People affected by crisis must be able to hold those providing support to account for the consequences of their actions.

CHAPTER 6:

Inclusive action

The needs and rights of all people affected by crisis must be the defining force behind the work carried out by aid organisations. Every human has many different needs and abilities, and each person is exposed to different risks.

> " *The IASC 2022 Principals statement called for greater inclusion and diversity "at every level of humanitarian decision-making."*

How people experience crisis depends on factors that overlap and intersect with others. These factors can be visible or hidden, such as age, gender, sex, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, race, tribal identify, religion, language spoken as well as many more.

Including the voices of people affected by crisis in the decisions and interventions of aid organisations is essential to the delivery of high quality, accountable assistance that meets people's needs.

People affected by crisis must be able to hold those providing support to account for the consequences of their actions.

That aid organisations must tailor interventions according to the needs, rights, capacities and experiences of different people has long been recognised. This was reaffirmed in the IASC 2022 Principals statement that called for greater inclusion and diversity "at every level of humanitarian decision-making".[64]

However, the often-formulaic way in which aid is designed and delivered means the first barrier to inclusive humanitarian action is frequently the inability to identify the very groups who are most at risk of exclusion. Translating inclusivity into system-wide and systematic action remains slow and organisations must be proactive to include a diversity of people at all stages of an aid response.[65]

Inclusive accountability to people affected by crisis involves a number of different actions. Key actions include crisis-affected people's participation at all stages of a response, particularly through participatory and collaborative decision-making processes, and the establishment of safe, culturally appropriate and accessible two-way communication and complaints channels.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Central to the analysis of each accountability theme is a set of CHS indicators that make up an index or grouping crucial to the cross-cutting area. For inclusive action, the data used is the aggregated scores from the CHS Gender and Diversity Index. The Index consists of 10 indicators, which are drawn from CHS Commitments 1, 3, 4 and 8. To assess progress on the Index, two sets of data are considered: 1) the compilation of verification scores from all 95 CHS-verified organisations ("data set one"); and, 2) compilation of verification scores from the 12 organisations that have completed the CHS certification cycle ("data set two").

Overall, verified organisations are making systematic efforts to include a diversity of people in their work, but not yet addressing all the key points they need to make sure every person is supported or protected equally. As a group, the aggregated scores of verified organisations do not achieve a score of 3 (requirement fulfilled) for any of the indicators central to providing an inclusive response.

PROMISING PERFORMANCE

When measured against the Gender and Diversity Index, verified organisations are doing best at meeting their commitment to communicate in languages, formats and media that are easily understood, respectful and culturally appropriate for different members of the community, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups (CHS indicator 4.2). This shows that organisations appreciate that diverse groups have different communication and information needs and may have different trusted sources of communication. It also suggests that aid organisations are making a robust effort to use new communications technology, an issue which was brought to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic.[66]

Over the last two decades, digital technology is facilitating more communication and greater community engagement (CCE) as well as enabling the collection of data. Examples include the use of hotlines – run by aid organisations or through third-party service providers, mobile phone data collection, and virtual discussion groups. This has come with both risks and benefits. CCE systems are often designed by aid organisations with limited participant collaboration or collaboration from the very people with whom they need to establish open and two-way communication.[67] This risks the creation of engagement mechanisms which are remote and are not tailored to communities being supported. More positively, digitalisation done right can make communication more secure or confidential and can help with collecting data from more people.[68]

