

BRIEFING PAPER TWO

**GOOD HUMANITARIAN
ACTION MEETS THE
PRIORITIES AND
RESPECTS THE
DIGNITY OF CRISIS-
AFFECTED PEOPLE**



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The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?

The aim of the Global Forum is to identify recommendations that will help the international system become more adaptable to different crisis contexts, thereby making overall humanitarian action more effective. To support these discussions, these Background Papers:

- Outline how the international system is performing against various criteria of effective humanitarian action
- Identify the key obstacles to improvement on each criterion of effective action
- Present the recommendations that have been put forward around the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) process to address these obstacles

Each paper's title describes a **success criterion** for humanitarian action. These are different ideas of what effective humanitarian action looks like. The seven success criteria were identified through a two-stage review of the evaluative research on humanitarian performance and the recommendations put forward for the World Humanitarian Summit process (for more detail, please see the accompanying paper: 'The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?').

WHAT IS THIS SUCCESS CRITERION ABOUT? WHY DOES IT MATTER?

These sections give a brief description of the success criterion and the different views on why this is important for good humanitarian action.

HOW WELL DOES HUMANITARIAN ACTION PERFORM AGAINST THIS SUCCESS CRITERION?

This section provides an overview of what is going well and what is not with respect to each success criterion. It draws on evidence to identify the degree to which the criterion is being met in current humanitarian action. The primary source of evidence for this section in each paper is the 2015 State of the Humanitarian System

(SOHS) report, and it should be assumed that this is the key reference unless cited otherwise. This section also introduces the key obstacles to improvement, which are bolded in the text. These key obstacles are also derived from the 2015 SOHS, as well as from other research and evaluation on humanitarian action.

KEY OBSTACLES

This section is a summary list of the key obstacles described in each paper as inhibiting better performance against the criterion.

KEY OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides a list of the recommendations which seek to address the key obstacles and so to improve humanitarian action with respect to each success criterion. These recommendations have been synthesised from over 700 recommendations across 39 position papers, WHS consultation reports and the work of the WHS Thematic Teams (see 'The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?' for more detail). They reflect the different recommendation areas external organisations have put forward and have been clustered according to the obstacles they seek to address. The aim of the synthesis is to accurately reflect the range of views and ideas for reform, and to connect these ideas to an evidence base on how the humanitarian system is performing. This means some synthesised recommendations may conflict with one another, or may not be mutually achievable, as there remains a lack of consensus among humanitarian actors on how best to improve humanitarian action.

ANNEXES

The annex to each paper (provided in a single-bound document to Global Forum participants) provides the full set of raw recommendations used in the synthesis, showing where these recommendations were clustered.

GOOD HUMANITARIAN ACTION MEETS THE PRIORITIES AND RESPECTS THE DIGNITY OF CRISIS-AFFECTED PEOPLE

1. WHAT IS THIS SUCCESS CRITERION ABOUT?

- Tailoring assistance to address needs and vulnerabilities for specific populations and contexts.
- Understanding the needs of different types of people, understanding how affected people prioritise these needs and adapting to meet these priorities as they evolve.
- Ensuring affected people are able to participate in decisions related to assistance and hold humanitarian actors accountable for decisions made on their behalf.
- While proximity and access are important for meeting the priorities of affected people, these issues are addressed in Paper 1: 'Reaching everyone in need'.

2. WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In a large-scale crisis, people may need food, safe water, health care, protection services, information or any combination of different types of support. The needs of different groups within a population also vary: girls and boys, the elderly and women and men, for example, may have unique needs. Under these circumstances, it is important that the needs and priorities of crisis-affected people be understood as they evolve and change over time, that any assistance they receive meets their needs and priorities and that it does so in such a way as to respect their dignity and humanity.

More broadly, international assistance should recognise the dignity and agency of people caught up in crises, recognise their own coping strategies and provide assistance in a way that does no harm. To do this, it must involve vulnerable and affected people in decisions about the nature of the support they receive. Where this is not possible, a minimum expectation should be that they are able to hold humanitarian actors to account for decisions made on their behalf.

