



THE STATE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

SUMMARY

2022 EDITION

ALNAP is a global network of humanitarian organisations, including UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, NGOs, donors, academics, networks and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve the response to humanitarian crises.

sohs.alnap.org

For the full list of acknowledgements please see [Annex 1](#) of the full report.

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online at: alnap.org/help-library/2022-sohs-biblio

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SUMMARY

Introduction



**Our world has never been more threatened.
Or more divided. We face the greatest cascade
of crises in our lifetimes.**

**António Guterres, UN Secretary-General
Address to the 76th Session of the
UN General Assembly,
21 September 2021, New York**



For over a decade, ALNAP's SOHS report has supported humanitarian learning by providing a unique, evidence-based understanding of the system and how well it works for affected people.

Humanitarian action can be a lifeline to people experiencing the worst that conflict and disaster inflicts. For those who deliver assistance and protection, the stakes could not be higher – and the obligation to learn and improve is therefore paramount. For over a decade, ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report (SOHS) has supported this learning by providing a unique, evidence-based understanding of the system and how well it works for affected people.

The 2022 SOHS focuses on the performance of the international humanitarian system and how it relates to other networks and sources of vital support for people in crisis. (See [Box 1](#) for an overview of the methodology.) The humanitarian system has shifting boundaries and encompasses diverse entities, which can make it hard to define ([Figure 1](#)). The SOHS uses a working definition of the international humanitarian system as:

The network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian action is undertaken when local and national resources are, on their own, insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis.¹

The period covered by this latest, fifth edition of the SOHS² (January 2018 – December 2021) was one in which the big summits and global agreements of 2015-2017 were put to the test. Rising real-world challenges catalysed calls for the system to change more profoundly and quickly than it had so far proved able to, and newly reignited debates around racism and colonialism prompted critical questions, necessary introspection and heightened antagonism about Western-led humanitarian action.

1 ALNAP (2022) The State of the Humanitarian System. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI. <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/2022-the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-sohs-%E2%80%93-full-report>.

2 Ibid. <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/2022-the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-sohs-%E2%80%93-full-report>.

Figure 1: Inside and outside the international humanitarian system: the entities involved in humanitarian action

The international humanitarian system is comprised of entities that accept international funding and identify with humanitarian norms or principles. They operate in a wider context of other sources of support for crisis-affected people.



Source: ALNAP. Notes: The size of the circles in this visualisation are not to scale and are therefore not representative of each entity's role or importance in the system.

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You can read more about the 2022 methodology in [Annex 3 of the full report please click here](#)

Box 1. Methodology for the 2022 SOHS

Drawing on evidence from the previous four studies, ALNAP's SOHS project takes a long view of changes over the past 15 years. The findings from this study are grounded in the same rigorous and multi-dimensional methods employed by and refined over previous editions, but we have also evolved the report in two important ways:

- For the first time, we consulted aid recipients in the study's design phase (not just the data gathering phase) and integrated their priorities in the course of our research
- We organise the findings according to 12 fundamental questions being asked of the system.

The findings in the 2022 SOHS are based on a synthesis of primary and secondary data drawn from 10 research components. Each component used a common analysis framework, based on a set of core questions about the humanitarian system and covering each of the adapted OECD-DAC criteria for the evaluation of humanitarian action³ to enable comparison with previous editions. The SOHS study team identified general trends and findings through a consideration of frequency, quality and triangulation across research components, using hypothesis testing and iteration to confirm or disconfirm emerging findings.

Primary data collection and analysis

Country-level research: Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were conducted in Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Lebanon, Venezuela and Yemen.

Country studies on localisation: Two country-level studies were conducted on localisation in Turkey and Somalia, featuring surveys and in-depth interviews with local and international actors.

Aid recipient survey: A survey of 5,487 aid recipients in six crisis contexts, using SMS and computer-assisted telephone interviewing to elicit their assessment of humanitarian performance.

Practitioner and host government survey: A global web-based survey, with 436 completed responses, to elicit the perceptions of humanitarian practitioners and host-government representatives on humanitarian performance.

Key informant interviews: Interviews with over 100 humanitarian practice and thought leaders to assess performance, identify important trends and address key evidence gaps.

Organisational mapping and analysis: Data collected from individual organisations and through desk-based review to estimate the number of humanitarian staff and organisations worldwide.

3 Tony Beck, *Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD-DAC criteria: An ALNAP guide for humanitarian agencies* (London: ALNAP/ODI, 2006) www.alnap.org/help-library/evaluating-humanitarian-action-using-the-oecd-dac-criteria



Between 2018 and 2021, the global figures of people in need (including HRPs, flash appeals and other UN coordinated appeals) rose by over 87%

Thematic research: Two original studies, commissioned by ALNAP, to assess the state of evidence on mortality in humanitarian settings and to understand the impact of innovation funding.

Synthesis of secondary data

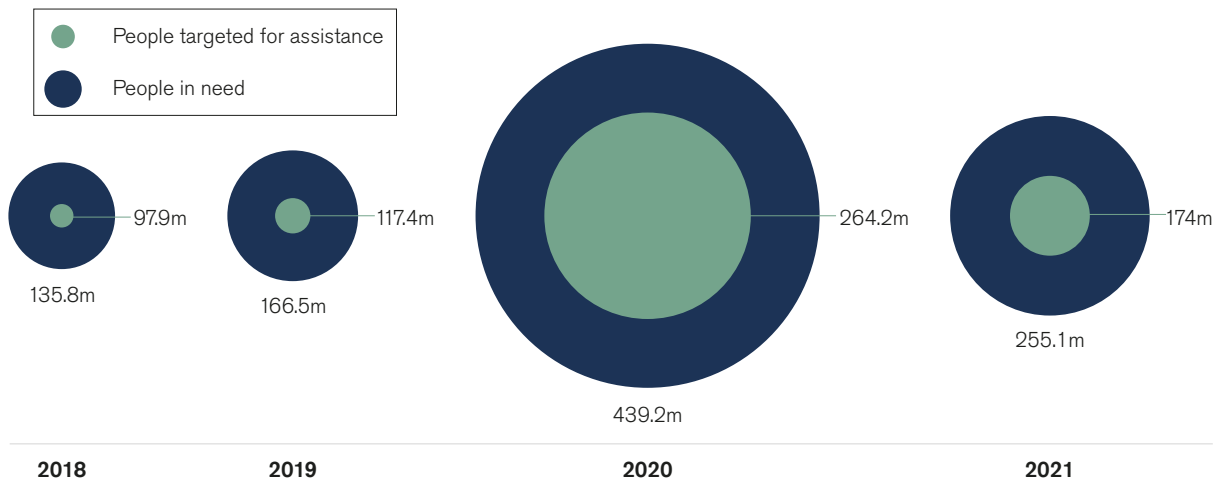
Evaluation synthesis: A synthesis of findings from humanitarian evaluations published between 2018 and 2022 in the [ALNAP HELP Library](#). Over 500 humanitarian evaluations were assessed for inclusion with over 130 evaluations chosen for more in-depth analysis.

Financial analysis: ALNAP worked with experts in humanitarian financing to analyse data and produce statistics on humanitarian financing.

Literature review: ALNAP reviewed over 250 research reports and academic work published within the study period on a set of 15 themes related to humanitarian policy and practice.

Figure 2: Number of people in need, 2018–2021

The estimated number of people in humanitarian need peaked in 2020. That year, UN appeals reported nearly 440 million people in need and aimed to assist just over 60% of them.



Source: OCHA Global Humanitarian Overview, 2018–2021.
 Notes: These figures include all UN coordinated appeals covered under the GHO, including refugee response plans, flash appeals as well as humanitarian response plans.



The pandemic's social and economic shockwaves resulted in an estimated 97 million people pushed into extreme poverty in 2021.

Global trends and crises

Over the four-year study period, the global number of people recognised by the UN-coordinated Global Humanitarian Overview as needing humanitarian assistance rose by over 87%.

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the scale and geography of humanitarian need – and the capacity of economies to support populations at home and abroad. The pandemic's social and economic shockwaves reverberated wider than the death toll: gains in poverty reduction were reversed as an estimated 97 million more people were pushed into extreme poverty by 2021.⁴ Meanwhile, the planet continued to heat up, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finding strong evidence that climate change is contributing to complex humanitarian crises.⁵ These crises intersected with insecurity, and protracted conflict continued to dominate the humanitarian caseload: the conflict in Syria entered its second decade and in Afghanistan, northern Ethiopia, Myanmar and other regions, civilians were caught up in new violence and upheavals. The number of conflicts more than doubled over in the decade to 2020⁶ and continued to rise despite the call for a global ceasefire following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of 2021, the number of displaced people was at a global high.

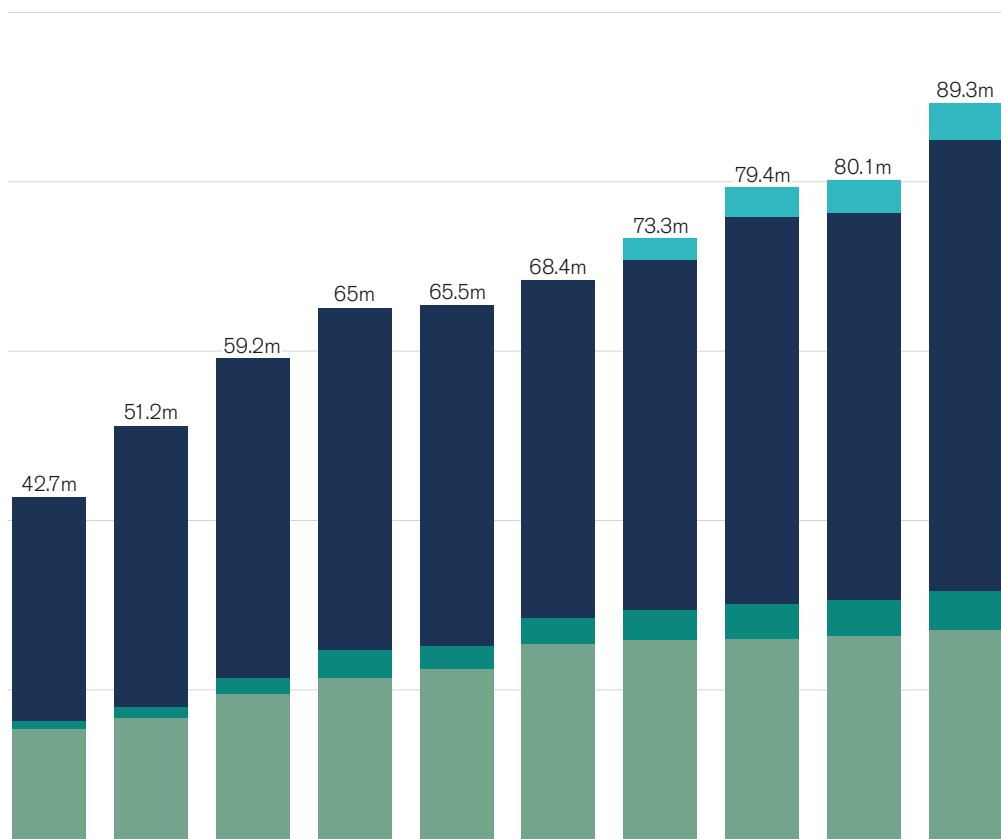
4 Carolina Sánchez-Páramo et al., 'COVID-19 leaves a legacy of rising poverty and widening inequality' (Blog), World Bank, 7 October 2021, www.alnap.org/help-library/covid-19-leaves-a-legacy-of-rising-poverty-and-widening-inequality

5 IPCC, Summary for Policymakers – Climate Change 2022 Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022) www.alnap.org/help-library/summary-for-policymakers-climate-change-2022-impacts-adaptation-and-vulnerability

6 This includes the categories of one-sided violence by the state, state-based violence and non-state violence. In 2010 there were a total of 83 such conflicts. See data gathered by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (<https://ucdp.uu.se>)

Figure 3: Number of people forcibly displaced, 2011-2021

The number of people living in forced displacement has grown every year since 2011, reaching 89.3 million in 2021. In that year, an estimated 53.2 million people were displaced in their own countries, and 27.1 million were refugees.



Source: UNHCR Global Trends, June 2022. Notes: The refugee category combines both refugees under the responsibility of UNHCR and UNRWA. Venezuelans displaced abroad' refers to persons of Venezuelan origin who are likely to need international protection under the criteria contained in the Cartagena Declaration, but who have not applied for asylum in the country in which they are at present.

Yet as people's needs grew, so did the barriers to meeting them. Geopolitically, multilateralism was under strain and global solidarity failed the litmus tests of COVID-19. In many countries, we saw a rise in autocracy and 'strongman' politics^{7,8} and governments becoming increasingly emboldened to flout human rights and reject humanitarian norms, with the pandemic providing further cover for violations and restrictions.⁹

7 According to the definitions elaborated and measured by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) at the University of Gothenburg. See: Vanessa A Boese et al., *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022* (University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2022) www.alnap.org/help-library/autocratization-changing-nature-democracy-report-2022

8 Gideon Rachman, *The Age of the Strongman: How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy Around the World* (Vintage Publishing, 2022)

9 According to Alizada et al. (2021), 'Most democracies acted responsibly but 9 democracies register major and 23 moderate violations of international norms; 55 autocratic regimes engaged in major or moderate violations and 2/3 of all countries imposed restrictions on the media.' See: Nazifa Alizada et al., *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021* (University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/autocratization-turns-viral-democracy-report-2021

Focus on: COVID-19



Once COVID-19 hit, all of our gains were reversed and worse.

INGO humanitarian practitioner, interviews for SOHS 2022

Despite warnings that the next pandemic was ‘a matter of when, not if’,¹⁰ COVID-19 caught the world unprepared. Many governments failed to apply the principles of early detection and robust response at the onset, resulting in high rates of transmission followed by stringent lockdowns. The World Health Organization estimated that excess mortality was approximately 14.9 million between January 2020 and December 2021.¹¹ In many humanitarian settings, transmission levels seemed not to be as high as feared, but there was a lack of reliable data.



Where the humanitarian system was already operational, its tight coordination and quick appeals mobilisation worked in its favour as the pandemic was declared.