Verified organisations score higher on having fair, transparent, non-discriminatory staff policies and procedures which are compliant with local employment law (CHS indicator 8.5), as well as having codes of conduct in place which oblige staff not to exploit, abuse or otherwise discriminate against people (CHS indicator 8.7). These are vital documents that underpin the behaviours of those representing aid organisations but are not in themselves enough and need to be actioned across an organisation to be effective.
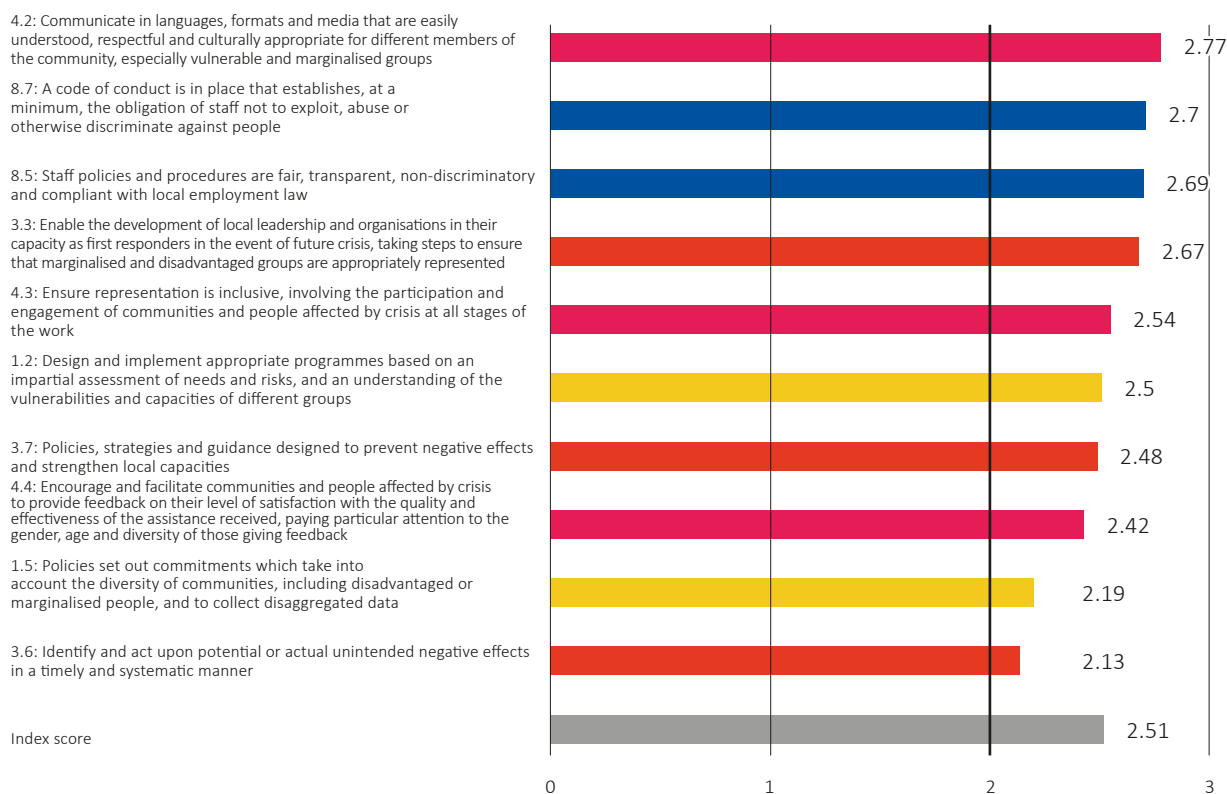
"

Digitalisation can make communication more secure or confidential and can help with collecting data from more people."

Figure 8: Inclusive action trends

This graph shows the average scores from all CHS verified organisations for each of the indicators that make up the CHS Gender and Diversity Index. Scores between 1-2 mean that CHS verified organisations are not making systematic efforts to fulfill the requirements of the indicator. Scores between 2-3 mean organisations are making systematic efforts, but not addressing all the requirements. Scores above 3 mean organisations are meeting all the requirements for the indicator.