3. HOW WELL DOES HUMANITARIAN ACTION PERFORM AGAINST THIS SUCCESS CRITERION?

Overall, 27% of participants in the State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) survey of crisis-affected people said they felt the aid they had received was relevant, in that it addressed their priority needs at the time. A greater proportion, 46%, said it was partially relevant and 25% said it was not relevant. When asked where the humanitarian system needed to improve, more survey respondents chose 'Provide the type of aid that is most needed' than any other area. Perceptions of relevance among aid recipients has declined from the prior survey (2012), in which 33% reported that aid was fully relevant to their priority needs. Surveys conducted for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) consultation in the Middle East and North Africa suggested that, on a 10-point scale, recipients of humanitarian assistance felt this assistance generally did not meet their priority needs (2.3/10 Yemen to 4.6/10 Palestinian Territories).ⁱ The WHS stakeholder consultation for Eastern and Southern Africa reported that only 27% of recipients of humanitarian assistance felt the aid they received was useful and appropriate.ⁱⁱ

There is a lack of sufficient data on needs.

Humanitarian programmes are not designed to address, and do not report on, the specific needs of particular groups.

Specific priority needs, such as protection and education are not being met.

Addressing specific needs and vulnerabilities

In both the 2012 and the 2015 SOHS surveys, aid recipients in natural disasters (e.g. Haiti, Philippines) were on average more positive about the relevance of aid than they were in protracted emergencies (Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Pakistan, Uganda). This may reflect the impact of the duration of unmet needs on overall wellbeing. It may also point to the more complex and longer-term nature of needs among populations in protracted crises (e.g. housing solutions, livelihoods, protection, children's education). Humanitarian actors do not devote the same level of resources and capacities to such needs; in addition, their positioning at the divide between relief and development has more meaning for aid providers than it does for affected populations.ⁱⁱⁱ

In contrast to the views of aid recipients, aid actors were fairly positive about their ability to prioritise and 'address the most urgent needs'. In 2015, respondents to the survey of aid actors rated performance in this area as poor in 11% of cases, fair in 38% of cases, good in 41% of cases and excellent in 9% of cases. This is a similar finding to the 2012 survey (poor – 13%, fair – 39%, good – 44%, excellent – 5%).

Differences between the views of aid recipients and aid practitioners may be a result of practitioners being more aware of the financial limitations of assistance, and so having lower expectations of what can be supplied, than do the people affected by crisis. However, this discrepancy may itself be an illustration of the lack of understanding of the real needs of crisis-affected people: practitioners are more likely to think they have got it right if they are unaware of what are the real priorities and needs are. In either case, this argues for improved communication between aid organisations and the people for whom they work (See below).

Among the most important elements in ensuring priority needs are met are the needs and capacity assessments conducted by humanitarian agencies at the onset of a crisis. The quality of assessments has improved significantly since 2007, but **there remain insufficient data overall on needs and capacities**. Shortcomings in assessments were identified as a key obstacle to meeting the needs and priorities of affected people by the SOHS 2015 as well as the WHS stakeholder consultations for Eastern and Southern Africa (in which 26% surveyed said the main constraint to meeting needs was lack of knowledge around

true needs) and North and South-East Asia (lack of information on needs in conflict settings was identified as the main constraint to an effective response).

ⁱⁱⁱ Coordination of assessments is still weak in many contexts, and, despite years of work on the Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA) tool, it has not been consistently used or is not reliably timely and useful. As a result, agencies conduct overlapping assessments that cannot easily be synthesised and tend to focus on 'one-off' assessments rather than on the collection of information related to needs over the course of the crisis.^v Questions have also been raised around the independence and objectivity of assessments conducted by humanitarian agencies.

A further challenge, and one that goes beyond assessments, lies in **understanding and responding to the needs of specific population groups**. While most humanitarian guidelines call for the collection and use of data on the specific needs of different groups (and particularly of women, men, children and the elderly), these data are seldom collected. Even when they are, most agencies and clusters are not clear on how to use them in the design of programmes.^{vi} A recent review of humanitarian funding according to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC's) Gender Marker showed around 60% was uncoded^{vii} (so it is not possible to say whether the funding considered and responded to different gender needs and capacities equally). This may reflect challenges with the measurement approach, which may not be sensitive enough to pick up on the points that matter to key groups, as well as attitudes of practitioners regarding the importance of such an exercise. In the survey of humanitarian actors, 18% thought their agency did a 'poor' job in taking account of the needs of gender, age and disability and 42% a 'fair' job; 39% thought their agency did a 'good' or 'excellent' job.^{viii}

In addition, humanitarian agencies seem to find difficulty in **addressing certain specific priority needs**, such as protection, education and shelter. Part of this difficulty stems from a lack of funding: the SOHS survey and interviews show affected people see education as a priority (particularly in protracted emergencies) but only 40% of appeal requirements were met in 2013. Similarly, in 2013, at a time when protection crises dominated the humanitarian caseload, protection was the least funded activity, with just 30% of requirements in appeals funded. However, in some cases, the failure of responses to meet these needs may stem from a lack of technical capacity and skills in humanitarian agencies,

a lack of tested programming options; or from certain priority needs, such as protection services, which may not be adequately placed at the heart of humanitarian action because it is considered easier to deliver on more perceivably tangible outputs.