Where the humanitarian system was already operational, with disaster response protocols in place, its tight coordination and quick appeals mobilisation worked in its favour. Donors responded with new funding and greater flexibility. However, there were political and practical barriers to humanitarian access. With international staff presence reduced due to curbs on travel, humanitarian organisations were compelled to rely more and more on local capacity (though there was little evidence of any transformational shift in power dynamics). Interactions with communities were restricted, to control the spread of COVID-19, but it wasn't long before the limitations of remote programming began to show – especially in understanding and responding to the secondary effects of the pandemic. In the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, lockdown measures saw 'non-essential' activities suspended and protection cases surge, with absent aid workers unable to effectively monitor or address the situation (see 'Bangladesh case study: COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar' in the full report). The West African Ebola Outbreak had shown that protection should be a central and essential element of pandemic response; it seems this lesson initially went unheeded.¹²

10 Jeremy Konyndyk, *Struggling with Scale: Ebola's lessons for the next pandemic* (Center for Global Development, 2019) www.alnap.org/help-library/struggling-with-scale-ebola%E2%80%99s-lessons-for-the-next-pandemic-0

11 WHO, *Global Excess Deaths Associated with COVID-19, January 2020 – December 2021* (World Health Organization, 2022) www.alnap.org/help-library/global-excess-deaths-associated-with-covid-19-january-2020-december-2021

12 ALNAP forthcoming.

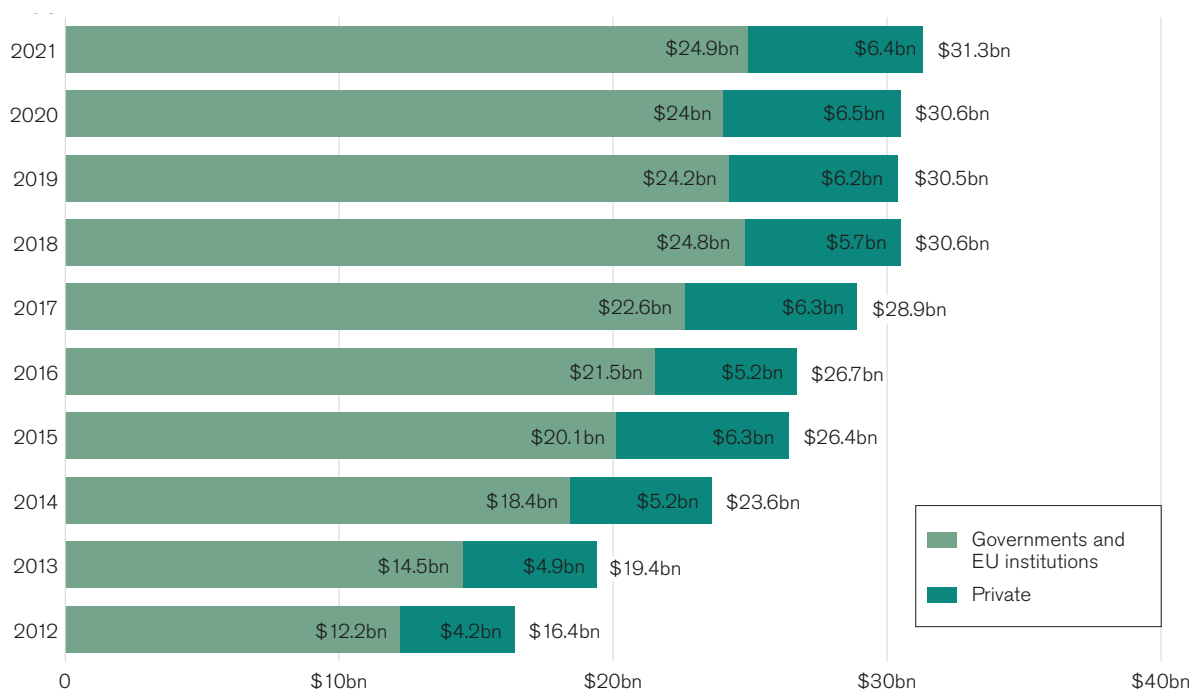
Part 1: What is the system?

What is the shape and size of the humanitarian system?

Financially, the humanitarian system is larger than ever: international humanitarian assistance (IHA) reached an estimated \$31.3 billion in 2021 – almost double what it was a decade before. However, funding did plateau over the past four years, as increases from some donors made up for cuts by others, and funding for the COVID-19 pandemic response offset falls in other contributions.

Figure 4: Total international humanitarian assistance, 2012–2021

Total funding for international humanitarian assistance in 2021 was nearly double what it had been a decade before, but largely plateaued over the four years between 2018 and 2021.



Source: Development Initiatives (DI) based on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service, UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and DI's unique dataset for private contributions. Notes: Figures for 2021 are preliminary estimates. Data on private funding is not consistently available for all organisations across all years. Data is in constant 2020 prices.

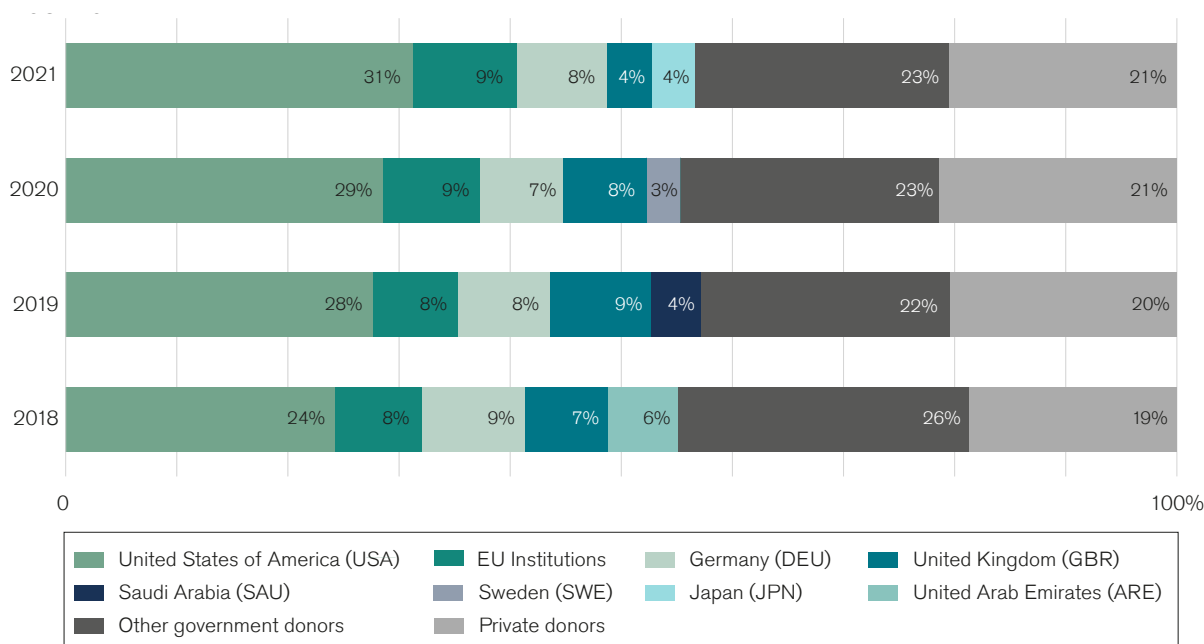
Although the system has grown, it remains financially concentrated. Despite intentions to diversify the funding base, almost half of IHA continued to come from just five donors over the study period. By 2021,

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around a third came from the United States alone. There was also volatility among the top donors over the period: Japan increased its aid while the UK cut its contribution by almost US\$1 billion; meanwhile declines from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates dampened earlier hopes of growth from this region.

Figure 5: Proportions of total international humanitarian assistance provided by 5 largest donors and all other donors, 2018–2021

Since 2018 at least half of all international humanitarian funding has come from just five donors each year. Around a third of total funds came from the US in 2021.



Over the past four years, almost half of the humanitarian aid directed to organisations went to just three UN agencies: WFP, UNHCR UNICEF.

Source: Development Initiatives based on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service, UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and our unique dataset for private contributions. Note: Government donor contributions for Figure 5 do not include imputed humanitarian assistance through EU institutions, which is shown as a separate public donor.

The bulk of IHA continues to flow to UN agencies in the first instance: a steady average of 56% from government donors between 2012 and 2021. Over the past four years, almost half of the humanitarian aid directed to organisations went to just three UN agencies: the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Funds are often passed on to implementing partners, but there is limited data on how funds flow through the system from donor to ultimate recipient.

This concentration in funding belies the growth and diversity of actors within the system. The estimated number of humanitarian organisations reached 5,000, growing by a tenth over the decade. This is due to the proliferation of non-governmental organisations: the number of international NGOs (INGOs) increased by a fifth and local and national NGOs

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(L/NNGOs) by a third – although the latter may reflect an improvement in data as much as actual growth.

Figure 6: Estimated number of humanitarian organisations, 2021

The estimated number of humanitarian organisations has increased by 10% over the past decade. The majority are L/NNGOs, although the apparent rise might be due to better data availability.



Source: Humanitarian Outcomes, Global Database of Humanitarian Organisations (GDHO). Notes: See methodology in [Annex 3](#) of the full report. NNGO/INGO figures for 2012 may be higher as 19% of a total 4,400 NGOs in the GDHO database were not categorised.



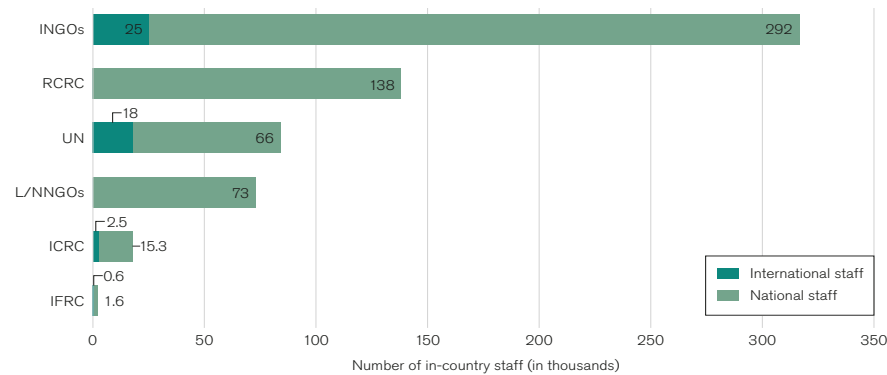
Estimates suggest that the number of humanitarian staff working in crisis contexts rose by 40% since 2013. National staff make up more than 90% of this 632,000-strong workforce in emergency settings.

With more funding and more organisations looking to support more people in more countries, it is unsurprising that the humanitarian workforce has also grown. Estimates suggest that the number of humanitarian staff working in crisis contexts rose by 40% since 2013. National staff make up more than 90% of this 632,000-strong workforce in emergency settings. But despite being the bedrock of humanitarian response, national staff continue to face a pay and power gap between them and their expatriate or headquartered colleagues.¹³ Staff who are nationals of crisis-affected countries also tend to be under-represented in leadership positions. Overall, while the system seems to be doing better on advancing gender parity in leadership, it is lagging behind on diversity, equity and inclusion. The Black Lives Matter movement has prompted renewed attention to broader issues of power and privilege and increasing scrutiny of racism in the sector. And although agencies have responded with new initiatives and commitments, real progress is difficult to discern; substantive data is hard to come by and surveys suggest a high degree of scepticism about the system's ability to change.

¹³ Comprehensive global pay scales are not publicly available, but analysis of a small sample of agencies and countries illustrated significant differences. See methodology in [Annex 1](#)

Figure 7: In country humanitarian personnel, national and international staff, 2020

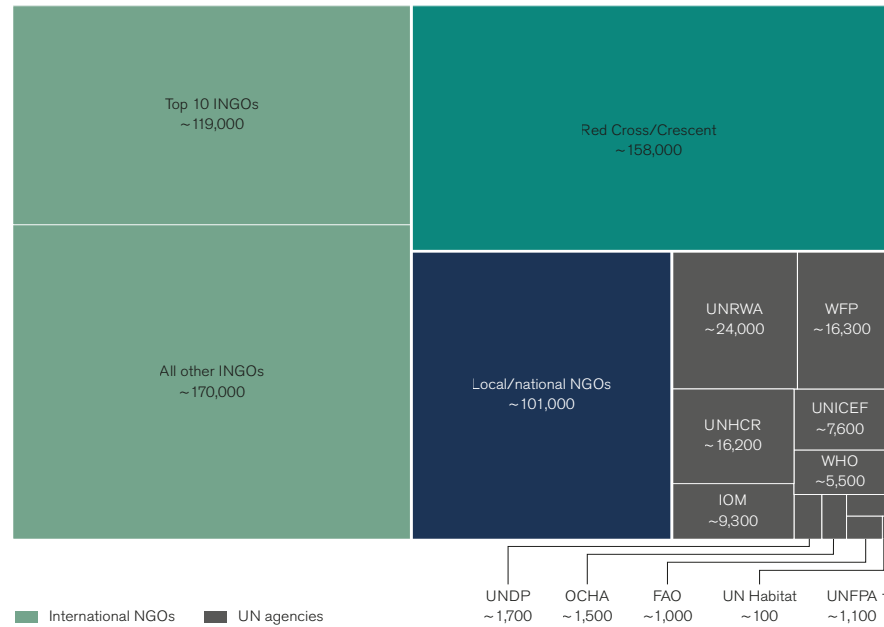
More than 630,000 humanitarian staff were estimated to be working in countries with humanitarian crises in 2020. Over 90% of these staff were nationals of the countries they were working in.



Source: Humanitarian Outcomes, Global Database of Humanitarian Organisations. Notes: See methodology in Annex 3 of the full report. L/NNGOs figure is based on the estimate of 1585 national and local NGOs working within the humanitarian system in 2020, compiled from OCHA 3Ws data pulled from humanitarianresponse.info.

Figure 8: In-country humanitarian staff by organisation type, 2020

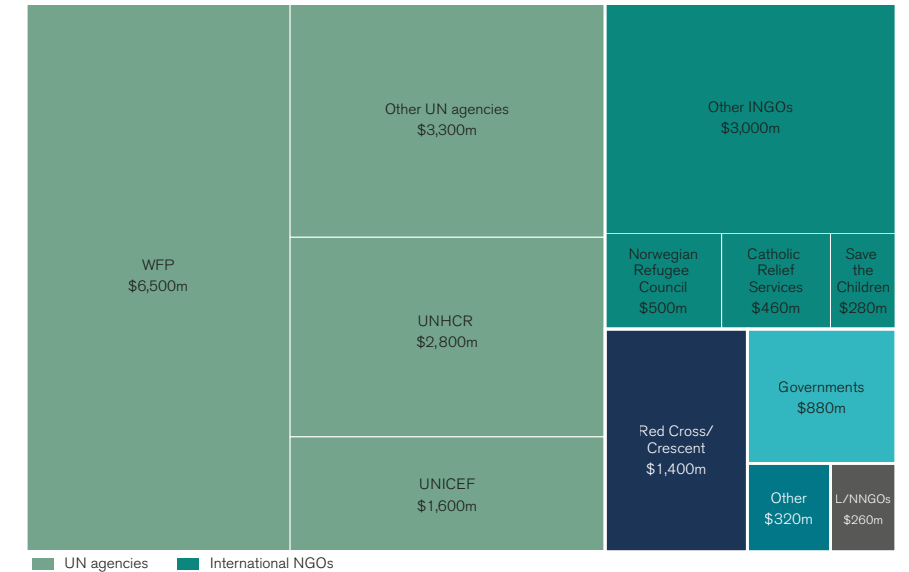
Nearly half of humanitarian staff in countries with humanitarian crises were working for international NGOs according to estimates in 2020.



