

Listening is not enough

People demand transformational
change in humanitarian assistance

Global analysis report | November 2022



Preface

“How communities experience and perceive our work is the most relevant measure of our performance.” In light of [this statement](#) by Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) on Accountability to Affected People in Humanitarian Action, the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA) commissioned [Ground Truth Solutions](#) (GTS) to provide a multi-country analysis that explores the recent perceptions of people in ten crisis contexts – Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, and Ukraine – with the aim to provide a snapshot of aid quality from the perspective of affected people, as well as recommendations for action that can address critical, systemic shortcomings.

Ground Truth Solutions is an international non-governmental organisation that helps people affected by crisis influence the design and implementation of humanitarian aid. GTS has over a decade of experience engaging with people affected by crisis to discover what they think about humanitarian assistance, while also gathering ideas on how things could be done better. Their methodologies draw on customer satisfaction research, such as the expectation-confirmation theory highlighted in this report, and polling, and use a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods to find out what people think.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the thousands of people impacted by crises who took the time to speak to us and share your views.

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Executive summary

It is indisputable that people should be 'at the centre' of humanitarian assistance. It is equally indisputable that they are not. Despite widespread efforts to include crisis-affected communities and align with their needs, **people impacted by crisis feel disempowered** and think aid is missing the mark. "To [humanitarians], our needs can be summed up by their needs assessment surveys conducted on what we eat during the day and how we live. But asking us what our basic needs are, they don't do that. So next time, when organisations want to help us, they should approach us and ask us what our real needs are," said an elderly, female host community member in Bangui, Central African Republic. She underscores that deeply extractive assessments have little impact on the lives of the people who give their time to answer lengthy and intrusive questionnaires. The same can be said of attempts to involve communities – however genuine the intention – if the humanitarian system is simply not designed to adapt to what people need. Rhetoric abounds, but feedback from thousands of people affected by crisis is clear: **decision-making power has not shifted.**

People want to be decision-makers

People are clear on what they want, need, and prefer from aid providers, but they are all-too-often excluded. A meagre 36% of surveyed aid recipients in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic think they can influence the humanitarian response. Feedback mechanisms are everywhere, but they are often avoided, not just because they are unclear, but because there is little trust that providing feedback would translate to action. Even the most regular community consultations throughout a project cycle are perceived as checkbox exercises when the discussions do not lead to programme adaptation.

Most people want to determine the assistance they receive. When asked if they expect to be able to influence aid, people overwhelmingly say yes. Compared to the dismal number who feel listened to in DRC and CAR, the vast majority (94% and 80%, respectively) think it is important that people in their community are able to influence how aid is provided. People are demanding a seat at the table and, in their own ways, calling for systemic change. "Including us in the decisions that determine the type of aid that they provide is very important. We wish the aid providers would ask for our opinion more," shares a female cash recipient in Gubio camp, Nigeria. "It's their [aid agencies] money so I don't know how much they would like for the community to participate. But we should be able to vote on things and make decisions, not just be told what is going to happen. But I doubt that will happen," said a female aid recipient in Somalia.

Meaningful engagement with communities entails making sure people first know that they have a right to influence aid, and then showing them that their views matter by acting on what they say. Doing this well requires widespread **humility, with humanitarians recognising that we are playing a supporting role.** Only when we accept that we do not know best, can community priorities drive the response. As it stands, people's sense of disempowerment is so strong that they often don't even try to engage. "The only right we have is to receive, because we don't know anything about what the people in charge of aid are doing," said a woman in Les Cayes, Haiti. People need to know that their knowledge, skills, experiences, and perspectives matter. **Telling people they have a right to have an opinion is a first step, but showing them that their opinion counts matters more.** People will only know they have a right to have a say when they see that their input is considered, valued, and actioned. This will only happen with systemic change. The goal must be to **shift peoples' roles from passive recipients to agents with authority over humanitarian decisions that impact the lives of their families and communities.**



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- Woman, Bangui, CAR



Including us in the decisions that determine the type of aid that they provide is very important. We wish the aid providers would ask for our opinion more.

- Woman, Gubio camp, Nigeria



The only right we have is to receive, because we don't know anything about what the people in charge of aid are doing.

- Woman, Les Cayes, Haiti

The current system of consultation – a needs assessment survey here, a feedback mechanism or focus group there – is not enough. Periodic integration of community consultations into planning documents risks enabling humanitarian responses to look accountable when those in positions of power and controlling resources are not systematically reacting to people’s views. **To be meaningful, engagement with communities must be sustained and linked to action at every level, from programme design through the delivery of assistance to monitoring and evaluation.** In Haiti’s Camp Perrin, one man said of aid workers: “I see them as tourists because they just pass by and watch but don’t seriously care about people’s problems.” Engagement means enabling people to participate in the way they want to. For some, a functional feedback process – in which they receive a satisfactory response or see concrete change – would be sufficient. Others want to hold leadership positions, to help determine the aid and services provided in their communities, targeting, and long-term plans. In Chari-Baguirmi, Chad, one woman called for diverse participation. “A youth leader, leader of older persons, female leader, male leader, and community leaders. The leaders of each category must be appointed to participate in all the meetings and activities in the camp so that each community feels involved and satisfied.”

Ensuring that aid meets people’s most important needs requires a system that shifts power to affected people, rather than just asking them questions. **It means a relinquishing of control.**

Few say aid meets their needs

Within this current system, in which efforts to include people are perceived to be tokenistic, aid relevance suffers. People do not feel their basic needs are met. In Chad, only 8% think aid covers their most important needs. A male refugee in Mandoul said, “we sell goods that do not meet our needs to buy the primary goods we need,” while in Ngama Kotoko a female refugee said, “food is a basic need, but for the past few months there has been nothing, and we are starving.”

Perception data show a system falling short of its primary goal to provide essential assistance, as well as meet people’s expectations.

“We don’t have a decision on the assistance we can receive,” says a displaced man in South Kivu, DRC. When assistance is not relevant to people’s needs and their views are disregarded, people feel disempowered and deprived of their dignity.

People feel anxious when they are at the mercy of others’ decisions, fickle distribution schedules, and unclear targeting. “Humanitarians should stop misleading vulnerable people with their promises after the targeting process,” said a displaced man in Mapanzo, DRC. In Nigeria, where 55% of cash recipients surveyed say aid meets their needs (a uniquely high number), respondents who report that aid comes when agreed are more likely to feel respected by aid providers.¹ Similarly, in Burkina Faso, respondents are more likely to think aid meets their needs when it comes on time.² But humanitarians’ frequent failure to adhere to distribution calendars is a common concern for aid recipients globally. A female refugee in Moyen Chari, Chad said, “We received information that the war in Ukraine is delaying our aid.” A perception that aid relies on imports and outsiders can be particularly hard for people, like those in Chad where only 8% think aid meets their needs. A male refugee in Gon explained that “the fact that seeds are distributed to us in July (after planting season) is a loss for humanitarians and seems a mockery for us.” Reconfiguring aid supply chains to be demand-driven would better adapt to people’s needs.



I see them as tourists because they just pass by and watch but don’t seriously care about people’s problems.

- Man, Camp Perrin, Haiti



A youth leader, leader of older persons, female leader, male leader, and community leaders. The leaders of each category must be appointed to participate in all the meetings and activities in the camp so that each community feels involved and satisfied.

- Woman, Chari-Baguirmi, Chad



We sell goods that do not meet our needs to buy the primary goods we need.

- Man, Mandoul, Chad



Food is a basic need, but for the past few months there has been nothing and we are starving.

- Woman, Ngama Kotoko, Chad



We don’t have a decision on the assistance we can receive.

- Man, South Kivu, DRC



Humanitarians should stop misleading vulnerable people with their promises after the targeting process.

- Man, Mapanzo, DRC



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- Woman, Moyen Chari, Chad



The fact that seeds are distributed to us in July (after planting season) is a loss for humanitarians and seems a mockery for us.

- Man, Gon, Chad

¹ Pearson’s coefficient: 0.37.

² Pearson’s coefficient: 0.30.

People are resilient, but not thanks to aid

People, of course, need more than band-aid assistance. They want sustained and meaningful change that utilises their agency. **Fewer than half of all people surveyed globally think the aid they receive enables them to live without aid in the future.** Respondents who received cash and voucher assistance were similarly negative about their prospects for resilience. This was especially striking in CAR where only 23% think the Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) they receive helps them feel self-reliant. To support people out of aid reliance, emergency cash alone is not going to cut it. People want support to earn a real income, new skills and income-generating resources. "There are a lot of idle young people in the district where I live. Giving us money to support us is good, but there are other ways to help. Organisations can conduct training to enable us to become autonomous, which would be an improvement, instead of always depending on external assistance," said a male youth leader in CAR.

