicators; and dedicating pages on community perspectives. However, the 2025 OCHA AAP evaluation found there were no processes in place to ensure these community inputs shaped OCHA’s decisions, strategies or workplans, nor to communicate back to communities.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, only 38% of OCHA’s partners were satisfied with its performance on including communities in response planning and decision-making.¹⁶⁸ Rapid timelines and implementation often constrained meaningful consultation and participatory design. In Colombia during the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan



process, only 49% of agencies routinely consulted communities about their needs – and of these, only 37% (18% of agencies in total) said they adapted their programming based on what people told them.¹⁶⁹ Because interventions were largely predetermined, people had limited influence over programming.¹⁷⁰

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, only two in 10 respondents in Mweso (North Kivu) and three in 10 in Minova (South Kivu) felt they could participate in decision-making.¹⁷¹ Similarly, the IAHE in Somalia¹⁷² and the independent compendium review of the humanitarian response to internal displacement¹⁷³ noted that people were not involved in decisions and had limited understanding of how and why they were made, and that aid organisations largely overlooked people's agency and capacities. An internally displaced man in Sudan told us:



'We as [internally displaced people] have not been involved in the decisions or consulted at all, they just deliver what they have, even when we raise concerns about the quantities provided and the items, they claim that this is what we can afford at this time.'

This recurring exclusion of people affected by crisis from decisions, and the overlooking of their agency and capacities, also hinged on narratives about what communities are assumed to want and how these narratives may drive practice. Some interviewees pointed to a recurring assumption, in parts of the system, that agencies cannot always ask communities what they want because then 'people will ask for everything' – and agencies cannot provide everything. Interviewees working directly on community engagement challenged this framing; they argued that communities were typically clear and pragmatic about their priorities, which were often relatively focused rather than unlimited, and that they would not simply ask for 'everything'.

This aligns with Ground Truth Solution's finding that, even during acute crises, people prioritised support that helped them make long term plans, recover, return to their homes, rebuild and strengthen their livelihoods. In Ukraine, people strongly emphasised rebuilding educational and healthcare facilities, alongside upskilling and livelihood diversification; in Burkina Faso people expressed a need for agricultural support to regain autonomy; and in northeastern Nigeria and Somalia, people described humanitarian assistance and cash support as being extremely short lived amid severe inflation, leaving them quickly returning to the same needs.¹⁷⁴



Even during acute crises, people prioritised support that helped them make long term plans, recover, return to their homes, rebuild and strengthen their livelihoods





Several positive examples showed the feasibility and value of a more accountable system. The International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Empower to Enable (E2E) project published a Learning Report and a toolkit (the latter in several languages).¹⁷⁵ In a five-month pilot in Iraq and DRC, the toolkit was tested to strengthen accountability by engaging frontline staff in decision-making and direct community engagement, and by integrating participation within organisational culture and strategy.¹⁷⁶ The UNFPA presented its interagency AAP system in northern Syria as a timely model for the Reset, since it built dialogue with communities into decision-making via SafeLine (a multichannel feedback mechanism, including an interagency hotline and receiving online complaints and feedback), rumour tracking (monitoring public social media to enable real-time responses to community perceptions),¹⁷⁷ and face-to-face engagement with a locally led community of practice. In 2025, more than 10,000 people used SafeLine, 500 volunteers supported in-person feedback and 1,285 rumours were logged (of which 10% were high-risk; that is, where people were at risk of immediate harm, requested urgent action, and expressed major dissatisfaction). Referrals led to concrete changes, including revisions to the Dignified Shelter Guidance.¹⁷⁸

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' (IFRC) *Community Engagement and Accountability Strategy 2023–25* noted that impact research in Guinea, Malawi, Guatemala, Georgia and Indonesia found community engagement helped communities feel more resilient to tackle their problems in a durable way, and that community trust was critical to the success of their responses, including to Covid-19, Ebola and in Ukraine.¹⁷⁹ The Community Engagement Forum brought practitioners together to share practice and support community-led projects and complaint and feedback mechanisms, including via Community Coffee and Chat webinar series.^{xviii} Our interviewees noted that the Forum was not prioritised in funding cuts, it was operating voluntarily at a 'skeleton level of activities' and was unable to follow-through on recommendations.

Complaint and feedback mechanisms

An IAHE synthesis found that processes intended to ensure AAP – mainly feedback mechanisms – fell well short of expectations: people affected by crisis trusted neither these processes nor, more broadly, aid distribution itself.¹⁸⁰ Ground Truth Solutions, drawing on findings from the REACH 2024 Multisector Needs Assessment, showed that only 19% of households surveyed knew how to file a complaint with, or make a suggestion to, a humanitarian organisation; of those, only one-third had ever actually done so; and of those, fewer than half (43%) received a response.¹⁸¹

^{xviii} The Community Engagement Forum, facilitated/managed by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and funded by UNHCR under the Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster, brought together humanitarian practitioners to share practice through knowledge exchanges, guidance materials, peer-to-peer learning and the promotion of best practices – including on community-led projects and complaints and feedback mechanisms. These activities were described as having improved AAP. It also ran the Community Coffee and Chat webinar series of 35 sessions at the time of the assessment (see Ndahimana (2025) <https://www.cccmcluster.org/resources/new-report-beyond-tokenism-displaced-persons-participation-cef-4>).



Our in-country teams told us that various local and international organisations established accountability systems in this SOHS period, including complaint and feedback mechanisms, hotlines, emails, boxes to receive suggestions, focal points and committees, but that their effectiveness was limited. Respondents in Sudan found that raising concerns seldom changed fundamental aspects of aid delivery, food rations, distribution timing or items provided. A cluster representative in Sudan highlighted multilayered communication chains in which complaints were forwarded across several offices and often lost:



'100 requests I send, I get a proper resolution for two.'

In Yemen, a lack of responsiveness to feedback created frustration, with people noting that their priority needs 'do not align with what is being provided by UN agencies'.¹⁸² One senior humanitarian practitioner, who thought AAP had been 'slightly co-opted, slightly instrumentalised', said:



'We need to have [complaint and feedback mechanisms], but very often [these] are used just to say: "Thank you for your complaint as to why you weren't included. Sorry, those are the rules". It's placating people; it's not opening a dialogue. Or: "Oh, I'm sorry the assistance didn't meet your liking, but that was the harmonised type that [it] was decided we were going to give". And so you're explaining why you've done what you've done.'

Our aid-recipient survey found that 61% of people who gave their opinion, made a complaint or suggested changes were satisfied with how the aid provider responded. However, this differed from other findings that surfaced in this period. An evaluation in Somalia found that 65% of people who provided feedback or filed a complaint said they did not receive a response.¹⁸³ In Myanmar, international and local humanitarian organisations told us there was an absence of follow-up to community feedback and donor-driven priorities often prevented adaptation to that feedback. They also said participation was limited to enumeration only. In Afghanistan, according to OCHA's earthquake lessons, agencies reported having AAP systems in place (including Awaaz: the first nationwide inter-agency humanitarian call centre),¹⁸⁴ but there was limited clarity regarding how these systems were implemented or led to programmatic adjustments.¹⁸⁵ This was echoed by our respondents in Afghanistan, who reported having limited awareness of, or access to, clear channels through which they could raise concerns or suggestions; some were entirely unaware that such mechanisms existed.

The evaluation of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Level 3 emergency response in northern Ethiopia found that early interventions focused on the immediate response; AAP was seen as limited to provision of suggestion boxes rather than



AAP was seen as limited to provision of suggestion boxes rather than being fully embraced for its strategic and ethical value



being fully embraced for its strategic and ethical value.¹⁸⁶ Our team in Sudan similarly noted that, in emergency contexts with scarce resources and funding cuts, programmes were designed rapidly, leaving 'very limited room for feedback and suggestion' beyond surface-level consultation – and that even when UN agencies (like WFP) adjusted their activities, such adaptations were ad hoc rather than systematic.

Although changes were isolated, sporadic and the exception rather than the rule, practitioners told us of some examples of promising practice: In Ukraine, feedback helped to correct the exclusion of a mother who did not receive assistance; in a few cases in Palestine, satisfaction surveys helped to adjust the quality of food items and increase the amount of cash assistance; and in Poland, feedback led to improvements in collective accommodation centres, including better language support.

Community and locally led accountability

Like the wider ecosystem (see [Chapter 4.1](#)), community and locally driven accountability practices often demonstrated stronger responses and legitimacy than formal systems. Internally displaced people in Sudan were too frightened or sceptical to use formal channels, preferring to complain informally to camp supervisors. In Myanmar, community accountability practices strengthened legitimacy where formal systems were weak. One interviewee said:



Community and locally driven accountability practices often demonstrated stronger responses and legitimacy than formal systems



'Local volunteer groups are more responsive, better connected with the needs of affected households and able to act quickly. They often verify data in real time, distribute aid transparently and maintain trust with local residents. Their grassroots presence also makes them more accessible and accountable.'

Evaluation evidence noted that communities preferred community-based channels due to cultural norms and a preference for resolving issues among themselves.¹⁸⁷ Humanitarian practitioners working directly with mutual-aid groups stressed the importance of community accountability measures. One interviewee, working for an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), provided examples from Palestine and Colombia on how communities created their own committees; each group had its own structure, and community members closely monitored one



another to ensure accountability. In Gaza, community-protection committees in every camp strengthened oversight and provided structured communication channels between camp managers, field staff and aid recipients, improving accountability, transparency and responsiveness to community needs.

One senior leader of a national NGO in the Philippines told us about the 'horizontal accountability' between their organisation, community-led groups and the wider community, which was grounded in communities' own assets, agency and social capital; community-led groups were entrusted with resources, and were responsible and very transparent with their constituencies. There were broader efforts to pilot locally led accountability, including the CHS Alliance programme, CHS LOCALED, which aimed to generate evidence on locally led accountability in the form of peer assessment in South Sudan, Ukraine, Nigeria and Bangladesh – and to fill a key AAP evidence gap. However, the programme was paused in January 2025 due to the cuts to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).^{xix}

Advancing the prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment



'We don't say it's not happening, it is happening a lot more than we think – or at least more than has been reported. Reporting is a big issue. There are trust issues, security issues, and many other factors. There's a lack of referral mechanisms; people don't feel safe to report, or they don't have access, or they would have to travel and spend money they don't have to go to a clinic or elsewhere. Funding is also very limited. So, we do what we can to raise awareness and monitor as much as possible.'

Aid practitioner, Myanmar¹⁸⁸

PSEAH^{xx} remained a central institutional and reputational concern in this period – and a core part of AAP, dignity and the 'do no harm' principle. The 2022 SOHS noted that high-profile scandals generated momentum for new interagency mechanisms. Yet despite the proliferation of guidance and resources over this period, humanitarian actors acknowledged that many existing tools were either highly complex, technical and resource-intensive or too generic to support frontline implementation.¹⁸⁹ In response, a new wave of operational tools and initiatives were developed.

^{xix} CHS LOCALED aimed to take a collective and localised approach, provide a comprehensive picture of aid effectiveness and drive improvements to close the gap in expectations between those providing assistance and those experiencing it (see CHS Alliance (n.d.) <https://www.chsalliance.org/chs-located-a-collective-solution-to-close-the-accountability-gap/>).

^{xx} The terms 'sexual exploitation and abuse' (SEA), 'prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse' (PSEA), and 'protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment' (PSEAH) are used differently across organisations and reports. They are used here as they appear in the original sources to preserve consistency with the cited material, rather than to imply interchangeable usage or confusion. Elsewhere in this report, PSEAH is used because it is broader and includes sexual harassment alongside sexual exploitation and abuse.