Source: Humanitarian Outcomes, Global Database of Humanitarian Organisations. Notes: Estimated numbers of staff, rounded to the nearest thousand. See methodology in Annex 3 of the full report. Red Cross/Crescent figure combines staff (employees) of ICRC, IFRC and National Societies in middle- and low-income countries.

Figure 9: Direct international humanitarian assistance received, by agency type, 2021

Most funding goes to UN agencies in the first instance. In 2021, they received two-thirds of all direct international contributions to humanitarian assistance.



Source: Development Initiatives based on UN OCHA FTS. Notes: Figures are based on shares of net organisation-allocable funding. This includes all funding that has been newly received by all organisation minus the funding each organisation in turn provides in the same year. Values have been rounded up. Data is in constant 2020 prices.

Focus on: Support outside the system



Now we are living in a cave. Its name is [the] humanitarian system. But if you go out of that, no one knows what we are speaking about. Are we building on and empowering those informal solutions that already exist? For sure we need to improve.

Local humanitarian practitioner in Somalia,
interviews for SOHS 2022

The international humanitarian system is only one source of support among many for people in crisis and its relative importance varies in different countries and contexts: IHA accounted for 46% of resource flows to Yemen in 2019, compared with 1% in Bangladesh. For the first time in the history of the SOHS research series, this edition looks at how other important networks and safety nets have operated and the ways in which the international humanitarian system relates to them.



In 2021, remittances to low- and middle-income countries were estimated at \$605 billion, more than 10 times higher than the total amount of IHA.

In crisis, the first responders are typically the people and communities affected. The international system became much more aware of the primacy of survivor/community-led response when its own access was constrained during the COVID-19 pandemic. And although it still lacks understanding of how best to engage with local efforts, it did appear to have learned lessons from the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak response as it worked much more closely with religious leaders and institutions to reach communities.

Diasporas also provide important support to many people in crisis-affected countries, not least through remittances, which – contrary to predictions – proved reliable even during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴ In 2021, remittances to low- and middle-income countries were estimated at \$605 billion,¹⁵ more than 10 times higher than the total amount of IHA. Yet, while parts of the international system are beginning to work with diaspora groups, challenges to collaboration remain – including trust, representation and concerns over race and power dynamics.

14 World Bank Group, 'Defying predictions, remittance flows remain strong during COVID-19 crisis' (Press Release), World Bank, 12 May 2021, www.alnap.org/help-library/defying-predictions-remittance-flows-remain-strong-during-covid-19-crisis

15 Knomad, 'A war in a pandemic: Implications of the Ukraine crisis and COVID-19 on Global Governance of Migration and Remittance Flows', Migration and Development Brief no. 36 (Washington DC: World Bank Group, 2022) www.alnap.org/help-library/a-war-in-a-pandemic-implications-of-the-ukraine-crisis-and-covid-19-on-global

In the formal international aid system, development financing can be crucial to address long-term causes and consequences of crises. There has been much attention on the World Bank's increased support to crisis-affected contexts. While these offers substantial funds, the approach remains firmly centred on resilience and shock-proofing development assets, rather than transforming the humanitarian funding landscape.

Is there enough aid?



**If COVID, then why not malaria or malnutrition etc?
This is a very legitimate question in communities
plagued by other needs.**

Ferretti and Murtaza (2020)¹⁶

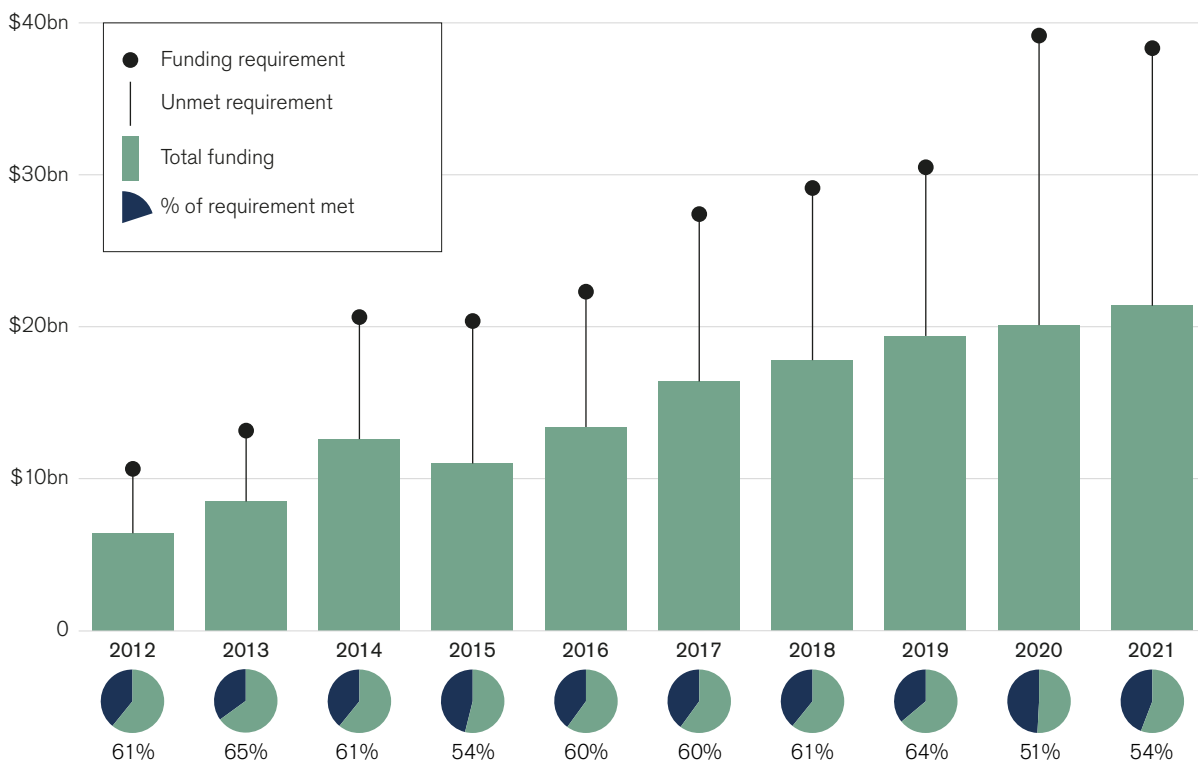
UN-coordinated appeals represent the humanitarian system's best collective estimate of needs and costs, and whether there was enough funding to meet them. Over the decade, financial requirements for appeals nearly quadrupled. In 2020, COVID-19 drove a peak ask of \$39.3 billion, but new funding was insufficient and only 51% of requirements were met – a record low.¹⁷

¹⁶ Silvia Ferretti and Niaz Murtaza, *War Child Holland COVID-19 Response: Multi-Country Real Time Review* (Amsterdam: War Child Holland, 2020), 4, www.alnap.org/help-library/war-child-holland-covid-19-response-multi-country-real-time-review-0

¹⁷ Excluding the \$3.8 billion in funding to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) for COVID-19, funding to appeals was lower in 2020 (\$16.3 billion) than in 2019 (\$19.4 billion)

Figure 10: Requirements and funding, UN-coordinated appeals, 2012–2021

The amount of funding required by UN humanitarian appeals nearly quadrupled over the past decade. In 2020 the appeals reached the highest level of requirements but the lowest level of funding.



Source: Development Initiatives based on UN OCHA FTS, Syria 3RP Dashboards and UNHCR data. Notes: Data from 2012 onwards includes all regional response plans tracked by UNHCR’s refugee funding tracker and all response plans tracked by FTS, including HRPs, flash appeals and other plans outside of OCHA’s Global Humanitarian Overview. Data is in current prices and was last updated on 22 June 2022. Funding data for the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan was taken from 3RP funding dashboards for 2018-2020 and FTS for 2021, given no end-of-year funding dashboard was available for 2021 at the time of analysis. There is potential double-counting for appeal requirements and funding in HRP countries that are also country components of RRP. However, the possible extent of this is not big enough to change global UN-coordinated funding trends. These figures include all UN-coordinated appeals covered under the Global Humanitarian Overview (regional response plans, refugee response plans, flash appeals and humanitarian response plans).



Over the decade, financial requirements for appeals nearly quadrupled.

The effects of the shortfall were uneven and the gap between the best- and the worst-funded appeals widened. In 2021, there was a 172-percentage-point gap between the least well-funded appeal and the most well-funded.¹⁸ Although these were outliers, they reflected a wider picture of growing polarisation in funding.

Global requirements and funding remained concentrated among a handful of major emergencies: Yemen and Syria were the two largest

¹⁸ In 2021, the COVID-19 Nepal response plan was 9% funded, while the Afghanistan flash appeal was 181% funded

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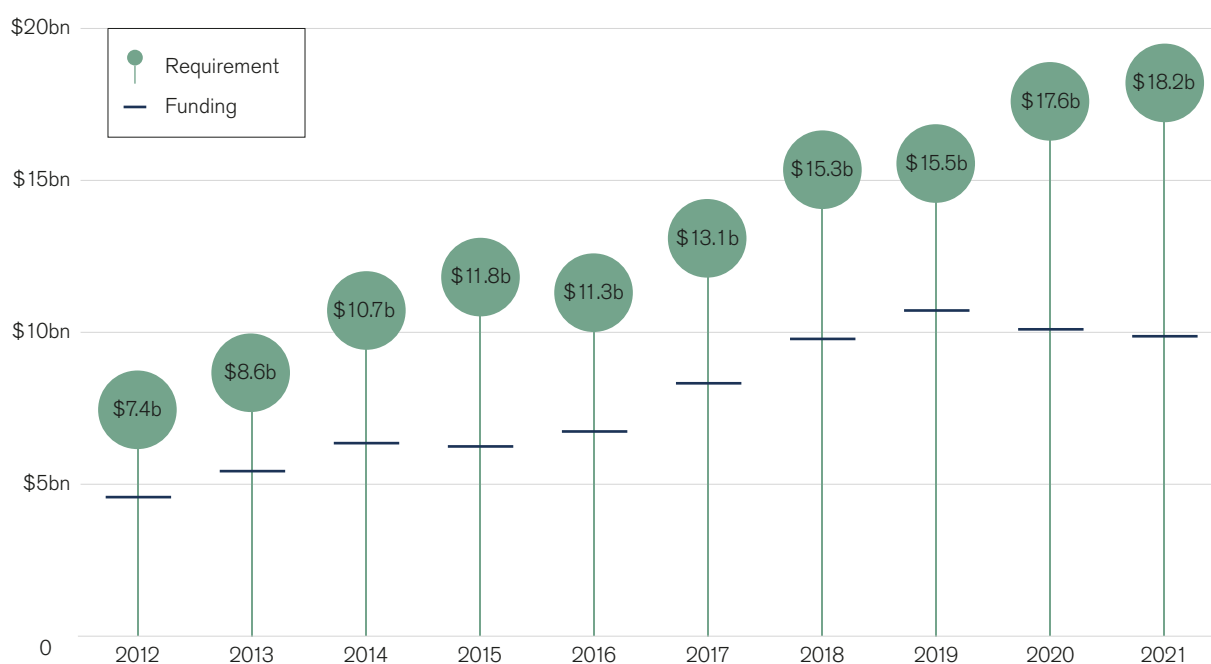


In 2020, COVID drove a peak ask of \$39.3 billion, but new funding was insufficient and only 51% of requirements were met – a record low.

recipients throughout the study period, receiving between a third and a fifth of all humanitarian assistance each year. Over the past decade, an average of 42% of country-specific humanitarian funding¹⁹ went to just five recipients. The COVID-19 pandemic diluted this concentration; funding to the largest recipients fell as the number of countries requiring assistance rose. Yet, the vast majority of humanitarian requirements continued to be for protracted crises. Of the 30 UN-coordinated humanitarian response plans (HRPs) in 2021, 12 were for countries with consecutive appeals for at least a decade, accounting for over 70% of requirements.²⁰ All of the seven largest HRPs were in this group but there was little consistency in how well-funded they were. Sustaining responses to protracted crises, with growing needs and no end in sight, continues to strain the system.

Figure 11: Levels of met and unmet requirements for countries with 10 consecutive years of appeals, 2012–2021

Twelve countries have had humanitarian appeals every year from 2012 to 2021, with the total requirement more than doubling over the period for these protracted crises. While the amount of funding to these has grown, the proportion of requirements met has been volatile.



Source: Development Initiatives based on UNOCHA FTS. Notes: Data is in current prices. Included in the figure are 12 countries that have had consecutive appeals every year for 10 years between 2012 and 2021: Afghanistan, CAR, Chad, DRC, Mali, Niger, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Yemen and oPt.

19 As reported to OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (<https://fts.unocha.org>)

20 Total of the 30 HRPs requirements according to FTS (downloaded 14 March 2022) was \$25.5 billion, excluding flash appeals, regional response appeals and other appeals.



Evidence on the impacts of underfunding revealed a difficult dilemma: humanitarian either had to reduce the numbers of people they reach or compromise on the quantity or quality of support they provide.

These system-wide shortfalls were felt by people receiving aid.²¹ Only 39% of SOHS survey respondents said that they were satisfied with the amount of aid they received – a decline from the previous study period.²² Tellingly, however, people were more positive about sufficiency when they felt that agencies had made good efforts to engage with them. Aid recipients who felt that they were consulted were 150% more likely to feel that they received enough aid than those who said that they weren't consulted.

Evidence on the impacts of underfunding revealed a difficult dilemma: humanitarians either had to reduce the numbers of people they reach or compromise on the quantity or quality of support they provide. But it is hard to know the full implications, given that evaluations measure what was done rather than what wasn't and monitoring capacity is often cut when funds are tight.²³ Funding uncertainty is also a significant challenge – and the effects of incremental cuts that tend to follow are even harder to see. While over a third of humanitarian practitioners in our survey said that the biggest financing problem was insufficient funding, a quarter said it was the *unpredictability* of funding.

Part 2: What is the system achieving?



Does humanitarian support reach the right people?

Humanitarian practitioner in the DRC, interviews for SOHS 2022

Humanitarian aid is expected to reach as many people as possible and to prioritise reaching those most in need. When we asked aid recipients what they wanted this edition of the SOHS to cover, making sure that the 'right' people receive aid was a top priority. In 2021, under the inter-agency responses where data was available, the humanitarian system reached an estimated 106 million people – 46% of those it identified as in need and 69% of those it targeted for assistance.²⁴ But these estimates are a crude indicator of success, revealing little about what constituted this reach.

