

# THE STATE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

## State of the Humanitarian System 2022

### Briefing: The shrinking space for principled humanitarian action

#### About ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report

Humanitarian action can be a lifeline to people experiencing the worst that conflict and disaster can inflict. For over a decade, ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report (SOHS) has provided a unique, evidence-based understanding of the system and how well it works for affected people. Based on a huge body of evidence including exclusive research with crisis-affected people and practitioners, SOHS addresses key questions about performance and effectiveness in areas such as hunger and mortality reduction, as well as giving a comprehensive picture of funding, resource flows, staffing and organisations. Consultations with people affected by crises were central to the research from the outset, and shaped the focus of the report. This edition of the SOHS looks at the period from January 2018 to December 2021 - a period that encompassed the global COVID-19 pandemic as well as multiple armed conflicts - and draws comparisons with previous editions to take the long view on trends, accomplishments and challenges in the humanitarian system.

#### Summary

In the face of growing constraints, restrictions and attacks on aid, humanitarians find it ever harder to practise their principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Aid workers often lack the support, skills and will to make difficult judgement calls in complex environments. At the same time, geopolitical shifts have intensified crises and rendered the international 'community' less able to respond effectively. In our interviews with frontline workers and leaders, two of the themes that came up consistently were the decline of multilateralism and the shrinking of civil society space. Both have the effect, in multiple ways, of obstructing the delivery of effective and impartial humanitarian aid to those most in need.

#### Rising autocracy and weak multilateralism meant norms under attack

[Autocracy and 'strongman' politics were on the rise in many countries](#). Sources across the world spoke about national governments feeling emboldened to flout the human rights of their citizens and reject the norms of humanitarian action.

- The Varieties of Democracy Institute found that 'dictatorships were on the rise and harbour 70% of the world's population'.
- Social media became a means of spreading distrust and misinformation about humanitarian actors, and was instrumental in the escalation of conflicts in Cameroon, Ethiopia and Myanmar.
- [Assertive governments were denying humanitarian action](#). For example, in Ethiopia, MSF was suspended for three months after making statements about attacks on healthcare facilities in Tigray, and the NRC was suspended for over five months, accused by the government of 'spreading misinformation'. Both organisations have faced suspensions

elsewhere because of their public statements, including in Iraq, Burkina Faso and Cameroon.

- [Among aid workers who responded to our survey](#), 45% felt that humanitarian space had declined and 24% that it had stayed the same. Only 31% felt it had improved.

**Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, divisions between Russia, China and the West were playing out in denial of humanitarian access around the world, from Syria to Myanmar.**

- Between 2019 and 2021 there has been a [marked decline in access to areas outside government control](#) in Syria, with Russia and China using their vetoes at the UN Security Council to close three out of the four original UN-mandated border crossings.
- As existing conflicts – such as those in Syria and Yemen – become more protracted, the [international system appears to be no closer to sustainably meeting the basic needs](#) of affected people or supporting political resolutions.
- If COVID-19 was the litmus test of global solidarity and unity over our four-year study period (2018-2021), the results were not good. National self-interest largely prevailed, most obviously in the [‘catastrophic moral failure’ to equitably share COVID-19 vaccines](#).
- There were however some [bright spots on the global stage within the study period](#), including the agreement of UN Resolution 2417 (2018), which forbade the use of starvation as a weapon of war.

### **Attacks on aid workers rose significantly**

**In the four years between 2017 and 2020, there was a 54% [rise in the number of aid workers attacked](#).**

- 947 attacks were recorded over the period, with 1,688 aid worker victims.
- Targeted violence against humanitarians increased in Syria (where cases more than doubled), Tigray, Ethiopia and in South Sudan.
- The only notable decline was in Afghanistan, where the establishment of Taliban control meant that large areas of the country were no longer violently contested. For the first time in the 20-year conflict, it was no longer among the five most violent contexts for aid workers.

**The [overwhelming majority – 95% in 2020 – of victims of attacks were national aid workers](#)**

- While the number and rate of attacks on international staff fell between 2017 and 2020, they rose for national and local counterparts as the system relied on them to deliver in the most difficult places.

### **Bureaucratic and political impediments undermined humanitarian access**

**[State-imposed bureaucratic impediments and political interference blocked access](#)**

- Aid workers felt these were a far greater barrier to reaching people in need than physical attacks.
- For example, in Bangladesh, [bureaucratic impediments and regulations slowed and narrowed the parameters of response](#). In much of Syria, [permission to operate is subject to tight control](#) by the Assad regime.
- One humanitarian leader diagnosed the [humanitarian system as ‘suffering from Stockholm syndrome’](#), accepting increasing compromises as the price for permission to operate.

## **Counter-terrorism measures and sanctions remained a major impediment to humanitarian access**

- A 2021 survey by VOICE found that 42% of respondents said that these measures affected decisions relating to their programming in the field, by preventing them from carrying out certain humanitarian programmes and activities, or by impeding access to areas where needs are acute.
- These measures also had a chilling effect on agencies' willingness to operate: regulations are complicated and unclear, and the risks associated with violating them are high. In Syria, fears of financial or criminal liability have led aid workers to avoid some areas of acute need in the north-west of the country.
- However there were positive developments: humanitarian exemptions to sanctions were secured in Afghanistan and Yemen, and some humanitarian workers hoped that this signalled a new understanding and engagement on the part of some donors, including the Biden-Harris Administration in the US.

## **Humanitarian agencies were often ill-positioned to make difficult judgement calls**

- [Applying principles in complex situations involves difficult trade-offs, sensitive negotiations and tough choices](#), but aid workers were often not in a position to make these judgement calls. Overall – with some exceptions – there was a lack of skills, leadership and clear guidance to support staff to weigh up options.
- [Agencies often defaulted to an 'access at all costs' imperative](#), accepting compromises to principles as the price of continuing to operate in heavily controlled contexts including Syria and Ethiopia.
- [Fear of expulsion muted humanitarians](#), making them reluctant to speak out about attacks on civilians and blocks on aid, and so drawing criticism from civil society actors. The humanitarian voice has gradually diminished over the last decade, although there have been creative advocacy partnerships with human rights advocates to partially address this.
- [Politicised aid, sometimes including migration management agendas](#), continued to pose issues for the independence of agencies accepting these funds. Competition for scarce resources undermined efforts to push back on this.