2 Humanitarian assistance leaves some of the most vulnerable behind

The question of whether assistance is going to those who need it most is central to humanitarian action. The surveys suggest many recipients feel that the humanitarian system only targets those people who fall within agencies or NGOs' mandates and programme objectives – many feel overlooked. On the other hand, humanitarian staff are confident that aid is going to those who need it most. This misalignment reflects how the segmentation of the affected population by a fragmented humanitarian sector can lead to people falling between sectors, most notably amongst the affected host population.
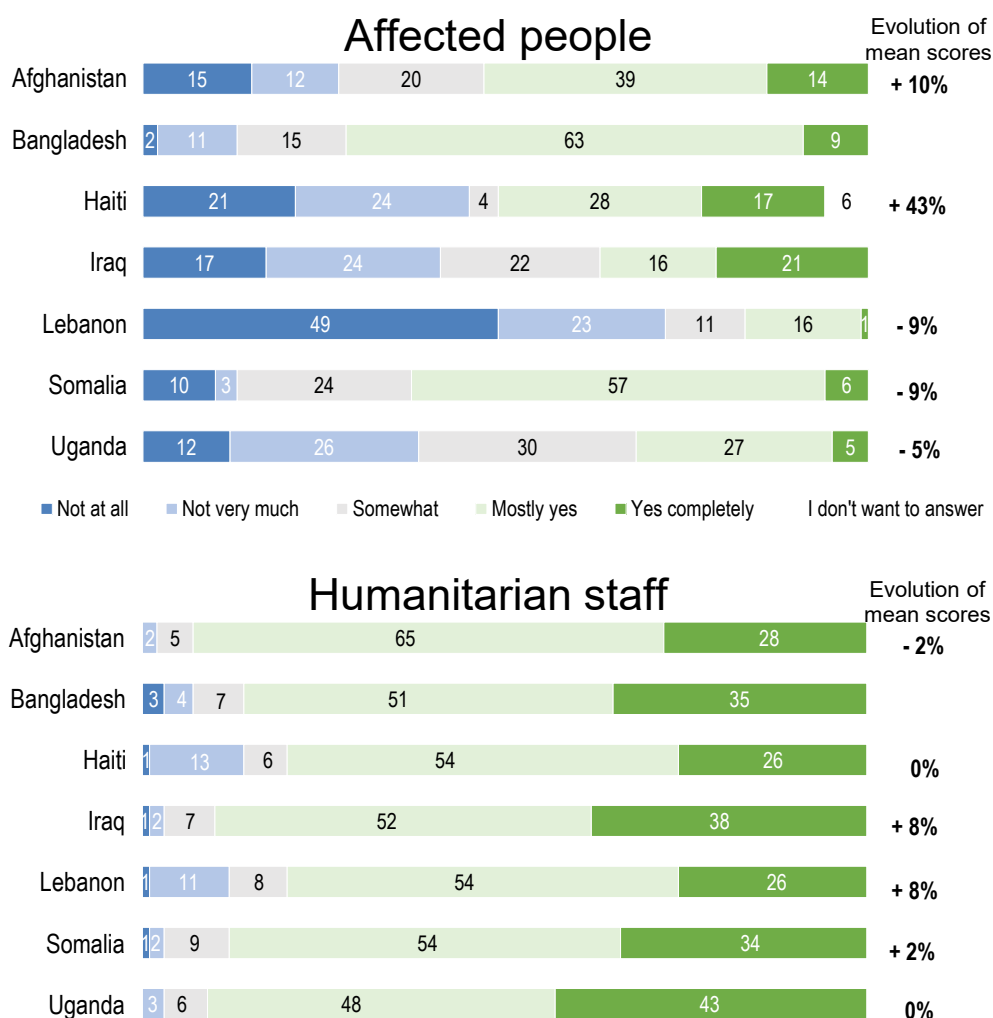
Key messages

- A fragmented humanitarian system can leave people behind when their vulnerability is not aligned with the traditional humanitarian sectors.
- Especially in protracted crises, joint and impartial vulnerability assessments must look beyond humanitarian sectors in order to take into account both humanitarian and long-term needs.

When asked whether aid is going to those who need it most, people affected by crises have mixed responses, with the perception of fairness ranging from 72% in Bangladesh down to 17% in Lebanon (Figure 2.1). In contrast, between 80% and 92% of the humanitarian staff interviewed believe aid is going to these who need it most.