This may in turn reflect the structure of international humanitarian aid: certain areas that fall within the mandates of large agencies tend to be well served; others that 'fall through the cracks' receive less attention. The **'supply side' orientation of aid (giving people what agencies are able and structured to provide, rather than supporting their own efforts to recover)** may therefore explain why priority needs are not being met.

Meeting priorities through participation and accountability

In theory, agencies can ensure they understand and meet the priority needs of crisis-affected people through two related mechanisms: their *direct participation* in decision-making around humanitarian programmes or *accountability mechanisms* through which they can hold agencies to account for decisions made on their behalf. These two mechanisms – often thought of under the single heading of 'accountability' – are held to improve the performance of humanitarian programmes – although, surprisingly, evidence around the causal relationship between participation and humanitarian performance is still fairly limited.^x At least as importantly, for many agencies, these mechanisms enhance the dignity and humanity of people caught up in crises, and so should be a core element of any principled humanitarian response. In certain contexts, however, participation may be challenging because it requires a type of engagement over time that humanitarian actors are not used to doing. It can also take more time, present tensions with expert opinion and engage humanitarian agencies in local politics and cultural issues.^{xi}

The area of consultation/participation is one that has seen a fair amount of attention over the three years covered by the SOHS 2015, but survey responses suggest there is still much to achieve. A total of 44% of respondents in the survey of affected people said they had not been consulted on their needs prior to distribution; 33% said they had been consulted.ⁱⁱ The WHS Eastern and Southern Africa stakeholder consultation reported that only 12% of affected people thought their feedback had been taken into account at least to some extent; the West and Central Africa

The structure and processes of the system do not support the participation of affected people in humanitarian decision-making and priority-setting.

Current approaches and delivery mechanisms of humanitarian aid decrease the agency of affected people.

stakeholder consultation identified accountability to communities as one of the most important factors to ensure effective humanitarian action in the region.^{xii} The importance of engagement and participation practices to aid recipients was expressed in the SOHS surveys in other ways. In terms of where the humanitarian system most needs to improve, after ‘Provide the aid that is most needed’ the second and third highest ranked responses from recipients were ‘Be more respectful of our customs’ and ‘Listen to us more’. In the survey conducted as part of the Middle East and North Africa consultation, ratings for consultation were between 1.7 out of 10 (Lebanon) and 3.7 out of 10 (Palestinian Territories).^{xiv} In the same survey, women in Lebanon gave scores of 2.0 out of 10 for the degree to which they and their communities were treated with respect and dignity. Men in the Palestinian Territories gave scores of 5.6 out of 10.

There appear to be a number of obstacles to improved participation of crisis-affected people in decision-making, including, at the operational level, skills and attitudes of humanitarian workers; costs (particularly in time) of consultation and participation; local social and cultural norms related to the role and capacities of certain groups; and the requirement to create context- and site-specific mechanisms for participation.^{xv} These commonly cited obstacles point to the **overall structure and processes of the system as an overarching obstacle to the participation of affected people in humanitarian decision-making and priority setting**. At a higher level, this obstacle stems from a general tradition of relative inflexibility in humanitarian funding, which prevents changes being made on the basis of local priorities and decisions once a programme has commenced,^{xvi} **as well as programming approaches that minimise the choices and agency of affected people** and limit input from affected people to project, rather than strategy, level.^{xvii} This is supported by the Listening Project, which interviewed over 6,000 aid recipients and found that the way agencies interacted with them diminished their agency and self-confidence.^{xviii}

Proposed solutions to these obstacles tend to concentrate on ensuring humanitarian agencies include crisis-affected people in decision-making on humanitarian programmes (through improved training of staff, policy initiatives or techniques and standards, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard). Solutions also focus on using programming approaches that increase the choice and agency of people in crises, by – for example – providing cash with which people can buy

Affected people often do not have the information to make informed choices or to hold agencies to account.