21 With the exception of Ethiopia, all of the survey countries saw a decline in funding against appeals over the study period

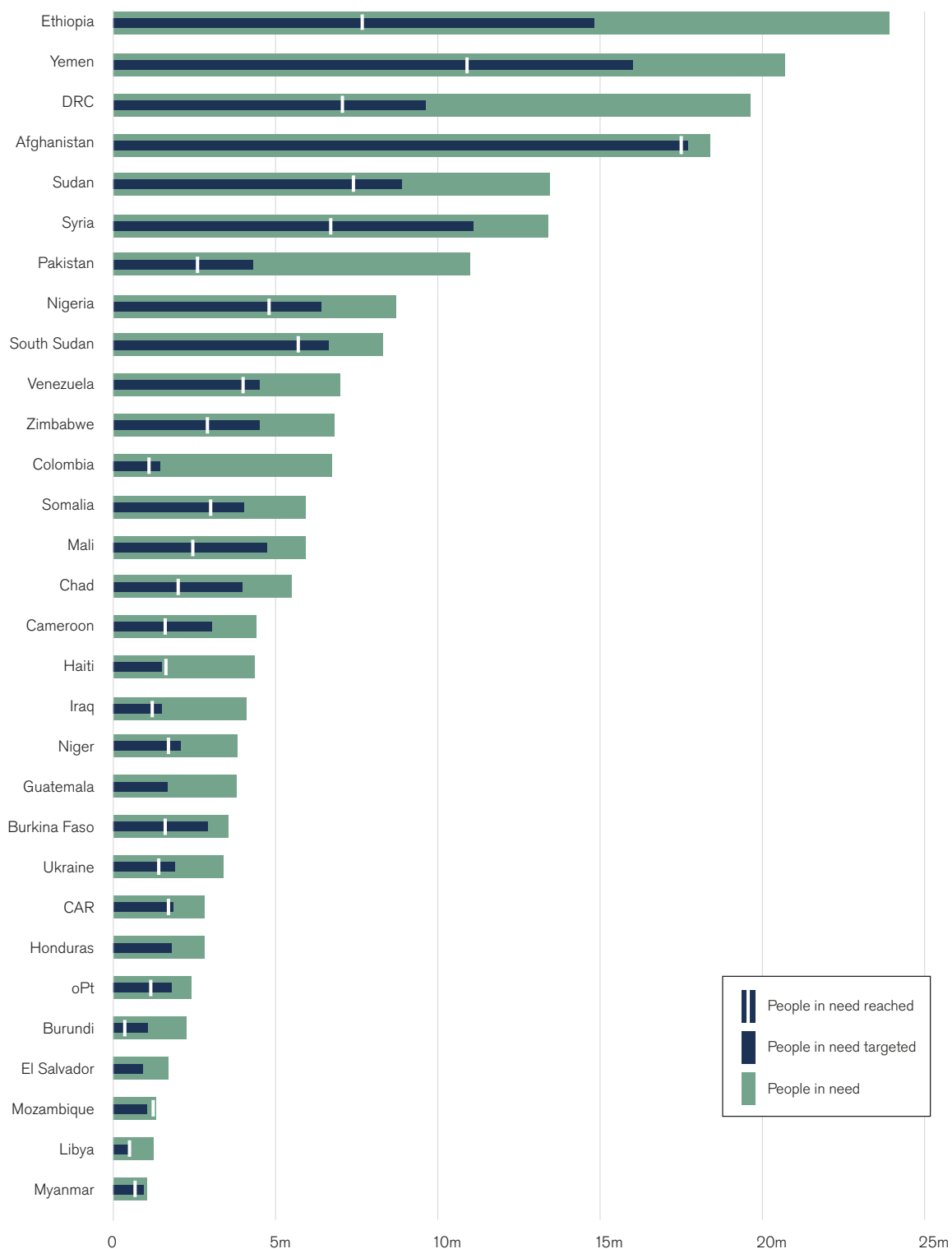
22 The same proportions answered 'partially' in both study periods: 39% in 2021 and 43% in 2018

23 Sophia Swithern, *Underfunded Appeals: Understanding the Consequences, Improving the System* (Stockholm: Expert Group for Aid Studies, 2018) www.alnap.org/help-library/underfunded-appeals-understanding-the-consequences-improving-the-system

24 These figures cover Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), flash appeals and other UN coordinated appeals for which data on reach is available and collated by OCHA on the Humanitarian Insights database <https://hum-insight.info/>. It does not include Refugee Response Plans as comparable reach data for these is not available. These figures differ from the sum of the data represented in [Figure 12](#) which, for reasons of data comparability, only includes HRPs

Figure 12: Number of people in need, targeted and reached in Humanitarian Response Plans, 2021

According to 2021 Humanitarian Response Plans, the largest populations in need were in Ethiopia, Yemen, DRC and Afghanistan. However, there was considerable variation in the proportion of people in need that the system aimed to assist, as well as the number of people it estimated it could reach.



Source: Development Initiatives based on UNOCHA HPC API Notes: 'Number of people reached' refers to UN OCHA estimates of numbers of people expected to have been reached. Expected reached data for El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala is not final, and is not shown. Comprehensive data only available for Humanitarian Response Plans. Figure excludes Flash Appeals, Regional Refugee Response Plans, and Other Appeals. CAR is Central African Republic; DRC is Democratic Republic of Congo; oPt is occupied Palestinian territory.

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36%

Among aid recipients surveyed, only [36%] thought that aid went to those who needed it most.



54%

Attacks on humanitarian workers continued to rise – by 54% between 2017 and 2020.

Among recipients surveyed, only 36% thought that aid went to those who needed it most;²⁵ people had limited trust in selection decisions and often felt that targeting practices were socially divisive. Poor engagement with affected communities repeatedly undermined perceptions of fairness, fuelling exclusion and mistrust. Transparent communication was all the more important given external influences on selection list by state authorities and other gatekeepers: one global evaluation found multiple instances of government interference.²⁶

For affected communities, corruption was a major concern that clearly affected how they rated the aid endeavour: more than a fifth (22%) of aid recipients responding to our survey said it was the biggest problem for humanitarian assistance.²⁷ While this is, to a large extent, part of the calculus when it comes to providing urgent assistance in some of the most constrained and compromised places around the world, agencies were becoming more rigorous and open about preventing, reporting and addressing corruption over the period – while still wary of the reputational risks involved.

In such insecure and politically restrictive settings, threats to the humanitarian space remained a major barrier to reaching populations. Attacks on humanitarian workers continued to rise – by 54% between 2017 and 2020.²⁸ National and local staff were disproportionately affected: while the number and rate of direct attacks on international staff fell over the period, they rose for national and local counterparts as the system relied on them to deliver in the most difficult contexts.

25 In the SOHS survey of affected populations, when asked if they thought aid went to those who needed it most, 35% of respondent answered, 'Yes' and 45% answered 'Partially'

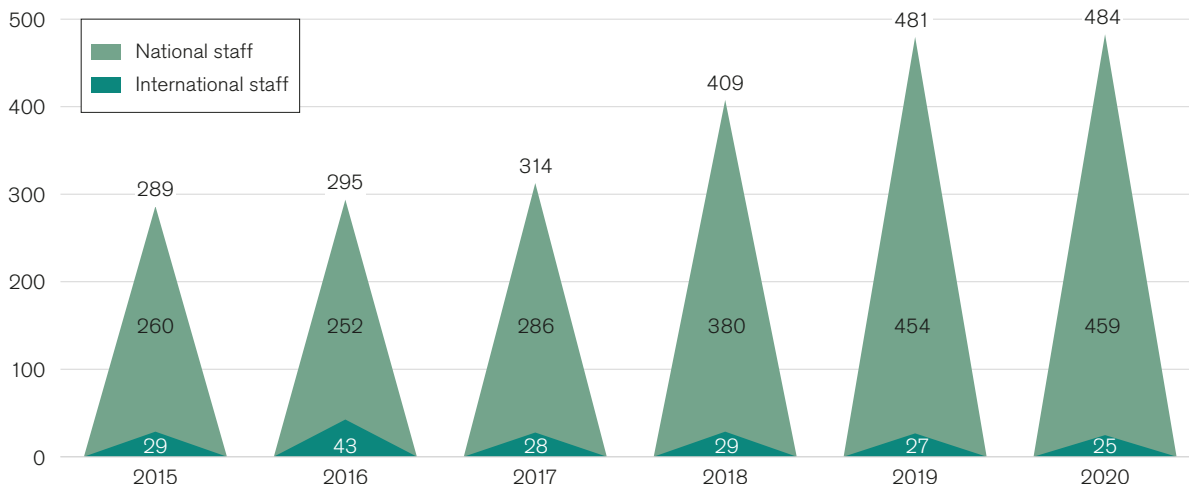
26 Julia Steets et al., *Evaluation of WFP Policies on Humanitarian Principles and Access in Humanitarian Contexts* (Rome: WFP, 2018), 63, www.alnap.org/help-library/evaluation-of-wfp-policies-on-humanitarian-principles-and-access-in-humanitarian-0

27 Overall, this made it the second largest concern for aid recipients, after 'not enough aid' (34%)

28 Aid Worker Security Database (see methodology)

Figure 13: National and international victims of attacks on aid workers, 2015–2020

The number of reported victims of attacks on aid workers has grown every year from 2015 to 2020. The majority of these victims – 95% in 2020 – were national staff.



Source: Aid Worker Security Database.



The effect of sanctions and counter-terrorism measures hampered the ability of agencies to reach people and ‘chilled’ risk appetite.

Even amid this increase in attacks, aid workers responding to our survey felt that bureaucracy and political interference were far greater obstacles to accessing populations in need; impediments designed ‘to make it a headache for you to be there’ were daily preoccupations. The effect of sanctions and counter-terrorism measures were also a major concern, hampering the ability of agencies to reach people²⁹ and ‘chilling’³⁰ risk appetite. There were, however, indications of progress as leadership grappled with the issue; for example, donors and diplomats were able to secure sanctions exemptions to unblock humanitarian operations in Afghanistan and Yemen.

Even when aid reaches communities, some segments of society often miss out. Over the period, there was a notable increase in system-wide attention to the most socially marginalised groups. Efforts to ensure equitable reach had a limited focus on LGBTQI³¹ communities but did result in more guidance on and consideration of the needs of women, older people and people with disabilities. It is hard to know how well the system

29 Gillian McCarthy, *Adding to The Evidence the Impacts of Sanctions and Restrictive Measures on Humanitarian Action* (VOICE, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/adding-to-the-evidence-the-impact-of-sanctions-and-restrictive-measures-on-humanitarian

30 Alice Debarre, ‘Safeguarding Humanitarian Action in Sanctions Regimes’ (New York: International Peace Institute, 2019) www.alnap.org/help-library/safeguarding-humanitarian-action-in-sanctions-regimes

31 LGBTQI includes people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex, as defined in Danielle Roth, Alexandra Blackwell, Mark Canavera and Kathryn Falb, *Cycles of Displacement: Understanding Violence, Discrimination, and Exclusion of LGBTQI People in Humanitarian Contexts* (International Rescue Committee: New York, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/cycles-of-displacement-understanding-violence-discrimination-and-exclusion-of-lgbtqi

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is doing against these reinforced frameworks: there is limited data available, and examples of positive practice were counter-balanced by instances of good intentions failing to stand up under pressure.

Focus on: Forced displacement



Can we really talk about moving to durable solutions for refugees given the current context in Lebanon? The context has been very difficult.

INGO practitioner in Lebanon, interviews for SOHS 2022

The world's refugee population continued to grow, reaching an estimated 25.4 million people in 2021 – 85% of whom were hosted in developing countries.³² The precarity of their circumstances meant that many refugees were badly affected by the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, particularly as they are often hosted in already-deprived areas. Balancing support for refugees and host communities also remained a challenge throughout the period (see, for example, 'Lebanon case study: Protracted refugee populations in a worsening host country situation' in the full 2022 SOHS report).



The world's refugee population continued to grow, reaching an estimated 25.4 million people in 2021 – 85% of whom were hosted in developing countries.

The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees aimed to transform how the international community and host governments shared responsibility for refugees.³³ But initial progress reports showed uneven uptake among major hosting governments.³⁴ Meanwhile many donor countries risked undermining solidarity by being 'constructive abroad but obstructive at home'.³⁵

Compared to other aid recipients in our survey, refugees were less satisfied with the relevance and volume of aid they received but more positive about having their views heard. Despite the IASC commitment to the

32 UNHCR, 'Refugee Data Finder', 2021, www.alnap.org/help-library/refugee-data-finder

33 To this end it has four objectives: (1) ease the pressure on host countries; (2) enhance refugee self-reliance; (3) expand access to third-country solutions; and (4) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity

34 In 2021 UNHCR produced its first monitoring report against the GCR indicator framework, complemented by a progress stock-take produced by IRC, NRC and DRC

35 Catherine Osborn and Patrick Wall, *The Global Compact on Refugees Three Years On: Navigating Barriers and Maximising Incentives in Support of Refugees and Host Countries* (Copenhagen/New York/Oslo: DRC, IRC, NRC, 2021). www.alnap.org/help-library/the-global-compact-on-refugees-three-years-on-navigating-barriers-and-maximising This was a critique on the signing of the GCR – that its model of responsibility sharing was seen as a simple quid pro quo between donors and host governments of 'you host, we fund'.



At the end of 2021, there were an estimated 59.1 million internally displaced people – more than double the number a decade before.

centrality of protection nearly a decade ago, evaluations noted less success with regard to protection relative to other areas of refugee assistance.^{36,37}

Internal displacement also reached its highest level during the study period. At the end of 2021, there were an estimated 59.1 million internally displaced people³⁸ – more than double the number a decade before. And, in the absence of long-term solutions, recurrent humanitarian costs continued to grow; in 2021 alone, the estimated global cost of internal displacement stood at almost \$1 billion.³⁹ After being largely absent from the Global Compacts, internal displacement regained political and policy visibility through the work of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement. It remains to be seen how their findings will be implemented, including through the UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda and the newly appointed Special Adviser.

Do humanitarians provide the right kind of support?



You need to talk to the people to understand what's needed to make sure whatever aid you take is meaningfully used - but then you can't talk to the people. So, you take what you think is needed.