Indicator	Score
4.2: Communicate in languages, formats and media that are easily understood, respectful and culturally appropriate for different members of the community, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups	2.77
8.7: A code of conduct is in place that establishes, at a minimum, the obligation of staff not to exploit, abuse or otherwise discriminate against people	2.7
8.5: Staff policies and procedures are fair, transparent, non-discriminatory and compliant with local employment law	2.69
3.3: Enable the development of local leadership and organisations in their capacity as first responders in the event of future crisis, taking steps to ensure that marginalised and disadvantaged groups are appropriately represented	2.67
4.3: Ensure representation is inclusive, involving the participation and engagement of communities and people affected by crisis at all stages of the work	2.54
1.2: Design and implement appropriate programmes based on an impartial assessment of needs and risks, and an understanding of the vulnerabilities and capacities of different groups	2.5
3.7: Policies, strategies and guidance designed to prevent negative effects and strengthen local capacities	2.48
4.4: Encourage and facilitate communities and people affected by crisis to provide feedback on their level of satisfaction with the quality and effectiveness of the assistance received, paying particular attention to the gender, age and diversity of those giving feedback	2.42
1.5: Policies set out commitments which take into account the diversity of communities, including disadvantaged or marginalised people, and to collect disaggregated data	2.19
3.6: Identify and act upon potential or actual unintended negative effects in a timely and systematic manner	2.13
Index score	2.51

Source: Data from CHS verifications (all options) for 95 organisations from 2015 to 2021

Key: Commitments 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

WHERE WE NEED TO IMPROVE

Once again, we are seeing lower scores – and so more problems to face up to and address – for the CHS indicators that require organisations to engage, listen and learn from those we serve. Accountability to people affected by crisis is an approach, not a policy document. It requires organisations to seriously analyse their approaches to the different experiences people face and cultivate a culture that responds.

Verified organisations struggle to identify and act on potential or actual unintended negative effects in a timely and systematic manner (CHS indicator 3.6). Indicator 3.6 covers key aspects of inclusive action such as the cultural, gendered, social and political relationships between members of crisis-affected communities.

A weak performance here suggests that aid organisations are not doing enough to identify, monitor or prevent negative effects in the provision of aid to amplifying unequal power relations between different groups of people, an issue which is underlined by existing research.[69] The low score for verified organisations and lack of progress over time for certified organisations on indicator 3.6 (see Figure 9, page 48) is a significant concern given that this is a key action required of organisations to ensure that aid does not accidentally (re)marginalise or (further) exclude people affected by crisis.

Wider research indicates that a barrier to better identifying and preventing the unfair provision of aid to different groups (linked to indicators 3.6 and 1.2 – *Design and implement appropriate programmes based on an impartial assessment of needs and risks, and an understanding of the vulnerabilities and capacities of different groups*) may lie in the fragmented, technical categorisation approach aid organisations often adopt. For humanitarian and development action to be fully inclusive, proactive consideration must be given to all potential forms of marginalisation or exclusion. This requires that organisations themselves are structured and managed in an inclusive manner (from the leadership all the way across the workforce). Staff must also be aware of, respect, and work in a way which actively understands and engages with the rights, needs and capacities of crisis-affected people, including excluded, discriminated and marginalised groups, as well as the drivers behind why this occurs.[70]

A better understanding of the multidimensional drivers of inclusion and exclusion – how they relate to each other and intersect – is needed if aid is to become more systematically inclusive.[71]

Cash and voucher assistance has long been recognised as way to provide people with increased choice, dignity and agency, as it can be more responsive to each individual's own needs.

Verified organisations also show poor performance when it comes to having policies that set out commitments which take into account the diversity of communities, including disadvantaged or marginalised people, and collecting disaggregated data (indicator 1.5). The low scores mirror research that finds that humanitarian and development organisations lack data about persons with disabilities.[72] Many aid organisations do not know how to collect or use data concerning people with disabilities and the challenges they face in accessing services.

A lack of diversity in leadership across the aid system may contribute to lower levels of understanding of – and responsiveness to – how people and communities with different characteristics and risks experience the world.[73] Homogeneity can show up in the mechanisms established for addressing power imbalances, and so affect the extent to which people affected by crisis are able to hold organisations to account. A 2021 survey by *The New Humanitarian* found that aid workers felt there was more talk than action on diversity, equality and inclusion, with very few international NGOs having made this central to their strategies.[74]

CHANGES OVER TIME

For CHS-certified organisations, the average score for the Gender and Diversity Index increased over the course of the verification process – the largest increase of all the CHS Indices – with seven of the ten indicators scoring higher at the end of the process than at the start. This shows that progress is being made on inclusive action by organisations that are regularly measured against the CHS.