People call for long-term solutions whenever surveyed, even if they live in an active conflict area with ongoing threats of violence and climate shocks. They are resilient but suffer from being at the will of aid providers. A female refugee in Moyen Chari, Chad highlighted this paternalistic dynamic, noting, "[Humanitarians] always try to assist us when we are in a crisis. They are like our parents, the parents of the affected people, so a parent cannot let their child suffer without helping them. But a parent who has means would always think about the future of their child." In Haiti, an aid recipient in Port-a-Piment said, "we can't stay in a tarp our whole lives," while another in Les Cayes said, "we don't want to be made into victims for a sack of rice."

No transparency, no trust

'Giving account' is one of the most basic and well-accepted commitments in the longstanding humanitarian definition of Accountability to Affected People, and the system is failing at it. On average, the largest gap between expectations and people's experiences is for transparent information on how humanitarian funds are spent. For instance, in Haiti, most (94%) people feel that it is important to know how humanitarian money is spent in their communities, but only 2% say they understand how funds are allocated. Globally, humanitarians are far from meeting people's expectations that they have a right to know how aid money is allocated and what the plans are. "It's at their level only. Nobody knows how it's going," said a female refugee in Logone Oriental, Chad. A woman in Les Cayes, Haiti demands, "We must have the right to ask questions to aid providers. Because we are all people, with the same rights, even if we are not on the same level in society." With limited rights to participate and receive information, people do not feel entitled to know what the overall strategy is, or what resources have gone where. **International actors delivering both humanitarian and development assistance need to work together to convey how funding is being utilised at both the national and community level.** Proper participation will help to break down the divisions that make people feel that they exist at a lower tier.

For transparency to increase, progress on participation and aid quality must be assessed by communities. **Aid workers cannot mark their own homework when it comes to participation.** But no matter how well independent perception studies are done, they will not lead to changes if there are no incentives in place to act on the data. Perception tracking should not become subsumed by the system and become a check-the-box exercise. Humanitarians must be held accountable for acting on independent perception data – and people's perceptions improving over time.



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- Man, Bangui, CAR



[Humanitarians] always try to assist us when we are in a crisis. They are like our parents, the parents of the affected people, so a parent cannot let their child suffer without helping them. But a parent who has means would always think about the future of their child.

- Woman, Moyen Chari, Chad



We can't stay in a tarp our whole lives.

- Man, Port-a-Piment, Haiti



We don't want to be made into victims for a sack of rice.

- Woman, Les Cayes, Haiti



It's at their level only. Nobody knows how it's going.

- Woman, Logone Oriental, Chad



We must have the right to ask questions to aid providers. Because we are all people, with the same rights, even if we are not on the same level in society.

- Woman, Les Cayes, Haiti

Tired of being left in the dark

To participate, people must first be informed. Globally, people are nowhere near as informed as they want to be. This gap between expectations and perceptions is the largest in Haiti with people feeling much less informed (14%) about aid and services compared to their expectations (98%). A man in Les Cayes describes this lack of communication, noting, "I'm not familiar with the organisations that usually provide aid in my community. They only come to distribute aid to the stadium without having any meetings."

Even if people rate themselves in surveys as being informed, follow-up questions demonstrate that they are not. Cash recipients in Nigeria and CAR say they feel informed (95% and 75%, respectively). Yet when asked more detailed questions about their assistance, even those who claimed to be well-informed did not know the answers. Only 36% in CAR and 34% in Nigeria knew when their CVA would terminate. Further, fewer than half of people surveyed globally know how aid is targeted – information that should be developed with communities throughout any project. The bar for information is extremely low, cementing people's roles as passive recipients.

When people do not have the right information, they will go to extremes to access aid, putting them at risk. Reports of sexual exploitation to get on distribution lists are commonplace, as are accounts of bribery and nepotism. A female returnee in Kaga Bandoro, CAR explained, "They slept with the girls. Only then would they put them on the list."

Information is not enough – talking at people is not participation.

If people are left out of decision-making, even the most comprehensive information-sharing won't lead people – especially those left out – to feel aid is provided in a fair way. **Enabling people to participate in aid decisions will be more likely to help people feel that aid is done 'right' than solely improving communication about decisions already made.** "I can participate if the objective is to ensure that the work is well done because we are there to ensure that things are well done," said a displaced man in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso.

None of this is new. People have been telling us these things for years. The challenge now is to actively listen; then, more importantly, to act. It is time for transformative change.



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- Man, Les Cayes, Haiti



I can participate if the objective is to ensure that the work is well done because we are there to ensure that things are well done.

- Man, Pouytenga, Burkina Faso

Key conclusions

- 1 Participation needs an overhaul.** People rarely feel consulted at the most basic levels, but even when they do, they do not equate this with influence. Extractive needs assessment processes, monitoring and evaluation exercises, and cluster-based analysis systems need to be reviewed.
- 2 People's participation must drive the response.** For this to work, the humanitarian system must be more flexible and processes that hinder true participation critically examined and addressed so that community input can influence programming. Otherwise, trust risks becoming further eroded and not built. This is no small feat: it has implications for less siloed humanitarian coordination, leadership performance management, a leaner Humanitarian Programme Cycle, more inclusive humanitarian financing, and more.
- 3 People need to be made more explicitly aware that they have a right to participate and to influence aid.** Because people want to participate in different ways, there must be an array of ways to get involved to help determine aid programming that everyone is aware of and can access. Humanitarians must be more intentional about creating opportunities for groups who are systematically excluded to participate. This process of informing people of this spectrum of participation opportunities cannot be achieved through simple messaging campaigns – talking 'at' communities – but should be the byproduct of consistent, respectful engagement.
- 4 Transparency needs to drastically increase,** so people can understand if those in charge are following the rules, delivering the aid they said they would when they said they would, spending aid funds efficiently, and making community-approved decisions about aid allocation. This will help build trust in humanitarians.
- 5 Cash programming has potential for improved perceptions of participation and resilience,** but these are not a given and should not be assumed. Until the humanitarian system enables full and active participation and ensures fuller more transparent information provision, cash will be held back from living up to its empowerment claims.
- 6 Shifting from a supply-driven to a demand-driven response will require listening to what people think about assistance and then systematically responding to what people want.** Independent data collection is critical, as respondents are less likely to provide honest answers about their perceptions of assistance to aid providers themselves. But no matter how well this is done, it will not lead to changes if there are no incentives in place to act on the data. Perception tracking should not become subsumed by the system and become a check-the-box exercise. Humanitarians must be held accountable for acting on independent perception data.
- 7 Participation goes hand-in-hand with longer-term solutions.** People do not want to be aid reliant. To improve people's trust in humanitarian action, joint planning – or at least better advocacy – with development actors based on people's preferences is essential, particularly in protracted crisis. A package of assistance that is better linked to longer term structures to support affected people to get closer to a future independent of aid not only aligns with what people want but makes financial sense for humanitarians, so they can phase out of some contexts and move on to others. Linked, people's views must drive the ongoing quest for localisation.

People's perceptions, analysed over time and across countries, lead us to conclude that for people to be finally placed firmly 'at the centre' of humanitarian action, serious reform is needed in two main areas:

1 Participation must be completely reimagined as a process of trust-building. Humanitarians drastically improve transparency; people have options for how to actively participate throughout a programme; and people define the response, rather than just occasionally commenting on it.

2 With a decade of perception data, the system must act on people's opinions so that responses are determined by crisis-affected people's agency, preferences, and priorities.

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People's perceptions matter

People affected by crisis are the best placed to determine what aid is relevant to their needs, when they need it, how it should be provided, and who should be involved in the process.

This year, [Martin Griffiths](#), the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, has emphasised the system's commitment to "enabling affected people, including women and girls, to effectively shape the humanitarian response." Echoing this call, the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Principals](#) reaffirmed their commitment to ensuring the humanitarian system answers to the people they serve, noting that "our accountability to [affected people] is paramount and must be acted upon. It is non-negotiable, at all times." This pledge reiterates prior commitments to accountability to affected people (AAP), such as those made in the [Grand Bargain](#) and the [Secretary-General's Agenda for Humanity](#). In light of renewed pledges to being accountable to affected people, the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#) commissioned [Ground Truth Solutions \(GTS\)](#) to provide a multi-country analysis that explores the recent perceptions of people in ten crisis contexts – Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, and Ukraine – with the aim to provide a snapshot of aid quality from the perspective of affected people, as well as recommendations for action that can address critical, systemic shortcomings.