Under WFP's IASC PSEAH Championship (2024–25), WFP and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) developed the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) Risk Mapping Package to help humanitarian clusters directly address the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse within sectoral activities.¹⁹⁰ The IOM and WFP also launched *PSEA at the Frontline: Together We Say No* in 2022, combining training for frontline personnel with the co-creation of PSEA materials alongside community members.¹⁹¹

Many existing tools were either highly complex, technical and resource-intensive or too generic to support frontline implementation

Efforts to broaden participation included the establishment of a PSEA Advisory Group, composed of 12 women-led organisations operating in high-risk contexts, under the WFP 2024–25 IASC PSEAH Championship as a global platform.¹⁹² PSEACap, established in 2023 by OCHA and NORCAP, deployed expert PSEA Coordinators to high-risk contexts as part of operationalising the IASC PSEAH Vision and Strategy 2022–26,¹⁹³ and it sought more than US\$9 million from donors in its 2025–26 appeal to support in-country activities, which are critical for strengthening interagency capacity and leadership in protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse.¹⁹⁴ ICVA assumed the IASC PSEAH Championship in January 2026, leading through an NGO coalition; it is focusing on strengthening evidence and learning, expanding support to frontline and local actors (through the PSEA Outreach Fund) and promoting the simplification of existing tools and coordination mechanisms.¹⁹⁵

Investments continued to be made in PSEA staffing and structures throughout the period. By January 2024, 79% of WFP staff had completed mandatory PSEA training, although with limited follow-up and an overreliance on online modules.¹⁹⁶ However, a multiagency evaluation in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) showed that approximately 86% of volunteers involved in assisting people receiving aid were not briefed or trained on PSEA, and 80% of community organisations were not trained on PSEA and did not sign the relevant code of conduct.¹⁹⁷ Until the end of 2024, WFP's Ethics Office served as the organisation's PSEA focal point¹⁹⁸ and built WFP's PSEA capacity, though management lacked the confidence to proactively engage with PSEA.¹⁹⁹ WFP's evaluation found that PSEA was not systematically operationalised and data was primarily used for headquarters reporting rather than informing decision-making at regional and country levels, which made it difficult to track progress or identify trends across regions and types of intervention.²⁰⁰

Dedicated PSEA capacity expanded across UN agencies. In 2023, UNHCR maintained a seven-person headquarters team led by a director-level (D-1)



Senior Coordinator and supported by 400 focal points across 132 countries;²⁰¹ WFP maintained five fully dedicated PSEA staff and more than 500 focal points globally; and UNICEF maintained an established PSEAH unit led by a senior staff member (P-5) since 2019, with P-4 positions across all regional offices and networks of national and international PSEA specialists.²⁰² Many other organisations also relied on PSEAH focal points, reflecting the ‘trusted intermediary’ approach, whereby victims/survivors seek support through trusted intermediaries and community entry points.²⁰³ However, these were usually staff members in existing substantive roles; focal-point duties comprised just 10–20% of their role, and short-term or rotating assignments constrained their ability to build trust or implement PSEAH measures.²⁰⁴ There was limited evidence of the impact of these resources, nor analysis of costs relative to results, making it difficult to assess their value or establish which approaches delivered the best accountability outcomes.

The Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, implemented by over 380 organisations, aimed to prevent perpetrators of sexual misconduct from moving between organisations undetected.^{xxi} Between 2019 and 2025, the scheme received 222,662 requests for misconduct data and responded to 196,368 of them, contributing to 677 rejected hires and zero upheld complaints or lawsuits. Although 2025 trends showed a decline in all these indicators compared with 2024, mainly due to cuts in the sector, the scheme continued to make good progress and participation grew.²⁰⁵

Overall, our aid-practitioner survey suggested some progress since the previous SOHS study period

Overall, our aid-practitioner survey suggested some progress since the previous SOHS study period. When asked how effective the humanitarian system had been in preventing and addressing exploitation and abuse of people affected by crisis, the proportion of respondents rating its performance as ‘excellent’ increased from 5.8% to 10.6%, while those rating it as ‘good’ increased from 34.6% to 40.4%. Qualitative responses, however, reflected a mixed picture. Respondents acknowledged greater investment in PSEA training, codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, but continued to highlight underreporting, ineffective or poorly communicated reporting channels, limited consequences for perpetrators and concerns that organisations focused more on processes than action. Respondents observed:



‘The sector asks the questions but does not adjust when there are problems.’



‘Report mechanisms are often ineffective and rarely shared with the communities of concern.’

xxi See <https://misconduct-disclosure-scheme.org/introduction>



The CHS Alliance foundational paper identified a wealth of guidance materials; however, reparation and redress comprised one of the least understood and least addressed areas of PSEAH practice. Survivors of exploitation and abuse were often left to navigate and cope with adverse cultural, psychosocial, security and legal consequences alone.²⁰⁶ One commentator argued that policy shifts and attention to PSEAH were largely reactive, driven by efforts to 'salvage credibility' following scandals and prioritising procedural accountability over prevention or meaningful redress for victims.²⁰⁷



Comprehensive PSEAH measures were often in place, yet power dynamics, cultural stigma, fear of reprisal, weak judicial support and potential loss of assistance hindered progress



Our in-country research and wider evidence found that comprehensive PSEAH measures were often in place, yet power dynamics, cultural stigma, fear of reprisal, weak judicial support and potential loss of assistance hindered progress. In addition, accessibility barriers, dense and confusing terminology, lack of trust in organisations and many mechanisms placing the burden to report on victims and survivors further constrained the effectiveness of these measures in situations of extreme vulnerability.²⁰⁸ Concerns around anonymity and privacy posed another challenge. An evaluation of UNHCR's response to the L3 emergency in

Afghanistan raised concerns over pressures to share sensitive 'beneficiary' data and restrictions on female staff that constrained outreach to women and people with specific needs;^{xxii} a strategic evaluation of WFP's PSEA framework identified breaches of confidentiality, inconsistent 'do no harm' practices and limited capacity to handle cases involving children and survivor referrals.²⁰⁹

The CHS Alliance's *Harmonised Reporting Scheme Snapshot (April–September 2025)* also highlighted power and accountability concerns.²¹⁰ Of 147 reported incidents of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, 62% involved aid recipients or affected community members, 44% of survivors were children and 97% were women. Managers accounted for 46% of alleged perpetrators in workplace-related incidents, with the proportion of senior managers increasing from 10% to 24% compared to the previous reporting cycle (October 2024–March 2025). Accountability also remained weak: substantiation rates (the proportion of allegations confirmed following investigation) remained at 31%, more than 20% of cases resulted in no action and 30% remained open. The snapshot further cautioned that declining incident

xxii According to UNHCR, 'persons with specific needs' (used interchangeably with 'person at heightened risk') are individuals who experience particular protection risks or barriers due to the intersection of their personal characteristics with their environment, and who therefore require targeted protection actions. In the Afghanistan L3 response, UNHCR developed Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures for people with specific needs, with assistance targeting individuals requiring protection or life-saving interventions, such as single women without community support, survivors of gender-based violence, persons living with disabilities or those requiring medical or legal assistance (see UNHCR (2025) <https://www.unhcr.org/glossary>; UNHCR (2023) <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/management-response-afghanistan-l3-evaluation.pdf>; UNICEF (2023) <https://www.unhcr.org/media/evo-2023-02-evaluation-unhcr-s-response-l3-emergency-afghanistan-2021-2022>).



numbers may reflect reduced reporting capacity and weakened safeguarding systems rather than a reduction in abuse. One respondent in Myanmar told us:



'Because this sector deals with sensitive issues, "no report" doesn't mean "no incident".'

Talk to Loop, an independent accountability platform, received 39,000 calls and processed 1,515 pieces of community feedback in Somalia and Somaliland between January and March 2025, including on PSEAH-related concerns. Use of this platform indicated growing community trust.^{xxiii} During the same period, 79% of sensitive referrals received a response, although response rates varied considerably between INGOs (90%), NNGOs (89%) and UN agencies (57%).²¹¹

Dignity under pressure



'For me, a person has no dignity except in their own home.'

Community leader, Palestine



'We don't want to be made victims for a sack of rice.'

Aid recipient, Haiti²¹²

According to the SOHS evaluation synthesis, 'dignity' remained less well defined than 'accountability' and 'participation'.^{xxiv} The updated Core Humanitarian Standard emphasised that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, linking this to three requirements: ethical communications (including in advocacy and fundraising), PSEAH, and protecting the safety and dignity of staff and volunteers.²¹³ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) mentioned dignity in relation to international humanitarian law,²¹⁴ while Catholic Relief Services provided new guidance, *Measuring Respect for Human Dignity*, to systematically track whether project activities and staff respect participants' dignity.²¹⁵

Yet dignity is inherently subjective and context dependent – it cannot be easily standardised or captured through metrics or definitions. Beyond a small number of initiatives (such as the Catholic Relief Services' guidance), there was limited articulation of what 'dignified programming' looks like in practice or how to assess whether dignity was upheld. As a result, some major humanitarian evaluations and documents proceeded with no explicit mention of dignity at all, aside from references to a 'dignity kit'²¹⁶ or broad invocation of 'dignity and rights'.



Dignity is inherently subjective and context dependent



^{xxiii} However, Talk to Loop closed in 2026, citing a difficult funding environment.

^{xxiv} ALNAP commissioned evaluation synthesis. See [Methodology](#).



Dignity received the most positive assessment in our aid-recipient survey. When asked whether they were treated with respect and dignity by aid providers, 84% of respondents answered 'yes' compared to 73% in the 2022 SOHS, with slight variances between different types of organisations. Our in-country teams highlighted a perception gap whereby, for humanitarian actors, it may be enough for people to receive assistance and appear satisfied, whereas people affected by crisis see other factors – including barriers to accessing aid, injustices and their experiences and vulnerabilities – as affecting their dignity.

Across contexts, people told us they felt disrespected when they received poor-quality aid, such as spoiled goods, dirty clothing, expired items or irrelevant standardised kits. In Ukraine, focus group participants said:



'Let it be smaller package, but with quality products ... It is so humiliating. There were pearl barley and 3 kg of oatmeal – and bugs were crawling in it.'

This was echoed in Haiti in a Ground Truth Solutions survey: 'Even if people need aid, it's no reason to give them rubbish.'²¹⁷

For many, dignity meant an individualised approach rather than prioritising quantity or efficiency, as a local authority representative from Gaza told us:



'Dignity has been one of the hardest values to uphold. Our system is built for efficiency under siege, but efficiency often comes at the expense of people's sense of agency and respect.'

People were concerned about not only the aid they received but also whether it was delivered respectfully and transparently. In DRC, respondents did not appreciate the IOM working at night to confirm the number of 'real' displaced people in a camp. In Palestine, respondents sometimes felt that aid providers acted as if they 'were giving from their own pockets', and that they used phrases considered disrespectful in Arabic, such as 'you are hungry'.

Our aid-recipient survey also suggested a strong association between communication and dignity: respondents who reported good communication from aid providers were 5.6 times more likely to report being treated with respect and dignity. Similarly, our Myanmar team found that transparent communication reinforced people's sense of dignity and helped reduce tension.



Respondents who reported good communication from aid providers were 5.6 times more likely to report being treated with respect and dignity





Across multiple contexts, distribution sites were described as unsafe, crowded and undignified, with long queues in harsh weather, unclear rules and a lack of safe spaces making people feel like ‘crowds’ rather than individuals.²¹⁸ In some cases, these conditions contributed to violence and injury. One participant in Haiti said a family member nearly lost an eye during a distribution.²¹⁹ In Sudan, people said:



‘We walk through the whole of the state to get water ... it puts everyone in a humiliating situation and people experience bullying. Little children ... are bullied.’

People living with disabilities, especially with reduced mobility or sensory impairments, noted that conditions at distribution sites often made aid inaccessible to them.²²⁰ Respondents noted that most shelters lacked ramps, accessible toilets and assistance devices, and they told us that families had to carry relatives or leave them behind. One man living with a disability from Gaza said:



‘I lost my house and then my dignity. In the shelter, I am a burden.’

Several respondents cited privacy as key to protecting dignity. Others noted the physical and psychological toll of lacking privacy: some described intentionally going hungry so as to avoid using the bathrooms in crowded shelters, while women in Gaza were delivering babies on mattresses laid on the floor and one young pregnant mother prayed no would look at her when she gave birth. A displaced woman in Palestine said:



‘I was displaced about six times. Our first displacement was to al-Nuseirat, to a school shelter. Around 120 people were crammed into one classroom of about 6 × 8 metres. At night we would step over each other to sleep, and we were families from different places. The classrooms were for women and children, while the men had to sleep outside, under the open sky, exposed to shrapnel from shelling, the danger from drones and bombardment, and the freezing cold and rain.’



The dignity of people affected by crisis was linked to them being treated as decision-makers



Cash and voucher assistance gained significant momentum due to its flexibility and ability to uphold recipient dignity.²²¹ Sources variously referenced cash as ‘dignity in action’²²² and offering the ‘dignity of choice’.²²³ Our in-country teams reiterated that the dignity of people affected by crisis was linked to them being treated as decision-makers; after the Kakhovka dam explosion in Ukraine, for example,

respondents appreciated cash and voucher schemes that allowed them to buy what they needed in a more dignified way. However, an evaluation for UNHCR/WFP of



multipurpose cash in Lebanon noted that refugees receiving cash reported cases of hostility, discrimination and verbal harassment from host communities, primarily due to deteriorated economic conditions²²⁴ (See [Chapter 2.2](#) for further discussions of cash assistance).

The use of photos in the humanitarian sector has long been controversial and contested. Palestinian academic Yafa El Masri noted that photos used in humanitarian communications often strip people of their personhood, agency and dignity; she cited refugee communities referring to stock images of suffering (which often feature children) as ‘UNICEF photos’.²²⁵ One of our interviewees in Palestine also linked dignity to being photographed:



‘Because my sisters are disabled, they are the most exposed to being photographed as “special cases”, but after they give them aid and photograph them, then [they] withdraw the aid. This is very harmful to them ... it is very offensive, annoying, and hurts their dignity.’