Certified organisations made the biggest improvements on designing and implementing appropriate programmes based on an impartial assessment of needs and risks, and an understanding of the vulnerabilities and capacities of different groups (CHS indicator 1.2). This illustrates that, with targeted action, organisations can improve their understanding of the vulnerabilities and capacities of diverse groups and reflect this back into their programming.

After going through a cycle of the CHS certification process, organisations were also better at ensuring inclusive representation, participation and engagement of communities and people affected by crisis at all stages of their work (CHS indicator 4.3). This improvement illustrates that organisations which focus on listening and learning from those they assist can start addressing some of the power imbalances that run through the system.

Certified organisations were also better able to meet their commitment to enable the development of local leadership and organisations in their capacity as first responders in the event of future crisis, taking steps to ensure that marginalised and disadvantaged groups are appropriately represented (CHS indicator 3.3). This could reflect an increased attention to the importance of building diverse and inclusive workplaces in organisational strategies and performance.[75]

The only indicator which saw a decrease in score over time for certified organisations was having staff policies and procedures that are fair, transparent, non-discriminatory and compliant with local employment law (CHS indicator 8.5). This is the only reduced performance area that is directly within an organisation's control, and so runs counter to the otherwise strong trend we see of aid organisations better delivering their accountability commitments in terms of the policies, processes and actions that are directly with their control. More research exploring why this is happening would be welcome.

Figure 9: Average Gender and Diversity Index scores

Measuring change over time: average Gender and Diversity Index scores for CHS-certified organisations at the start and end of four years using the CHS

Source: Data set two - data from the 12 organisations that have completed at least one four-year CHS certification cycle.

Key: ⓪ ④ Year of audit

How COAST Foundation became more inclusive by using the CHS

COAST Foundation emerged in 1998 in the southern part of Bhola Island in Bangladesh – one of the world's most dangerous cyclone zones.

Currently the organisation serves around 1.7 million people, 95% of which are women. COAST exists for the poor and fights for their interests. Therefore, the concept of putting "people first" and holding the organisation accountable to the community they serve has always been at the centre of its response.

COAST is a long-time member of the CHS Alliance. Believing in quality and accountability to its core, the organisation embarked on a CHS certification with the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI) in 2017. The main objective of starting a verification journey was to strengthen the organisation's institutional governance system and compliance with the CHS.

The initial CHS certification audit by HQAI identified that COAST excels in coordinating assistance with other actors and ensuring that communities receive complementary assistance. But the audit also identified an area of non-compliance against CHS indicator 4.4. The audit reported that communities and people affected by crisis were not systematically encouraged by COAST to provide feedback on their level of satisfaction with the quality and effectiveness of assistance. And that no attention was paid to the gender, age and diversity of those giving feedback. This non-conformity led to a minor Corrective Action Request (CAR). COAST was given two years to address this problem as part of the CHS certification process.

At the time of the initial audit, COAST staff felt that their work had been going well, as they often received good feedback. Yet they were not aware that the feedback wasn't being collected systematically. They also did not realise the need to pay specific attention to the differences between the people they were seeking feedback from, in terms of things like gender, age or sex diversity. The findings of the initial audit were a wakeup call that COAST needed to be more proactive in encouraging feedback from all of the different groups of people they served.

Reacting to the findings, the COAST Senior Management Team revised COAST's Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) policy. The policy changed to require feedback to be collected systematically from the people COAST supports every three months though surveys, focus group discussions and personal interviews. COAST developed a new format for conducting these discussions and interviews, training staff on how to ensure inclusive participation by actively collecting views from people of different genders, ages and from those with diverse characteristics.