Though systematically listening to crisis-affected people might not have been the norm in years past, it is now common practice to proactively ask people what they think about the aid they are entitled to. Now, independently collected perception data are recognised as an integral metric for aid efficiency and integrated into many Humanitarian Response Plans. This data has exposed a system that is far from meeting people's expectations of aid. They do not feel that aid meets their needs, and they feel uninformed and left out of the decision-making process. People share this feedback about the aid they receive year after year. These results are also backed by this year's [State of the Humanitarian System \(SOHS\)](#) report, which notes "little sign of agencies using feedback to adapt projects or providing meaningful opportunities for community decision-making." For these reasons, most of the findings of this report are not new.

People are demanding that aid provision changes, and they are clear about what change they want to see. Efforts to be more accountable abound, but are mostly mechanisms, piled onto ongoing programming and processes. Without systemic changes, these have had minimal impact. To break the cycle, it is critical that the humanitarian system moves beyond the process of collecting data and commits to using this information – at both global and national level – to shape and inform future humanitarian responses. Adapting and adjusting aid provision according to what people think is a collective obligation. Without doing so, humanitarians are complicit in contributing to the disempowerment of communities.

Methodology overview

The perception data included in this report comes from countries where GTS conducted recent quantitative and qualitative studies and had relationships with humanitarian actors (Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Nigeria, Somalia, and Ukraine). The exception is Syria, where the data was provided by the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP).

GTS' survey was designed to measure satisfaction with aid using expectation-confirmation theory, one of the main approaches used in the private sector to explain customer satisfaction. GTS asked respondents a set of questions for each of the following four themes: participation, information, transparency, and aid relevance. Respondents were first surveyed about their expectations for that theme, and then how they saw it working in reality. The gap between expectations and perceptions can be considered the "aid delivery gap," and information on the size of each gap can indicate where responses should focus their efforts to better align with people's expectations. Using customer satisfaction models from the private sector strengthens the case that aid-receiving people should be seen as end-users with expectations towards service providers that influence their service satisfaction, just like private sector customers.

While perception data per country is placed side-by-side for each of the five expectation-perception themes, this analysis does not attempt to explain why one country is more positive or negative than another. This analysis does not aim to rate countries against each other, but rather to focus in on a few countries per thematic as small case studies to understand the factors that may influence more positive or more negative responses for that country. Through an examination of these case studies, this analysis seeks to present how people's perceptions point to broader structural issues that humanitarian decision-makers should address.

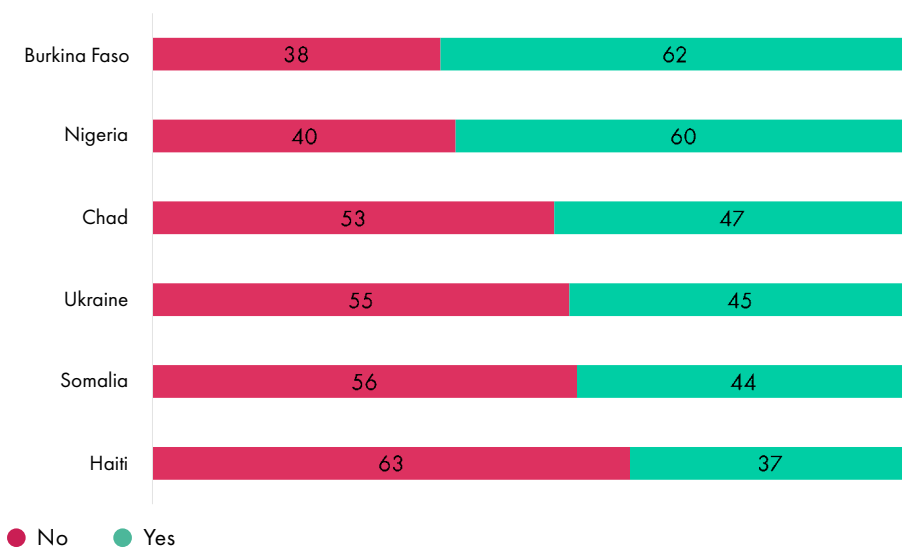
HNAP data included in this report comes from two separate research projects: a study on demographic and socioeconomic access to services at the household level and the Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA).

The full methodology is available in an [annex](#) to this report.

1. People want to be decision-makers

It should be standard for aid providers to consult communities throughout a project cycle, but even at a basic level, most people surveyed do not think their community was consulted. This is especially true in Northwest Syria where 66% report that no one in their household was consulted by humanitarian organisations about the need for, or type of, humanitarian assistance.³ Where people do feel consulted, most do not think their opinion influences anything. Ideally, people who feel consulted would also be more likely to think that they are able to influence aid or that their opinions are taken into account. This correlation is strong in Burkina Faso, but not in any other context, which points less to a lack of consultation than to a lack of the *right kind* of consultation: one that influences anything.⁴

Do you think your community was consulted on humanitarian aid programming in your region? (targeting, needs assessment, proposed modalities, distribution schedule, etc.)



People report a lack of opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision-making. “I don’t know of ways that I can have a say in aid. We take what they give us. The process is not done with us. It is done with the leaders and committee of the neighbourhood,” explains a female CVA recipient in Camp Shabelle, Somalia. Because there are no chances to participate in the decision-making process, people think that their voices do not matter to humanitarians. When asked why she felt left out of the decision-making process, a female refugee in Logone Oriental, Chad said, “They do this because they think we are illiterate.”

Further, people are not told that they have a right to participate, which sees many engagement efforts fail. “The people are very often neglected or forgotten here in the camp of Doholo. They are often not educated and do not even know their rights,” said a male refugee in Logone Oriental, Chad.

Despite this exclusion, people still demand a seat at the table. Most respondents express that it is important that their communities are able to influence how aid is provided. Yet needs assessments, post distribution monitoring surveys, and other community consultations are not enabling people to feel like they have a real say.



I don’t know of ways that I can have a say in aid. We take what they give us. The process is not done with us. It is done with the leaders and committee of the neighbourhood.

- Woman, Camp Shabelle, Somalia



They do this because they think we are illiterate.

- Woman, Logone Oriental, Chad



The people are very often neglected or forgotten here in the camp of Doholo. They are often not educated and do not even know their rights.

- Man, Logone Oriental, Chad

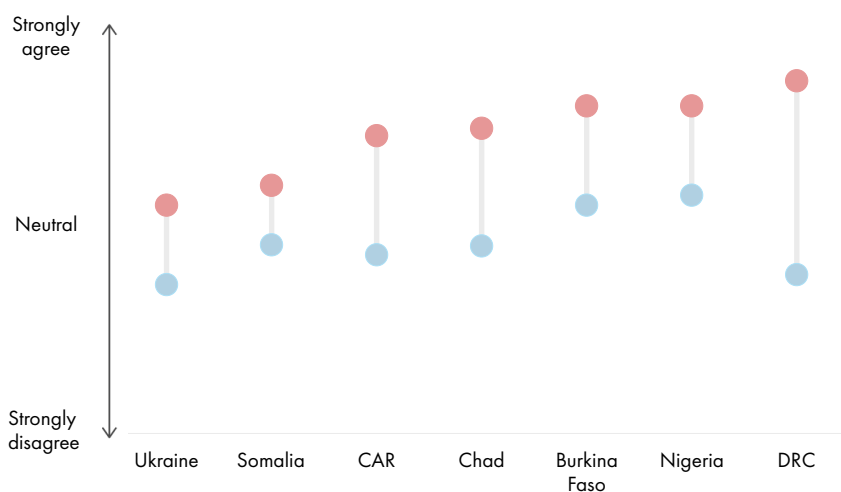
³ Only perception data from GTS are depicted in the binary chart to ensure consistency, which is why Syria data, collected by H NAP, is not listed.

⁴ Pearson’s coefficient: 0.45.

People want to be involved at all stages of the project and highlight a need for systematic rather than tokenistic participation.

“The community should be part of discussions before the project starts. As a beneficiary, we should be able to ask them questions. Also, when the project is done, we should be able to sit with them and tell them what was good and what wasn’t,” said a male CVA recipient in Hodan, Somalia. How this is best done will vary. In Somalia, some suggest relying on committees of trusted and knowledgeable persons, others suggested making participation even more open, for example by allowing more people in the community to vote on key decisions that affect them. These wider fora for consultation could have an added benefit, as some people considered aid agencies to be more responsive to concerns raised by groups of people rather than concerns raised by individuals.

- Is it important for you that people in your community are able to influence how aid is provided?
- Do you think people in your community can influence how aid is provided?