Humanitarian practitioner involved in the northern Ethiopia conflict response, interviews for SOHS 2022

The measure of humanitarian success rests not just on whether people received support, but also whether they received what they

- 36 Julian Murray, *Evaluation of the European Union's Humanitarian Response to the Refugee Crisis in Turkey* (European Commission, 2019) www.alnap.org/help-library/evaluation-of-the-european-union%E2%80%99s-humanitarian-response-to-the-refugee-crisis-in-turkey; Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop, Karin Wendt and Sahjabin Kabir, *Independent Evaluation of the Aktion Deutschland Hilft e.V. (ADH) Joint Appeal to Rohingya Myanmar Bangladesh* (Geneva: HERE, 2019). www.alnap.org/help-library/independent-evaluation-of-the-aktion-deutschland-hilft-ev-adh-joint-appeal-to-%E2%80%99C Rohingya
- 37 Jane Cocking et al., *Independent Review of the Implementation of the IASC Protection Policy* (London: HPG/ODI, 2022). www.alnap.org/help-library/%E2%80%99Independent-review-of-the-implementation-of-the-iasc-protection-policy
- 38 IDMC, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021* (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/global-report-on-internal-displacement-2021
- 39 This figure represents the average cost of providing each internally displaced person with support for housing, education, health and security, and their loss of income. For each metric, the average costs and losses per person are assessed for a year of displacement. The impact on livelihoods is based on World Bank data, while the impact on all other areas is based on UNOCHA's Humanitarian Response Plans and Humanitarian Needs Overviews. For detailed methodology, see: Christelle Cazabat and Marco Tucci, *The Ripple Effect: Economic Impacts of Internal Displacement – Unveiling the Cost of Internal Displacement* (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019) www.alnap.org/help-library/the-ripple-effect-economic-impacts-of-internal-displacement-unveiling-the-cost-of-



The gap between what people need and what they get is not only due to the shortcomings of the humanitarian system; what humanitarian agencies are able to offer is often limited by the environment in which they operate.

actually needed.⁴⁰ Over the study period, misalignment persisted: while humanitarian practitioners continued to believe that relevance was the system's strongest area of performance, the proportion of recipients who felt that aid addressed their priority needs declined. Engagement was critical to the relevance of assistance: recipients who said they were consulted beforehand were more than twice as likely to feel that the aid they received met their priority needs, compared to those who said they weren't consulted.⁴¹ Like practitioners, humanitarian evaluations also tended to be positive about relevance – but this is perhaps unsurprising given that the system still judges itself on its own terms; asking aid recipients whether the aid they received was relevant is not routine practice and where needs are widespread, any support at all can be seen as useful.

There has been system-wide progress in the way in which humanitarian needs are analysed, with tools such as the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework aiming to provide more multidimensional analysis that better reflect people's priorities. The Framework has been credited with contributing to improvements in Humanitarian Needs Overviews. But across the system, there is little evidence on whether or how humanitarian organisations actually use information about needs in their programme design.

The gap between what people need and what they get is not only due to the shortcomings of the humanitarian system; what humanitarian agencies are able to offer is often limited by the environment in which they operate. In active conflicts and highly constrained environments, blockades, directives and other impediments are preventing the delivery of certain provisions and determining what can be given. Evidence on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected relevance is still emerging; evaluations suggest that, while the health response was largely relevant, there are larger questions about whether this skewed humanitarian response away from other priority needs.

Where the local authorities and markets permit it, cash and voucher assistance (CVA) can give people greater scope to meet their priority needs. Between 2018 and 2021, the rise of cash continued apace, surpassing expectations. Over the period, funding for CVA increased by an estimated 30%, accounting for a fifth of all IHA. As cash programming

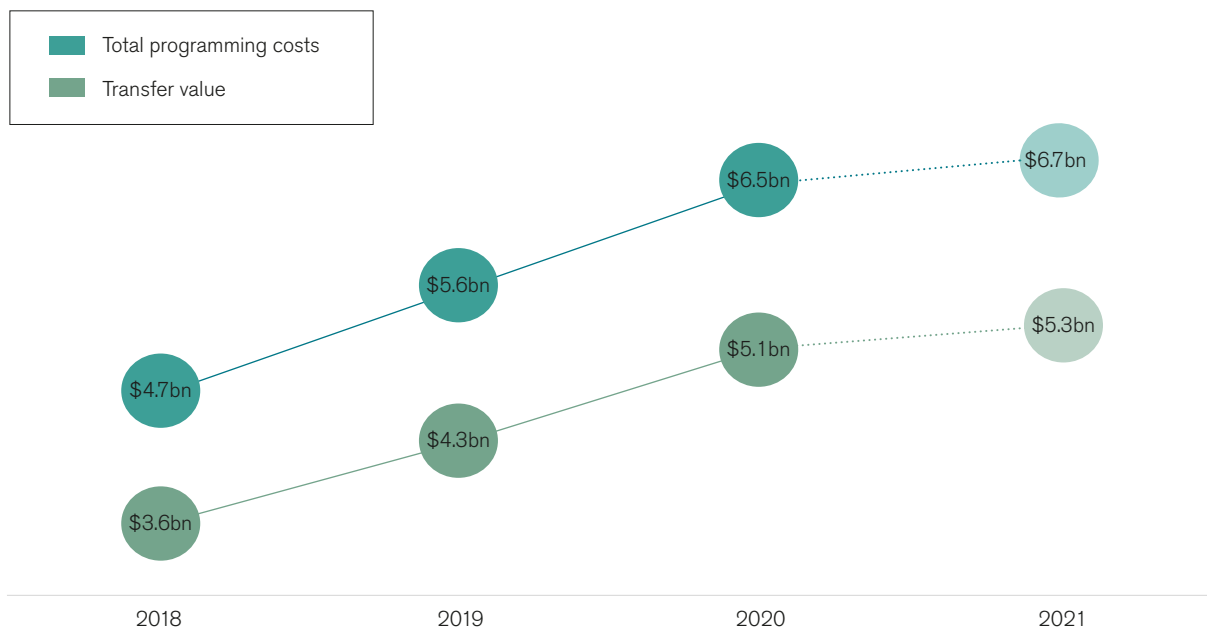
40 Chianca (2008) and Sagmeister (2016) argue that if a project is not relevant to people, it cannot be judged successful. See: Thomaz Chianca, 'The OECD/DAC criteria for international development evaluations: An assessment and ideas for improvement', *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation* 5, no. 9 (2008) www.alnap.org/help-library/the-oecd-dac-criteria-for-international-development-evaluations-an-assessment-and-ideas; Elias Sagmeister, 'Assessing the relevance of development assistance: Current practice and suggestions for a better way forward', GPPI, 25 February 2016, www.alnap.org/help-library/assessing-the-relevance-of-development-assistance-current-practice-and-suggestions-for. See also: Sophia Swithern, *Background Paper – ALNAP 32nd Annual Meeting: More Relevant? 10 Ways to Approach What People Really Need* (London: ANLAP/ODI, 2019) www.alnap.org/help-library/background-paper-alnap-32nd-annual-meeting-more-relevant-10-ways-to-approach-what

41 Julia Steets et al., *Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Drought Response in Ethiopia 2015-2018* (IASC, 2019), 35, www.alnap.org/help-library/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-of-the-drought-response-in-ethiopia

continued to scale up, so did evidence about its positive effects. However, practitioners and recipients agreed that cash is not inherently aligned to what people need and can suffer from the same consultation deficits as other forms of aid. In some contexts, CVA was also impeded by international sanctions and counter-terror regulations, as well as domestic restrictions and banking closures.

Figure 14: Funding for humanitarian cash and voucher assistance, 2018–2021

The amount of international humanitarian funding spent on cash and voucher assistance continued to grow. Preliminary data for 2021 – likely to be an underestimate – suggests it reached at least \$6.7 billion, 80% of which went to recipients in the form of cash or voucher transfers.



Source: Development Initiatives based on data collected with the help of the Cash Learning Partnership (CALP Network) from implementing partners and on UN OCHA FTS data. Notes: RCRC is the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Data for 2021 is preliminary as data for some organisations has not yet been provided or is based on estimations. Double counting of CVA programmes that are sub-granted from one implementing partner to another is avoided where data on this is available. Programming costs are estimates for organisations that provided only the amount transferred to aid recipients. Data is not available for all included organisations across all years. Data is in current prices.

Humanitarian actors recognised that they needed to do better at ensuring aid is relevant and appropriately delivered for the most marginalised people. Since the previous SOHS (2018), which pointed to numerous gaps, the system has made notable investments towards the application of inclusion and accessibility commitments. However, good practice remained fragmented and inconsistent over the study period for this edition. There were also concerns that guidelines on inclusion fed into ‘cookie-cutter’ approaches – identity-based stereotypes of people’s vulnerabilities and needs that overlooked their strengths, resilience

and capacities.^{42,43} Some agencies responded to this challenge with new thinking about intersectionality but there is little evidence so far to assess whether this has taken root in programming⁴⁴ – particularly because ‘intersectionality in some ways invites complexity, whereas operationalisation necessarily requires simplification’.⁴⁵



Focus on resilience in protracted crises

From this assistance, I used half for food and the other half I bought a sewing machine and now it helps me to have something [for income] and my children eat.

Aid recipient in DRC, focus group discussions for SOHS 2022

Over the study period, protracted crises – from Syria to Yemen to DRC – continued to account for the majority of humanitarian need. People living through these chronic and cyclical situations made clear calls for assistance to help them support themselves.⁴⁶ Aid recipients in DRC were fatigued by instability and believed that humanitarian interventions would be unable to provide long-term solutions to the crises they faced (see ‘DRC case study: Waiting on recovery and resilience’ in the full 2022 SOHS report).

Despite years of incremental growth, resilience programming has not become a major part of the humanitarian response – largely because it is

- 42 Mariangela Bizzarri et al., *Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls* (New York: OCHA, 2020), 15, www.alnap.org/help-library/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-on-gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women
- 43 Verity McGivern and Ken Bluestone, *If Not Now, When? Keeping Promises to Older People Affected by Humanitarian Crises* (HelpAge International, 2020) www.alnap.org/help-library/if-not-now-when-keeping-promises-to-older-people-affected-by-humanitarian-crises
- 44 See, among others, Hugo Slim, ‘Impartiality and Intersectionality’ (Blog), Humanitarian Law & Policy, 16 January 2018, www.alnap.org/help-library/impartiality-and-intersectionality; Véronique Barbelet and Caitlin Wake, *Inclusion and Exclusion in Humanitarian Action: The State of Play* (London: HPG/ODI, 2020) www.alnap.org/help-library/inclusion-and-exclusion-in-humanitarian-action-the-state-of-play-0; Mirela Turcanu and Yves Ngunzi Kahashi, ‘SADI – CAFOD’s Safe, Accessible, Dignified and Inclusive Approach’, *Humanitarian Exchange* 78, October 2020, www.alnap.org/help-library/disability-inclusion-in-humanitarian-action-sadi-%E2%80%93-cafod%E2%80%99s-safe-accessible-dignified; Valentina Shafina and Pauline Thivillier, *Inclusive Client Responsiveness: Focus on People with Disabilities and Older People* (New York: IRC, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/inclusive-client-responsiveness-focus-on-people-with-disabilities-and-older-people
- 45 Barbelet and Wake, *Inclusion and Exclusion*, 28.
- 46 While a request for support for livelihoods, education and other support for longer-term recovery was a finding in the 2018 SOHS KIIs and focus group discussions with affected people in some settings, it was mentioned with more frequency and emphasised more by community participants in the 2022 FGDs in DRC, Lebanon and Yemen

unclear what it means, where its boundaries lie and whether it should be the responsibility of humanitarians, who have limited resources and must prioritise immediate needs. Early recovery activities remain underfunded, receiving just 17% of what was required in 2021 – a shortfall that was not made up by mainstreaming resilience across other sectors. In many contexts, where programming options are determined by governments, there are limits to what recovery and resilience support can be provided. The same is true in many active conflicts; as one practitioner put it, ‘How resilient can you be to a man with an AK-47?’

The resilience activities that humanitarians did implement – from shock-responsive cash grants to weather information systems and livelihoods training – seemed to have been effective, if relatively short-lived. Overall, evidence on humanitarian contributions to longer-term resilience and self-reliance remains limited and suffers from poor definitions and confusion around how to measure impact.

Does humanitarian action work?



If ... in Bangladesh you give \$50 to a family that in the end was only flooded up to their hip instead of up to their neck, I’m happy to go in front of the donor and explain why we did this.

**International humanitarian agency representative,
interviews for SOHS 2022**

‘Does it work?’ is perhaps the most basic question asked of international aid, and the hardest to answer. The difficulties of monitoring and evaluation in a crisis mean that the humanitarian system has often struggled to measure and understand the difference it is making for the people it serves. However, there are signs that understanding of the system’s effectiveness has improved; investments in technical capacity, programme quality and evidence gathering appeared to be paying off.

A fundamental aim of humanitarian assistance is to save lives, yet this evidence remains hard to capture. Links between humanitarian support and reduced mortality are not straightforward and crisis-affected countries are often data-poor: in a sample of 29 countries with humanitarian responses, only four had available, consistent, year-on-year mortality data. Drawing on existing mortality data from three countries, original research for this edition of the SOHS found a mixed effect and weak evidence of humanitarian action reducing deaths.

Humanitarian action also seeks to protect people in crises from physical and psychological harm. Although the past four years witnessed renewed acknowledgement of the importance of protection, progress was mixed, with more improvements in child protection and protection against

sexual and gender-based violence but fewer in protecting civilians from conflict. Measuring the results of protection remains a challenge for the humanitarian system. There were innovative efforts over the past four years to strengthen monitoring and evaluation;⁴⁷ however, a recent review revealed system-wide barriers to effective protection – including a lack of shared understanding, ownership and accountability to translate activities into outcomes.⁴⁸

Other areas of humanitarian responses saw clearer gains, with some of the strongest evidence for effectiveness coming from the food security and nutrition sectors, and in education (notwithstanding the mixed results of remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic). The increased investments in CVA were reflected in evidence of its ability to achieve a range of outcomes – from access to shelter to lower morbidity for children under five.

Across multiple other sectors, humanitarians continued to improve the attention paid to programming quality, making frequent reference to Sphere minimum standards and increasing adherence to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). More than half (56%) of aid recipients surveyed for this 2022 SOHS report felt that aid was of sufficient quality, a slight increase from the 54% reported in the 2018 SOHS.

To be effective, humanitarian aid must not only be high quality but also arrive when people need it. Compared to where it was a decade ago, or to the engagement of development actors in crises today, the humanitarian system appears to be considerably faster. Over the study period, there were new mechanisms and resources for preparedness and rapid response, such as existing partnerships, pre-positioned staff and stock, early warning systems and contingency plans. Several examples highlighted the effectiveness of these models, yet their potential was not routinely realised system-wide and was often limited by access, funding, and logistical and bureaucratic delays.

The rise of anticipatory and early action within the humanitarian agenda was one of the most significant system shifts over our study period. In the previous period, the potential of anticipatory and early action was primarily hypothetical; in this period, high-level commitment driven by the former UN Emergency Relief Coordinator led to the creation of a pilot anticipation window in the UN's CERF pooled fund, which allocated \$140 million to 13 country pilots. A vanguard of agencies – the German Red Cross, IFRC,



56% of aid recipients surveyed for this 2022 SOHS report felt that aid was of sufficient quality, a slight increase from the 54% reported in the 2018 SOHS.