COAST also improved how the organisations created and shared learning from feedback. The organisation designated a MEAL section leader to compile all feedback reports into a single, accessible document that was widely circulated for internal learning and making changes.

Systematically encouraging and acting on feedback from everyone that COAST serves became an integral part of the organisation. Feedback and the changes in response are discussed at every monthly project coordination meeting. Each project team also prepares a monthly newsletter that details changes made as a result of feedback, which if shared throughout the organisation.

By the mid-term CHS certification audit in 2019, auditors found that COAST had in place a systematic process of seeking feedback from communities affected by crisis on the organisation, behaviour of staff, its programmes, and unintended negative impacts. COAST had also established a system of regular meetings at all levels to share information and reflect on feedback results. Therefore, the audit closed the CAR and recommended continuation of the certification for COAST.

" *Systematically encouraging and acting on feedback from everyone that COAST serves became an integral part of the organisation."*

" In conversation with Martha Nemera Woyessa and Christian Modino Hok

To debate how to make aid work better for everyone in crisis, Martha and Christian exchange their views on the inclusive action findings from the 2022 HAR.

Martha Nemera Woyessa

Executive Directress – Women Empowerment– Action, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Christian Modino Hok

Humanitarian Director – CBM Global Disability Inclusion, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Q. What are your reactions to the lowest scoring areas?

MARTHA: *Here in Ethiopia, these low scores reflect the reality on the ground. There are key areas which need improvement in terms of inclusion and diversity because one of the key gaps is diversity of leadership, particularly women's participation and inclusion at the leadership and expert levels in humanitarian response. There are different humanitarian coordination clusters in Ethiopia where the participation of women is minimal. I am the only female participant in one of the clusters and it's down to me to raise the issue of women's participation as well as to ensure that cluster members are gender aware.*

In Ethiopia inclusion challenges are linked to social norms. Gender and power dynamics discriminate against women – not just at the leadership level but also against women affected by crisis as they are not given a voice. Women in this country can face double discrimination – firstly, because they are women but then for women with disabilities or those who are socially outcast due to their livelihoods, for example, as commercial sex workers, they face further discrimination. Social norms must be considered when trying to address these issues and norm setters, who tend to be influential leaders, must be part of the deconstruction of these barriers to inclusion.

Another key area that needs addressing is the lack of gender-responsive recruitment policies in both humanitarian and development organisations. If we don't address this, scores will remain low.

CHRISTIAN: *None of this is surprising. These are areas where many organisations score low – not because of lack of effort but lack of capacity and resources to be able meet all the sector's accountability demands.*

So, for me, there are four "must-do" actions for the sector to ensure inclusion – firstly, one already mentioned by Martha, which is ensuring the participation of groups representing at-risk communities. Secondly, the identification, understanding and removal of barriers that prevent those groups from participating in the decision-making processes on an equal footing with other organisations. Thirdly, investing more in building the capacity of these organisations so they are better equipped to engage in humanitarian coordination mechanisms and better understand how the humanitarian and development system operates. Fourthly, ensure data is collected and disaggregated to inform programme design and implementation and ensure no one is left behind. If there is no consistent investment in these four key areas then inclusion will always be challenging. These four minimum must-dos are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

I also want to highlight that donors have a big responsibility in ensuring that enough resources are allocated for humanitarian actors to take appropriate actions in this regard, including lifting barriers for grass-root organisations, such as women's associations or organisations of persons with disabilities to access funding.