the items they feel they need most, or by rebuilding key local infrastructure that supports agency, such as information and communication technologies (ICTs) and banking services. The WHS Thematic Teams have developed the concept of subsidiarity to frame several of their recommendations on these issues. Subsidiarity reflects the idea that international humanitarian actors ought to focus on filling gaps in pre-existing capacities, not just at a state-wide level (as addressed in Paper 4), but also at a more fundamental level in their work with crisis-affected individuals.^x [endnote citation here, see below] The concept of subsidiarity turns the issue of participation around to become a question of how international humanitarian actors can participate in the process of relief and recovery led by crisis-affected people, who have their own abilities and coping strategies.^{xix}

With respect to accountability, 19% of respondents in the SOHS poll said they had been able to give opinions and make complaints to aid agencies; 44% had not. Although aid agencies have put significant resources into feedback and complaints mechanisms in recent years, these results suggest more work is required in this area. Part of this work relates to clarifying the relative accountability of international actors and the state in responding to emergencies. It is also important to ensure **affected people have information about the situation and programmes** so they know what agencies should be accountable for. Even where feedback and complaints mechanisms are in place, **agencies do not pay the price for poor programming, due to a lack of effective sanctions** for individuals or organisations that do not meet the legitimate expectations of populations. The lack of effective sanction mechanisms may be a contributing factor to the slowness of agencies in incorporating the views of affected people into changes in strategy. This may also be partially a result of the focus towards responding to individual complaints rather than tackling higher-level changes to project design and implementation.^{xx}

4. KEY OBSTACLES

1

There is a lack of sufficient data on needs.

2

Humanitarian programmes are not designed to address, and do not report on, the specific needs of particular groups.

3

Specific priority needs, such as protection and education are not being met.

4

Humanitarian organisation and programmes are better adapted to provide 'supply-side' solutions than to meet demands from affected people.

5

The structures and processes of the system do not support the participation of affected people in humanitarian decision-making and priority-setting.

6

Current approaches and delivery mechanisms of humanitarian aid decrease the agency of affected people.

7

Affected people often do not have the information to make informed choices or to hold agencies to account.

8

Humanitarian actors do not 'pay the price' for poor programming: they should be more effectively held to account.

5. KEY OBSTACLES AND SYNTHESISED RECOMMENDATIONS

The WHS Thematic Teams' Bonn recommendations reflect the most recent thinking of the WHS Secretariat and Thematic Teams on the key areas for reform to be addressed by the Summit. These recommendations are italicised below.

1

KEY OBSTACLES

There is a lack of sufficient data on needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Streamline needs assessments – create more joint assessments or common formats.
- Create stronger assessments that consider the context and existing capacities, as well as needs.
- Ensure, as standard, that assessments collect and analyse data disaggregated by gender, age and other aspects of vulnerability.
- Develop more systematic, responsible use of big data for better understanding needs of affected populations.*
- Ensure data collected in assessments are stored and managed in a secure manner.

2

KEY OBSTACLES

Humanitarian programmes are not designed to address, and do not report on, the specific needs of particular groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Include gender markers or similar demographic measures in programme design and reporting.
- Commission regular independent monitoring and publishing of sex and age disaggregated community feedback to generate real time performance data, including rankings of agency performance, to improve the response.*
- Require the official Humanitarian Programming Cycle system and National Action Plans for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management to include sex and age disaggregated data, gender analysis in the activities of each sector and objectives regarding meaningful engagement of local communities including women.*
- Make funding conditional on the application of a gender equality lens across the program cycle, which could be enabled through the use of a gender marker.*
- Ensure reproductive and sexual health needs are addressed in all responses.
- Ensure psychosocial needs of particularly vulnerable groups (women, children, the elderly) are addressed in all responses.
- Improve funding to meet the needs of vulnerable groups – especially children and the elderly.
- Identify, programme for and report on the specific needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs), to the degree that these needs differ from those of other communities.
- Identify, programme for and report on the specific needs of pastoral populations, where these form a part of the caseload.

3

KEY OBSTACLES

Specific priority needs, such as protection and education, are not being met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Humanitarian actors should increase funding for protection, and ensure protection activities take place throughout the programme cycle*
- Protection in the context of humanitarian aid should match the needs and priorities of affected communities, and be contextualised.
- Regional entities should currently play a more significant role in monitoring and promoting protection and assistance, in particular through the creation of regional frameworks.*
- Build on the upcoming UN General Assembly resolution to bolster protective accompaniment/presence.*
- Humanitarian actors should address protection in non-conflict situations (such as migration and asylum-seekers travelling by sea, urban and communal violence and during pandemics).*
- Humanitarian actors should invest in creating greater funding and capacity for delivering education programming.
- Humanitarian actors should strengthen the skills and capacities needed to carry out effective programming for older men and women.

