

# ACCOUNTABILITY UNDER PRESSURE



THE GAP BETWEEN  
COMMITMENTS AND COMPROMISE



## Humanitarian Accountability Report 2026

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without a truly collective effort, as evidenced by the excellent contributions found throughout the report.

A special acknowledgement needs to be made to the lead author and editor, **Jessica Alexander**. Our gratitude goes to the following for helping get the report to its final production.

**Design:** Debbie Weaver, Weaver Creative, [www.weavercreative.co.nz](http://www.weavercreative.co.nz)

**Proofread:** Melissa Pitotti

**Editorial Advisory Committee:** William Anderson, Regina “Nanette” Salvador-Antequis, Michael N. Barnett, Mihir Bhatt, Jennifer Doherty, Mayumi Fuchi, Véronique de Geoffroy, Sema Genel Karaosmanoğlu, Alexandra Sicotte-Levesque, Rachel T. Maher, Alex Ross, Sudhanshu Singh, Sophie Tholstrup, Kristin Vestheim.

Our appreciation to those who completed our anonymous survey which helped inform the findings of this report.

With thanks,  
**Tanya Wood, Executive Director, CHS Alliance**

*CHS Alliance is a global network of 300+ organisations committed to making aid safer and more accountable through the application of the Core Humanitarian Standard.*

ISBN: 978-2-940732-50-0

CHS Alliance  
NGO Humanitarian Hub,  
La Voie-Creuse 16,  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland

info@chsalliance.org  
www.chsalliance.org  
+41 (0)22 788 16 41

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# ACCOUNTABILITY UNDER PRESSURE

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HUMANITARIAN ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT 2026



## THE NEGOTIATION TABLE

Poem by Peter Kidi  
poet and advocate

They told us,  
"Refugees must be part  
of the conversation."  
They said,  
"Nothing about you  
without you."

So we came.  
Across oceans.  
Across checkpoints.  
Across deserts of  
paperwork and waiting.  
We came with the dust  
of the camps on our shoes  
and the names of  
the missing  
burning quietly  
in our mouths.

The room was bright.  
Too bright for the  
things we carried.  
In the middle  
stood the table  
long as a border,  
smooth as a promise.

Around it sat  
the architects  
of our survival.

Diplomats.  
Lawyers.  
Donors.

People who have  
never stood in a food  
line that ends before  
your turn.

They smiled when  
we entered.  
"Welcome," they said.  
"Your voice matters here."

Then they seated us  
at the edge.  
Not where the pens were.  
Not where the maps were.  
Not where tomorrow  
was being written.  
Just close enough  
to be photographed.

The meeting began.  
"Let's talk about  
sustainable solutions."  
"We must focus  
on efficiency."  
"Resources are limited."

We waited.  
We waited for someone  
to ask what hunger  
sounds like.  
For someone to ask  
why boys from the  
camp are disappearing  
toward the sea.  
For someone to ask  
how a mother cooks  
when the pot holds  
nothing but water  
and shame.

Instead a polite voice said,  
"Please keep your  
intervention to two  
minutes."

Two minutes  
for a life.  
Two minutes  
for a war.  
Two minutes  
for a childhood  
spent inside a tent.

We spoke anyway.  
But every sentence  
we offered  
was translated into  
something safer.

We said hunger.  
They wrote  
"food insecurity."

We said despair.  
They wrote  
"resilience challenges."

We said people  
are breaking.  
They wrote  
"communities  
are adapting."

And slowly  
we understood the truth.  
We were not invited  
to shape the decision.  
We were invited  
to prove the decision  
was fair.

### IMAGE, PREVIOUS PAGE

Amna Idres Musa Mahamod leads the Al-Wifag  
Women's Association in Toker, Sudan.

© UN Photo/Mona Elfateh, via UN Women

### IMAGE, THIS PAGE

© Igor Rodrigues on Unsplash

*Outside the room  
the camps were still  
breathing dust.  
Children were still  
counting empty plates.  
Mothers were still  
whispering to sleeping  
stomachs,*