Who gets to participate is also an issue. In Somalia, people felt that it was important to ensure all voices were heard, not just community leaders. Some felt that it was also important to talk to people who were not selected to receive aid, as they are part of the community. Generally, there are no such checks and balances. A female cash and voucher assistance (CVA) recipient in Camp Shabelle laments that “sometimes the agency comes and asks questions to those who have benefitted, but rarely to the people who didn’t receive it.” Certain demographic groups might also feel underrepresented. Take a young man from Les Cayes, Haiti who explains, “No, we don’t have [the right to make decisions about aid] because community organisations tend to minimise the role of youth.” Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, only 18% of women interviewed think their opinions are taken into consideration by aid workers.⁵ “We are women, we cannot do anything, but we can ask male members in our family to gather people and talk with them to address any issues,” said a woman in Kandahar. In contexts like Afghanistan, where the imposed socio-political norms restrict and prevent women from participating in society, **humanitarians need to be more intentional about safely including groups that are systematically excluded.**

The red dots indicate people’s ratings of the importance questions, while each blue dot indicates responses to the perception questions. The position of each dot was calculated according to the mean Likert score given for each question, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. The line in between represents the “gap” between expectations and perceptions of aid.

“The community should be part of discussions before the project starts. As a beneficiary, we should be able to ask them questions. Also, when the project is done, we should be able to sit with them and tell them what was good and what wasn’t.”
- Man, Hodan, Somalia

“Sometimes the agency comes and asks questions to those who have benefitted, but rarely to the people who didn’t receive it.”
- Woman, Camp Shabelle, Somalia

“No, we don’t have [the right to make decisions about aid] because community organisations tend to minimise the role of youth.”
- Man, Les Cayes, Haiti

“We are women, we cannot do anything, but we can ask male members in our family to gather people and talk with them to address any issues.”
- Woman, Kandahar, Afghanistan

⁵ Respondents in Afghanistan were not asked about their expectations for being able to influence aid, so their data is not included in the graphic.

Interviewees in Nigeria, where an unusually high number (60%) of cash recipients feel consulted, explain that participation takes many forms: taking issues to aid providers in person in their camp, seeing changes made based on their suggestions or complaints, and being consulted on aid providers' plans in advance and throughout programme implementation.⁶ As an example of responsive cash programming, a youth leader in El-Miskin camp, Nigeria explains, "When vendors bring food items that are not of a good quality or if there are issues with our vouchers, we report it and we see changes immediately."



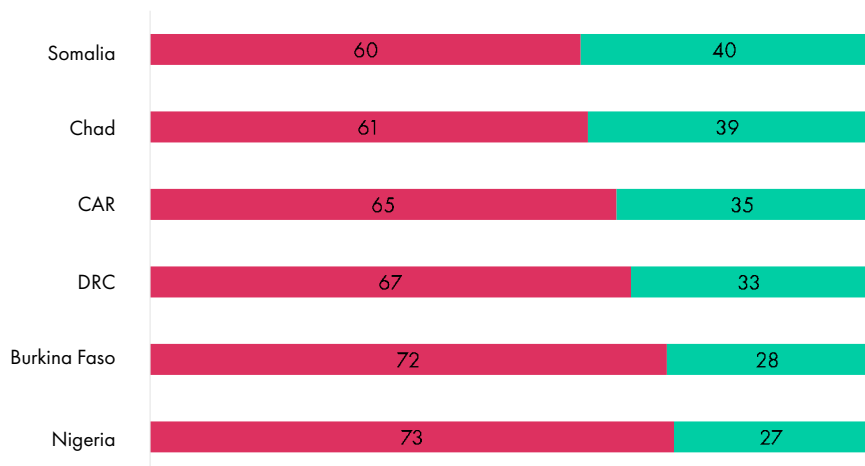
When vendors bring food items that are not of a good quality or if there are issues with our vouchers, we report it and we see changes immediately.

- Youth leader, El-Miskin camp, Nigeria

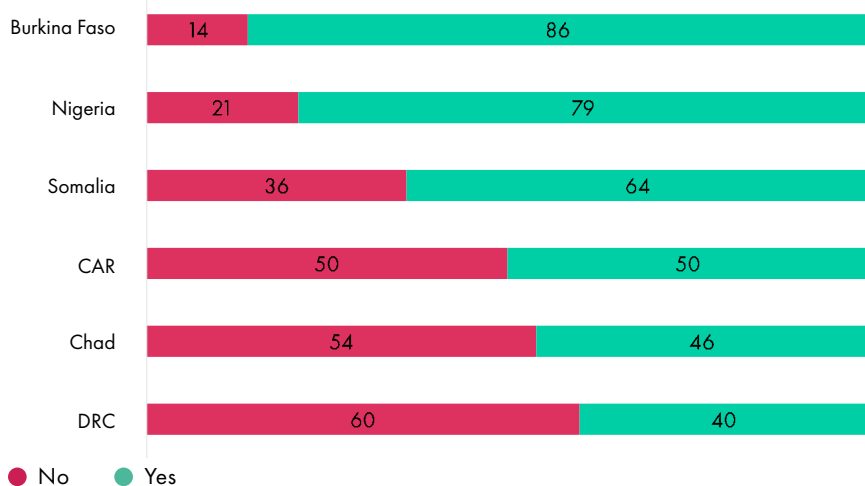
Do you know how to make suggestions or complaints about the aid/services you receive?



Have you filed a suggestion or a complaint to those providing aid?



Did you receive a response to your suggestion or complaint?



● No ● Yes

⁶ Ground Truth Solutions. July 2022. "Community reflections: The cumulative impact of keeping people informed."

Unfortunately, examples of such course correction after submitting feedback are rarely mentioned. Even in countries where understanding of complaint and feedback mechanisms is greater, few use them. Community feedback indicates that there are a slew of reasons for this low usage rate: limited access, mechanisms that people don't trust, feeling unentitled to complain, or feeling like it is inappropriate to do so. In Syria, of those who reported that they were asked for a favour in exchange for assistance, 92% did not report it as inappropriate. Most respondents (76%) cite their lack of trust in the complaint mechanism as the reason why they chose not to use it, followed by their fear of losing access to aid (59%). Syrians think losing out on aid is a real threat, with 71% noting that there is a risk that their aid will be denied if they do not carry out the favour requested. A female refugee in Moyen Chari, Chad shares this fear of reprisals noting, "We are afraid to state the abuses for fear of being taken off the list." **Complaint and feedback mechanisms need to be determined in partnership with communities, so they are adapted to preferences. As evidenced by many years of perception data, no one will use them unless there is a strong sense of trust between the community and humanitarians.**

This is why simply focusing on mechanisms and 'AAP activities' will not allow people to shape aid. The 2015, 2018, and 2022 editions of the SOHS identify that "feedback mechanisms are in place, but do not influence decision-making."⁷ Such a focus on feedback mechanisms, and AAP activities broadly, is at odds with the participation agenda where people should be the ones determining aid programming, not just consulted about it, and not only complaining about it. Many point to community leaders as key people who should be in constant dialogue with humanitarians and help determine the targeting criteria but think that not all leaders represent everyone. Others note that their personal participation can help ensure effective aid. "I can also participate if the objective is to ensure that the work is well done because we are there to ensure that things are well done," said a displaced man in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso.

Qualitative evidence from Ukraine – where people have low expectations and perceptions that they can influence humanitarian assistance – indicates that people may have more ability to influence local, less formalised aid organisations compared to international providers. A Ukrainian volunteer in Kyiv explained how their association easily shifted from preparing hot meals to providing water filtration systems when requested. A female host community member in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso explains, "If the displaced arrive, they have no food, so we have to find them food. If you have whatever they don't, you will help them." Local communities often fill in the gaps when humanitarian assistance falls short, yet such efforts rarely have a place at the decision-making table. And even if a major organisation works through local contractors, people know that they have less say in the plans defined by the international organisation because local contractors do not have the discretionary power to adapt based on people's feedback. **This points to a need to recalibrate power relations within the humanitarian architecture, focusing on rebalancing the asymmetric relations between donor and implementing partners, as well as those between international and national partners.**



We are afraid to state the abuses for fear of being taken off the list.

- Woman, Moyen Chari, Chad



I can also participate if the objective is to ensure that the work is well done because we are there to ensure that things are well done.

- Man, Pouytenga, Burkina Faso



If the displaced arrive, they have no food, so we have to find them food. What they don't have, if you have it, you will help them.

- Woman, Pouytenga, Burkina Faso

⁷ ALNAP. 2022. "2022 The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) – Summary."