Following widespread criticism for using a photo of a 16-year-old rape victim in its communications,²²⁶ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) launched a review of its media archive – nearly 200,000 visual assets – in late 2021.²²⁷ By the end of 2022, the review identified 10,000 potentially problematic images against ethical criteria including stereotypes, lack of dignity, protection of minors, security risks and disturbing or offensive content.²²⁸

In September 2025, VOICE Out Loud focused on the ethical challenges of humanitarian communications – such as narratives and photos – in fundraising, including colonial legacies, power dynamics and impacts on dignity.²²⁹ Reflecting growing attention to locally led development, power, inequality and embedded coloniality and racism in the aid sector, Bond updated its ethical storytelling guidance in 2024. The guidance encouraged organisations to recognise contributors as partners rather than subjects; to move away from images and narratives that portray people as being in need of saving and that perpetuate racist stereotypes, instead recognising their capacities and agency; and to plan and budget for providing the final copies of photographs and stories to participants wherever possible.²³⁰

Enabling accountability

The value of accountability in a time of cuts

Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher framed the Humanitarian Reset as ‘cutting red tape and bringing decisions closer to households rather than agency headquarters’.²³¹ This will require the humanitarian system to commit and genuinely



invest in AAP, particularly in approaches that have demonstrated tangible progress and impact, and to exercise political will and pressure needed to sustain them. As ICVA's report *Lives on the Line* noted: 'accountability is not just a "nice to have"; in situations of acute crisis and shrinking budgets, community voices must drive decisions more than ever before, or we are failing miserably to fulfil our basic humanitarian mandate.'²³²

Cuts to assistance increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse, including through negative coping strategies such as transactional and survival sex.²³³ In Mozambique, following cuts in food rations, displaced women reported that girls as young as 11 years engaged in these practices for as little as 50 metical (US\$0.25). In DRC, UNFPA described an 'epidemic of survival sex' linked to a lack of other livelihood options, and several displaced women and girls reported exploitation by community leaders and humanitarian staff.²³⁴

We found strong evidence, through our aid-recipient survey and wider research, that communication, consultation and the opportunity for people affected by crisis to provide feedback and receive responses all correlated significantly with more positive results on dignity, relevance, targeting and quality.^{xxv} Several exercises and pilots during this period showed that genuine and meaningful community engagement in planning and decision-making led to responses that better reflected community priorities and strengthened trust.

Genuine and meaningful community engagement in planning and decision-making led to responses that better reflected community priorities and strengthened trust

In the Philippines, the Flagship Initiative developed and piloted the Listen, Discover, Enhance approach, which systematically engaged communities to identify their priorities, capacities and locally led solutions and to develop and fund action plans.²³⁵ Following a cyclone in Caraga, the community developed an action plan cofinanced by a national NGO and the local government; they prioritised a new water system, with the community providing land and labour. Participatory community consultations in South Sudan helped around 10,000 internally displaced people across Unity, Upper Nile, Jonglei and Western Bahr el Ghazal gain access to farmland and resources, leading to improved harvests and

xxv For example, our aid-recipient survey found that communication was the strongest driver of positive perceptions. People who felt well-informed about the aid they received rated humanitarian performance much more positively across the board, especially dignity (about six times higher), targeting (about five times higher) and quality (about four times higher). In addition, twice as many people reported being consulted in this period compared to the previous SOHS period (55% of people who responded said they had been consulted on what they need prior to distribution; 45% said they had not), while feedback mechanisms showed the weakest performance (41% of people who responded said they were able to give their opinion, make complaints, or suggest changes to aid agencies; 42% said they were not). Consultation also had moderate positive associations with satisfaction with targeting, quantity, timeliness, relevance, quality and feeling treated with dignity. Providing feedback had smaller but consistent positive effects on the same outcomes.



reduced aid dependence.²³⁶ In Wau, 2,700 internally displaced people were able to return to their villages after lengthy displacement following collective consultations and follow-up with authorities and partners.²³⁷

A recurring challenge that emerged was the limited external pressure on organisations to respond to feedback and follow through on accountability commitments, alongside a tendency to ‘mark their own homework’. This points to the potential value of further exploring independent mechanisms and associations, which could help to connect communities affected by crisis with those who hold power, resources and decision-making authority. In this period, several independent accountability mechanisms and platforms – such as Talk to Loop, Ground Truth Solutions and CHS Alliance – tried to go beyond collecting feedback; however, they were often squeezed by funding cuts and the system’s resistance to independent mechanisms.



AAP and PSEAH systems are most trusted when they provide safeguards between communities affected by crisis and those responsible for decisions and resources



Interviewees and wider evidence noted that such mechanisms could help to ensure that communities’ perceptions, priorities and experiences inform decisions, rather than reducing AAP to a compliance exercise focused on reporting and tools. Effective accountability requires mechanisms that are sufficiently independent from those exercising power, whether UN agencies, INGOs, local and national actors, or community leaders. AAP and PSEAH systems are most trusted when they provide safeguards between communities affected by crisis and those responsible for decisions and resources. Political and reputational

sensitivities, particularly among larger humanitarian agencies and organisations, created reluctance in this period to share information, engage with independent scrutiny or support accountability mechanisms beyond their direct control.

The role of donors

Donors can play a critical role and use their leverage to shape incentive structures around accountability and the enforcement of accountability commitments. Several humanitarian interviewees argued that organisations were often more responsive to donor scrutiny than to affected populations themselves. One interviewee explained that when donors required their grantees to follow up on complaints made by people affected by crisis to an independent platform, responsiveness to sensitive reports – such as protection concerns, PSEAH, fraud and corruption, or requests for mental-health support – increased substantially and to a greater rate than other forms of feedback.

Our in-country research in DRC noted similar dynamics: organisations that had reported no cases related to PSEAH for eight months subsequently reported more than 100% of expected cases after being informed that failure to report could affect future funding. As one practitioner working directly with these mechanisms put it:

 ***'The reality is the accountability follows the money.'***

 **Several humanitarian interviewees argued that organisations were often more responsive to donor scrutiny than to affected populations themselves** 

Donors and intermediaries could therefore play an important role by providing greater flexibility for programmes to adapt to community feedback and requests and changing contexts. As highlighted in the Collective AAP Advocacy brief released by OCHA, this requires shifting the focus from collecting feedback and imposing limited penalties to acting on feedback, and from rigid and process-driven requirements towards funding approaches that prioritise outcomes for people affected by crisis.²³⁸

Improving trust

Some humanitarian leaders and commentators have argued that the humanitarian system is facing a crisis of trust and legitimacy.²³⁹ Trust (or lack of trust) – a fundamental element of AAP – operates at multiple levels: relationships between communities and aid actors, between local and national actors and international organisations, and among international aid organisations themselves.

Our Myanmar team emphasised that communities' trust in humanitarian actors hinged on clarity, consistency and neutrality of operations, as well as transparent communication and visible follow-through. Communities trusted when agencies publicly shared donor information and budgets, and they expressed greater confidence in aid groups that returned regularly and kept their promises. In contrast, one-off visits without feedback from aid providers created scepticism. Evaluations in Türkiye, Lebanon and Somalia found that lack of transparency led to heightened mistrust and perceived politicisation and favouritism, among other impacts.²⁴⁰

ICVA similarly found that failing to respond to feedback undermined the credibility of, and people's trust in, the humanitarian system.²⁴¹ Further, when community-engagement exercises promised action but did not deliver it, this often led to 'disillusionment or even anger', particularly when projects diverged from jointly identified priorities. There were also challenges in translating these priorities into operational planning processes, such as for the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan;²⁴² as the Flagship Initiative noted, the accountability of Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams needs to be measured by whether they deliver against the priorities of communities affected by crisis.²⁴³

Trust is also shaped by whether accountability systems are seen to generate consequences and enforcement. In Goma, DRC, one respondent noted that perpetrators of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment were sometimes only relocated, limiting deterrence and leaving conditions for repeated abuse. Interviewees highlighted key accountability challenges, including weak enforcement and limited sanctions, which can enable impunity (especially in cases of exploitation and abuse), silence whistleblowers, fail to secure survivors' rights and contribute to the lack of political will to properly resource and institutionalise accountability.²⁴⁴ These dynamics also undermine trust. Unlike in a business, humanitarian actors do not have to respond to signals and feedback from clients, since their 'clients' – people affected by crisis – have nowhere else to go.²⁴⁵

Unlike in a business, humanitarian actors do not have to respond to signals and feedback from clients, since their 'clients' – people affected by crisis – have nowhere else to go

Conclusion

The evidence from this SOHS period suggests that strengthening accountability is one practical way for the humanitarian system to rebuild credibility and regain damaged trust. However, this is ultimately a question of political will and humanitarian leadership. There are several levers that can help. Independent mechanisms and platforms can provide safer channels and make responsiveness more credible. Donors and intermediaries can shape incentives – not only through what they fund, require and monitor, but also by providing greater flexibility for programmes to adapt to community priorities, feedback and changing contexts. Accountability is also strengthened when commitments are followed through, when there are consequences for inaction and misconduct, and when humanitarian organisations are prepared to explain difficult decisions transparently and demonstrate how community perspectives have influenced them.

As the humanitarian system navigates shrinking resources and increasingly difficult trade-offs, accountability becomes more, rather than less, important. The evidence from this period may suggest that rebuilding trust will depend less on making new commitments than on fulfilling existing ones, on demonstrating responsiveness in practice and on showing that people affected by crisis genuinely influence humanitarian decisions.

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CHAPTER 5

LEARNING AND ADAPTING TO CHANGE

>	SUMMARY
>	CHAPTER 5.1 RESPONDING TO CHANGING CRISES
>	CHAPTER 5.2 20 YEARS OF THE SOHS: WHAT HAS CHANGED, AND WHAT HASN'T?

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY

In 2025, protracted crises accounted for 95% of humanitarian funding to interagency appeals – up from 54% in 2016 – and 19 of the 25 most climate-vulnerable countries were also affected by conflict. Yet the system continued to run on short-term funding, and development and climate finance were unable to fill growing gaps.

Alongside the funding cuts in 2025, total official development assistance (ODA) fell by 23.1% in real terms. Between 2022 and 2024, humanitarian funding exceeded development finance at least once in seven of the most severe crises, while climate finance largely bypassed conflict-affected areas and peace financing fell to its second-lowest level since 2004. In many places, national debt compounded the financing squeeze: countries in protracted crisis spent twice as much servicing debt in 2024 as a decade earlier. New financing

mechanisms proved useful but remained small relative to the size of the system. The humanitarian–peace–development (HDP) nexus was designed to bridge these systems, but aid practitioners rated it the worst-performing area in our survey: only 28% reported positive progress (almost unchanged since 2022).

The six editions of *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS) have documented successive reform agendas, from the cluster system to successive Grand Bargains to the Humanitarian Reset, often aiming to address similar problems: weak coordination, funding bypassing local organisations and thin accountability to – and (especially in conflict) poor protection of – people affected by crisis. While two decades of reforms have delivered some important technical improvements, from pooled funds to joint intersectoral analysis to cash-first policies, commitments like localisation have not been met due to agencies' incentives to protect funding and mandates.

The share of funding going to protracted crises increased from 54% to 95% between 2016 and 2025.

Investment in other mechanisms, such as innovation and learning, continued to grow: evaluation coverage expanded, innovation units and funds matured, and shared platforms and coalitions supported the spread of new approaches. Cash and anticipatory action



have moved from marginal to established approaches over the six SOHS editions, supported by pilot evidence, donor investment, coalitions and networks. Use of technology has also grown, though it requires stronger governance. The 2025 cuts affected innovation and learning infrastructure, but many organisations tried to retain these capabilities.

The Reset progressed in a few specific ways, such as in technical processes to prioritise needs, expanded pooled funds and fewer clusters. Critics have questioned whether these measures reflect what the system needs to do to respond to the changing nature of crisis. Protection received little attention in early discussions, despite the profound effect of current conflicts on civilians, and protection programming was cut in several countries. Meanwhile, the Reset was criticised for not meaningfully consulting communities, and some argued that the formal system had been captured by organisational agendas and should be looking to better complement local ecosystems instead.

Rating of progress on the HDP nexus as 'good' or 'excellent' varied considerably between local & national NGO staff and international staff.



CHAPTER 5.1

RESPONDING TO CHANGING CRISES

'We are happy to receive the assistance, but it cannot turn us self-reliant and can never cover all the needs.'