Across the surveys, those who are ill or with chronic diseases, the elderly, people without social/political connections and those who are undocumented are perceived to be left behind by surveys' respondents (OECD, 2019[1]). Survey's respondents also feel that people in remote areas or living outside camps often have more difficulty accessing aid, such as in Haiti after Hurricane Matthew, in the most remote provinces of Afghanistan or the distant rural areas of Somalia.

Those who believe aid is not fairly distributed also indicate that people are left out because of poor information and targeting (21% in Uganda, 24% in Afghanistan, 13% in Somalia). Perceptions of biased practice, including corruption, are widespread. In Somalia, up to 85% of those believing aid is not fairly distributed blamed corruption or other biases.

Figure 2.1. Does assistance go to these who need it most?

Affected people

Evolution of mean scores

Country	Not at all	Not very much	Somewhat	Mostly yes	Yes completely	I don't want to answer	Evolution
Afghanistan	15	12	20	39	14		+ 10%
Bangladesh	2	11	15	63	9		
Haiti	21	24	4	28	17	6	+ 43%
Iraq	17	24	22	16	21		
Lebanon	49	23	11	16	1		- 9%
Somalia	10	3	24	57	6		- 9%
Uganda	12	26	30	27	5		- 5%

■ Not at all   ■ Not very much   ■ Somewhat   ■ Mostly yes   ■ Yes completely   ■ I don't want to answer

Humanitarian staff

Evolution of mean scores

Country	Not at all	Not very much	Somewhat	Mostly yes	Yes completely	Evolution
Afghanistan		2	5	65	28	- 2%
Bangladesh	3	4	7	51	35	
Haiti	1	13	6	54	26	0%
Iraq	1	2	7	52	38	+ 8%
Lebanon	1	11	8	54	26	+ 8%
Somalia	1	2	9	54	34	+ 2%
Uganda		3	6	48	43	0%

Note: Figures reflect respondents' perceptions in survey round 2 (2017-2018). The bar charts show the percentage of respondents who selected each answer option. The mean scores are calculated based on reported responses using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 .The evolution of mean scores reflects a negative or positive evolution since round 1 (2016-2017). Some numbers cannot be added up to exactly 100%, as graphs show rounded percentages without decimals, therefore distorting the relative frequencies between answer options.
Source: (OECD, 2019[1]), Ground Truth Solutions, humanitarian perception survey, round 1 (2016-2017) and round 2 (2017-2018).

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The current humanitarian model is fragmented and sector-based

While it is not surprising that humanitarian workers are more positive about the assistance they provide than beneficiaries, this misalignment does reflect how the humanitarian system functions. Humanitarian agencies assess needs and programme their operations according to their mandates and their ability to enrol their beneficiaries. This ability can be constrained by the context: insecurity can prevent humanitarian teams from accessing some areas, and it can also prevent people in need from reaching humanitarian aid distribution points, as expressed by survey respondents in Afghanistan and Somalia. Local authorities can also restrict humanitarian work through administrative red tape. Obstacles to humanitarian access is widespread and increasing, as is disregard for humanitarian assistance principles and respect for

assistance workers by belligerents (ALNAP, 2018[2]). Such constraints exclude the weakest, who might remain out of reach of humanitarian agencies.

However, the humanitarian system itself can leave some of the weakest unreached. Organisations' mandates and programme objectives can restrict the scope of the needs assessment when these needs are primarily determined by people's status or categories. Since the 2005 humanitarian reform the humanitarian sector has been compartmentalised into 11 clusters (Figure 2.2) (IASC, 2006[3]). The cluster approach clarified the division of labour among organisations and defined their roles and responsibilities within these 11 sectors. Its aim was to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies. However, the cluster approach is still used in protracted crises, such as in Somalia and Afghanistan (OCHA, 2018[4]).