Community feedback indicates that ways to meaningfully engage with humanitarians are lacking, leaving people with the impression that they have no power to influence aid provision. To change, the humanitarian system must demonstrate to communities that they have a right to influence aid by acting on what they say. **Humanitarians must recognise that they are playing a supporting role,** accepting that they do not know best, and community priorities must drive the response. Because people's sense of disempowerment is so strong, many do not bother to take part in the various 'participation activities' in aid programmes. "The only right we have is to receive because we don't know anything about what the people in charge of aid are doing," said a woman in Les Cayes, Haiti. People need to know that their knowledge, skills, experiences, and perspectives matter. **Telling people they have a right to have an opinion is a first step, but showing them that their opinion counts matters more.** People will only know they have a right to have a say when they see that their input was, in fact, considered, valued, and used. The goal must be to **shift peoples' roles from passive recipients to agents with authority over humanitarian decisions that impact the lives of their families and communities.**

Sustained, meaningful engagement is key. Within the current system of consultation – a needs assessment here, a focus group there – humanitarians will be unable to shift decision-making power. In Haiti's Camp Perrin, a village in Les Cayes, one man said of aid workers: "I see them as tourists because they just pass by and watch but don't seriously care about people's problems." Systematic, repeated engagement will show people that their opinion matters and build their confidence that they can drive response decisions. People must see that their voice makes a difference, not once, but all the time.

Providing people with a variety of ways to meaningfully participate is essential. People might just want a complaint mechanism that works, where they get a response and humanitarians adapt based on that feedback. Meanwhile, groups that feel underrepresented in the humanitarian sphere, or marginalised in society in general, might want clear information about how their views are actively sought out and acted on. Still others might want to support aid distributions and ensure that aid is fairly allocated, while some might want to hold leadership positions, helping to determine targeting processes. **Engagement is a spectrum, but people need a series of options for how to get involved so they can select how they want to be heard and influence humanitarian assistance.** A displaced woman in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso noted, "I think that if humanitarians include people, little by little, people will understand well because right now no one knows [how to influence aid]."



The only right we have is to receive because we don't know anything about what the people in charge of aid are doing.

- Woman, Les Cayes, Haiti



I see them as tourists because they just pass by and watch but don't seriously care about people's problems.

- Man, Les Cayes, Haiti



I think that if humanitarians include people, little by little, people will understand well because right now no one knows [how to influence aid].

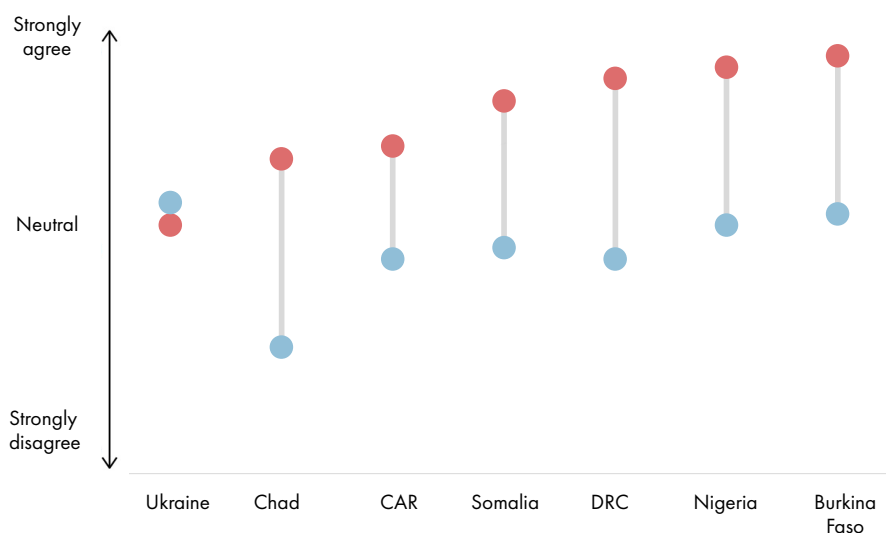
- Woman, Pouytenga, Burkina Faso

2. Few say aid meets their needs

When people are not listened to, aid will always fall short. Perceptions show a system that is not addressing people's most important needs. In all but one country, fewer than half of all respondents surveyed think the humanitarian assistance provided meets their most important needs.

● Is it important for you that aid covers your most important needs?

● Does aid meet your most important needs?



The exception is Ukraine, where 58% report that aid meets their basic needs and was better than what they expected (a relatively low 49% expected aid to meet their needs).

The type of crisis is likely a determinant of people's perceptions of aid quality (to take the Ukraine example, early aid provision with blanket targeting in a context where humanitarian action is not widely understood could explain both the low expectations and the fact that they are exceeded – this is expected to change in our next round of data collection), but it is not the only factor.

Timeliness and keeping promises are key. In Nigeria, where 55% of cash recipients surveyed say aid meets their needs, respondents who report that aid comes when agreed are more likely to feel respected by aid providers.⁸ Similarly, in Burkina Faso, respondents are more likely to think aid meets their needs when the aid they receive comes on time.⁹ The converse is also true: humanitarian's failure to adhere to distribution calendars is a common concern for aid recipients globally, as well as a frustration for aid workers who feel exhausted by constant delays, access negotiations, or funding lags. ALNAP notes that aid workers surveyed think bureaucracy and political interference are the greatest challenges to accessing populations in a timely manner, or even at all.¹⁰ A female refugee in Moyen Chari, Chad states, "We received information that the war in Ukraine is delaying our aid." Aid's reliance on imports can be particularly hard for people, like those in Chad where only 8% think aid meets their needs. **Reconfiguring aid supply-chains to be demand-driven will better address people's needs.**



We received information that the war in Ukraine is delaying our aid.

- Woman, Moyen Chari, Chad

⁸ Pearson's coefficient: 0.37.

⁹ Pearson's coefficient: 0.30.

¹⁰ ALNAP. 2022. "2022 The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) – Summary."

Insufficient quantities of assistance that do not fully meet people's needs are an obvious challenge. Of those in Northwest Syria who are not satisfied with the assistance received or their access to services, most (83%) reported insufficient quantity as the main reason. A displaced man in Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso explains, "Humanitarians need to reconsider the assistance provided because our numbers have increased, and the quantity of aid is the same." Host community members feel the ripple effects of insufficient aid when increasing numbers of people arrive in their area. A female community member in Kaya said, "We have shared [our fields] with the IDPs, which means that our yields are decreasing. Therefore, humanitarians should provide food." Yet there is a tension between wanting sufficient aid and wanting aid distributed to everyone. In some contexts, people would prefer that everyone in need gets a share, even if everyone gets less. "If they have 100 things to distribute, but there are 600 people who may need it, I suggest they ensure that they can reduce the quantity or even the type of goods in a manner that will go round for everyone in need," explains a camp chairman living in the El-Miskin camp in Nigeria. This request to give to everyone is particularly notable in contexts where people think everyone is in need and thus humanitarians' criteria for vulnerability might not be aligned with people's perceptions of the situation and their community. A female CVA recipient in Camp Shabelle, Somalia explains, "The issue is, if you give more money and the process is not fair, then you have just wasted money because some people who really need it won't get it, and those who don't need it will get richer. But if you give to a lot of people, more people who actually need it will get it."

People know that humanitarian organisations' resources are tight but feel aid provision could at least be more adapted to their needs. Respondents note that needs assessments and post distribution monitoring fall short. "To [humanitarians], our needs can be summed up by their needs assessment surveys conducted on what we eat during the day and how we live. But asking us what our basic needs are, they don't do that. So next time, when NGOs want to help us, they should approach us and ask us what our real needs are," said an elderly, female host community member in Bangui, CAR. Involving communities remains the central issue. **Getting surveyed about needs – and increasingly perceptions – has become an extractive process to feed Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP) globally but does little to help people determine the assistance they receive.** Even when asked what type of aid people want to receive (in-kind, cash, services), many hesitate. "We don't have a decision on the assistance we can receive," said a displaced man in South Kivu, DRC. The sense that people can influence aid provision through a survey, or even have a say, remains foreign to many. **A system that shifts power to affected people and their communities, rather than just surveying them about it, will make the difference.**

“

Humanitarians need to reconsider the assistance provided because our numbers have increased, and the quantity of aid is the same.

- Man, Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso

“

We have shared [our fields] with the IDPs, which means that our yields are decreasing. Therefore, humanitarians should provide food.

- Woman, Kaya, Burkina Faso

“

If they have 100 things to distribute, but there are 600 people who may need it, I suggest they ensure that they can reduce the quantity or even the type of goods in a manner that will go round for everyone in need.

- Camp chairman, El-Miskin camp, Nigeria.

“

To [humanitarians], our needs can be summed up by their needs assessment surveys conducted on what we eat during the day and how we live. But asking us what our basic needs are, they don't do that. So next time, when NGOs want to help us, they should approach us and ask us what our real needs are.