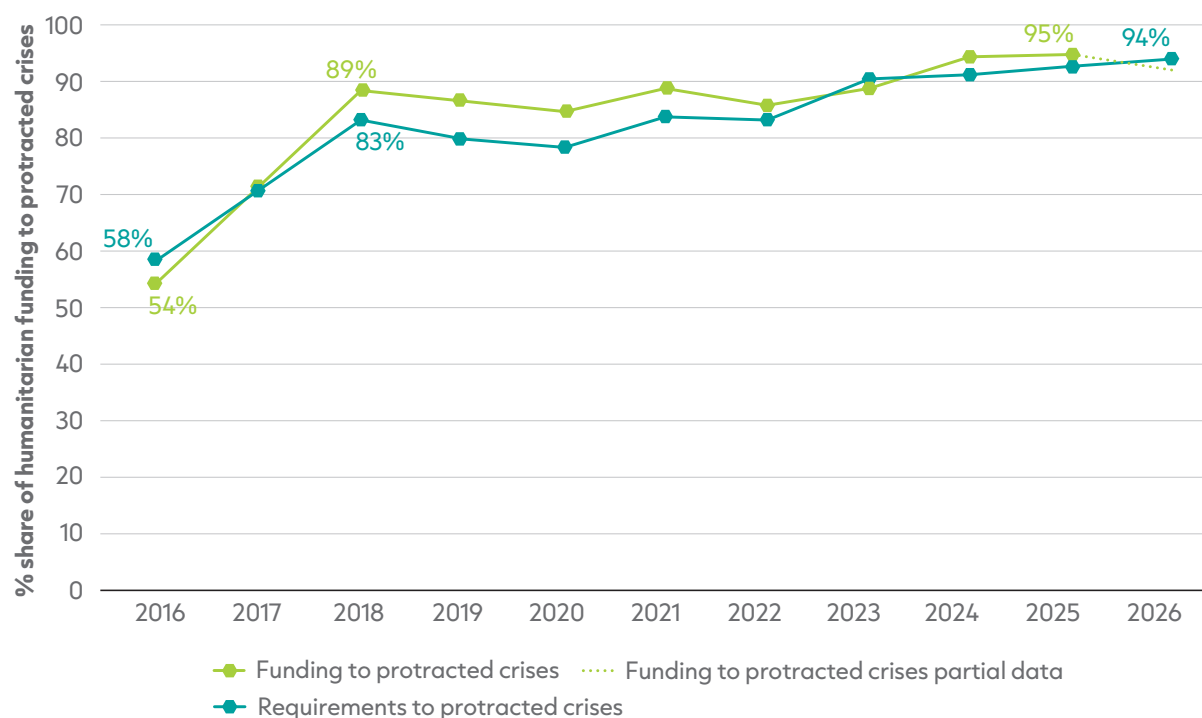
— Displaced person, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Conflict intensified and spread across the 2022–25 period, with crises lasting longer, affecting more civilians and generating more complex displacement patterns. The climate crisis compounded this – and will continue to increase humanitarian need over the next decade – underscoring the necessity to address the root causes of crisis and sustain engagement across humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) systems. Yet development, peace and climate finance faced simultaneous pressures, with total official development assistance (ODA) reducing by 23.1% in 2025. Disaster risk reduction (DRR), anticipatory action and some innovative financing mechanisms showed potential for better understanding and managing risks, but they were small-scale compared with aid financing. Local and national actors did some of the joined-up work the HDP nexus aspires to, but they were not well-resourced to sustain it; goals for reducing recurrent needs featured in many humanitarian response plans but attracted little funding. With humanitarian financing contracting and its remit narrowing to 'lifesaving', it is important to build bridges that connect development, climate and peace systems without simply adding another layer of bureaucracy.

The changing crisis landscape

Protracted crises (those lasting five or more years) dominated the humanitarian landscape over this SOHS period, accounting for a greater share of both needs and funding. Nearly all humanitarian funding for interagency appeals went to protracted crisis contexts – 95% in 2025 – almost identical to the 94% of all funding that is needed for protracted crisis contexts in 2026. While percentages upwards of 90% have been the norm since 2024, this was not always the case: in 2016, only 54% of funding went to protracted crisis contexts.ⁱ

ⁱ Based on the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS), the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) dashboards and data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Figure 5.1: Percentage of funding and overall funding requirements of UN-coordinated appeals focused on protracted crisis contexts, 2016–2026

Source: OCHA FTS, Syria 3RP dashboards and UNHCR data.

Notes: Funding for 2026 is preliminary, as of May 2026. Contexts are considered in protracted crisis when they have had five or more years of consecutive humanitarian appeal, regional appeals are considered protracted when they have existed for five or more consecutive years. Funding and requirements considered not to a protracted crisis includes all funding and requirements under appeals reported by OCHA that have not existed for five or more consecutive years. This does not include global appeals, such as the global elements of the Covid-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan.



Protracted crises were characterised by high levels of displacement. Internally displaced people faced heightened protection risks, interrupted livelihoods, and inadequate and temporary shelter. An assessment of the humanitarian system's response to internal displacement found that little had changed over 30 years and that responses stayed in emergency mode long after the acute phase of crisis, contributing to people being stuck in 'limbo' with inadequate access to livelihood support, education, civil documentation and housing.¹ This contributed to higher mortality and worse health outcomes among internally displaced people than any other population group in humanitarian emergencies.² Compounding this, organisations largely excluded this population from decisions about their own situations; internally displaced people consistently prioritised safety of return, livelihood support and rights, but they reported that such support was unavailable and that they had little access to information about aid programmes or organisations' longer-term plans.

The climate crisis intensified the challenges of protracted crises. Of the 25 most climate-vulnerable countries, 19 were also fragile and conflict-affected situations, which typically lacked the capacity to prepare for, respond to or



rebuild between climate-related crises.³ In Somalia, Yemen and the Sahel, climate shocks compounded conflict and pushed people into successive food-insecurity crises.ⁱⁱ Some humanitarians concluded that the climate crisis demands a fundamental rethink of humanitarian practices. For example, Hugo Slim, author of *Humanitarianism 2.0: New Ethics for the Climate Emergency*, argued that protecting the natural world should be a core humanitarian concern; that impartiality should consider suffering across a universal crisis, rather than prioritising discrete emergencies; and that humanitarians should embrace anticipation and long-term adaptation alongside traditional emergency response.⁴



Climate risk generated new forms of humanitarian need for which the system had limited tools



Extreme heat in this period illustrated how climate risk generated new forms of humanitarian need for which the system had limited tools.⁵ Local organisations offered 'tangible, effective, and often low-cost strategies' to reduce humanitarian risk, such as adapting school calendars in South Sudan and establishing community cooling centres in Sibi, Pakistan.⁶ However, wider humanitarian engagement was still 'nascent';⁷ in India, for example,

early-warning systems that had achieved dramatic reductions in cyclone mortality were not adequately adapted for heat, and the All India Disaster Mitigation Institute reported that data on heat impacts remained scattered and insufficiently focused on the people most vulnerable to the impacts of extreme heat.⁸

The humanitarian system's mandate, funding architecture and planning cycles were not designed to handle recurrent or permanent displacement in which climate and conflict compounded across the same populations and contexts. Yet well before the 2025 prioritisation process, the system was using short-term emergency grants (12–18 months) in protracted crises that lasted a decade on average. ODI Global argued that the language of *lifesaving* and *emergency* obscured the operational reality that most of what the system was doing was sustaining, rather than saving, lives.⁹ Successive *State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS)* reports have documented the system's relative strength in responding to acute shocks, but protracted, climate-driven, repeated and predictable crises have come to dominate the caseload, and immediate emergency response has been insufficient. As humanitarian financing contracted and the sector's remit narrowed explicitly towards 'lifesaving' basics, important questions arose: Had the humanitarian system built effective bridges with the development, climate and peace systems – and were actors in those systems still present to engage with?



Protracted, climate-driven, repeated and predictable crises have come to dominate the caseload



ii Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3 (Crisis), Phase 4 (Emergency) and Phase 5 (Catastrophe/Famine).



The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) five-year monitoring report of its 2019 recommendation on the HDP nexus found that Development Assistant Committee (DAC) members had developed new policies, strategies and modalities to make their development and humanitarian instruments more cohesive. Some had made internal structural changes to reduce silos and there was visible momentum, but OECD concluded that fundamental changes to response models and architecture were still required.¹⁰ Some practitioners emphasised that the main limitations were under-resourced national and local systems for basic services as well as the volume and the flexibility of development funding in protracted settings. This included politically complex contexts where development actors had withdrawn and humanitarians had filled gaps that humanitarian funding was not well-designed to address.

The financing landscape

Total ODA fell by 23.1% in real terms in 2025.¹¹ Across countries included in the *Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) 2025*, total non-humanitarian financing from DAC members in 2022–24 amounted to US\$256.6 billion,ⁱⁱⁱ most of which was development finance (81.0%) or peace finance (18.6%). Funding was highly concentrated: Ukraine alone accounted for US\$98.1 billion (38.2%). Climate finance often bypassed contexts affected by crisis (there were negligible levels of non-ODA climate finance),^{iv} and private capital tended not to reach crisis contexts.

Development funding again became the largest share of ODA to protracted crisis contexts in 2024. However, humanitarian funding exceeded development finance in seven of the most severe and long-running crises at several points during 2022–24. In the most extreme case – Syria – humanitarian funding accounted for 90% of all external financing; in Sudan, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen, it accounted for 38–58%, while climate finance across all five combined reached just US\$9.4 million.

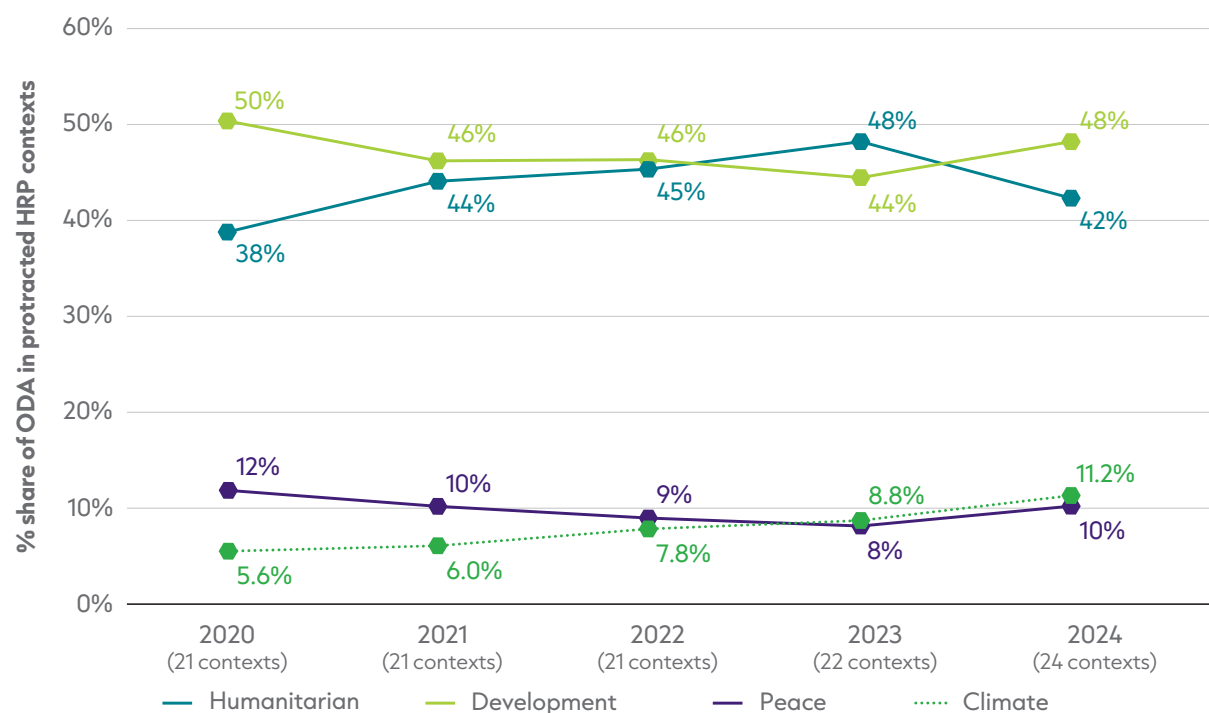
Humanitarian funding exceeded development finance in seven of the most severe and long-running crises

Where climate-marked ODA did reach GHO countries, it was generally not the primary objective of that funding. In 70.4% of the US\$30.3 billion that donors said was climate-related, climate was only a secondary objective; the funding was primarily for another sector (such as education or health).^v Double-counting between humanitarian and climate expenditure lines made it difficult to track this funding.¹²

iii Values in this 'The financing landscape' subsection on the composition of humanitarian financing stem from ALNAP-commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing – see [Annex 1](#) for more information.

iv Accounting for 0.5% of total non-humanitarian financing from DAC members in 2022–24.

v DAC donor funding to *GHO 2025* countries (2022–24). Data coded as significant rather than principal using the Rio climate markers on ODA flows.

Figure 5.2: Share of ODA to development, humanitarian, peace and climate to protracted contexts (excluding Ukraine), 2020–2024

Source: Based on OECD DAC Common Reporting Standards (CRS).

Notes: Excludes Ukraine as a recipient in all years. Climate share is cross-cutting across other categories. Recipients vary between years. HRP = Humanitarian Response Plan. Ukraine meets the GHA definition of a protracted crisis but is excluded to give a clearer view of underlying trends across other protracted crisis contexts, given the scale of development funding allocated to Ukraine by DAC members since 2022.



