

# THE STATE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

## State of the Humanitarian System 2022

### Briefing: Crisis-affected populations, accountability and dignity

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

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

#### Summary

Over the 2022 SOHS study period, prominent scandals and the impetus of decolonisation and Black Lives Matter forced the humanitarian system to consider how it respects the dignity and voice of crisis affected populations and upholds the key principle of 'do no harm'. The period has seen some progress: 73% of aid recipients reported that they felt that aid workers treated them with dignity, compared with 68% in the previous study period. Following the 2018 exposure of sexual abuse in Oxfam's 2010 Haiti response, a Misconduct Disclosure Scheme was used in 31,000 recruitment processes and prevented 142 potential hires in 2021 alone. However, progress on wider accountability and providing opportunities for aid recipients to provide feedback and shape decision making have stagnated with many affected people indicating that their inputs to humanitarian programmes remain superficial at best. This is despite many efforts across the humanitarian system to improve the policy and implementation of community engagement mechanisms. There remains more to be done to undo power imbalances, particularly in engaging crisis-affected communities meaningfully in humanitarian decision-making. This issue is not only an ethical one, but a performance one: aid recipients who experience an engagement mechanism are more likely to be satisfied with the quality and relevance of the support they receive.

#### High-level context and key stats

- 73% of aid recipients reported that they felt that aid workers treated them with dignity, although this number varied by country.
- There have been many changes in agency standards and policies, but only one in three aid recipients said they were able to provide feedback or complain, approximately the same as in 2018.
- Only one-third of aid recipients said agencies did well in communicating information about plans and activities, a slight decline from the previous period.

- People who had been consulted about what kind of aid they required were more than twice as likely to say that the amount of aid they received was sufficient, relevant and of good quality.

## Dignity

**73% of aid recipients in the SOHS survey reported that they felt that aid workers treated them with dignity.**

- Creating expectations of participation and then failing to meet them appears to result in a lower perception of dignity than offering no consultation opportunities at all, although this finding requires further investigation.
- Humanitarian aid that supports agency, such as cash, is often preferred by aid recipients, but there can be challenges for certain demographics such as heightened protection risks.

**Women and people under the age of 24 were more likely to report being treated with dignity by aid workers,** and women were more likely to perceive humanitarian aid as important support for their basic needs.

**Distribution practices are just as important as good intentions when it comes to supporting dignity.**

- In Lebanon, women were humiliated by staff when they went to collect their aid and doors were closed in their faces; in South Sudan, women were embarrassed to be given personal hygiene kits while queuing alongside men for food.

## Participation and accountability

**Agencies, including at the IASC level, have [developed a wide range of guidance and tools to encourage participation](#).**

- Despite this, only one in three aid recipients said they were able to provide feedback or complain, approximately the same as in 2018.

**COVID-19 restrictions made face-to-face contact - preferred by aid recipients - particularly challenging.**

- In refugee communities in Somalia and in Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh, refugees reported feeling 'abandoned' by the humanitarian community during COVID-19 restrictions.

**Meaningful accountability mechanisms for crisis-affected people – those which allow communities to hold agencies to account through sanction or redress – continue to elude the system.**

- Most engagement mechanisms centre on feedback rather than redress.

**There may be [widening gaps between the expectations of communities and those of humanitarian workers](#), and the expectations and desires of affected people to be consulted appeared to vary in ways that defied easy solutions.**

- Some communities expressed the desire to have more input in consultations on needs while others found current consultative practices to be invasive or embarrassing, making it difficult to generalise how the humanitarian system could best improve.

Note: We use the term 'aid recipients' to describe crisis-affected people who have been supported by humanitarian assistance.