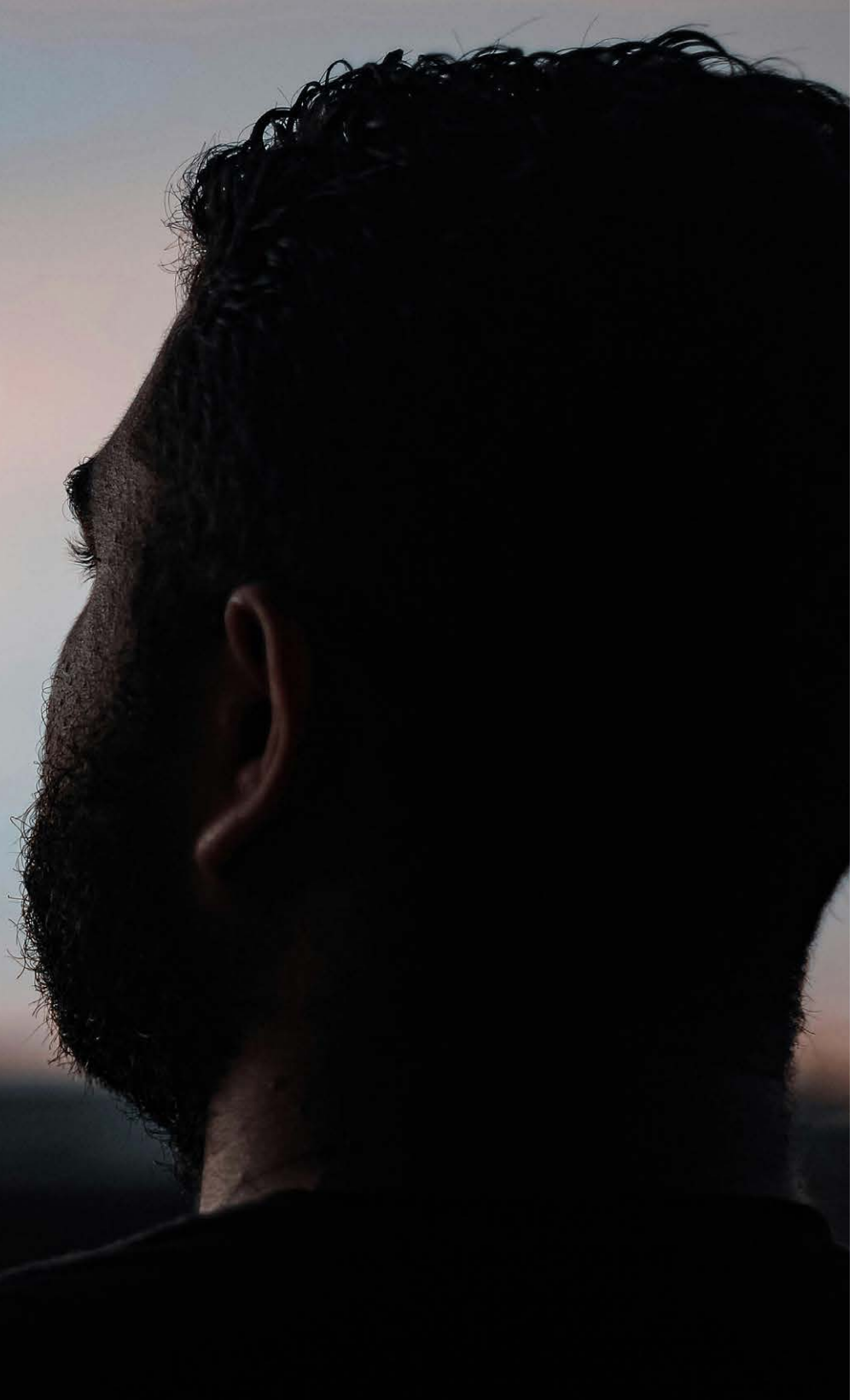
*"Tomorrow will be better."  
Inside the room  
they thanked us.*

*"Your testimony is  
very powerful."  
"We appreciate  
your perspective."  
"This discussion has  
been very productive."*

*They shook our hands  
like history had moved  
forward.*

*But we knew.  
A seat at the table  
does not mean  
your life is being protected.*

*Sometimes  
it only means  
you are close enough  
to hear someone say,  
"Unfortunately, we cannot  
fund everyone."*





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IMAGE  
AI generated

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## FOREWORDS



### FOREWORD:

#### Lubna Alkanawati

Executive Director,  
Women Now for  
Development,  
Board Member,  
CHS Alliance

“

*Life-saving assistance matters profoundly. But a life stripped of dignity, learning, safety, agency, and political voice is not the standard any of us would accept for ourselves or our own children. We should not accept it on behalf of others.”*

I write this from the perspective of a Syrian feminist organisation that has spent more than a decade working alongside Syrian women through displacement, siege, earthquakes, the fall of a regime, and now the slow withdrawal of international attention. We have seen repeatedly what happens when funding contracts and political will recedes, and we have seen who is expected to absorb the cost.