In 2025, peace financing (low throughout the SOHS period) reached its second-lowest level since 2004 in contexts of 'high' or 'extreme fragility'.¹³ Considering all countries included in the GHO 2025, Ukraine absorbed 63.5% of peace finance (US\$30 billion) across 2022–24. In the 10 highest-ranking contexts within OECD's States of Fragility security dimension, peace accounted for just 15% of combined development and peace financing in 2024 – and there was no clear relationship between fragility ranking and financing volume. Again for the countries in the GHO 2025, the peace portfolio was dominated by funding for governance and public-sector support (87%); only 13% addressed drivers of conflict through activities such as conflict prevention, disarmament and demobilisation or security reform. Peacekeeping expenditure also declined by 16.9% across those countries between 2022 and 2024 (from US\$5.80 billion to US\$4.82 billion), driven mainly by the closure of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) that was deployed in that country over 2013–23.

Multilateral finance, debt and climate finance

Multilateral development bank (MDB) funding for the top-20 humanitarian crises tripled between 2014 and 2023 (from US\$3.5 billion to US\$10.3 billion).¹⁴



The World Bank's crisis-related instruments brought development finance closer to humanitarian contexts, and many practitioners saw potential in their ability to offer multiyear funding.^{vi} Over the period, the Window for Host Communities and Refugees^{vii} grew modestly, and a World Bank partnership with the UNHCR to support refugee-hosting costs broadened its reach, though by the end of the period this Window had dropped its commitment that at least 60% of eligible countries would make significant policy reforms on refugees.^{viii} The World Bank's Fragility, Conflict and Violence Envelope^{ix} also sought to provide additional financing to conflict settings.¹⁵

However, the form of MDB funding was a concern to some practitioners. For example, in 2025 61% of International Development Association (IDA) financing to humanitarian contexts took the form of loans rather than grants, meaning that countries already at risk of debt distress were, in effect, borrowing to meet basic needs.^x Practitioners also questioned whether MDB finance reached the people most affected by crisis, particularly as a draft refresh of the World Bank Fragility, Conflict and Violence strategy^{xi} centred on jobs, security and access to justice, rather than on safety nets.¹⁶

61% of IDA financing to humanitarian contexts were loans rather than grants – countries already at risk of debt distress were borrowing to meet basic needs

Domestic revenue systems in protracted contexts were often too constrained to absorb the costs of humanitarian withdrawal, with tax-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratios in several deprioritised contexts running well below regional averages.^{xii} Debt burdens compounded the financing gap in the contexts most dependent on external support. On average, countries facing protracted crises spent twice as much on government debt payments in 2024 as they did a decade earlier.¹⁷ In 2024, Sudan spent the highest proportion of government revenue on external debt payments (42%), followed by Cameroon (21%) and Nigeria (20%).¹⁸ Four countries (Ethiopia, Sudan, Malawi and Zimbabwe) were already in debt distress, and nine more were at high risk, meaning that 41% of *GHO 2025* countries faced severe constraints on domestic fiscal space.^{xiii} Countries with poor credit ratings that could not access concessional MDB finance increasingly turned to more expensive private creditors, including domestic commercial banks, to manage cashflow problems.¹⁹ Debt repayments left less money for health,

vi Including the Window for Host Communities and Refugees and the Crisis Response Window.

vii The World Bank Window for Host Communities and Refugees is a special financing mechanism that was launched in 2017 to help low-income countries manage large-scale refugee crises.

viii Such as granting refugees the right to work or access to national services (see Dempster and Ginn (2026) <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/world-banks-window-host-communities-and-refugees-successes-challenges-and-way-forward>).

ix A dedicated World Bank financing stream that provides additional resources to countries facing acute fragility, conflict or violence, on top of their regular country allocations. It aims to help these countries address the drivers and impacts of conflict.

x ALNAP-commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing, see [Annex 1](#).

xi A dedicated World Bank strategy for finance to contexts that are fragile, affected by conflict and violent.

xii ALNAP-commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing, see [Annex 1](#).

xiii ALNAP-commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing, see [Annex 1](#).



education, social protection and climate adaptation,²⁰ raising questions about whether new debt-based financing mechanisms risked compounding problems.

Debt repayments left less money for health, education, social protection and climate adaptation

One promising development was the emergence of Climate-Resilient Debt Clauses (CRDCs): agreements that allowed countries to pause debt servicing for up to two years after a severe climate shock. At the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference (COP28), five MDBs committed to incorporating CRDCs into future sovereign lending and 73 countries urged all creditors to adopt them

urgently.²¹ In 2024, St Vincent and the Grenadines was the first country to exercise a deferral, after Hurricane Beryl, and the World Bank increased the scope of CRDCs later that year to cover all natural hazards.²² However, CRDCs remained limited in coverage with only 14 of 45 eligible countries including them in loan agreements in 2024.²³

Climate finance was not always well-aligned with needs in protracted crisis contexts. For example, MDB climate finance that did reach GHO 2025 countries in 2024 was weighted towards mitigation (reducing future emissions) over adaptation (coping with existing climate impacts) – at 60.2% compared to 37.4%, respectively, with an additional 2.4% marked as both.^{xiv} Despite some commitments during this period,²⁴ analysis consistently found that ‘the more fragile a country is, the less adaptation finance it receives’.²⁵ Climate-finance institutions were designed for government counterparts with strong technical capacity; many conflict-affected states lacked the institutional bandwidth to navigate their complex application processes and meet fiduciary requirements.²⁶ Most humanitarian agencies remained outside the Green Climate Fund (GCF) architecture entirely, though the UN Development Programme (UNDP) was implementing early-warning systems projects²⁷ and the World Health Organization (WHO) completed the lengthy GCF accreditation in March 2026, opening a potential financing channel through health programming into humanitarian contexts.²⁸

Climate-finance institutions were designed for government counterparts with strong technical capacity; many conflict-affected states lacked the institutional bandwidth to navigate their complex application processes and meet fiduciary requirements

The Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage was the first formal international agreement to create a dedicated mechanism for climate-related loss and damage. Governments made initial pledges of approximately US\$789 million,

xiv ALNAP commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing, see [Annex 1](#).



although only US\$348 million had been paid into the fund by mid-2025;²⁹ there were bureaucratic delays, barriers to converting pledges into actual financing and challenges developing an allocation approach that prioritised climate vulnerability.³⁰ The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) described the global situation as both 'underfinanced' and 'underprepared'.³¹

In January 2025, the United States withdrew from the Paris Agreement and rescinded US\$4 billion in pledges to climate funds,³² alongside wider reductions in finance. Before closing the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US had accounted for nearly 10% of global climate finance.³³ Other wealthier countries did not fill the gap; indeed, several reduced their projected climate-finance delivery. These wealthier countries were highly unlikely to have met their pledge to double adaptation funding (to around US\$40 billion a year) by 2025.³⁴

New and alternative finance mechanisms

Efforts to link humanitarian and development funding were limited by both structural and political constraints. Earmarking by large donors continued to constrain flexibility, and 10 out of 11 Humanitarian Country Teams surveyed by the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) cited financing as the primary barrier to implementing the HDP approach.³⁵ Likewise, some aid practitioners we surveyed rated 'siloed funding' and 'short-term funding and planning' as barriers to the HDP approach, while senior practitioners and other respondents noted incompatible structures and a lack of coordination.

Grand Bargain 3.0 discussions identified the HDP nexus as a core theme and proposed joint funding windows and longer grant cycles.³⁶ Several donors made internal structural changes: Ireland established a dedicated unit to bring together the political and development-cooperation aspects of its peace and stability work;³⁷ in 2025, OECD assessed Switzerland's merger of its humanitarian and development units (reported in the *2022 SOHS*) as having enabled joined-up analysis and response to emerging and protracted crises, linking short and long-term programming;³⁸ and some Country-Based Pooled Funds began allowing allocations to support recovery and other longer-term activities, alongside immediate response. However, these small institutional shifts did not translate into measurably different financing approaches.

Crisis modifiers were one of few approaches that showed promise for improving links between development and humanitarian activities within a single funding instrument. By embedding a contingency budget line in an existing development or humanitarian programme that could be triggered by a shock, they offered an entry point for an HDP approach and allowed more 'risk-conscious' programming.³⁹

For example, USAID employed crisis modifiers in Ethiopia.⁴⁰ In general, however, financial tracking instruments did not include crisis-modifier volumes; published evidence was also thin (though the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP) argued that, in all likelihood, more were being used than were included in published evidence).⁴¹

In response to the growing mismatch between a more protracted, more climate-driven crisis landscape and existing financing architecture, humanitarians increasingly explored a range of alternative financing mechanisms, with significant growth in pre-financing and trigger-based financing mechanisms for disasters. Pre-arranged finance reached US\$9.4 billion in 2024, though only 7% of that went to 'low-income' or 'fragile and conflict-affected' countries,⁴² and the Centre for Disaster Preparedness described 'an urgent need for more instruments tailored to those nations'.⁴³ However, there was also progress: the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) expanded its anticipatory-action portfolio⁴⁴ and four CERF frameworks were triggered in 2024 alone, which released US\$19.6 million ahead of floods in Bangladesh, Chad, Nepal and Niger.⁴⁵ In Bangladesh, funds reached 388,000 people five days before peak flood levels and were activated within 16 minutes of the trigger threshold being met.⁴⁶ Analysts described how such risk-based mechanisms could encourage organisations to better manage risk over time, rather than simply reacting to shocks.⁴⁷

Crisis modifiers were one of few approaches that showed promise for improving links between development and humanitarian activities

Interest in insurance-based approaches to humanitarian financing also continued to grow over the period. There were large payouts from the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility (US\$91.9 million to Jamaica in 2025)⁴⁸ and the African Risk Capacity (US\$84.8 million to African Union member states and humanitarian partners in 2024).^{xv} In Jamaica, for example, one regional disaster management agency told us that previous investments in DRR provided a 'base layer' for risk financing that included parametric insurance, contingent lines of credit and a catastrophe bond. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) also secured the first indemnity-insurance policy for the system, insuring the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund against funding exhaustion in years of exceptional need with contingency funding of US\$23 million.^{xvi} The policy was triggered for the first time in 2024, generating a CHF14.4 million payout (equivalent to approximately US\$16.4 million in 2024) that supported 31 operations.⁴⁹ Practitioners described these mechanisms as helping stabilise rapid-response capacity without needing to hold large idle reserves, but they emphasised the

xv Replica policy payouts (allowing humanitarian organisations to mirror and top up government insurance policies) to the World Food Programme (WFP), UNHCR and the Start Network totalled approximately US\$24.4 million (see ARC Ltd (2025) <https://arcltd.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ARC-report-2024-English.pdf>).

xvi This was informed by the Danish Red Cross' Volcano Catastrophe Bond – the first humanitarian catastrophe bond listed on a stock exchange – which ran over 2021–24 (see IFRC (2023) <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/ifrc-launches-groundbreaking-financial-mechanism-transform-disaster-response>).



challenge of ensuring triggers are designed to match communities' experience of disasters, as well as the need to invest in state and community engagement.

Other mechanisms explored in this SOHS period included blended finance (piloted through initiatives supported by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO)),^{xvii} dedicated venture units^{xviii} and debt swaps.^{xix} Pilots were often expensive, slow to develop (often taking two to five years) and highly person-dependent, with insufficient legal expertise and country-level capacity. However, new units (such as the Humanitarian Innovative Finance Hub) facilitated knowledge-sharing, while private counterparts gained experience in working with humanitarian organisations and provided less risky mechanisms for partners lacking technical capacity.

International private capital did not always reach the highest-risk contexts, however. Private finance totalled US\$70 billion globally in 2023, of which an estimated 12% went to Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and 6% to social sectors.⁵⁰ Private capital is generally invested where risks are lower and returns clearer. OECD noted that private finance has scarcely benefited those countries most in need, and that risk perceptions continue to deter investors.⁵¹

Some organisations saw opportunities for better coordination with diaspora remittances,⁵² which accounted for a high proportion of GDP in several crisis settings: 8.5% in Ukraine and 31% in Lebanon in 2023, for example.⁵³ A series of real-time reviews by Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination (DEMAC) illustrated that diasporas offer early local intelligence, trusted networks and the capacity to act quickly.⁵⁴ In Lebanon, diaspora-led mobilisation was rapid but integration with formal coordination structures remained weak, and local organisations lacked strategies for proactive diaspora engagement.⁵⁵ Remittances mostly focused on individual households, rather than projects, although DEMAC was exploring pre-designed crowdfunding campaigns for anticipatory-action projects that could be activated against early-warning triggers.⁵⁶

Planning and coordination



'Even if you fix today's crisis, those people you've saved today will die in six months' time ... because we have failed to fix the biggest threat that exists. And I don't know that anyone's found a good way to have that conversation.' Climate expert and aid worker

xvii Blended finance combines grant funding with private investment.

xviii The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), Save the Children and Mercy Corps have all established venture-capital funds to invest in social enterprises delivering essential products and services – including access to finance, energy, healthcare and education – in settings affected by crisis.

xix In a debt swap, a creditor agrees to reduce a country's debt in exchange for the debtor investing those freed-up resources in agreed social or environmental programmes.