47 DG-ECHO, '2021 Protection Mainstreaming Key Outcome Indicator and Monitoring Tool', www.dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/download/referencedocumentfile/204; InterAction, *Embracing the Protection Outcome Mindset: We all have a role to play* (Washington DC: InterAction, 2020) <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/embracing-the-protection-outcome-mindset-we-all-have-a-role-to-play>; InterAction, *MindShift: A Collection of Examples That Promote Protection Outcomes* (Washington DC: InterAction, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/mind-shift-a-collection-of-examples-that-promote-protection-outcomes

48 J. Cocking, et al, 'Independent Review of the Implementation of the IASC Protection Policy' (London: HPG/ODI, 2022). <https://odi.org/en/publications/independent-review-of-the-implementation-of-the-iasc-protection-policy/>

members of the START Network and WFP – continued or expanded their trials of forecast-based financing and anticipatory action and boosted the evidence base.

However, the scale and proportion of aid allocated to these quick response measures remained low and overall humanitarian funding continued to have a timeliness problem. A study of 10 crisis responses from between 2015 and 2019 found that only 41% of total response funding had been committed after six months and, of what was committed, only 64% was disbursed 18 months post-crisis.⁴⁹ Aid recipients felt the effects of these delays: only 57% of respondents to our survey said they were satisfied with when aid arrived – a significant decline from the 69% in 2018.

Focus on: Hunger



The problem in Yemen is not a problem of food, [or] food availability, it's a problem of food affordability. And humanitarian assistance cannot really deal with that.

Humanitarian practitioner in Yemen, interviews for SOHS 2022

The number of people facing acute food insecurity rose by a third over the study period, to a total of 161 million people in 2021.⁵⁰ This was caused primarily by conflict, drought and other climate events, and a return of 'intentional starvation' as a conflict strategy, despite the UN Security Council Resolution 2417 passed in 2018, which prohibited the use of starvation as a method of warfare.

A declaration of famine gains attention; but we saw fewer resources and less attention 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.⁵¹ This was the case in Yemen, where the emphasis on famine or catastrophic levels of food insecurity (IPC

49 Elle Crossley et al., *Funding Disasters: Tracking Global Humanitarian and Development Funding for Response to Natural Hazards* (Centre for Disaster Protection/Development Initiatives, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/funding-disasters-tracking-global-humanitarian-and-development-funding-for-response-to

50 FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises, *Global Report on Food Crisis* (Rome: Food Security Information Network, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/global-report-on-food-crises-2021

51 Daniel Maxwell et al., 'Viewpoint – Determining Famine: Multi-Dimensional Analysis for the Twenty-First Century', *Food Policy* 92 (2020): 101832, www.alnap.org/help-library/view-point-determining-famine-multi-dimensional-analysis-for-the-twenty-first-century

Phase 5) may have distracted from the large populations facing ‘crisis’ or ‘emergency’ levels (IPC Phases 3 and 4)⁵² (see ‘Yemen case study: Understanding effectiveness in a food crisis’ in the full 2022 SOHS report).

Over the period, the system remained under-resourced when it came to responding to food crises – a situation that’s expected to worsen with the effects of the war in Ukraine. Despite some shifts towards smarter funding for food crises, respondents expressed concern that previous lessons – especially from the successes in responding to the four famines of 2017 – had not been systematically retained.

Does it do harm?



Assurances to victims/survivors and witnesses regarding their safety and security is often limited, and this is likely to be a significant deterrent to [PSEA] reporting.

Bond et al. (2019)⁵³



60%
of practitioners
responding to
our survey rated
implementation
around prevention
of sexual
exploitation,
abuse and
harassment
(PSEAH) as only
‘Fair’ or ‘Poor’.

Humanitarians operate in extremely sensitive environments, working closely with highly vulnerable communities. This comes with a high risk of causing direct or indirect harm to the people that the system seeks to support. Historically, the humanitarian system has not been good at assessing or mitigating the potential negative impacts of its activities. Over the past four years, the system has paid far greater attention to the harm it might cause and stepped up commitments to address it – but there is still some way to go.

The high-profile cases of sexual exploitation and abuse that we covered in the last edition of the SOHS prompted greater scrutiny and long-awaited reforms within the humanitarian system. Multiple high-level and inter-agency initiatives were created, including a new Office of the Victims’ Rights Advocate, and recent reviews, guidance and staffing investments suggest that this is an active priority for the system. In practice, however, the system still fails to consistently hold perpetrators to account or provide survivors with support and redress. The majority (60%) of practitioners responding to our survey rated implementation around prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH) as only ‘Fair’ or ‘Poor’.

The increasing collection, storage and use of data and the digitisation of ways of working in humanitarian practice also drew attention to the risks

52 Maxwell et al., ‘Viewpoint’.

53 Sarah Bond et al., *Evaluative Review of UNHCR’s Policies and Procedures on the Prevention of and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2019), 31, www.alnap.org/help-library/evaluative-review-of-unhcrs-policies-and-procedures-on-the-prevention-of-and-response



Humanitarian agencies are creating new tools, strategies and staff positions to track and mitigate carbon emissions and the impact of activities on local environments.

of digital harm, introducing new risks and ethical concerns around how sensitive information is stored, accessed and shared. Over the period, major data compromises – including the biometric data of Rohingya refugees – prompted the system to develop new codes and guidance on data responsibility.

Humanitarian aid can have both positive and negative impacts on wider conflict dynamics. Aid agencies and host governments are increasingly aware that disparities in aid provision between displaced or refugee populations and host communities can cause tensions and are increasingly considering social cohesion objectives in programming.

In protracted crises, long-term provision of aid can damage household resilience, undermine local capacities and substitute for state responsibility. Surveys of aid recipients have generally shown that they do not feel the aid they receive supports them to be self-reliant.⁵⁴ Despite widespread recognition of the problem, it remains difficult to address, as humanitarians are often constrained by short-term funding cycles or restrictions imposed by governments.

Humanitarian agencies are beginning to pay greater attention to their potential to do environmental harm, creating new tools, strategies and staff positions to track and mitigate carbon emissions and the impact of activities on local environments. In 2021, ahead of the 26th Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26), the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement launched a new Climate and Environmental Charter for Humanitarian Organizations. By the end of the year, more than 200 organisations had signed the Charter, which commits them to preparing for climate change disasters and reducing their own environmental impacts. Evidence indicates that these nascent efforts are necessary: evaluations revealed that the transport of humanitarian goods and staff was responsible for significant carbon emissions over the SOHS study period, exacerbated by short-term surge travel.⁵⁵

54 Accessed from: <https://groundtruthsolutions.org/data>

55 Nancy Mock and Ali Hassan Ali, *Decentralised Evaluation of UNHCR's Livelihood Programme in Djibouti (2015–2018)* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2019) www.alnap.org/help-library/decentralised-evaluation-of-unhcrs-livelihood-programme-in-djibouti-2015-2018; Eric Debert, Harold Sougato Baroi and David Sanjib Sarkar, *External Evaluation: Plan International UK's DEC Funded Response to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh* (Woking/London: Plan International UK/Disasters Emergency Committee, 2019) www.alnap.org/help-library/plan-international-uks-dec-funded-response-to-the-rohingya-refugee-crisis-in-bangladesh; Jock Baker et al., *Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to Cyclone Idai in Mozambique* (New York: OCHA, 2020), 39, www.alnap.org/help-library/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-of-the-response-to-cyclone-idai-in-mozambique

Part 3: How is it working?

Does the system treat people with dignity?



I don't think that we can influence decisions about aid because we are only beneficiaries [sic] and the international organisations are the ones that decide this matter.

Aid recipient in Yemen, focus group discussions for SOHS 2022



73%
of aid recipients surveyed said that aid providers treated them with dignity.

Respecting crisis-affected people means seeing them as dignified individuals and self-determined communities rather than mere statistics of need – and over the past decade, the humanitarian system has worked to take this on board. Nearly three-quarters of aid recipients surveyed said that aid providers treated them with dignity. However, there was also continued evidence of people feeling side-lined, humiliated or abused by aid workers. In the four-year study period, as the system continued to work to improve how it engages with aid recipients, it also faced renewed pressure to more fundamentally shift power dynamics between aid agencies and communities.

Only around a third of aid recipients responding to our survey thought that humanitarian organisations did well at keeping them informed – a slight decline on the previous period. When it came to being able to give their views on aid, around one in three aid recipients surveyed said they were able to provide feedback or complain, a level which was similar to that reported in the last edition of the SOHS.⁵⁶ In an effort to realise the Grand Bargain promise of a 'Participation Revolution' (2016), aid organisations and donors invested in a wide range of initiatives – and there were some examples of good practice. Overall, however, the system still struggled to provide meaningful opportunities for input and influence. COVID-19 restrictions and difficulties in accessing populations during conflict made it harder for humanitarian actors to engage with affected people in-person and increased the system's overreliance on often unsuitable remote models for soliciting peoples' views.

When crisis-affected people were able to communicate their views, they were not generally met with an effective response from humanitarian agencies; refugees in Lebanon renamed a complaints hotline a 'coldline'.⁵⁷ This often created frustration and a sense of powerlessness, diminishing

⁵⁶ In 2018 this was 36%, in 2022 it is 33%.

⁵⁷ Focus group discussions in Bangladesh and Yemen; WFP, *Evidence Summary – Cash-based transfers: Lessons from evaluations* (World Food Programme, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/wfp-evidence-summary-cash-based-transfers-lessons-from-evaluations

people's trust in the system and their willingness to provide feedback. While there were some positive examples of programmes being adjusted after community input, most did not go beyond small tweaks, with humanitarian staff feeling that they didn't have the time or know-how, remit or authority, to make major changes.

The question of the system's collective accountability also came to the fore over the last four years. At the country-coordination level, more Humanitarian Country Teams incorporated 'Accountability to Affected People' measures into their ways of working and were at the time of writing set to pilot new tools to track their progress. At the system level, the idea of creating a humanitarian ombudsman was revived and the departing Emergency Relief Coordinator called for the creation of a new independent body to publicly grade humanitarian responses on how well they met people's priority needs.⁵⁸ The idea was met with initial support, but there were questions about how it would function and fit with other initiatives.

Does the international system enable locally led action?



The matter is not about capacity of local organisations, it is about [a] political decision ... to give more trust and more power to the local actors to act themselves and set the agenda themselves.

L/NNGO representative, 2021 ALNAP Annual Meeting, 18–21 October 2021

Looking back on the past four years, it is hard to find an issue that has commanded more attention in the international humanitarian system than the way it treats local actors. The last SOHS (2018) was the first edition to assess the system's performance in this regard, charting commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit. Since then, 'localisation' became an even more pressing issue for many humanitarian agencies: both a practical necessity arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and a moral imperative emerging from reflections on racism and the humanitarian

58 OCHA, *Proposal: Piloting the Independent Commission for Voices in Crises* (Geneva: OCHA, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/proposal-piloting-the-independent-commission-for-voices-in-crises-icvic



Direct funding to local actors remained extremely low as a share of international humanitarian assistance, fluctuating between a high of 3.3% and a low of 1.2%.

system's colonial past. Views previously considered 'fringe' or radical^{59,60} entered the mainstream during the study period, prompting searching system-wide conversations.⁶¹

If these conversations were difficult, translating them into real change proved even harder, with country-level implementation of the localisation agenda 'still wanting'.⁶² While over half (56%) of humanitarian practitioners surveyed were positive about the overall relationship between international and local/national actors, less than a third were positive about the specifics of power-sharing and support.⁶³ Implementation has been complicated by the many different visions of what a locally led system should look like and how it should be achieved. Power issues were also at play, with localisation requiring that international actors relinquish their limited resources in a system hard-wired for competition.

Overall, direct funding to local actors remained extremely low as a share of international humanitarian assistance, fluctuating over the study period between a high of 3.3% and a low of 1.2%. After small but steady increases since commitments in 2016, both indirect and direct funding to L/NNGOs declined in 2021 to around 1.5% of all international humanitarian funding. A significant barrier was the concern among donors and INGOs that L/NNGOs would be unable to meet expectations for accountability and compliance, and the lack of support for strengthening the systems required to do so. Donors also noted the administrative challenges of managing multiple smaller grants to L/NNGOs. Meanwhile, among local actors, there was growing concern about not only the quantity of funding but also the quality; slow, sporadic funding and limited overheads can hinder local actors even as their access to resources increases. Performance in this regard was mixed: research undertaken by NEAR for this edition of the SOHS noted that some L/NNGOs received overhead and organisational costs, but other evidence suggests that this was not consistently available within or between responses. And in the limited number of cases where international agencies receive flexible,

59 DA Global, *Is Aid Really Changing? What the COVID-19 Response Tells Us about Localisation, Decolonisation and the Humanitarian System* (London: British Red Cross, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/is-aid-really-changing-what-the-covid-19-response-tells-us-about-localisation

60 Hugo Slim, 'Is racism part of our reluctance to localise humanitarian action?', *Humanitarian Practice Network*, 5 June 2022, www.alnap.org/help-library/is-racism-part-of-our-reluctance-to-localise-humanitarian-action; Paul Currian, 'Decolonising aid, again', *The New Humanitarian*, 13 July 2021, www.alnap.org/help-library/decolonising-aid-again-%E2%80%9Cthe-unfinished-business-of-decolonisation-is-the-original-%E2%80%9C

61 Smruti Patel, 'Localisation, racism and decolonisation: Hollow talk or real look in the mirror?', *Humanitarian Practice Network*, 29 September 2021, www.alnap.org/help-library/localisation-racism-and-decolonisation-hollow-talk-or-real-look-in-the-mirror; GHD, 'Co-Chairmanship Priorities 2021–2023', Good Humanitarian Donorship, n.d., www.alnap.org/help-library/co-chairmanship-priorities-2021-2023

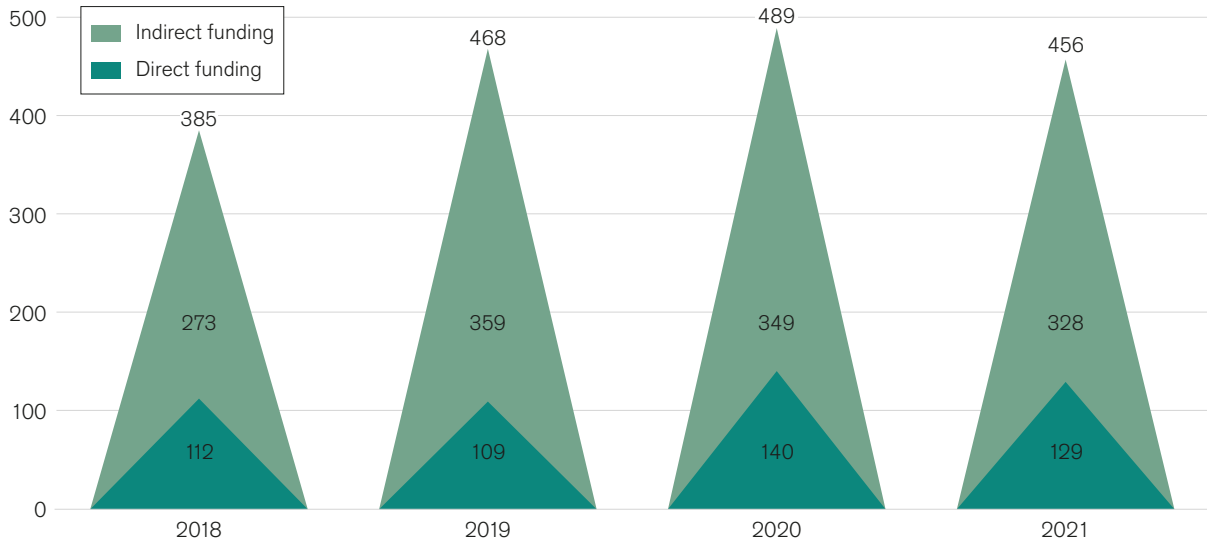
62 Charter for Change, *Annual Meeting Report 2021*.