MARTHA: *Just to give more emphasis to what Christian has raised about the capacity of local humanitarian organisations, despite a lot of effort on the localisation of aid there is a long way to go to realise the actual localisation of aid programmes.* ***Despite the local organisations having adequate knowledge from the ground and knowing that social and gender norms can bring out different strategies for inclusion of diverse groups, there remains a huge gap in terms of accessing humanitarian funds and capacity building programmes.***

Q. What are your reactions to the progress seen in the scores?

MARTHA: *In relation to the high scores, I can speak from my own organisation's perspective as we have undergone independent verification. Through the different capacity-building processes we have good results. Being a member of CHS Alliance has helped put in place policies and guidelines for verification, as we've received training and coaching support. But what is lacking is monitoring and learning in relation to the implementation of policies and guidelines. In our case, having appropriate policies is also part of government compliance so it's a double compliance which is maybe why most organisations comply.*

CHRISTIAN: *Yes, I agree with what Martha has said. But it's difficult to judge as there are gaps. For example, with indicator 4.2, many organisations still do not consider consistently accessibility issues in their communications, such as using sign language interpretation, captioning, appropriate rights-based language or simply consulting with communities and different groups on their communication preferences. This needs to be improved. On indicator 8.5, as already highlighted by Martha, the challenge is monitoring and bringing evidence on the application policies.* ***Rolling out policies is a big job and ensuring they are understood by staff is important.***

Q. What are the key actions needed now to enhance and improve inclusive humanitarian action?

CHRISTIAN: *I have already mentioned four main actions all organisations should do, but I think having a better common understanding of what we mean by inclusion and the barriers to it is a key first step. But this is not new! There are already very good guidelines, training materials, and cases studies that have been developed to support policymakers and practitioners make their work more inclusive. Humanitarian and development actors need to make inclusion an organisational priority and ensure they have the appropriate mechanisms in place to track and assess how inclusion principles are incorporated in internal policies and applied in practice. Finally, more investments in research and evidencing would be very important to keep informing advocacy efforts and programme work. With regard to technology, we need more specific practical tools for example to help collect and disaggregate data by disability.*

MARTHA: *Yes, we need to put more emphasis on tools, mechanisms and the capacity to transform commitments into action.*

CHRISTIAN: *Connected to this is more participation of representative groups in coordination mechanisms. Here international organisations and national governments have a role to play.*

Finally, ***funding is critical and it's important that donors provide targeted funding for inclusion – if there is no funding and support for organisations to develop capabilities around inclusion then it will become more challenging.*** *All organisations need to have robust feedback and complaints mechanisms in place before a crisis and to proactively ensure that those systems are accessible to everyone they assist. There is a need for organisations which work through national partners to understand the diversity of the partners and the capacities that need to be built so that these can also meet the accountability Commitments of the CHS. Resourcing is required for all of this.*

Action needed to strengthen inclusive action

On the basis of the identified gaps and progress to date, the following improvements are required to meet the commitments that have been made to crisis-affected people:

Aid organisations:

- ⊘ Continually carry out robust assessments and analysis of the drivers of exclusion and the barriers and enablers of access to assistance, services, protection, information, communication and participation to proactively identify and mitigate unintended (further) marginalisation or exclusion.

- ⊘ Work collaboratively with development, peacebuilding, human rights and other specialised actors as well as social scientists, in particular from crisis-affected locations, to analyse and account for patterns of discrimination and marginalisation.

- ⊘ Improve and scale up the ethical disaggregation of data on the experiences of people affected by crisis.

- ⊘ Regularly review the diversity of their boards, leadership and staffing. If needed, make clear targets to improve.

- ⊘ Measure how they well they are delivering against the CHS Gender and Diversity Index and use the data to plan how to improve – prioritising indicators that require deep engagement with communities.

Collective and multilateral efforts

- ⊘ Support collective assessments, analysis, data collection and (safe) sharing of this information to mitigate exclusion or marginalisation of people or groups affected by crisis.

- ⊘ Research and raise awareness of the multidimensional vulnerabilities and capacities of different groups of people facing crisis and share knowledge on programme design that respond to differential needs and risks.

Donors:

- ⊘ Incentivise programming that is designed to include excluded and hard-to-reach groups, ensuring they are able to hold aid organisations to account for their actions.

- ⊘ Consider their own diversity and inclusion within their leadership and hiring practices.

ACCOUNTABILITY IS NON-NEGOTIABLE