There was good progress in joint analysis and planning in several contexts. OECD's aforementioned five-year review found structural changes in context analysis;⁵⁷ for example, joint assessment exercises were undertaken in food security crises in Venezuela, Haiti, Chad, Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Pakistan.⁵⁸ UNDP and UNHCR launched a Global Collaboration Framework for Inclusion and Solutions (2023–25), which aimed to increase joint assessments, establish common standards and 'combine innovations with data to scale up successful solutions'.⁵⁹ A World Bank–UNHCR Joint Data Centre on Forced Displacement generated socioeconomic data⁶⁰ and supported at least one national census to integrate issues affecting internally displaced people into their data analysis.⁶¹

Collective outcomes (jointly envisioned results agreed among humanitarian, peace and development actors, with timeframes of three to five years) were common but tended to focus on immediate needs rather than underlying drivers. Case studies warned that they risked creating a new, parallel layer of planning,⁶² and practitioners told us that a mismatch between the centralised architecture of the humanitarian system and the state-led frameworks for most development work, as well as different organisational skillsets and cultures (for example, between clusters and MDBs), led to disconnects in HDP discussions at country level. The OECD five-year review tracked self-reported processes (such as collective outcomes) rather than whether needs, risks or vulnerability had reduced; evaluations were inconsistent in what they measured;⁶³ and some practitioners said much of what was described as 'the nexus' was simply a relabelling of existing practices.



A mismatch between the centralised architecture of the humanitarian system and the state-led frameworks for most development work led to disconnects in HDP discussions at country level



Positive examples of coordination in Iraq and Uganda were attributed to 'strong government ownership, donor interest and existing country coordination'.⁶⁴ In Ukraine, there were large-scale joint assessments; the EU4Recovery framework addressed livelihood, service delivery and social-cohesion needs simultaneously;⁶⁵ and staff from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) told us the European Union (EU) accession process created political will and financing for childcare, education and social protection reforms that had previously failed. Globally, however, only 40% of aid practitioners we surveyed reported 'excellent' or 'good' government involvement in humanitarian activities.



Only 40% of aid practitioners we surveyed reported 'excellent' or 'good' government involvement in humanitarian activities





Some organisations proposed area-based coordination as a way to improve coordination for the HDP nexus. A practitioner account in Mali described how it allowed joint planning between the MINUSMA, Malian defence and security forces, UN agencies and international NGOs (INGOs). This secured humanitarian access to Mondoro (central Mali) and enabled health needs assessment, thereby contributing to reduced mortality from preventable diseases.⁶⁶ Area-based pilots also supported HDP coordination in some parts of Yemen,⁶⁷ Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo,⁶⁸ but these did not reliably translate into joined-up implementation across the HDP nexus (see also [Chapter 2.2](#)).

Programming

Progress on the nexus was the lowest-rated performance measure in our aid-practitioner survey: only 28% of respondents rated it 'excellent' or 'good' in 2025 (compared with 27% in our 2022 survey). The gap between institutions was wide: 49% of surveyed local and national NGO (L/NNGO) staff rated progress positively, compared to just 21% of INGO staff and 10% of UN staff. People we spoke to suggested this may reflect different conceptions of the nexus itself.

For example, IASC mapping found that local actors defined progress in terms of community-level integrated programming rather than formal coordination processes.⁶⁹ Indeed, local and national actors often pieced together humanitarian and longer-term development programming⁷⁰ even in the most severe crises: from local food-production cooperatives in Gaza to community-led DRR initiatives in Myanmar (see [Chapter 2.2](#)).

49% of surveyed L/NNGO staff rated progress positively, compared to just 21% of INGO staff and 10% of UN staff

There were several larger-scale examples of joint programming in this period. The Enhanced Rural Resilience in Yemen programme brought together food security, livelihoods, climate-resilience and social-cohesion activities across eight governorates; among 47,000 households, the Food Consumption Score (an indicator of household food security) increased by 26–53%, reliance on humanitarian aid fell by 48%, and 70% of communities reported stronger social cohesion.⁷¹ Overall, however, the inclusion of civil society, L/NNGOs and local government in top-down nexus policy and programming was weak. An OECD review found that putting people at the centre often remained a generic ambition in programming,⁷² and a review of nexus evaluations from 2018 to mid-2022 found that only 4% referenced locally or nationally led approaches.⁷³

Evaluations in Ethiopia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Yemen consistently revealed that HRP goals to reduce recurrent need were largely unmet. There were some successes – for example, support to government bodies for rebuilding water infrastructure rather



than trucking in Haiti,⁷⁴ early support for the agricultural sector in Afghanistan,⁷⁵ and implementation of 'peace-supportive approaches' in a food-systems project in Sudan⁷⁶ – as well as attempts to harmonise national social safety-net mechanisms with humanitarian cash distribution.⁷⁷ Overall, however, humanitarian 'lifesaving' approaches consistently 'took precedence when crises escalated'.⁷⁸ Recurring problems included underfunding livelihoods, land-ownership issues, an absence of coherent linkages to social protection systems (see [Chapter 2.2](#)), short-term funding, separate budgets, and conflicting understandings of the nexus among and between HDP actors.⁷⁹ The Somalia Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) concluded that 'the humanitarian response did little to contribute to livelihoods and resilience of affected people'.⁸⁰



Where the nexus did achieve results, they were most visible in DRR and anticipatory action

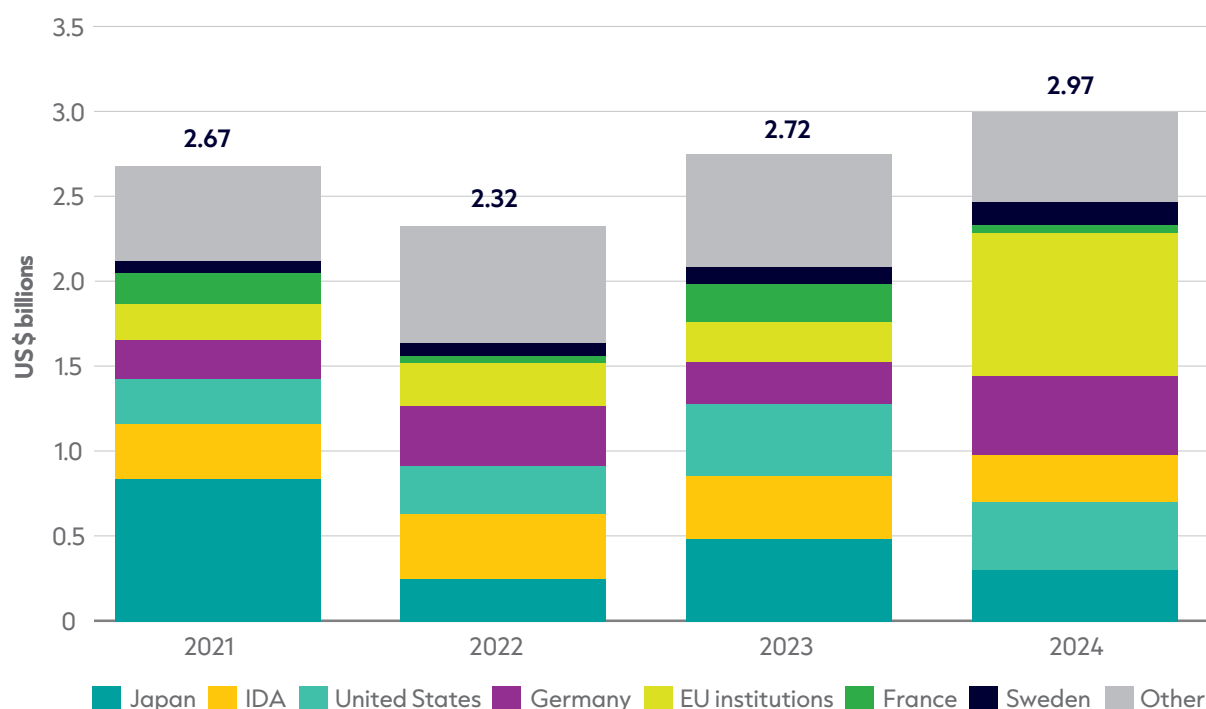
Where the nexus did achieve results, they were most visible in DRR and anticipatory action. In Bangladesh, for example – where there was sustained domestic investment in multilayered early-warning systems, cyclone shelters and climate education in schools, alongside NGO activities such as gender-inclusive volunteer

programmes⁸¹ – deaths fell by over 100-fold since the 1970s (despite increased climate risks). This established the country as a model for climate-adaptive humanitarian programming.⁸² When Cyclone Remal struck in May 2024, early warning and mass evacuation kept the death toll low, with around 807,000 people moved to 9,424 government shelters and 16 deaths recorded, even as the storm affected 4.6 million people⁸³ – though the effect on livelihoods remained, with around US\$90.7 million in crop losses and infrastructure damage estimated at US\$600 million.⁸⁴

Globally, the mid-term review⁸⁵ of the Sendai Framework for DRR (the primary global policy framework for reducing disaster risk) also identified areas of progress, including better tools for understanding climate–conflict intersections, some improvements in risk governance at the national and regional levels, and nascent DRR funds for conflict-affected settings. Overall, however, the mid-term review found that progress on developing strategies and frameworks has not been matched by implementation.

Between 2021 and 2024, approximately US\$10.7 billion was allocated globally for DRR and preparedness; this figure grew to US\$2.97 billion in 2024 – a 9% increase on 2023 levels. Five donors accounted for nearly 70% of all funding: Japan, EU institutions, the US, the IDA and Germany each contributed the equivalent of over US\$1 billion across the period. However, their trajectories diverged significantly: while Japan remained the largest single donor, its contributions fell from US\$830 million in 2021 to US\$304 million in 2024, whereas EU institutions more than tripled their funding to US\$829 million in 2024.^{xx}

xx Based on OECD DAC CRS data.

Figure 5.3: Volumes of humanitarian assistance for DRR and preparedness by donor, 2021–2024

Source: OECD DAC CRS data.

Notes: Volumes are based on disbursements data using purpose codes for disaster prevention and preparedness, as well as DRR. Projects which have a principal DRR marker or are picked up as having major DRR relevance by key word search and are allocated to emergency/humanitarian purpose codes are also included and considered projects with mainstreamed DRR.



Robust early-warning systems were central to many gains, providing the trigger mechanisms that allowed anticipatory funding to flow before climate events

Anticipatory action also grew steadily, reaching 1% of humanitarian funding in 2025, and the evidence base for it increased (see [Chapter 2.2](#)).⁸⁶ Robust early-warning systems were central to many gains, providing the trigger mechanisms that allowed anticipatory funding to flow before (rather than after) climate events.⁸⁷ The UN's Early Warnings for All initiative launched in 2022 and 60% of all countries had a multihazard early-warning system in place by the end of 2025, with Africa seeing the largest gains in the number of countries with early-warning systems.⁸⁸ Yet the popularity of

early warning as a relatively low-cost investment also contributed to significant fragmentation, with one senior humanitarian describing multiple parallel systems operating in the same contexts and limited coordination between them.

Despite being a stated priority in Grand Bargain 3.0 discussions and in the OECD recommendation, climate was rarely integrated into humanitarian planning. In a



review of nexus evaluations between 2018 and 2022, climate was a meaningful element in only six of 90 evaluations.⁸⁹ Joint analysis frameworks rarely incorporated climate data in ways that informed programming decisions, and the skills and data needed for climate-sensitive planning were absent from most Humanitarian Country Team structures.

The proportion of ODA directed to peace in all GHO countries (including in Ukraine) fell slightly in this period (from 19.4% in 2022 to 17.0% in 2024),^{xxi} while a 'segmented mindset' prevented actors from forging links.⁹⁰ Diplomats and mediators did not often draw on humanitarian or development analysis, and the peace pillar lagged behind – despite its inclusion at policy level.⁹¹ The original recommendation to establish the HDP nexus described the peace pillar broadly, spanning community-level social cohesion, political dialogue and institution-building, and the diplomatic and security efforts that shape the conditions for peace.⁹² In practice, humanitarians often saw peace-building as community-level social cohesion and sometimes failed to engage with diplomatic and security actors, which some practitioners attributed to discomfort working alongside them.

Despite being a stated priority in Grand Bargain 3.0 discussions and in the OECD recommendation, climate was rarely integrated into humanitarian planning

Local organisations continued to invest in community-level conflict resolution,⁹³ but this was often invisible to the formal system and under-resourced.⁹⁴ For example, we spoke to aid workers in Myanmar who undertook de facto peace work, including community mediation and social-cohesion programming, with neither formal recognition nor resourcing from the international system. In Sudan, as formal courts and state institutions ceased to function, communities developed their own mechanisms to resolve family and custody disputes (see [Chapter 3.3](#)).