63 On the specifics of capacity supporting LNNGO leadership, passing on direct funding and power-sharing in decision-making forums, only 36%, 21% and 27% provided a positive rating for those criteria, respectively.

multi-year funding, they rarely pass this flexibility on in their partnership agreements with local actors.⁶⁴

Figure 15: Total direct and indirect funding to national and local NGOs, 2018–2021

Direct and indirect funding to national and local actors decreased by nearly 10% in 2021 to \$129 million and \$328 million respectively. Direct funding accounted for around 40% of the share received by local and national actors in the same period.



Source: Development Initiatives based on UN OCHA FTS and UN OCHA CBPF Data Hub. Notes: Direct funding is sourced from the FTS, containing all direct funding from first-level donors, such as governments or private donors, to organisations that could be identified as national and local NGOs. Southern international NGOs, which receive funding to operate within the country they are headquartered in, are included as national NGOs. Calculations of indirect funding through country-based pooled funds (CBPFs), either as direct allocations or as sub-grants of CBPF allocations, are sourced through the UN CBPF data hub. Indirect funding from sources other than CBPFs is taken from FTS where reported as net funding received. Data is in constant 2020 prices.



Charter for Change signatories noted that the pandemic was a ‘lost opportunity’ for better joint decision-making and collective project design dwindled.

Overall, the humanitarian system’s reliance on L/NNGOs to deliver so much of the response during the height of COVID-19 restrictions did not result in a transformative rebalancing of power over the study period. Aside from a few positive examples, L/NNGOs had few opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision-making forums over the study period. Charter for Change signatories noted that the pandemic was a ‘lost opportunity’ for better joint decision-making and collective project design dwindled.⁶⁵ And although L/NNGO participation in cluster coordination mechanisms increased in 2020 (comprising 44% of membership), their presence in leadership roles remained rare – with L/NNGOs occupying just 11% of cluster co-chair positions. In several contexts, local actors felt their engagement to be largely tokenistic and not sufficiently representative of their organisations. See the case studies in Chapter 9 of the full SOHS 2022 report.

64 Key informant interviews and a survey conducted in Somalia and Turkey in 2021.

65 Charter for Change, *Charter for Change Annual Meeting Report 2021*.

Does the system use resources efficiently?



Cost effectiveness is the last criterion. We first want to make sure that whatever modality we're choosing, is feasible and is going to be the most appropriate and effective to meet the goals and objectives of the programme.

Donor representative, interviews for SOHS 2022

In the face of rising humanitarian need and overstretched financing, the imperative to spend each and every dollar efficiently has grown. Yet efficiency continues to be hard to track; figures such as cost-per-output or cost-per-aid recipient are available in some cases, but do not reflect the reality that the people experiencing greatest need are often also the most expensive to reach. More useful data, like a weighted cost-per-outcome, is either held within individual agencies or not measured at all. Over the study period, some organisations made conscious efforts to address this data gap (see box on the Dioptra tool in the full SOHS 2022 report).

Meanwhile, the continued lack of available data means that – despite strong opinions among humanitarian practitioners – it is impossible to draw firm conclusions about which aid modalities are most cost-effective. What little evidence there is suggests that cost-effectiveness is highly dependent on context. In this study period, inflation, pandemic-related supply chain issues and bureaucratic impediments in particular affected the cost effectiveness of humanitarian response. CVA seems to be the most cost-effective form of support in many contexts, but the extent of its efficiency is strongly influenced by the scale of assistance, the duration of delivery, market availability of goods and inflation.

Over the period, there were notable efforts to improve the efficiency of funding mechanisms –driven primarily by the reform efforts of Grand Bargain signatories. The COVID-19 pandemic also made the inefficiencies of long transaction chains all the more apparent, which the rise in contributions to pooled funds went some way to addressing. Some progress was made towards lightening the paperwork load, with donors and UN agencies working to harmonise reporting and due diligence requirements for partners.

In other areas, however, progress was limited. Donor practice on multiyear and flexible funding was mixed; while major multilateral agencies saw an increase in the amount multiyear funding they received, this did not increase as proportion of their annual funding.

Over the period, efficiency was supported by enhanced coordination and multi-agency response consortiums. Strong inter-agency coordination was credited with improved effectiveness in protection, education and food security; and in some responses, area-based programming led to needs



Strong inter-agency coordination was credited with improved effectiveness in protection, education and food security.

being more comprehensively met. At the same time, the impacts of *poor* coordination were also clear – particularly in the health sector. After more than 15 years, the limits of the sector-based coordination system began to show and the humanitarian system began experimenting with new models to support cross-cutting solutions. The IASC developed a new model for cash coordination and the Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement called for a review of the cluster system.

Innovation can bring improvements in both the efficiency and the effectiveness of humanitarian action. But original research for this edition of the SOHS found that agencies have only partially realised this promise. While humanitarian agencies have deployed new technologies and approaches in isolation so as to rise to the challenge of longer and more frequent crises, system-wide solutions have failed or stalled. Key challenges are under-investment, limited support for innovators and a lack of reliable monitoring and evaluation data to understand the impact of innovations.

Does the humanitarian system uphold its principles?



Our ability to save lives is determined by our presence on the ground and that is in the hands of the host government. So, many times, the cost of our presence is our silence.

INGO leader, interviews for SOHS 2022

Assertive states and a weakened multilateral system have increased the pressure on principled humanitarian action over the past decade. Looking back over the four-year study period, 45% of aid practitioners surveyed for this report said that respect for humanitarian space had declined and 24% said it had not changed. There was some normative progress – in the form of UN resolutions on starvation in conflict and humanitarian exemptions to sanctions – but beyond this, and in the words of one advocacy leader, the system was ‘in an absolute crisis of a fight for core norms’.

In the face of growing constraints, restrictions and attacks on aid, humanitarians found it ever harder to practice their ideals of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. And although they continued to pin their identity to these principles,⁶⁶ humanitarian practitioners often lacked the support and skills to make difficult judgement calls in complex

⁶⁶ According to the survey of aid workers for this edition of the SOHS, humanity and impartiality were felt to be the most important: 85% and 78% positively rated their importance, compared to 70% for neutrality and 66% for independence.

operating environments. Overall, a lack of clear policies, strategic direction and operational guidance resulted in a ‘generally poor understanding of humanitarian principles across the whole humanitarian community.’⁶⁷

Agencies often defaulted to an ‘access at all costs’ approach in heavily controlled contexts, accepting increasing constraints and compromises to its principles as the price of securing permission to operate. Evaluations suggested that decisions were not backed up by organisational inclination or staff capacity to strategically weigh up the implications.⁶⁸ Fear of expulsion had a chilling effect on the sector’s collective willingness to speak out about abuses of civilians and blocks on aid; the humanitarian voice became more and more muted, drawing criticism from civil society activists that neutrality was being used as a cover for silence. This country-level reticence reflected a decline in vocal solidarity on the global stage. There were, however, new efforts by humanitarian agencies to join forces with experienced advocates from other sectors. For example, protection advocates noted a new creative pragmatism around working with human rights actors that sought to minimise operational risks while maximising the impact of their advocacy.

Although most international donors claim to be guided by humanitarian principles, humanitarian funding is often informed by and entwined with foreign policy and domestic objectives. The new UN Emergency Relief Coordinator noted that humanitarian agencies should not be in thrall to their funders:



Donors are giving a massive amount of money and along with this comes their political views. We shouldn’t be surprised at this, but we should be able to disagree with them.⁶⁹

However, disunity among agencies, competition for limited funds and a lack of clear boundaries, undermined efforts to push back against politicised aid.

67 Nick Maunder et al., *Evaluation of WFP’s Corporate Emergency Response in Northeast Nigeria (2016-2018)* (Rome: WFP, 2019), 38, www.alnap.org/help-library/evaluation-of-wfps-corporate-emergency-response-in-northeast-nigeria-2016-2018.

68 Maunder et al., *Corporate Emergency Response*; Andy Featherstone, *Evaluation of the Coverage and Quality of the UNICEF Humanitarian Response in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies* (New York: UNICEF, 2019), 51, www.alnap.org/help-library/evaluation-of-the-coverage-and-quality-of-the-unicef-humanitarian-response-in-complex; Steets et al., *Evaluation of WFP Policies*

69 ODI, ‘Humanitarian Action in 2021: Tensions, Trade-Offs and Dilemmas’ (Event), ODI, 3 December 2021, www.alnap.org/help-library/humanitarian-action-in-2021-tensions-trade-offs-and-dilemmas

Focus on active conflict



Syria is in its tenth year . . . And in every year, the humanitarian delivery to the people of Syria gets less and less. And the poverty levels of the people of Syria gets more and more. We need to look at how to move away from that.

Martin Griffiths interviewed by Heba Aly
for the 'Rethinking Humanitarianism' podcast,
26 January 2022

Conflict continued to drive the majority of humanitarian need. Of the 30 humanitarian response plans in 2021, 27 were for countries with active conflicts, and there were a further eight refugee response plans to support people fleeing conflict.⁷⁰ As multiple threats collided, hunger and disease were often a greater threat to life than direct attack. Across the five countries at greatest risk of famine during 2018–2021,⁷¹ a common factor was violent conflict.

The mapping of humanitarian presence within conflicts remains imprecise. Access constraints limit the number of agencies and programmes operating, particularly in areas outside state control. And although aid does get through – against the odds and often at high costs and with considerable risk – there is little analysis of its positive or negative impacts in such intense settings.

While significant advances have been made in anticipating and preparing for disasters, major escalations in conflicts remain harder to predict. There were promising examples of early action, with some success, including in Northern Nigeria and DRC,⁷² but this was not happening at scale. In Afghanistan, most agencies had no preparedness plan for the anticipated withdrawal of US troops and were shocked by the speed of the Taliban takeover. In Ethiopia, the aid system struggled to step back from its close development relationship with the government in order to respond swiftly and adequately to Tigray conflict; one senior practitioner described it as 'the worst response in decades' (see our [case study on Ethiopia](#) in the full SOHS 2022 report).

70 This is an increase from the start of the study period – in 2018, there were 24 HRPs for conflict-affected countries, and 4 RRP.

71 Yemen, South Sudan, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Ethiopia.

72 Marilise Turnbull, Lezlie Morinière and Arielle Tozier de la Poterie, *Start Fund: Evaluation of Crisis Anticipation* (Start Network, 2020) www.alnap.org/help-library/start-fund-crisis-anticipation-evaluation-2016-2019

Does the system connect with longer term priorities?



Donors used to ask, “What are you doing to meet needs?’ Now the question is ‘What are you doing about the nexus?’

INGO practitioner, interviews for SOHS 2022

Between 2018 and 2021, the humanitarian system stepped up its efforts to address the age-old problem of trying to meet people’s highly connected needs with disconnected aid. With the agreement of the OECD DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus in 2019, the term ‘nexus’ graduated from short-hand jargon to an official framework, giving impetus to internal and inter-agency efforts to ‘join the dots’. Several donors strengthened the links between their teams and funding streams, with some undertaking structural changes and investments. Global initiatives were launched to create a cadre of ‘trilingual’ staff that would be able to build connections between approaches. At country level, new nexus working groups joined up their analysis of short- and long-term needs and developed ‘collective outcomes’ for communities facing crisis and risk. By the end of 2021, at least 10 countries⁷³ had some form of nexus coordination structure involving UN leadership at some stage of evolution.

Yet it was hard to know how much of a transformative effect this step-change had for the system – or for risk-affected people. Humanitarian agencies did begin to look at their own performance, and a new body of nexus evaluations started to emerge, but so far these have tended to focus on single-agency process rather than collective results. The view from practitioners was not positive – two-thirds of SOHS survey respondents felt that the system was doing a ‘Fair’ or ‘Poor’ job of connectedness and nearly three-quarters rated progress in strengthening the nexus as ‘Fair’ or ‘Poor’. Staff at all levels said that they found the policy debate abstract and were unclear on what the nexus means, both in theory and in practice.

The introduction of the peace pillar appears to have exacerbated this confusion. And despite efforts at clarification,⁷⁴ it remained a source of contention – especially where the international community is engaged in militarised stabilisation efforts. New IASC nexus guidance helped to distinguish between context types – and thus the space for coordination

73 Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Colombia, DRC, Jordan, Libya, Niger, Ukraine and Somalia (planned).

74 See, e.g., IASC (2020), which makes the distinction between ‘big P’ peacekeeping and political peace processes, and ‘little p’ peace-building processes – IASC, *Exploring Peace within the Humanitarian-Peace-Development Nexus* (Geneva: IASC and OPAG, 2020) www.alnap.org/help-library/exploring-peace-within-the-humanitarian-peace-development-nexus



Aid practitioners responding to our survey saw the prevailing model of short-term funding as by far the largest barrier they saw to realising the nexus.

with state bodies.⁷⁵ But, as events in Ethiopia and Burkina Faso showed, this space was precarious. As one commentator put it, ‘The problem of problem states hasn’t been solved’.⁷⁶

Many donors were still unable to join up their own aid efforts. According to an OECD survey, more than half of DAC donor member respondents did not think or know that their organisation was able to avoid fragmented, siloed or inappropriately short-term funding.⁷⁷ Aid practitioners responding to our survey saw the prevailing model of short-term funding as by far the largest barrier they saw to realising the nexus. But the volume of aid was also a serious challenge: struggling with immediate shortfalls, agencies often had little space to make long-term connections.⁷⁸ Pressures on overall aid budgets also meant that many actors saw the nexus as a zero-sum game. There were fears on both humanitarian and development sides that a nexus approach could divert funds away from their core business.