- Woman, Bangui, CAR

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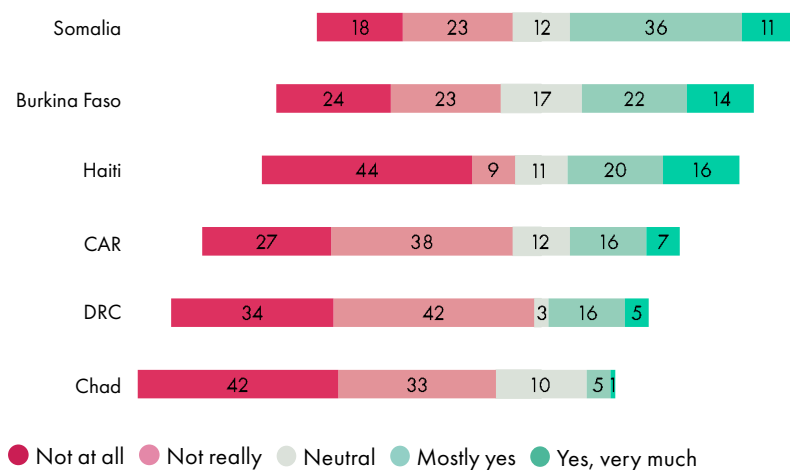
We don't have a decision on the assistance we can receive.

- Man, South Kivu, DRC

3. People are resilient, but not thanks to aid

If we listen, we will always hear that people need more than band-aid assistance. People call often for longer term strategies across aid and development spheres. Yet respondents do not see sustained impact: fewer than half of respondents globally think the assistance they receive enables them to live without aid in the future, though every 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan for the countries listed in the graphic below include language about reducing aid reliance.

Does the assistance you receive help you to live without aid in the future (become self-reliant)?



This is especially true in Chad, where respondents feel the most negatively about aid supporting their future resilience, many of them having received assistance for almost a decade. Noting the utter lack of long-term solutions in her area, a female refugee in Moyen Chari explains, “[Humanitarians] always try to assist us when we are in a crisis. They are like our parents, the parents of the affected people, so a parent cannot let their child suffer without helping them. And a parent who has means would always think about the future of their child.” In one breath, this woman underscores the colonial, patriarchal nature of the humanitarian aid she has experienced, as well as its continued deficiencies.

Yet these comments are not only common to those living in protracted crisis. People in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso who had been recently displaced or recently welcomed displaced people into their community and were living in a conflict zone were asked if they think attaining resilience is even possible given the ongoing violence and instability in their area. Everyone pointed to the need for durable solutions. “Nobody can help someone to be self-sufficient. But if they have income-generating activities, it is better than income, it is better than aid. The one who helps you will get tired one day. But if you have an [income-generating] activity, it can go ahead. If not, the day the person who helps you abandons you, that’s the day you will fail too,” said a displaced man.

“[Humanitarians] always try to assist us when we are in a crisis. They are like our parents, the parents of the affected people, so a parent cannot let their child suffer without helping them. And a parent who has means would always think about the future of their child.”
- Woman, Moyen Chari, Chad

“Nobody can help someone to be self-sufficient. But if they have income-generating activities, it is better than income, it is better than aid. The one who helps you will get tired one day. But if you have an [income-generating] activity, it can go ahead. If not, the day the person who helps you abandons you, that’s the day you will fail too.”
- Man, Pouytenga, Burkina Faso

Respondents who received CVA were similarly negative about their prospects for resilience. This was especially striking in CAR where only 23% think the CVA they receive helps them feel self-reliant, demonstrating that to support people to truly move past key barriers, emergency cash alone is not going to cut it. People want support to earn a real income (not more aid), as well as trainings and agricultural resources. “There are a lot of idle young people in the district that I live. Giving us money to support us is good but there are other ways to help. NGOs can conduct training to enable us to become autonomous, which would be an improvement, instead of always depending on external assistance,” said a male youth leader in CAR. This comment is a reminder that many of the people targeted by humanitarian responses are children or youth. **Giving their families band-aid assistance in the name of prioritising “life-saving” assistance cannot go on for too long, or it risks stagnating young peoples’ development and life prospects.**

People are not blind to the challenges to attaining full security and resilience. Burkinabè were quick to note that the actual assistance needed is peace in their country. “The support we want is security so that everyone can return to their homes to cultivate their fields...If we go back to our fields, we will benefit more than from the help of a humanitarian.” Yet that does not mean durable solutions have to wait until peace is restored or climate change is dealt with – all challenges that have no foreseeable resolution in place. Further, **people also note that supporting them with their resilience is not only good for them but makes sense for humanitarians to do too.** “If they manage to help people in trades, they can be autonomous in the future and even help other people,” said a male host community member in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso.

Some humanitarians might point to how such solutions are outside of the mandate of humanitarian aid and how assistance, already stretched thin, cannot bear another task on top – and do it well. Others might note that circumstances are too volatile to be able to start ‘work on’ longer-term programming. But **the global prioritisation of longer-term solutions is in line with community priorities.** Respondents are quick to speak about the need for long-term solutions that help them feel resilient and continue to survive – but on their own. People – not just those in protracted crises, but also those dealing with very recent shocks and knowing the precariousness of their situation – call for solutions that are sustainable and help them long-term. They need durable solutions now, not later. Resilience should be an outcome of smart humanitarian programming and not siloed as a sequential phase that follows humanitarian action. **With limited funding, this is not a call to do ‘more with less’ but rather to work smarter, and ensure better coordination with development, peace, and state actors. A package of assistance, services, and training that support affected people to get closer to a future independent of aid not only aligns with what people want but makes financial sense for humanitarians so they can phase out of some contexts and move on to others.**



There are a lot of idle young people in the district that I live. Giving us money to support us is good but there are other ways to help. NGOs can conduct training to enable us to become autonomous, which would be an improvement, instead of always depending on external assistance.

- Male youth leader, CAR



The support we want is security so that everyone can return to their homes to cultivate their fields...If we go back to our fields, we will benefit more than from the help of a humanitarian.

- Woman, Kaya, Burkina Faso



If they manage to help people in trades, they can be autonomous in the future and even help other people.

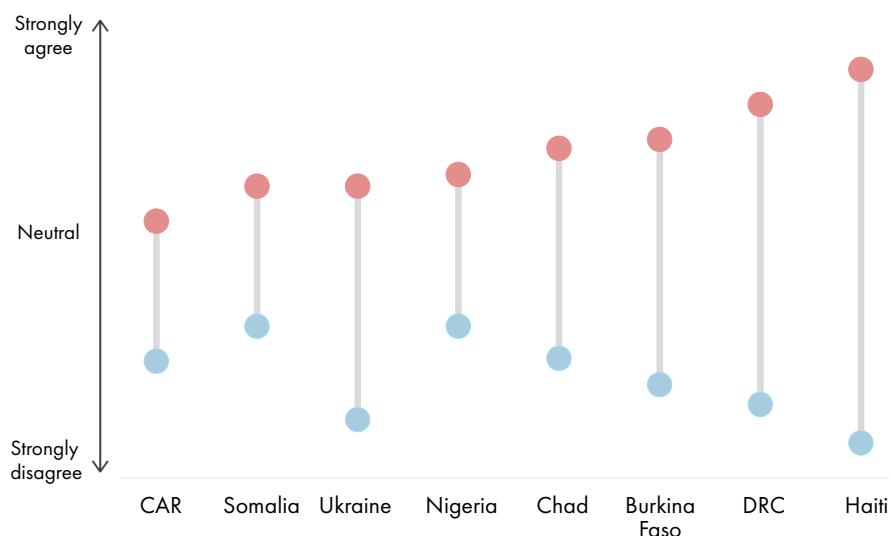
- Male host community member, Pouytenga, Burkina Faso

4. No transparency, no trust

Lacking even information on aid that directly impacts them, it is not surprising that respondents do not know how aid funding is spent in their communities overall. This means they need to blindly trust aid providers, but real trust is built on transparency and open communication. With limited rights to participate and receive information, people do not feel entitled to know what the overall strategy is, or what resources have gone where. "It's at their level only, nobody knows how it's going," said a female refugee in Logone Oriental, Chad, of what humanitarians were doing with aid funding. The El-Miskin camp chair in Nigeria explains, "I do not think it is right for us to tell the person trying to help us that this is the type of help we want. Someone who is not your relative and has come to give assistance, and you want to tell them how to assist you? I honestly do not think it is appropriate." A woman in Les Cayes, Haiti, similarly explains: "The only right we have is to receive because we don't know anything about what the people in charge of aid are doing." **Many crisis-affected people do not think they have a right to know how decisions are made, or have an opinion, in a system that is not set up to systematically inform or involve them.** Sometimes this is cultural – in many places, it is inappropriate to criticise. **This is why a process that builds trust is what is needed, not a series of generic mechanisms.**

● Is it important for you to know how aid agencies spend money in your area?

● Do you know how aid agencies spend money in your area?



Most (94%) people in Haiti think that it is important to know how humanitarian money is spent in their communities, but only 2% understand how funds are allocated. People have heard a lot of talk about the 3.5-billion-dollar investment of humanitarian relief in their country, but seen little returns.¹¹ Haitians are tired of hearing that tonnes of money were pumped in, but they don't know where it went, especially when one-off assistance programs have barely scratched the surface of their problems, let alone helped them stand on their own.