When the humanitarian system exits

The number of crises classified as 'protracted' rose from 19 of 43 (44%) in 2016 to 35 of 46 (76%) in 2025, and this contributed to the challenge of humanitarian exits.⁹⁵ Several evaluations identified the absence of exit strategies as a core failing of humanitarian response in protracted crises.⁹⁶ Where exit strategies existed, they largely involved planned linkages with development and peace initiatives, coordination with national and local governments, and plans to build local capacity;⁹⁷ however, these plans did not always materialise.⁹⁸ Humanitarians' expectations about transitions were often mismatched with how both development actors and states functioned, and evaluations called for more efforts to form

xxi Not all data for 2025 was available at the time of analysis.



partnerships that would promote transitions.⁹⁹ In some cases, a senior practitioner explained, humanitarian service-delivery standards exceeded those of other existing government or NGO services, which also made exits difficult.

A synthesis of IAHE evaluations from the period concluded that, in many contexts, a viable model for longer-term recovery proved hard to identify, difficult for donors and international financial institutions to support, and too high-risk for private-sector investors.¹⁰⁰ It also noted that many policies and processes in the system were designed around sudden-onset disasters – which, by the study period, accounted for less than 10% of humanitarian spend – and they assumed a state-supporting role that donors and agencies were reluctant to play.¹⁰¹

We spoke to aid workers in Myanmar who undertook de facto peace work, with neither formal recognition nor resourcing from the international system

The 2026 Humanitarian Programme Cycle introduced a formal requirement for HRPs to consider transitions – both geographic (actors stepping back from specific areas) and sectoral (clusters standing down).¹⁰² Under the Reset, humanitarian agencies within IASC agreed on eight crisis settings where they would speed up the wind-down of the formal humanitarian coordination system,¹⁰³ making those settings a test of how exit planning will actually work in practice. In principle, transition means the state assuming responsibility for the services

The simultaneous contraction of humanitarian and development funding risks leaving growing numbers of people without assistance

the international system has been providing. Yet the financing picture suggests few of these governments were positioned to do so. Across the eight contexts, total ODA disbursements in 2022–24 reached US\$49.2 billion, most of which was development finance (77.5%); humanitarian finance accounted for only 11.5%.^{xxii} However, the simultaneous contraction of humanitarian and development funding risks leaving growing numbers of people without assistance – with the impact falling hardest in protracted crisis contexts where alternative provision is weakest.¹⁰⁴

xxii ALNAP commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing, see [Annex 1](#).



Conclusion

This SOHS period ended with conflict intensifying and spreading and with the climate crisis compounding humanitarian need. ODA contracted and support was skewed by political priorities. Innovative financing offered promising new ways to engage with risks, but it was small-scale. The HDP nexus provided a policy space for discussion and progress on joint planning, yet not a step-change in practice. The peace pillar of the nexus lagged behind development: ODA for conflict prevention fell, the peace pillar was poorly understood by many humanitarians, and community-level conflict resolution was under-resourced. Ultimately, sustainable responses over 2022–2025 depended on states having both the fiscal space and institutional capacity to deliver. Yet in many contexts, government complicity in crises, decades of aid provided in parallel to public services, and mounting debt burdens left authorities unable – or unwilling – to absorb the costs of humanitarian withdrawal.



Ultimately, sustainable responses over 2022–2025 depended on states having both the fiscal space and institutional capacity to deliver



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/NGOs) 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



In every era of the SOHS, the system produced a major new reform that aimed to address a similar set of well-documented problems





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.



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.



Cash moved from a relatively marginal modality in 2010 to the best-evidenced approach in humanitarian response by 2022



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



Some of the most significant innovation investments documented throughout all SOHS reports were in shared data and analytical infrastructure



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/>



AI, mentioned just once in the 2022 SOHS, burst onto the scene over this period.



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

The system invested less in the decision architecture that would translate evaluation findings into changed practice



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

One mapping exercise had identified seven evidence and data platforms that had closed since the cuts

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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PART 3

CONCLUSION

Image: Bangladesh, 2017. In a community feedback session, a woman is expressing her concern. © SIRCAR, Rufas Raf

CONCLUSION

'Political discourse translated into lack of funding and capacity... There are opportunities now to get it right.'

– Senior humanitarian actor

How did the system perform?

The international humanitarian system faced substantial challenges, both internal and external, over the 2022–25 period. Humanitarian needs rose as a result of increased food insecurity, high levels of forced displacement, more frequent climate shocks, and multiple new and protracted conflicts. Crises became more widespread and more complex. A rise in violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) by state and non-state actors heightened protection risks for civilians and at the same made it harder for humanitarians to provide support.¹ In the 20 years since The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) began, there has never been a more deadly time to be an aid worker. And yet in the face of these growing needs and risks, international humanitarian assistance fell by 30% – from an all-time peak in 2022 to a severe trough in 2025 – as key government donors cut funding.

This report explored how the international humanitarian system performed against five key policy areas in this extremely difficult period. This final chapter parses out what the system managed to achieve despite the challenges, which positive efforts were particularly constrained by those challenges, and where the system did not make progress even though it controlled levers for change.

Achievements despite the challenges

Across the policy areas explored in this report, there were clear examples of progress and movement. The humanitarian system helped to avert climate-driven famine and to save hundreds of thousands of lives in Somalia and improved food security in Afghanistan through large-scale food assistance. It made some gains in effectiveness, efficiency and response times by using pre-positioned supplies, anticipatory action and rapid pooled-fund disbursements. It also made greater



use of digital tools, especially to facilitate the delivery of cash-based assistance and to expand the speed and scale of mapping, early warning and delivery in major responses. Overall, the system made improvements against its own quality standards in this period – although these did not always align with the quality perceptions of people affected by crisis.



The humanitarian system helped to avert climate-driven famines and to save hundreds of thousands of lives in Somalia



As threats to civilians and humanitarian staff increased, the system made some progress on protecting people affected by crisis and on improving security. Engagement with peace actors, community-led protection and conflict-prevention structures produced promising results. Cross-sector efforts on protection grew and tools were developed to more practically embed and measure the 'Centrality of Protection' in response strategies. The system also developed specialist expertise on the risks of artificial intelligence (AI) in warfare, as well as on responding to misinformation and disinformation campaigns and digital shutdowns – though these capabilities stayed concentrated in only a few organisations. This period also highlighted the importance of principled action; there were key discussions about what this meant and how different groups interpreted specific principles, like neutrality, to achieve humanitarian objectives.

Localisation remained an overall sticking point, but actors in the international system made some concrete progress on supporting locally led pooled funds, on evolving pooled-fund governance to be more equitable, and on working through alternative and more locally led intermediary models. Once treated as niche, mutual aid was more squarely recognised as an important model of humanitarian support to people affected by crisis. As such, international humanitarian actors provided assistance to mutual-aid actors through mechanisms like support to community-led responses (sclr), dedicated philanthropic funding modalities, diaspora support or via exceptions to typical United Nations (UN) pooled-fund procedures.² Important conversations were had about how best to support these structures, without co-opting and displacing them.

External barriers to progress

Operational challenges constrained progress in several key areas, however. Humanitarian staff and volunteers frequently told us they pushed forward despite feeling exhausted by the external pressures that reduced the effects of their efforts.

The large funding cuts in 2025 reversed some gains made in the early years of this SOHS period. Nutrition progress in Yemen, Ethiopia and Bangladesh deteriorated rapidly as cuts disrupted services. The system made improvements



The large funding cuts in 2025 reversed some gains made in the early years of this SOHS period



in needs assessments with the creation of the Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) 2.0 and greater use of multisectoral needs assessment in the early part of the period. But cuts led to reductions in the number and scale of assessments, thereby reducing the system's ability to identify populations most in need. System-wide monitoring functions and platforms, such as the Famine Early Warning Systems Network

(FEWS NET), were also hit by cuts that threatened efforts to both track and predict need. In 2025, due to funding cuts and access constraints, the system often failed to reach even the subgroup of people hyper-prioritised as in most severe need of support. Initial progress on inclusion across a range of identity groups was hit in early 2025 by a combination of increasingly restrictive diversity, equity and inclusion policies and the funding cuts; women-led organisations experienced widespread cuts and, in some contexts, tailored services were often the first to be withdrawn.

Closing humanitarian space also threatened access and protection. The system's efforts could not adequately address need in conflict-driven famines in Sudan, Gaza and Haiti, where access obstruction, political paralysis and funding shortfalls were decisive. Nonetheless, frontline staff and volunteers worked hard to maintain their support for people affected by crisis, which often included their own communities. Access challenges affected even networks of community solidarity in contexts like Gaza and Sudan, whose resources dwindled dangerously under blockades, conflict and bombardment. While UN Resolution 2730 on protecting humanitarian staff and infrastructure was passed, investments in collective security infrastructure and efforts to better protect local staff and volunteers were undermined by a combination of funding cuts and continued IHL violations. As parties to conflict failed to uphold IHL, and as UN member states failed to hold perpetrators to account, the security efforts of humanitarian actors and the maintenance of protection as a lifesaving function within the Humanitarian Reset paled in comparison to the threats.

Areas of underperformance

In our interviews with aid practitioners and recipients we also heard a good deal of disappointment at the lack of progress in some areas that were more clearly within the



The security efforts of humanitarian actors and the maintenance of protection as a lifesaving function within the Humanitarian Reset paled in comparison to the threats





humanitarian system's control. Much of this related to willingness to alter power structures, which caused growing frustration, particularly among local actors but also many international ones. Partnerships remained largely transactional, with little meaningful decision-making power shifting to local actors across coordination, resource allocation and strategic priorities. Frustration was also expressed at the lack of momentum on interrogating colonial structures and power dynamics within individual organisations and the system. The scarcity of quality funding flowing to local actors was revealed as a core vulnerability after the sudden funding cuts in 2025 – a significant number of local organisations closed because they lacked the flexibility or reserves to maintain staff or infrastructure. While there was growing recognition of the role of mutual-aid structures and local disaster-governance mechanisms, the more centralised and rigid structures of the international system often struggled to engage with these horizontal, fluid and dispersed forms of assistance.

The scarcity of quality funding flowing to local actors was revealed as a core vulnerability

Despite some high-level attention paid to accountability to affected populations (including in the Flagship Initiative of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), for example), engagement with communities affected by crisis often remained tokenistic and was characterised by poor responsiveness to people's input. Upholding accountability and dignity was undermined by a lack of investment: not in frameworks, tools and strategies, but in the processes, structures and incentives that would shift the system's business model and make people affected by crisis the primary point of accountability rather than donor contracts. The system-level reforms and political will required to enable engagement with independent mechanisms – which communities sometimes trusted more than organisations directly providing assistance – were also absent. Lack of independent mechanisms was a particular challenge when responding to sensitive complaints about sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, and about corruption; these continued to be largely internally managed by the organisations being accused. While people affected by crisis

Engagement with communities affected by crisis often remained tokenistic

often prioritised food as an immediate need, they also consistently requested more focus on resilience to future crises and livelihoods for recovery. A decision to explicitly narrow the humanitarian remit to 'lifesaving' needs caused some people affected by crisis to question the relevance of humanitarian assistance to their broader priorities.



In the immediate term, the reduction of development funding – combined with a lack of progress on connecting humanitarian action with the development, peace and climate systems – means the people and programmes who are no longer prioritised by the humanitarian system risk going unserved. As funding reduced in this period, each system narrowed its priorities, largely in isolation. Because of the different structures and purposes of the humanitarian, peace, development and climate systems – and the ways states pursued their interests across all – decisions were made that did not reflect the intersectional realities of people affected by crisis, whose needs were not neatly divided into sectors. In the longer term, the humanitarian caseload could ultimately increase due to a lack of investment in tackling root causes and protecting against future harm in these systems.

A decision to narrow the humanitarian remit to 'lifesaving' needs caused some people affected by crisis to question the relevance of humanitarian assistance

Cuts to donor spending and the politicisation of assistance in this period could be seen as external forces, driven by politics and public perception. However, international humanitarian actors also play a role in preserving the legitimacy and value of the system to influence funding choices. While this requires the system to make an effective case for its own value, it also means making promised changes, upholding ethical principles and investing in the most effective and efficient models of assistance, as well as in the evidence base that enables those assessments (including outcome data and community perceptions of performance). The system could have gone further to adopt and scale some of the most effective and efficient approaches – where significant evidence already shows that they work – such as investing further in multiyear flexible funding, cash, anticipatory action and funding for local (rather than international) intermediaries.

In the next few years, we will see the legacies of this period, including the full implications of funding cuts, a narrowed humanitarian remit, the loss of structures and staff, and the impacts of IHL violations and of genocide. Some choices made were a pragmatic reaction to the shocks experienced. However, there are opportunities to make strategic choices – and to leverage the passion and experience of committed individuals – to make the international humanitarian system better able to serve people affected by crisis in an uncertain future.

The system could have gone further to adopt and scale some of the most effective and efficient approaches



Is the system fit for the future?

Predicting the future is not easy: the 2018 SOHS could not have anticipated the widespread effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, nor the 2022 SOHS the size and scale of this period's funding cuts. As such, this report does not attempt any precise forecast. Recent research, however, has looked at some of the likely challenges and drivers of change for the system.