In donor capitals and headquarters, the conversation today is about “hyper-prioritisation” and “funding contractions” – the arithmetic of choosing between crises. In Syria, the conversation is different. It is about a girl whose school was destroyed during the war and who now has no safe place to continue her education. It is about a women’s centre closing when a single grant ends. It is about decisions taken thousands of miles away quietly reshaping what is possible for an entire generation.

This piece sits between those two worlds, between the view from the room and the view from the ground. It is in that gap that the humanitarian system’s legitimacy crisis now lies.

The humanitarian system often speaks in the language of neutrality, as though aid exists outside politics. But those of us working in contexts like Syria know this has never fully been true. Decisions about whose suffering is prioritised, which crises remain visible, what kinds of organisations are trusted, and what forms of leadership are funded are all political decisions. The shrinking of aid is not experienced neutrally by communities living through conflict and displacement, nor are the consequences distributed equally.

The defining question of this aid recession is not simply how to manage with less, but whether this moment will entrench a thinner, more centralised model of aid or finally push the system towards a more grounded and accountable one that confronts underlying imbalances of power. Cultures only change when they are forced to. The question is what kind of change this crisis will produce.

When budgets shrink and trade-offs sharpen, accountability to affected people becomes even more essential because life-and-death decisions are being made by fewer people and with fewer resources. Without meaningful participation,

those decisions continue to be made in rooms that the people most affected are still not invited into. A reform agenda that continues to treat women, refugees, and crisis-affected communities as “beneficiaries” rather than rightful owners of the response will not deliver the transformation this moment demands.

We should also be honest about what the system is asking people to settle for. Syrian women have told us consistently for more than a decade what they need: safety, education, protection, dignity and the chance to rebuild lives and livelihoods. They have also made clear they do not only want inclusion within existing systems of power; they want their rightful place in leadership, decision-making, and political life.

Yet a shrinking humanitarian ambition is steadily reducing the conversation to “life-saving only.” Life-saving assistance matters profoundly. But a life stripped of dignity, learning, safety, agency, and political voice is not the standard any of us would accept for ourselves or our own children. We should not accept it on behalf of others.

Women-led organisations across Syria and the region are already running centres, leading protection work, responding as first responders, negotiating access, sustaining communities, and carrying political and social leadership with a fraction of the resources and little recognition.

The test of any “Humanitarian Reset” will not be whether international actors cut costs more efficiently. It will be whether they finally move from asking people to participate in our projects to asking how they can participate in theirs.

If we cannot remain accountable now, when accountability is hardest, we should not pretend we ever truly were.

## For those of us who have experienced displacement, accountability is not an abstract principle. It is deeply personal.

As a refugee, I learned early what it means to depend on decisions made by others. Decisions about protection, assistance, education, resettlement, and opportunities to rebuild a life. Some of those decisions opened doors and created possibilities. Others were made without fully understanding the hopes, priorities, and aspirations of the people they were intended to serve. That experience continues to shape how I view humanitarian action today.

At its core, accountability is about recognising that people affected by crisis are not passive recipients of humanitarian assistance. They are individuals with knowledge, capabilities, aspirations, and a profound stake in their own futures.

This is particularly important at a time when the humanitarian system is under immense pressure. Across the world, conflicts are becoming more protracted, displacement is reaching unprecedented levels, and resources are increasingly constrained. Millions of refugees have spent years – and in some cases decades – living in uncertainty. Humanitarian assistance remains essential, but it was never intended to become a permanent substitute for opportunity, inclusion, or hope.

When I speak with refugees, I hear remarkable resilience. But I also hear clear aspirations. People want access to education. They want livelihoods. They want to return home when conditions allow. They want opportunities to contribute to the societies that host them. Above all, they want agency over the decisions that shape their lives.

If we are serious about accountability, these aspirations must help shape our responses.

At UNHCR, this conviction informs our goal to halve the number of refugees trapped in protracted displacement and dependent on humanitarian assistance by 2035.

Success should not be measured only by the assistance we provide today, but by whether we help create pathways towards solutions tomorrow.

Achieving this will require strong partnerships across the humanitarian, development, financial, and private sectors. Most importantly, it will require listening to refugees themselves and ensuring they play a meaningful role in shaping the policies, programmes, and solutions that affect their futures.

This is why accountability to affected people matters so profoundly. When we listen to affected communities, humanitarian action becomes more effective, relevant, and responsive to the realities of those it seeks to serve.