International actors delivering both humanitarian and development assistance need to work together to convey how funding is being utilised at both the national and community level.

¹¹ United Nations Financial Tracking Services. "Haiti Humanitarian Appeal (Revised) (January - December 2010)."



It's at their level only, nobody knows how it's going.

- Woman, Logone Oriental, Chad



I do not think it is right for us to tell the person trying to help us that this is the type of help we want. Someone who is not your relative and has come to give assistance, and you want to tell them how to assist you? I honestly do not think it is appropriate.

- El-Miskin camp chair, Nigeria



The only right we have is to receive because we don't know anything about what the people in charge of aid are doing.

- Woman, Les Cayes, Haiti

5. Tired of being left in the dark

A person can only begin to participate if they are informed. For that reason, activities carried out under an 'accountability' banner have often focused heavily on information, with many specialist agencies focusing primarily on messaging campaigns and coordinated communication. People's perceptions of how informed they feel varies across contexts, with those in Haiti feeling much less informed (14%) compared to their expectations (98%). A man in Les Cayes describes this lack of communication, noting, "I'm not familiar with the organisations that usually provide aid in my community. They only come to distribute aid to the stadium without having any meetings."

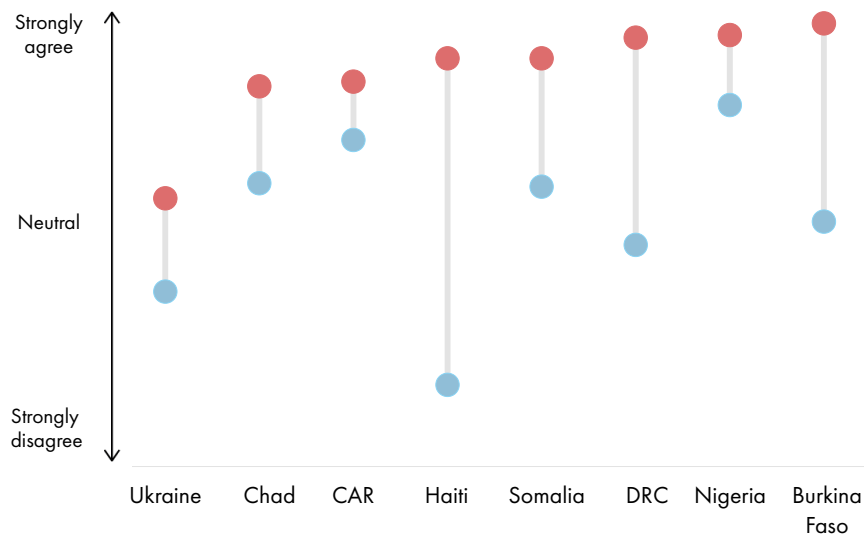


I'm not familiar with the organisations that usually provide aid in my community. They only come to distribute aid to the stadium without having any meetings.

- Man, Les Cayes, Haiti

● Is it important for you to be informed about the aid available to you?

● Do you feel informed about the aid and services available to you?



Cash recipients in Nigeria and CAR say they feel more informed (95% and 75%, respectively). Yet when asked more detailed questions about their assistance, even those who feel most informed did not know the answers. Only 36% in CAR, and 34% in Nigeria knew when their CVA would terminate. If even those who feel the most "informed" about available aid lack key details, then something is not working. **This indicates a lack of empowerment: people are used to being in the dark and never knowing entirely what is going on.**

In most humanitarian responses, people do not understand targeting processes. "It is not normal that some receive, and others do not. We all have the same problems," says one displaced man in Kaya, Burkina Faso. Criticism of targeting processes is widespread. Some respondents call on humanitarians to better involve leaders in the targeting process. "Leaders must identify the newcomers who are in need and do not know anyone to help them," explains a male non-displaced person in Kaya. Others maintain that community leaders are to blame. "The people in charge are not honest. They may even delete the names of some people so that they don't get the aid. You are more afraid that someone will delete your name from a list. Women are afraid of this. That's why we need dignified and honest representatives who care about their fellow people," explains one male non-displaced person in Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso.

Do you know how organisations decide who receives humanitarian aid and who does not?



Unclear targeting processes can prompt people to go to extremes to access aid. For people in Ukraine, inaccurate information about targeting and a lack of communication about when decisions are made has led many to apply for aid in vain. "If you had known the date of the response, you wouldn't have written to 100 foundations. I understand that I am making a workload for the foundations, but I do not have a choice. When I fill out applications, I don't know who will respond and who will not," shared a woman in Kharkiv.

“
It is not normal that some receive, and others do not. We all have the same problems.”
- Man, Kaya, Burkina Faso

“
Leaders must identify the newcomers who are in need and do not know anyone to help them.”
- Man, Kaya, Burkina Faso

“
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- Man, Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso

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If you had known the date of the response, you wouldn't have written to 100 foundations. I understand that I am making a workload for the foundations, but I do not have a choice. When I fill out applications, I don't know who will respond and who will not.”
- Woman, Kharkiv, Ukraine

Knowing that people will go to extreme ends to receive aid has led to exploitation. Reports of bribery, corruption, and sexual exploitation are far too common. A female returnee in Kaga Bandoro, CAR explained, "They slept with the girls. Only then would they put them on the list." Another shared a clear example of bribery: "Sometimes the personnel that the humanitarian agency has tasked with selecting beneficiaries in our community asks us for money in return for being considered." A woman in Bangui explained how nepotism is common: "Sometimes actors tell their family members to come over when the Orange Money accounts for us are set up. The moment one rightful beneficiary is absent, they replace them with one of their relatives." Health aid recipients in Afghanistan share similar concerns about who gets prioritised to receive aid. A woman in Kunduz explains, "The community leaders always get to be seen first, and they and their families get all the medication. When the health teams come to us, they rush with us because they have no time, and we don't get a lot of help." Respondents in Afghanistan who do understand the targeting process are more likely to think that aid is provided in a fair way.¹²

Clear communication of targeting processes will empower people to understand if those in charge are following the rules or making selective decisions about aid registration and aid provision.

"If the [targeting] criteria aren't clear then many people who are poor and vulnerable will feel that they have been cheated. This [criteria] should be something that everyone knows," said a male CVA recipient in Hantiwadaag, Somalia. Humanitarians should also explain the constraints to aid programming, why assistance doesn't target everyone, or only a subset of a given demographic group, and why aid has reduced or stagnated despite increasing numbers of people in need. "Information is not only about aid programming. It's also knowing why there is no aid," says a male host community member in Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso, underscoring the need for sustained community engagement. But clear communication can mean different things for different people. In Ouahigouya, a displaced man explains that "the majority of the IDPs are illiterate, so trainings are needed so that they understand and do not blame the designated information-sharing leaders. As a solution, I propose to educate the IDPs first, to explain the targeting process before acting."



They slept with the girls. Only then would they put them on the list.

- Woman, Kaga Bandoro, CAR



Sometimes the personnel that the humanitarian agency has tasked with selecting beneficiaries in our community asks us for money in return for being considered.

- Woman, Kaga Bandoro, CAR



Sometimes actors tell their family members to come over when the Orange Money accounts for us are set up. The moment one rightful beneficiary is absent, they replace them with one of their relatives.

- Woman, Bangui, CAR



The community leaders always get to be seen first, and they and their families get all the medication. When the health teams come to us, they rush with us because they have no time, and we don't get a lot of help.

- Woman, Kunduz, Afghanistan



If the [targeting] criteria aren't clear then many people who are poor and vulnerable will feel that they have been cheated. This [criteria] should be something that everyone knows.

- Man, Hantiwadaag, Somalia



Information is not only about aid programming. It's also knowing why there is no aid.

- Man, Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso



The majority of the IDPs are illiterate, so trainings are needed so that they understand and do not blame the designated information-sharing leaders. As a solution, I propose to educate the IDPs first, to explain the targeting process before acting.

- Man, Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso

¹² Pearson's coefficient: 0.42.

