

THE STATE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

The State of the Humanitarian System 2022: Key facts and figures

In a period of intense and overlapping crises, the humanitarian system reached more people than ever before, but fell short of its target

Overall demand for humanitarian assistance and protection has increased due to four main factors:

- 1. Compound crises, including conflict, climate, and COVID-19, created more economic vulnerability and displacement & more humanitarian need.**
 - The number of conflicts more than doubled in the decade to 2020.
 - Even before the war in Ukraine, displacement was already at its highest ever level, driven by both conflict and disasters. While the pandemic may have temporarily limited displacement, by the end of 2021 there were an estimated 53.2 million internally displaced people and 27.1 million refugees, and conflict-induced internal displacement had reached its highest level in a decade.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the scale and geography of humanitarian need, pushed around 97m people below the extreme poverty line and greatly increased protection risks, particularly for women and girls.
 - The number of climate-related disasters increased year on year since 2018, global temperatures continued to climb to record levels, and the IPCC found strong evidence that climate change is contributing to humanitarian crises.
- 2. The rise of hunger was a specific challenge, particularly in conflict settings.**
 - The number of people facing acute food insecurity rose by a third over the study period, to a total of 161 million people in 2021.
 - This was caused primarily by conflict, drought and other climate events, and a return of 'intentional starvation' as a conflict strategy.
 - A declaration of famine gains attention, but fewer resources and less attention were directed to protracted hunger crises, where populations remain at lower levels of emergency for longer periods of time, resulting in higher rates of excess mortality.
 - Food security was little more than half funded (53% in 2021) as donors failed to keep pace with growing needs - even before the worsening global food security situation in 2022.
- 3. Crises became more protracted in the absence of political leadership to end them, making more people reliant on humanitarian aid over the long term.**
 - The vast majority of international humanitarian assistance (IHA) requirements are for protracted crises.
 - The seven largest UN-coordinated humanitarian response plans in 2021 were for countries which had appeals every year for at least the last decade.
 - Of 30 humanitarian response plans in 2021, 27 were for countries with active conflicts.
 - Yemen and Syria were the two largest recipients, receiving between one-third and one-fifth of all IHA each year.
 - In 2021 the largest populations in need were in Ethiopia, Yemen, DRC and Afghanistan.
 - Development cooperation and gains were jeopardised in some major aid recipient countries including Afghanistan (with the Taliban take-over) and Ethiopia (with the conflict in Tigray).
- 4. The humanitarian system therefore continued to expand the number of people it tried to reach.**

- The number of people recognised by UN-coordinated appeals as needing humanitarian assistance grew by 87%, from an estimated 135.8m people in 2018 to 255.1m people in 2021.
- This number peaked in 2020 with the COVID-19 Pandemic, when UN appeals reported nearly 440m people in need and aimed to assist just over 60% of them. At this peak, appeal requirements totalled \$39.3bn; 51% was met.
- The humanitarian system does not consistently count the number of people it reaches. But in the 2021 responses where it did, it reached around 106m people - 46% of those estimated to be in need of support, and 69% of those who had been targeted to receive assistance.

While needs rose, humanitarians struggled to reach people affected by crisis due to assertive states, attacks on aid workers, and sanctions