While the process of developing collective outcomes brought key players together, their value as a practical framework for collective action remained unclear. They risked remaining an umbrella for existing or disparate programming rather than driving real systemic or programmatic change. The lack of monitoring processes meant that there was no joint accountability for these collective outcomes and little incentive for achieving them.

75 These include ‘constrained’ settings, where state authorities are unwilling to uphold obligations to their populations and limit international engagement; ‘capacity-driven’ settings, where there is state willingness but limited capacity and budget support; and ‘consultative’ settings, where authorities are willing and have capacity but where there is emergent peace or active conflict.

76 Joanna Macrae, *Linking Thinking: Why Is It So Hard and What Can We Do about It?* (Netherlands: KUNO, 2019) www.alnap.org/help-library/linking-thinking-why-is-it-so-hard-and-what-can-we-do-about-it

77 OECD, *The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus Interim Progress Review* (Paris: OECD, 2022) www.alnap.org/help-library/the-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-interim-progress-review

78 Lydia Poole with Vance Culbert, *Financing the Nexus: Gaps and Opportunities from a Field Perspective* (Rome/Oslo/New York: FAO, NRC, UNDP, 2019) <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/financing-the-nexus-gaps-and-opportunities-from-a-field-perspective>

Conclusion

Snapshot: Assessing humanitarian performance against the ALNAP/DAC criteria



I'm always telling my teams let's pull up our socks, so when at the end of the year you see how we could serve so many more people in an ethical way, that really motivates staff which is important and it also helps us understand our potential.

NGO leader, interviews for 2022 SOHS



As the full 2022 SOHS report describes in detail, the conditions for delivering effective, efficient and principled humanitarian assistance grew considerably more difficult over 2018–2021.

Since the publication of the pilot study in 2010, ALNAP has provided regular assessments of the humanitarian system's performance using the DAC evaluation criteria. There have now been five editions of the report, including the 2010 pilot, spanning a 15 year period (the 2010 pilot covered performance from 2007-2009).

While we broadened the scope of assessment for this report (see [Box 1](#) on methodology), we continued to use the ALNAP/DAC criteria as a key part of our assessment of the performance of the system, to support comparability. The assessment against the criteria should not be read as a summary of all findings in the 2022 SOHS but rather a snapshot of performance against a specific sub-set of issues.

Overall, compared to the previous period (2015–2017), between January 2018 and December 2021 there was distribution of mixed progress, partial progress and decline. Though perhaps not the scale of improvement that many would hope to see, it might be regarded as an achievement given the external challenges faced by the system. As the full report describes in detail, the conditions for delivering effective, efficient and principled humanitarian assistance grew considerably more difficult over 2018–2021.

Key: performance assessment summaries



Improvement

Clear progress made in policy and/or country-level implementation



Partial progress

Slight or small improvements made, typically in policy or perception rather than implementation or outcome



Mixed progress

Clear improvements made, but also clear declines in other areas



Decline

Clear decline in policy and/or country-level implementation













No change

Level of performance on this criterion remains largely the same as in the previous SOHS

Performance area	Summary	2012 SOHS (2010–2011)	2015 SOHS (2012–2014)	2018 SOHS (2015–2017)	2022 SOHS (2018–2021)
Sufficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite increases in international humanitarian aid, there was not the same growth as in the previous period, and levels have not kept pace with the near-quadrupling over the past decade of the global requirements set out in humanitarian appeals. The COVID-19 pandemic drove a peak in requirements in the 2020 UN-coordinated humanitarian appeals, but little more than half of these were met – a new low. On average, levels of funding to appeals were lower than in the previous periods. While several major donors increased their contributions, others made significant cuts. Despite previous attention to the importance of diversifying funding sources, this has not translated into a shift away from reliance on a few donors for the bulk of humanitarian aid. Aid recipients' views showed a decline in sufficiency, and both recipients and aid practitioners noted insufficient aid as the biggest barrier to support. 				
Coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response to the sharp increase in needs due to COVID-19 meant that more people were reached with humanitarian assistance, signalling some progress. In 2021 and 2020, the system reached around 70% of those it targeted for aid. There is no comparable data for the previous period, but the system is paying more attention to estimating its reach. Crisis-affected people expressed significant concerns about aid not reaching those most in need, citing concerns about targeting decisions and aid diversion. Access constraints seemed to worsen, including government-imposed impediments, making it more difficult and costly to reach affected communities. Attacks against aid workers rose by 54%, particularly affecting national staff. Sanctions and counter-terrorism measures continued to block aid in some contexts. Efforts to ensure equitable reach to women, older people and people with disabilities resulted in better frameworks, tools and visibility. However, the system has little data on how well it is doing on inclusiveness. 				

- Summary
- Introduction
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- Part 3: How is it working?
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Performance area	Summary	2012 SOHS (2010–2011)	2015 SOHS (2012–2014)	2018 SOHS (2015–2017)	2022 SOHS (2018–2021)
Relevance and appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proportion of aid recipients who felt that aid met their priority needs declined since the last report. Aid practitioners however continue to believe that this is their strongest area of performance. Improvements in multi-sectoral analysis have enabled the system to better understand people's priorities, but evidence of efforts by humanitarian actors to adapt or design what they offer on the basis of recipients' views continues to be limited. In the COVID-19 response, the system adapted to provide a largely relevant and appropriate health response, but there was evidence that the pandemic skewed attention away from people's other priority needs. There has been further focus on tailoring aid to better support women, older people, and people living with disabilities, and this has translated into a mix of improved practice and simplistic application. The marked increase in cash assistance has surpassed expectations and led to improvements in relevance in some areas, although it still accounts for only around a fifth of humanitarian aid and is not universally preferred by or appropriate for aid recipients. 	 Improvement	 No change	 Partial progress	 Mixed progress
Accountability and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consultation, participation and feedback continue to be strongly linked to aid recipients' perceptions of the relevance, dignity and effectiveness of aid. While agencies continued to gradually increase their use of feedback mechanisms, these are not seen as being used effectively to influence decision-making. Both the 2015 and 2018 editions of the SOHS found that 'while there are a number of initiatives and approaches that show potential, they have not yet delivered greater accountability or participation'. Despite increased attention to accountability to affected populations (AAP) issues in the past four years, this finding still holds. COVID-19 provided a challenging context for communication and feedback with affected populations due to the shift to remote formats. Some agencies used the pandemic to strengthen ties with communities by enlisting community members as proxies for face-to-face messaging. While meaningful accountability mechanisms for affected populations remain elusive, there were positive developments in the form of high-level acknowledgement of the need to strengthen AAP and in the improvements made to PSEAH mechanisms. 	N/A	N/A	 Partial progress	 Mixed progress
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The availability and use of mortality data in crisis settings is poor, inhibiting an understanding of the degree to which humanitarian action delivers on its primary mission to save lives. However, there was some evidence that the system contributed to reduced mortality in some contexts. The system has made some progress on programming for gender-based violence and child protection. However, coordination structures for protection remained largely ineffective. Protection was overlooked during the COVID-19 response and the system was unable to meet the scale of protection needs in contexts of displacement and conflict. There was evidence of improved wellbeing and other outcomes for people in crisis, particularly in the food security, nutrition and education sectors, as well as in cash modalities and in early mobilisation of the COVID-19 health response. Increases in the use of preparedness and early action led to improved timeliness in a range of settings but remain a small proportion of overall humanitarian assistance. There were continued sector-specific attempts to improve the quality of humanitarian response, yet evaluations noted ongoing challenges with meeting quality standards. 	 Mixed progress	 Mixed progress	 Improvement	 Partial progress

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Performance area	Summary	2012 SOHS (2010–2011)	2015 SOHS (2012–2014)	2018 SOHS (2015–2017)	2022 SOHS (2018–2021)
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As the system's estimates of the number of people needing humanitarian assistance have increased, so too have its investments in building longer-term efficiency into humanitarian response, with examples ranging from improvements to funding mechanisms to changes in coordination mechanisms and investment in multi-agency and digital cash payment systems. The ongoing lack of robust data on costs and outcomes means that assessments of efficiency remain largely qualitative, limiting the ability to fully determine how much progress is being made with new reforms. Five years of Grand Bargain implementation have delivered meaningful improvements to several drivers of inefficiency in the system, but progress remains limited, both in the number of actors engaged in these initiatives and in the overall proportion of international humanitarian assistance affected by them. 	 No change	 Partial progress	 Partial progress	 Partial progress
Connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant shifts in policy frameworks on the humanitarian–development–peace triple nexus have marked a step forward in connecting the humanitarian system with approaches to longer-term risk and vulnerability. This normative shift has yet to translate beyond programmatic examples of good practice into system-wide results and observable change for affected people. Evidence so far has focused on process rather than outcomes, while aid recipients continued to report a desire for aid that better enables self-sufficiency and resilience. Investments have been made in improving connections between humanitarian, development and peace staffing and structures, with new ways of working within donors and country teams. But aid practitioners still reported confusion about what the triple nexus meant, and tensions over how to apply it. New crises challenged nexus aspirations: connectedness in the COVID-19 response was patchy rather than strategic, and the swing back to humanitarian aid in Afghanistan highlighted how the 'problem of problem states' has yet to be solved. 	 Improvement	 Partial progress	 Improvement	 Partial progress
Coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners continue to attach great importance to the humanitarian principles, yet often lack the skills and support to apply them in complex settings. Assertive states and weakened multilateral meant that pressures on the space for principled humanitarian action increased over the past 10 years. Government-imposed restrictions and blocks on aid were cited as the primary constraint to access by humanitarian practitioners, and declining respect for international humanitarian law and refugee law was widely reported. Humanitarians' ability to handle trade-offs between their own principles was tested, with many accepting increasing compromises as the price for operating in heavily controlled contexts, including Syria and Ethiopia. There were policy bright spots, such as the passage of UN Resolution 2417 on starvation in conflict, as well as innovative advocacy collaborations. Overall, however, the risk of expulsion and a decline in avenues for influence were felt to have had a chilling effect on humanitarians' willingness and ability to call for respect for principles and rights. 	 Decline	 No change	 Decline	 Decline

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Performance area	Summary	2012 SOHS (2010–2011)	2015 SOHS (2012–2014)	2018 SOHS (2015–2017)	2022 SOHS (2018–2021)
Complementarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change in this area has been incremental and uneven, despite the attention to ‘decolonising’ the aid sector and the opportunity provided by the COVID-19 pandemic to shift towards a more locally led model. Compared to how the system viewed and engaged with local actors a decade ago, there is now a widespread recognition that local leadership is a goal for the system to work towards, but implementing the commitments made on localisation has been more difficult than some actors have anticipated. In several contexts, international agencies continue to side-line or undermine national actors and compete for resources, using risk and capacity concerns as reasons for the slow shift to localise. In other contexts, local actors are excluded from response planning altogether. In a significant shift from the 2018 study period, the relationship between governments and INGOs in particular has declined, and the relationship with UN agencies become more challenging, as national governments attempt to exert more influence over targeting and the use of humanitarian resources. While COVID-19 provided opportunities for more positive partnerships with crisis-affected states in some contexts, in others the pandemic was used as the basis for further restrictions on humanitarian actors, causing increasingly strained relations. 	N/A	N/A	Improvement 	Mixed progress 

For some it is a source of frustration that the system has not moved forward faster. Others, meanwhile, note the internal and external factors that make slow and non-linear progress understandable. The fact that performance largely stayed the same, and in some areas slightly improved, can therefore be regarded as a positive accomplishment, but not a reason for complacency, especially in the face of new challenges in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and its wider impacts on other humanitarian crises.

Is the humanitarian system fit for the future?

“What is a humanitarian organisation when the world is in such a crisis? Can the humanitarian sector overall evolve at a pace to remain relevant, given what climate change and other threats are bringing to the fore?”

Climate and environment lead in a humanitarian organisation, interviews for SOHS 2022

When the UN marked its 75th anniversary in 2021, the Secretary-General pointed to the continued erosion of international norms and threat to global solidarity on upholding people’s fundamental rights. A clear message emerging from our review of the past four years is that the basic principles that underpin and enable humanitarian action are under stress. And while none of this is new, the evidence suggests it is worsening, with a quick reversal of recent trends unlikely.

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Right-sizing the humanitarian system for the future will demand much more than an increase in resources and efficiency; it is likely also to demand a re-evaluation – and a reassertion – of its ambitions, its scope and its role in relation to others.

At the same time, global system risks are accelerating and hyperconnected systems mean that ‘everyone is living downstream of something else’.⁷⁹ Climate change is a clear driver of this systemic risk, creating cascading effects that cross geographic, political and sectoral boundaries. The face of conflict is also changing, and the ‘world is moving closer to the brink of instability, where the risks we face are no longer managed effectively through the systems we have’.⁸⁰

Humanitarians are used to dealing with disruption, uncertainty and large-scale needs – it is their operational milieu. Despite being rife with self-critique, the system has proven repeatedly that it can be flexible and successful in facing major new challenges as it supports people through crises. There have been notable improvements and humanitarians are able to see and respond to risk in more sophisticated ways. But the extent to which these advances prepare the system for the potential magnitude of the challenges ahead is questionable. Today’s humanitarian system may have grown and evolved from that of 15 years ago, but its basic model can be unwieldy and highly resistant to change.

While the system has continued to grow, financing has plateaued in recent years, suggesting that future expansion is by no means a given – especially in the context of global economic slowdown.⁸¹ Even at current levels, there are significant shortfalls. An increasing humanitarian caseload will intensify dilemmas between reaching the most people or the people most in need in a way that better takes account of their views.

Right-sizing the humanitarian system for the future will demand much more than an increase in resources and efficiency; it is likely also to demand a re-evaluation – and a reassertion – of its ambitions, its scope and its role in relation to others. Finding the right balance between scaling up and letting go will demand conscious effort by all stakeholders. While localisation and decolonisation were by far the biggest ‘fit for the future’ issues identified by respondents to our survey, these changes are likely to be slower and more contested than what some desire. Becoming fit for the future demands both deep humility and high ambition on the part of the humanitarian system. As one recipient of local aid in Venezuela put it: ‘It is not the idea that only humanitarian organisations are acting in our country. The idea would be to grow all together, to continue with our humanitarian intention to help the weakest and to strengthen all of us as a society.’

79 UNDRR, *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2022: Our World at Risk – Transforming Governance for a Resilient Future* (Geneva: UNDRR, 2022) www.alnap.org/help-library/global-assessment-report-on-disaster-risk-reduction-2022-our-world-at-risk-transforming

80 UN, *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: United Nations, 2021) www.alnap.org/help-library/our-common-agenda-%E2%80%93-report-of-the-secretary-general

81 The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reduced its forecast of global growth in 2022 by 0.8 percentage points to 3.6%. See: UNDRR, *Our World at Risk*, 9.

**Previous editions
of *The State of
the Humanitarian
System* report**

2018 SOHS

2015 SOHS

2012 SOHS

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