Participatory forecasting by the Inter-Agency Research and Analysis Network (IARAN),³ exploring the future of aid up to 2040, outlines key drivers of change in the system. Externally, this includes continued pressures of the climate crisis, conflict, displacement, geopolitical shifts and power realignments. Internal drivers include shifting patterns of funding and donor influence, continued pressures towards greater local leadership, changes in aid governance and stronger agency for people affected by crisis. Taken together, these drivers are likely to create greater humanitarian needs, more complex crises and multifaceted power dynamics to navigate. They suggest a continued need for the international system to more meaningfully – and with greater political will – grapple with longstanding power dynamics and deliver assistance more effectively, efficiently and ethically. A lack of certainty about the future also points to a need to be adaptive in the face of change.

Despite the funding shocks of this period, the drop in funding in 2025 was not as big as several pessimistic predictions. At the time of writing, there are indications that the decline is slowing in 2026 and that the system may level out, with the United States still playing a strong funding role. While in 2025 the system shrank back to 2017 levels, that system of 2017 was still vital in the humanitarian landscape that supported millions of people affected by crisis around the world.⁴

How the international humanitarian system chooses to move forward in the next few years matters immensely – and reduced funding means the system must think carefully about how it invests in strengthening performance. The analysis in this report suggests some considerations for decisions made over the next four-year SOHS period, with associated tensions and challenges.

Reduced funding means the system must think carefully about how it invests in strengthening performance

Consideration 1: Complementing broader ecosystems of support

Broader ecosystems of support are essential in contexts affected by crisis. The international humanitarian system can build on some of the lessons of this period to make stronger, more appropriate connections with these actors. It can take



steps to better understand what patterns of support exist, what is likely to be directed to supporting humanitarian needs and which people affected by crisis might be left out of those structures due to resource gaps or political dynamics. By taking these ecosystems as a starting point, the international system can centre existing local structures, knowledge and leadership – from the point of planning a response – to establish what it can most usefully offer. This can help a reduced humanitarian system use its resources most effectively to play a supportive, gap-filling or enabling role.



The international humanitarian system needs to think beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement, focus on existing capacities and be sensitive to political barriers to assisting and protecting people



The ability of state structures to support all people affected by crisis varied across contexts in this period. States were not only the main drivers of disaster management, but also parties to conflict or oppression. Evidence also suggested that states are reacting to the international funding cuts with different policy responses, some of which seek to diminish reliance on foreign assistance. These variations suggest that the international humanitarian system needs to think beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement, focus on existing capacities and be sensitive to political barriers to assisting and protecting people. Newly empowered Humanitarian Coordinators may need support to lead effectively on appropriate

engagement with governments and de facto authorities in contexts with complex politics and varied levels of disaster-management infrastructure.

To better interact with informal support systems, the international system can build on its progress in engaging with mutual aid and sclr approaches in this period. Evidence demonstrated that the system could work with – and more directly fund – mutual-aid networks in contexts like Myanmar, Ukraine and Sudan. There is potential to replicate positive progress in other contexts. However, it is also important to be sensitive to the dynamics of these organic approaches and consider the risks of changing their value if the humanitarian system scales up this support. The international system tends to be more rigid, divided by sector and accustomed to funding at scale; mutual-aid networks are more horizontal, fluid and dispersed, and they derive their legitimacy and accountability from the communities they serve. As such, the international system may need to work differently with these networks than its standard operating model. Mutual-aid structures, civil society and local/national non-governmental organisations (L/NNGOs) often design their support to address their communities' holistic needs and preferences, rather than dividing their activities into humanitarian, development, peace and climate 'buckets'. Given the international system has struggled to overcome those silos in



contexts affected by crisis, it will need to ensure that increasing its engagement with informal networks does not replicate or impose these international silos so networks lose their ability to address communities' requirements holistically.

Indeed, progress may also be required to strengthen the humanitarian system's engagement across the development, peace and climate systems – but the evidence suggests this will be difficult to achieve. These systems also contracted significantly over 2022–25, and they often favour contexts with capable state counterparts and manageable political risks because they channel funds through national governments and international financial institutions. Their prioritisation followed state and donor interests that did not always align with the crisis-affected and politically volatile contexts where humanitarian assistance focuses.

Some might assume development actors will fill gaps as the humanitarian system steps back to focus on populations affected only by recent shocks and to provide 'lifesaving' support. This assumption will require further probing – and contingency planning – to avoid people who are experiencing vulnerability going unassisted, and to avoid resilience to future crises being ignored. Further testing of some existing mechanisms could enable progress on the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, including area-based coordination, stronger emphasis on transition planning in Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans, or donors combining humanitarian and development functions. However, the humanitarian system will likely need to go beyond coordination and planning functions to better understand the complexity of international systems with very different operational functions and incentives. It must also consider how to work with local ecosystems that are less hierarchical than many international structures.

Consideration 2: Strengthening trust

Funding cuts, pressurised decisions, disinformation and a lack of movement on key Grand Bargain commitments have all dented trust; the international humanitarian system needs to strengthen several relationships over the next few years. While this will take time rather than quick fixes, the system can build on some pockets of progress from this SOHS period.

Some progress was made to better engage with people affected by crisis, but trust diminished because these people were not centred in decision-making and because the system failed



Evidence showed the power of investing in accountability to affected populations: communication, consultation and feedback were all linked to positive outcomes





to meaningfully respond to their inputs and communicate with them effectively over project closures. However, evidence showed the power of investing in accountability to affected populations: communication, consultation and feedback were all linked to positive outcomes on feelings of dignity and the effectiveness of assistance. The broad benefits of strengthened accountability could be key considerations for donors and operational agencies in prioritisation decisions within the coming period.



The Humanitarian Reset stated that people affected by crisis will be at its centre; the coming period presents an opportunity to clearly articulate how to make that promise a reality



To increase trust, the system will also need to invest in reducing harm. Accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian staff were reported on a large scale in this period, and scarcity of humanitarian assistance may further drive vulnerability to abuse.⁵ Increased use of digital technology also created data-protection risks, while people affected by crisis were often unsure of how their data was being used. The system could usefully build on existing safeguards, apply more caution in building biometric-based platforms, be clear-sighted about the risks of cyberattacks, invest in AI governance and offer meaningful data consent to

people affected by crisis. Following rapid retreats in 2025, the system could build on nascent efforts by some international actors to plan for more ethical exits with local actors and communities. At a system level, the Humanitarian Reset stated that people affected by crisis will be at its centre; the coming period presents an opportunity to clearly articulate how to make that promise a reality.

Local actors told us of their significant frustration with the formal system due to a lack of progress on Grand Bargain commitments. The consequences of unfulfilled promises were felt as sudden funding cuts saw the closure of local organisations and loss of local staff. OCHA-managed pooled funds were positioned as a localisation mechanism in the Humanitarian Reset, but the system could strengthen localisation by applying political will to areas of progress. For example, adjusting the governance structures of existing international pooled funds to make decision-making more equitable, and scaling up support to locally led pooled funds to overcome the challenge (reported by donors) of funding many local organisations versus a few international intermediaries. These intermediaries could also learn from some evolved intermediary models emerging in this period that better tailored their support to what local actors asked for. As funding cuts play out still, international intermediary organisations can decide where to work, and what to work on – choosing to complement existing local efforts over competition and operational maintenance.



Widespread IHL violations hindered the international system's ability to protect civilians, staff and volunteers in this period. While humanitarian actors can try to apply humanitarian principles in contextually appropriate ways to achieve humanitarian ends, large-scale structural barriers require UN member states to uphold IHL and hold perpetrators of violations accountable. As such, humanitarian actors need the leverage of political decision-makers. In an effort to better inform and influence these decision-makers around IHL and access, some operational and donor organisations took steps – and explicitly invested in strategies – to strengthen humanitarian diplomacy. The practical evolution of IHL workstreams within the Humanitarian Reset and UN80, and implementation of the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, could all be important vehicles for sustaining momentum over the next few years. Actors can also capitalise on opportunities to share their learning from these efforts to further strengthen this protective function.



Humanitarian actors need the leverage of political decision-makers



Attacks on aid budgets, widespread misinformation and disinformation, and poor articulation of impact have also damaged relationships with donor publics and politicians. This 2026 SOHS indicates several areas where the system could build on progress to repair and strengthen those relationships. This progress includes efforts by some to better understand and tackle disinformation – from community to international levels – and to track and analyse cost data so the system can



The system could benefit from greater investment in evaluating outcomes, rather than outputs



measure and articulate cost effectiveness. While some sectors were able to measure their impact in this period, the system could benefit from greater investment in evaluating outcomes, rather than outputs, and from consciously investing in programming and modalities that are shown to work effectively and efficiently.

Although difficult operational settings induce some risk of corruption and abuse, the system can build on the practical and collective steps taken in this period in contexts like Somalia to address diversion. After the 2025 funding cuts, the system also made some nascent progress on articulating to donor publics the value of the humanitarian system, presenting a potential opportunity for engagement by international NGOs. However, discussions on decolonialism and dignity in this period highlighted tensions that may arise when trying to accessibly convey the impact of international humanitarian assistance while maintaining an ethical, respectful approach to – and mutual solidarity with – people affected by crisis.



Consideration 3: Pursuing opportunities for structural and functional change

To address immediate challenges in this period, many prioritisation decisions were made quickly at both system and organisational levels. Opportunities were rarely taken to bring about strategic shifts and tackle persistent sticking points. The levelling out of the funding decline may enable the system to address some of the limitations inherent to prioritising when in panic and survival mode. Strategic and transformational choices could be made: moving the model from one driven by international actors' supply decisions to one driven by the demands of people affected by crisis.

Political will would be required to make such practical changes. Otherwise, the system risks doing the same but smaller instead of making meaningful gains on key challenges: localisation, accountability, the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, and investing more in effective modalities of anticipation and resilience to future shocks rather than in reactive response alone. An increased focus on cash in the Humanitarian Reset and 2026 UN-coordinated appeals could incentivise shifts – if the funding follows.

The system risks doing the same but smaller instead of making meaningful gains on key challenges

While the system's funding was more balanced in 2025 than in the past, dependency and concentration remained. The largest four donors still provided almost half of all public funding, and a similar proportion of funds still flowed to three UN agencies. The funding cuts and political challenges to multilateralism revealed the precariousness of a concentrated system. While humanitarians looked to alternative funders – including philanthropies, non-Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors and the private sector – at the time of writing, the size of their contributions means they are unlikely to fill the gaps left by governments. Engagement with these different sources of funding also requires humanitarian agencies to learn

The funding cuts and political challenges to multilateralism revealed the precariousness of a concentrated system.

more about their modalities, potential and limitations (including incentives and risks), as well as their preferred means to build relationships. Diversifying delivery mechanisms could also shore up sustainability if some larger, concentrated delivery mechanisms become blocked. As demonstrated in this period, beyond broader imperatives to localise, there are strong practical benefits of investing in local actors who remain present when international delivery mechanisms lack access.



Consideration 4: Retaining what already works

As well as indicating how the international system could work in more thoughtful and complementary ways, our research underscores improvements that have been made in learning, innovations and quality. Many of our interviewees raised concerns that, in the face of funding cuts, the system would lose this hard-won progress and learning by 'going back to the eighties' or returning to unsuitable models of 'truck and chuck', which could result in low-quality assistance or harm to people affected by crisis.

In the aftermath of the cuts, we identified losses to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning positions; cuts to evaluation budgets; and reductions in system assessments and data platforms. However, valiant attempts were also made to salvage learning from organisations that had closed (like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Development Initiatives), to fund data enablers, and to create a more sustainable data ecosystem that combined international and local knowledge. Shoring up these functions will be crucial so the system can track and respond to future crises and further improve its performance. With staff losses across the system, there is a need to maintain space for convening and sharing learning (as well as 'unlearning'), while also making system knowledge more equitable so that vital local knowledge can inform the future functioning of the international system.

With staff losses across the system, there is a need to maintain space for convening and sharing learning

Standards of assistance and delivery processes have improved over the past 20 years, although there is more to be done so the system's technical standards match the contextual realities and quality perceptions of people affected by crisis. As well as maintaining quality, the system could do more to avoid backsliding on addressing the harm it may cause and in upholding the dignity of people affected by crisis through mechanisms to prevent sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. While continuing to embrace digital technology for better efficiency and effectiveness, the system also needs to be inclusive and mindful of the serious risk of holding sensitive data from people affected by crisis.

Harnessing the potential for change

Across our interviews with individual humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers, including local and international staff and volunteers, we consistently heard commitment, passion and a sense of solidarity with people affected

by crisis. We also heard significant frustration, both at the lack of progress on longstanding reform areas and at the loss of skilled colleagues across the sector. As the system adjusts to an altered landscape of assistance, efforts will be required to galvanize the potential of the people who work within and alongside it - their knowledge and lessons learned, their commitment, and their frustrations – to shape future international humanitarian action that is more effective, appropriate and ethical for people affected by crisis.



Harnessing the sector's experience and commitment will be critical to future change



ENDNOTES

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ANNEX 1

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ANNEX 2

PEER REVIEW AND
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