- **Democratic norms were eroded by the actions of different governments around the world, who flouted the human rights of their citizens and undermined humanitarian response.**
 - Deepening tensions between Russia, China and the West paralysed the United Nations Security Council, affecting the ability of the multilateral system to uphold international laws of war.
 - One humanitarian worker summarised these challenges: “We’re in an absolute crisis of a fight for core norms.”
- **Attacks on aid workers rose by 54% between 2017 and 2020.**
 - In 2020, national staff represented 95% of the victims of these attacks.
 - Despite the increase in attacks, many aid workers (28% of SOHS survey respondents, the majority of them international staff) felt that bureaucratic obstacles or political interference were a far larger obstacle to accessing populations in need. This was twice the number of respondents who cited insecurity or attacks on aid workers
- **Access constraints increased in many countries.**
 - Fear of expulsion had a chilling effect on the sector’s collective willingness to speak out about abuses of civilians and blocks on aid. Humanitarians were criticised for opting for silence in order to maintain their presence to deliver aid.
- **Just 36% of crisis-affected people think aid reaches the people who need it most.**
 - Decisions on who gets aid remain unclear to people in crisis, and in several contexts the traditional humanitarian principle of providing aid only to those ‘most in need’ runs against cultural practices of sharing resources across a family or community. This is especially challenging in contexts where many people come close to the threshold of need.
 - Agencies face a number of challenges in prioritising those most in need, including pressure from governments and others to alter distribution lists and targeting criteria.
 - 22% of affected people in our survey said corruption was the biggest problem for humanitarian assistance. This included local ‘gatekeepers’ unfairly influencing distribution, as well as aid diversion by authorities and by aid workers. Humanitarian organisations and donors have put stringent anti-corruption measures in place.

There’s not enough good quality financing for humanitarian action

- **Funding plateaued in the three years between 2018 and 2020 and rose in 2021 by just 2.5%, compared to an average annual growth of 10% between 2012 and 2018.**
 - The increase in funding over the past decade has been significantly outstripped by an increase in the number of people affected by crisis; humanitarian funding requirements have more than quadrupled over the past decade. In 2020, the UN coordinated response plans put forward their highest appeals for funding (US\$39.3 billion), but also saw their biggest funding gap (with just 51% funded).
- **There is wide variation in the funding available for crises.**
 - 40% of IHA went to five countries in 2021 (Ethiopia, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan).
 - Funding gaps in humanitarian appeals are not evenly distributed. There was a 172% gap between the best and worst funded appeals in 2021 (the Afghanistan flash appeal and the Nepal COVID-19 appeal).

- **The funding gaps had a real effect on crisis-affected people.** Just 39% of SOHS survey respondents said they were satisfied with the amount of aid they received, compared with 43% in the previous study period
- **There is strong evidence that preparedness improves the speed and effectiveness of response, and emerging evidence that anticipatory action improves the outcomes for aid recipients, but these mechanisms still occupy a very small proportion of overall humanitarian assistance.**

Power and resources remain concentrated despite efforts to localise and calls to 'decolonise' humanitarian aid

- **There are more organisations, staff and money in the system than ever before.**
 - There are an estimated 5000 humanitarian agencies, an increase of 10% over the decade, mostly due to an increase in international, national and local NGOs.
 - The number of humanitarian staff working in crisis contexts has increased 40% since 2013, to around 632,000 people, 90% of whom were nationals of the countries in which they worked.
 - International humanitarian assistance (IHA) reached an estimated \$31.3 billion in 2021, almost double what it had been a decade before.
- **The overall trend is towards heavy concentration of international humanitarian resources being provided by a very small group of donors and going to a small number of international agencies.**
 - 57% of IHA comes from five public donors (USA, EU institutions, UK, Japan, Germany USA, EU institutions, Germany, UK, Japan) and by 2021 nearly one-third came from the USA alone. Around one-fifth continues to come from private sources, mostly individual giving.
 - The continued reliance on so few donors is precarious. The system has failed to diversify its funding base and there was volatility among the top humanitarian donors in the period, with UK cuts to international development aid and the dashed hopes of growth in funding from Middle Eastern donors. However, other donors including the US demonstrated their commitment, managing to increase funding even while facing the economic constraints of COVID-19 at home.
 - Almost half of IHA goes to three UN agencies (WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF). This concentration of funding is relatively unchanged over time despite the growth in the number of humanitarian organisations.
- **Despite a huge uptick in rhetoric on issues of localisation, diversity and equity, meaningful change has been limited.**
 - There have been reflections and policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion within humanitarian organisations but no observable system-wide change on the structural challenges.
 - The humanitarian system relied on local and national NGOs to deliver during the height of COVID-19 restrictions, but this did not result in a permanent rebalancing of power. Most of the local NGOs we surveyed were either unsure about the impacts of the pandemic on local leadership or felt negatively about it.
 - Direct funding to local actors remained extremely low as a share of IHA, fluctuating between a high of 3.3% in 2018 and a low of 1.2% in 2021.
 - More indirect funding is available, but it is slow to arrive and often of poor quality, heavily conditioned and short term, and treats local actors like sub-contractors.