From listening to action

- 1 Participation needs an overhaul.** People rarely feel consulted at the most basic levels, but even when they do, they do not equate this with influence. Extractive needs assessment processes, monitoring and evaluation exercises and cluster-based analysis systems need to be reviewed.
- 2 People's participation must drive the response.** For this to work, the humanitarian system must be more flexible and processes that hinder true participation critically examined and addressed so that community input can influence programming. Otherwise, trust risks becoming further eroded and not built. This is no small feat: it has implications for less siloed humanitarian coordination, leadership performance management, a leaner Humanitarian Programme Cycle, more inclusive humanitarian financing, and more.
- 3 People need to be made more explicitly aware that they have a right to participate and to influence aid.** Because people want to participate in different ways, there must be an array of ways to get involved to help determine aid programming that everyone is aware of and can access. Humanitarians must be more intentional about creating opportunities for groups who are systematically excluded to participate. This process of informing people of this spectrum of participation opportunities cannot be achieved through simple messaging campaigns – talking 'at' communities – but should be the byproduct of consistent, respectful engagement.
- 4 Transparency needs to drastically increase,** so people can understand if those in charge are following the rules, delivering the aid they said they would when they said they would, spending aid funds efficiently, and making community-approved decisions about aid allocation. This will help build trust in humanitarians.
- 5 Cash programming has potential for improved feelings of participation and resilience,** but these are not a given and should not be assumed. Until the humanitarian system enables full and active participation and ensures fuller more transparent information provision, cash will be held back from living up to its empowerment claims.
- 6 Shifting from a supply-driven to a demand-driven response will require listening to what people think about assistance and then systematically responding to what people want.** Independent data collection is critical, as respondents are less likely to provide honest answers about their perceptions of assistance to aid providers themselves. But no matter how well this is done, it will not lead to changes if there are no incentives in place to act on the data. Perception tracking should not become subsumed by the system and become a check-the-box exercise. Humanitarians must be held accountable for acting on independent perception data.
- 7 Participation goes hand-in-hand with longer-term solutions.** People do not want to be aid reliant. To improve people's trust in humanitarian action, joint planning – or at least better advocacy – with development actors based on people's preferences is essential, particularly in protracted crisis. A package of assistance that is better linked to longer term structures to support affected people to get closer to a future independent of aid not only aligns with what people want but makes financial sense for humanitarians, so they can phase out of some contexts and move on to others. Linked, people's views must drive the ongoing quest for localisation.

People's perceptions, analysed over time and across countries, lead us to conclude that for people to be finally placed firmly 'at the centre' of humanitarian action, serious reform is needed in two main areas:

1 Participation must be completely reimagined as a process of trust-building. Humanitarians drastically improve transparency; people have options for how to actively participate throughout a programme; and people define the response, rather than just occasionally commenting on it.

2 With a decade of perception data, the system must act on people's opinions so that responses are determined by crisis-affected people's agency, preferences, and priorities.

Methodology Overview

Overview of Ground Truth Solutions' methodology

GTS' research methodology is rooted in two traditions of inquiry: participatory development and customer satisfaction. The focus of their surveys and qualitative studies is on perceptions, examining, for example, how affected people see the relevance and fairness of the support they receive, whether they know what to expect of aid providers, how to seek recourse and if they feel safe. They do this with the belief that people who receive humanitarian aid are best placed to evaluate its effectiveness. GTS workshops their findings in focus groups and interviews, triangulating feedback from crisis-affected people with information collected by aid agencies and donors as part of their regular programme monitoring and evaluation. Having obtained an accurate picture of the way affected people see things, GTS engage with aid providers and policymakers, working with them to think through the feedback and determine how they can respond, thereby simultaneously improving the quality of their programmes and accountability to those supposed to benefit. The data presented in this report is at different stages of dialogue with crisis-affected people and humanitarians per country.

Country selection

This report draws on perception data collected in nine countries where GTS already had consistent programming and a strong relationship with OCHA and the Humanitarian Country Team. A tenth country was added using data collected by the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) in Northwest Syria. Country specific methodologies can be found [here](#).

Overview of Ground Truth Solutions' sample

Country	Month	Year	Women	Men	People living with a disability	IDPs	Refugee	Returnee	Host community (Non-displaced)	Other	Aid recipient	Non-aid recipient
Afghanistan	Q4	2021	343	658	-	-	-	-	-	-	234	767
Burkina Faso	Q3	2022	998	990	352	1673	-	-	315	-	1988	-
Central African Republic	Q3	2022	748	739	355	427	-	177	878	5	1487	-
Chad	Q4	2022	442	357	-	-	424	252	123	-	799	-
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Q4	2022	580	580	163	709	-	263	169	19	1160	-
Haiti	Q4	2021	505	746	-	-	-	-	-	-	144	1106
Nigeria	Q4	2022	1154	827	112	980	6	324	671	-	1981	-
Somalia	Q3	2022	680	581	182	540	14	81	591	35	1261	-
Ukraine	Q4	2022	1114	909	379	443	-	-	1580	-	1511	512
Total			6564	6387	1543	4772	444	1097	2747	59	10565	2385

Data collection

All respondents were interviewed in 2022, except for those in Afghanistan and Haiti who were interviewed in late 2021. Quotes referenced from the Mandoul and Chari-Baguirmi region of Chad were collected in late 2021 as well. Preference was given to face-to-face interviews, but where this was not possible (Ukraine, Haiti, and Afghanistan), people were surveyed over the phone.

Respondents

Respondents had differing relationships with aid: those surveyed in CAR, Nigeria, and Somalia were recipients of cash and voucher assistance; those surveyed in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Chad, and DRC were recipients of any type of humanitarian assistance; and those in Haiti, Syria, and Ukraine included both those who had and had not received aid assistance in communities targeted by the response. Methodologies, including sampling strategies and modes of data collection, were tailored to local contexts to best capture how people perceive aid.

Questionnaire

The themes selected for this analysis include aid relevance, resilience, information, targeting, and participation. They are derived from the Humanitarian Principles, Core Humanitarian Standard, IASC accountability commitments, GTS core questions list, and Grand Bargain 2.0, OECD/DAC evaluation criteria.

The survey was designed to measure satisfaction with aid using expectation-confirmation theory, one of the main approaches used in the private sector to explain customer satisfaction. GTS asked respondents a set of questions for each of the following four themes: participation, information, transparency, and aid relevance. Respondents were first surveyed about their expectations for that theme, and then how they saw it working in reality. The gap between expectations and perceptions can be considered the “aid delivery gap,” and information on the size of each gap can indicate where responses should focus their efforts to better align with people’s expectations. Using customer satisfaction models from the private sector strengthens the case that aid-receiving people should be seen as end-users with expectations towards service providers that influence their service satisfaction, just like private sector customers.

Other perception questions were included that did not follow the expectation-confirmation model but served to provide additional data to inform the analysis per thematic section. Not all of these questions were asked in all contexts.

	Expectation question	Confirmation question	Other questions
Aid relevance	Is it important for you that aid covers your most important needs?	Does aid meet your most important needs?	What are your unmet needs?
Resilience			Does the assistance you receive help you to live without aid in the future (become self-reliant)?
Information	Is it important for you to be informed about the aid available to you?	Do you feel informed about the aid and services available to you?	Do you know how organisations decide who receives humanitarian aid and who does not?
Transparency	Is it important for you to know how aid agencies spend money in your area?	Do you know how aid agencies spend money in your area?	
Participation	Is it important for you that people in your community are able to influence how aid is provided?	Do you think people in your community can influence how aid is provided?	Do you think your community was consulted on humanitarian aid programming in your region? (targeting, needs assessment, proposed modalities, distribution schedule, etc.)
			Do you know how to make suggestions or complaints about the aid/services you receive?
			Have you filed a suggestion or a complaint to those providing aid?
			Did you receive a response to your suggestion or complaint?

Translation and question comprehension

Questions were translated into local languages in each context. GTS conducted extensive training of enumerators to ensure that local translations aligned with the intended measurement framework for the English versions. In most contexts, a qualitative testing phase was conducted to test these questions and ensure that respondents understood the question in the same way that it was intended to be understood by the researchers. If there was any concern about a misunderstanding of the question upon final receipt of the data, these data were not included in the analysis to ensure high data quality standards and comparability across contexts.

Dialogue process

As well as gathering quantitative perception data, GTS conducts complementary qualitative studies and discussions with crisis-affected communities to explore perceptions of aid in further detail. Their teams also workshop the findings with coordination teams, aid agencies, and donors to include their perspectives in the analysis. The GTS data presented in this report is at different stages of dialogue with crisis-affected people and humanitarians per country.

Overview of HNAP's methodology

The Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) for Syria is a joint UN assessment initiative which tracks displacement and return movements, conducts sector and multi-sectoral assessments, and monitors humanitarian needs inside Syria. HNAP is implemented with technical support from UN Agencies, through local Syrian NGOs. Data used in this analysis comes from two different HNAP research projects: a study on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Syria focused on household perceptions of favours in exchange for aid and their Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) survey.

Global analysis

While perception data per country is placed side-by-side for each of the five expectation-perception themes, this analysis does not attempt to explain why one country is more positive or negative than another. This analysis does not aim to rate countries against each other, but rather to focus in on a few countries per thematic as small case studies to understand the factors that may influence more positive or more negative responses for that country. Through an examination of these case studies, this analysis seeks to present how people's perceptions point to broader structural issues that humanitarian decision-makers should address.



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