

Executive summary

In 2016, the “One humanity, shared responsibility” report of the United Nations Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit called for a new paradigm for conceiving, programming and delivering humanitarian assistance. The scale, complexity and longevity of many crises are proving challenging to the international community in designing and funding interventions fit for such complex situations.

Three years after the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the OECD project, “Lives in crises”, demonstrates the need to continue on the reform path set out at the summit. The project has seen two rounds of surveys conducted in seven crisis countries since 2016, asking more than 12 000 affected people and humanitarian workers about their perceptions of aid. The surveys’ findings and additional research reinforce the call to pursue reforms in how donors support people and countries in crisis contexts:

- **Humanitarian assistance improves conditions but does not cover all basic needs.** The surveys clearly illustrate that humanitarian assistance represents only a part of what people require to meet their most important needs. The extent to which humanitarian assistance meets people’s needs depends on the context, but affected people generally need to find other sources of income. The project shows that the *quality* of the response and local authorities’ *management* of the crisis are critical elements in recipient satisfaction, implying that meeting the most important needs does not depend exclusively on donors’ humanitarian budgets. In crisis contexts, meeting these needs requires a thorough vulnerability analysis to understand household economies so that humanitarian assistance can be combined with actions or programmes that enhance income generation and preserve assets.
- **Humanitarian assistance leaves some of the most vulnerable behind.** Surveys indicate that assistance is not always perceived as going to those who need it most, and reveal a stark contrast between affected people’s and humanitarian workers’ perceptions of fairness. Across the surveys, those who are ill or with chronic diseases, the elderly, people without social/political connection, the undocumented and remote were perceived to be left behind by people receiving aid. Yet, humanitarian staff surveyed are confident that aid is going to those who need it most. This suggests that the system targets those most in need as long as they fall within agencies or NGOs’ mandates and programme objectives. The current fragmented and supply-driven humanitarian business model risks overlooking people – notably amongst the host populations, who fall into the cracks between traditional humanitarian sectors. A vulnerability analysis is key to ensuring that the humanitarian response leaves no one behind.
- **Supporting self-reliance requires a blended set of aid instruments.** If humanitarian assistance is not sufficient to meet people’s most important needs, it is even less effective in achieving economic self-sufficiency. People surveyed consistently mention the lack of economic and livelihood opportunities as a primary grievance. In the protracted crises that make up most humanitarian contexts, affected people want autonomy, not prolonged assistance. Because humanitarian assistance is not designed to put an end to need, and because it is unpredictable in nature, other aid instruments need to be mobilised to help create an enabling environment in which livelihood opportunities are available for both affected people and host communities.

- **Some limited progress is being made on the Grand Bargain commitments.** The surveys do reveal some improvements in the way aid is delivered. Support to education in crises is increasing, showing that humanitarian-development silos can be overcome by donors. Some of the Grand Bargain commitments, such as multiyear frameworks and joint needs assessments, are starting to deliver positive initiatives that now need to be systematised. The cash agenda is becoming more widespread, though it remains sector based. Some serious challenges remain however. The localisation agenda is moving too slowly, mainly because donors' architecture does not encourage it. The way people's views are taken into account remains limited and people have limited clarity over why they do or do not qualify for aid, what they receive, and for how long. The humanitarian system is still supply driven, based on international organisations' mandates and programmes, rather than on the affected people at the centre of the response.

From people to policy: a call for new approaches

The paradigm shift called for at the World Humanitarian Summit is yet to occur. Some changes are yielding positive outcomes, but these mostly reflect improvements to the current humanitarian system begun before the summit, rather than systemic change in the way crises are understood and addressed. Continuing on the reform path implies the following actions:

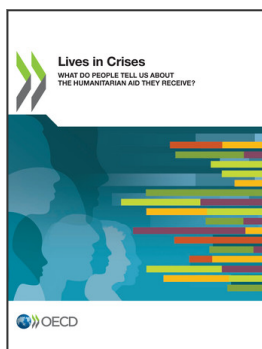
- **Look beyond the humanitarian response.** What we learn from affected people is that not all their needs in a crisis are humanitarian in nature, and a humanitarian response is not by default the best instrument to meet people's needs. Meeting people's needs requires a fresh look at what crises are. Both political crises and natural disasters create humanitarian needs, and they should be designated as such, rather than as "humanitarian crises", so that DAC members willing to respond can mobilise a range of instruments that include, but are not limited to, humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian assistance plays a role, but as seen in the surveys, in protracted crises other instruments – including political dialogue, peace instruments and development co-operation funds – should also be mobilised.
- **Implement the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.** Determining which instrument and which channel is best suited to meet people's needs requires collaboration, coherence and complementarity among assistance instruments, in line with the DAC Recommendation on the humanitarian, development peace nexus. Undertaking a joint analysis will help understand the context for people's urgent and long-term needs, and how responding to these needs can also strengthen local capacities and economies.
- **Fill gaps and build opportunities.** The current humanitarian system is built on organisations' specific mandates, each designed to fill sectoral gaps. This system is poorly equipped to build on existing political and economic opportunities in order to create long-term livelihoods for people and countries affected by crises. Because humanitarian assistance is not designed to end need, and does not allow for self-sufficiency, it must be complemented with other instruments that can create sustainable livelihoods, taking into account people's aspiration and building on their potential for rebuilding their lives, or preparing to return, relocate or successfully integrate.
- **Shift from a supply- to a customer-driven approach to meeting needs.** In the protracted situations that now represent the majority of humanitarian responses, a customer approach to assistance would represent a genuine participation revolution when based on household economy and vulnerability analyses. Because it cuts across all sectors, multipurpose cash transfer, combined with the use of data and information technology in both humanitarian assistance and development co-operation, can help deliver the participation revolution by individualising humanitarian assistance delivery.
- **Change paradigms to protect humanitarian assistance.** Humanitarian assistance was deemed very relevant and was widely perceived positively by survey respondents. The most difficult

contexts offer little alternative to humanitarian assistance. Yet mobilising huge amounts of humanitarian assistance over years or decades in contexts showing little prospect of political resolution is unsustainable, and can discourage the mobilisation of other political, peace or assistance instruments. Changing paradigms, starting by operationalising the DAC Recommendation on the humanitarian–development–peace nexus and looking at how each instrument can best help design a coherent response to a given crisis, will allow humanitarian response to fulfil its original mandate of protection and assistance where other instruments cannot be mobilised.

Box 1. Methodology and demographics

Over the two rounds of surveys, 8 666 people affected by crises were interviewed in seven countries facing different type of crises. Respondents were selected randomly through local partners and the humanitarian country team in each countries. Respondents were the beneficiaries of aid programmes from a wide variety of aid agencies, and were approached face-to-face, except for Somalia where interviews were conducted via phone for security reasons. During the most recent round of surveys, 53% of respondents were male and 47% female. 57% of respondent were refugees, 13% were internally displaced, 10% were returnees; and 20% were local resident with humanitarian needs. 48% of respondent were in the 18-25 age group, 35% in the 36-50 age group and 16% were over 50 years old.

3 471 humanitarian workers were also interviewed, 51% of them working for international NGOs, 46% in UN humanitarian agencies and 3% in local NGOs. 71% of the humanitarian staff interviewed was based in field location whereas 29% was based in their capital city offices.



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