Figure 2.2 The cluster sector distribution
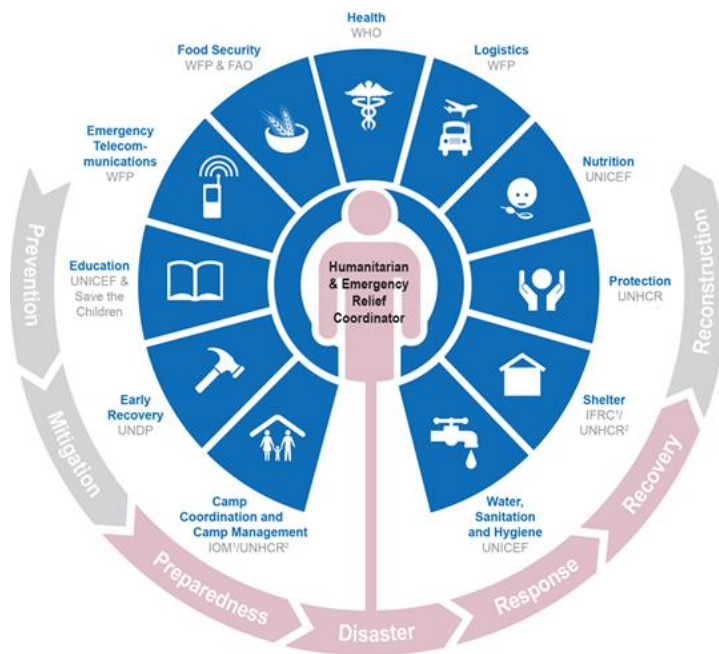
Source: (Humanitarian Response, n.d.[5]), What is the Cluster Approach?, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/about-clusters/what-is-the-cluster-approach (accessed on 5 April 2019).

Even when the clusters are not activated, such as in Lebanon, the response still follows this sectoral approach (Government of Lebanon and UNHCR, 2019[6]). While organising a humanitarian response by sectors clarifies responsibilities, the sector approach to humanitarian action has also segmented the humanitarian response. Humanitarian workers select their beneficiaries within the scope of their mandate and sectors. Conversely, the general population, including people affected by crises, tend to see vulnerability more holistically and irrespective of humanitarian status. This is reflected in all the surveys: those perceived to be left behind, such as the elderly or the undocumented, do not fall into the traditional humanitarian sectors. This difference partly explains the sharp perception gap between people affected by crisis and assistance workers depicted in Figure 2.1. Humanitarian workers do provide assistance to the people most in need, but they do so in line with their programmes and projects, which do not cover those off the sector-based humanitarian radar screen, notably vulnerable groups within the host population, as opposed to the refugee population.

Vulnerability needs to be identified and addressed differently in protracted crises

The survey results point to a need for reviewing of how vulnerability is measured and aid beneficiaries selected, especially in protracted crises where people directly affected by a crisis intertwine with a vulnerable host population. Designing a response based on a holistic vulnerability analysis rather than exclusively on pre-set sectors would notably increase coherence between humanitarian assistance and the social sector. Humanitarian assistance is not designed to address poverty, and better links between humanitarian assistance and social safety nets, where they exist, are necessary. In protracted displacement crises in particular, a joint and impartial vulnerability assessment that looks at both humanitarian and long-term perspectives would spare some humanitarian funding and resources for its core humanitarian and protection mandate. In Lebanon, for example, the 2018 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees put a particular emphasis on food consumption, economic vulnerability, livelihoods and income, household assets and coping strategies in addition to some of the traditional humanitarian sectors (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, 2018[7]). Looking at a whole range of vulnerabilities beyond humanitarian aid sectors represents a good step towards the joint and impartial needs assessment that is called for in the Grand Bargain.
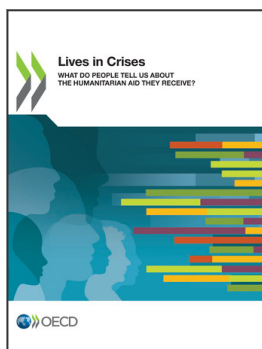
The way humanitarian assistance is delivered also plays an important role in reaching the weakest. This is most striking in places where in-kind global distribution is organised, as reflected in the Haiti survey. Here the most vulnerable do not always have the strength, wealth or social networks to be registered on distribution lists, or do not feel secure enough to bring home a monthly distribution pack of food and other items (GTS, 2019[8]).

Digital cash delivery mechanisms, such as mobile payment, but also e-vouchers and ATM debit cards, are a convenient alternative to cash or in-kind distribution, and brings many benefits to beneficiaries as well as to the cost-efficiency of humanitarian delivery. However, the most vulnerable are often in hard-to-reach areas and such technology, even mobile payment is not necessarily available to them (World Bank, 2019[9]). The humanitarian community should also be careful that the use of technology does not exclude those are not technologically literate from receiving assistance. Humanitarian assistance should always be about serving the most vulnerable, which often requires a human network, including local networks, to assess vulnerability correctly. Furthering the localisation agenda, relying on local responders that have this granular understanding of vulnerabilities at local level (see Chapter 4) can help in reaching out to and targeting the most vulnerable.

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[9]