4

KEY OBSTACLES

Humanitarian organisation and programmes are better adapted to provide 'supply-side' solutions than to meet demands from affected people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Pilot market-based approaches in which agencies pitch their services to local people.*
- Reconsider organisational mandates to move humanitarian agencies away from sector- or population-driven responses.
- Reform funding to move humanitarian agencies away from sector- or population-driven responses.
- Pay particular attention to reaching vulnerable populations rather than 'easier-to-reach' populations that meet mandates.
- Change reporting systems to include more explicit focus on the degree to which real needs have been addressed.
- Create clear standards and requirements for engaging affected people and frame these within the aim of creating a more demand-driven humanitarian system.

5

KEY OBSTACLES

The structures and processes of the system do not support the participation of affected people in humanitarian decision-making and priority-setting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Prioritise accountability as a key humanitarian issue, possibly as a humanitarian principle.
- b. *Humanitarian action needs to be driven by the concept of subsidiarity.*
- c. *Establish donor commitments on accountability to affected populations, which build on Good Humanitarian Donorship. Monitor these through a mechanism similar to the Humanitarian Response Index.*
- d. Reform funding mechanisms to allow for changes to programming based on the views of and input from affected people.
- e. *Nominate a senior humanitarian official within every major emergency operation that is responsible for ensuring affected people are included in shaping the response.*
- f. *Establish a contact group from the affected community for every major response to inform decision making.*
- g. Invest in innovation to improve the engagement of affected people, particularly when access is constrained.
- h. Ensure participation of affected people in the identification of underlying risks and in programme design.
- i. Include clear systems of communication and feedback in all programmes.
- j. Evidence reporting on community consultations and their consequences for action in agency reports and share it with communities.
- k. Partner with local civil society in all cycles of programming, including design, delivery and monitoring.
- l. Adopt sector-wide standards/Core Humanitarian Standards (CHSs) to improve quality and accountability.
- m. Invest in greater leadership in accountability and community engagement, including among donors, at cluster and humanitarian country team (HCT) level, within humanitarian agencies and within specific field teams.

6

KEY OBSTACLES

Current approaches and delivery mechanisms of humanitarian aid decrease the agency of affected people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. *Prioritise rebuilding services that enable community-led response, e.g. financial services & communication networks.*
- b. *Scale up multi-sector, multi-purpose cash (e.g. increasing from 3.5% to x% by 2020).*
- c. Build responses around existing coping strategies.
- d. Provide individuals with clear options that support personal agency, such as Settle or return; Rebuild or relocate; Cash or assistance in kind.
- e. Expand social protection programmes.
- f. Advocate for refugees to have the right to work.

7

KEY OBSTACLES

Affected people often do not have the information to make informed choices or to hold agencies to account.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. *Develop common information & complaints mechanisms, within each major response, using local languages.*
- b. Use new and existing media to ensure better communication with affected communities.

8

KEY OBSTACLES

Humanitarian actors do not 'pay the price' for poor programming: they should be more effectively held to account.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. *Create effective accountability feedback systems that give people a strong voice in assessing the performance of humanitarian responses.*
- b. Invest in innovation to improve accountability of humanitarian response providers.
- c. Use collective approaches and technology to improve accountability for humanitarian responses.
- d. Create stronger incentives to collect community satisfaction data and engage with affected people.
- e. Move the costs and risks of poor quality aid from the recipient populations to implementing agencies.
- f. Establish clear roles and responsibilities, and legal frameworks to ensure accountability.
- g. Invest in transparent, comprehensive and open data on financing flows of all actors.
- h. Provide data on financing flows to all actors.

6. ENDNOTES

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- viii. Progress is also currently being assessed on the participation of affected women and girls in the Global Review of Security Council Resolution 1325. The most recent report of the Secretary General on Women, Peace and Security noted that, 'Given the crucial linkages between the participation of women in decision making and their enjoyment of basic human rights, improving participation and leadership in refugee and internally displaced persons settings is essential' (S/2014/693. Para 41. 23 September 2014).
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