Engaging affected people makes a difference to how well they view aid, but the 'participation revolution' has not materialised

- **Accountability practices are linked to better performance.** Those who were consulted about the aid they received were 2.2 times more likely to say that aid addressed their priority needs, 2.7 times more likely to say that the aid they received was of good quality and 2.5 times more likely to say that the amount of aid was sufficient.
- There has been no observable improvement in feedback and accountability practices in the eyes of aid recipients since 2018, despite the efforts of many agencies to strengthen these practices.

- Roughly 1 in 3 aid recipients say they were able to provide feedback or were consulted about what they wanted prior to receiving aid, reflecting no significant change since 2018.
 - COVID-19 restrictions and difficulties in accessing populations during conflict made it harder for humanitarian actors to engage with affected people in-person. Remote models had poor rates of uptake in many contexts.
 - There is a widening gap in expectations and perceptions between humanitarian staff and affected populations, with staff feeling more positive about their efforts to consult and engage than aid recipients. Over 44% of humanitarian practitioners rate their organisations as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ on accountability to affected populations, in contrast to roughly one in three aid recipients reporting they had been involved in mechanisms for consultation, feedback and/or complaints.
- **In many crises, while people found the support provided to be useful, it didn’t necessarily meet their *most important* needs – and the gap between what the system offered and what people wanted seemed to widen over the study period.**
 - Only 34% of surveyed aid recipients felt the aid they received met their most important needs, a decline from the last period.
 - The number one improvement in the humanitarian system requested by nearly a third of aid recipient survey respondents was ‘providing what was most needed’.
- **The system saw meaningful improvements in how it prevents the sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of crisis-affected people.**
 - More positively, there were big changes to how agencies share information on recruitment and collect and respond to reports of SEA following two high profile scandals over 2018-2021.
 - Country-level systems for coordinating to prevent SEA were better resourced and strengthened.
 - But systems for providing survivors with assistance and restitution are still ad hoc and under-resourced, leaving an accountability gap.

Despite the challenges, the humanitarian system has provided a vital lifeline for millions – but it requires ongoing change if it is to be fit for future crises

- **Available (limited) data indicates that humanitarian aid is generally effective at achieving positive outcomes for people in crisis.**
- **After the 2015-2017 period of high-level summits and agreements, in the past four years while implementing these commitments the system has established a track record of slow evolution. This is despite significant disruption and calls for faster rates of change.**
- **Moving ahead, the system will need to change more quickly to handle expected shifts in Caseload, Crises and Contexts.**
 - **Caseload:** Right sizing the humanitarian system for the future demands more than increasing its resources and increasing its efficiency; it may also demand re-evaluating the scope of its ambitions and its role in relation to others. The system continues to link poorly to the ‘systems outside the system’ - the efforts of other actors in crisis response. These actors will be increasingly important in a world where crisis is the new norm.
 - **Crises:** The system has made several improvements to help it deal with higher rates of cascading crises: in joint assessments, multi-dimensional analysis related to the humanitarian–development–peace ‘triple nexus’, investments in systems thinking, and anticipatory action. But the extent to which these advances prepare the system for the potential magnitude of change in crises is questionable.
 - **Contexts:** Although humanitarian agencies are developing initiatives to strengthen their negotiation and advocacy for humanitarian space, their appetite and ability to influence the terms and extent of their access is limited, and their ability to shift power to local actors to better navigate the varied challenging contexts for conflict and disaster has proven to be limited.