This Humanitarian Accountability Report offers an important opportunity for reflection across our sector. It challenges us to examine whether our systems, structures, and practices are truly responsive to the people at the centre of our work, and makes clear that while progress has been made, significant gaps remain between our commitments and the lived experiences of many people affected by crisis.

The people affected by crisis are not only experts in their own experiences. They are essential partners in building solutions. Our responsibility is not simply to support people through crisis, but to ensure they have a meaningful role in shaping the solutions, opportunities, and futures they seek to build for themselves.



### FOREWORD:

#### Dr Barham Salih

United Nations  
High Commissioner  
for Refugees  
(UNHCR)



*The people affected by crisis are not only experts in their own experiences. They are essential partners in building solutions.”*

# INTRODUCTIONS



## INTRODUCTION:

### Iryna Z

Slovak Red Cross  
volunteer

“

*Every person carries pain, a story, and the potential to support others. They just need opportunity and a safe space.”*

## THE COMMUNITY WE BUILT

I arrived in Slovakia shortly after the outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022. I came as a refugee with my son, fleeing a city in eastern Ukraine near the Russian border that has been under constant attack. Those first days are still vivid in my memory. They were filled with fear, chaos, and deep uncertainty. We had to leave quickly, with very little time to prepare. I was torn from my wider family and suddenly responsible for keeping my child safe in completely unknown circumstances.

It felt as if my whole world had fallen apart. I did not know what would come next, where I belonged or how to rebuild a sense of safety. Everything familiar to me – my home, work, routines, and community – had disappeared almost overnight.

During that time, I found my way to a mental health and psychosocial support centre in Košice. At first, I came as someone in need of help. Gradually, I found the strength to support others going through similar experiences and began volunteering, mainly helping organise community activities.

In Ukraine, my work included organising events and coordinating logistics. I was grateful to use those skills again in this new context. At first, I thought my role would simply involve logistics, communication, and helping keep the centre welcoming. But I quickly realised the work was much deeper: creating a space where people could breathe again, feel accepted, and not be alone with their stories.

One of the most important lessons was the value of feedback. At first, we designed activities based on our own assumptions about what people needed. But once we started truly listening, people trusted us more and shared their concerns openly. We learned that even small adjustments, such as changing meeting times, creating activities for children, or allowing more room for informal conversations, improved participation and community well-being.

It was deeply moving to watch the community transform. People who initially arrived quiet and fearful slowly began to open up, share experiences, and support one another. I realised how powerful a sense of safety and belonging can be. Every person carries pain, a story, and the potential to support others. They just need opportunity and a safe space.

I also learned that help is never one-sided. Community members supported one another without being prompted. They shared information, offered emotional support, and helped newcomers through their first difficult days. People who had recently arrived often became a source of strength for others soon after.

Although I came to the centre to offer support, I received so much in return: meaningful connections, new experiences, and a renewed sense of purpose. The community we built together became a piece of home again. True support begins with listening, trust, and respect. These are the foundations of both accountability and resilient communities, and I am grateful to be part of one.

## LET'S FIND THE COURAGE TO DO WHAT WE KNOW WORKS

If funding cuts were earthquakes, what struck the humanitarian sector in 2025 would count as “The Big One.” The sudden rupture of funds from major donor countries was a seismic shock, forcing the entire humanitarian system to confront a harsh new reality.

At the IFRC, we have taken our fundamental principles – humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality – as the basis for Renewal. What matters is that communities experience the impact of these principles. That is how we build the trust necessary to do our best work.

Our Community Trust Index gathers insights from more than 12 countries, and one finding stands out: while communities overall have high trust in our work, young people trust us less than older generations do. They are the generation that will face the worst climate impacts and most protracted crises. We must win them back.

I was 14 years old when I first walked through the door of the Nepal Red Cross as a volunteer, so that gap does not feel abstract to me. Young people do not withdraw trust from institutions they genuinely feel part of. The answer is to bring communities, especially younger people, into decisions and ownership.

Shrinking funding threatens the infrastructure of trust. Feedback loops, safe reporting channels, trained staff, and time for dialogue risk being treated as “extras” rather than “fundamentals.” But without accountability, there is no trust, and without trust, humanitarian action loses the conditions that make it possible. Access erodes, acceptance weakens, and legitimacy fractures. The UN’s Reset must guard against this, just as we are doing through Renewal.

When trust breaks down, risks to humanitarian workers rise. I think of the volunteers who step into crises every day with nothing but a Red Cross emblem and a commitment to their communities. That emblem is meant to signal humanity, neutrality, and therefore protection. It should be enough. It must be enough.

We call on all states to sign, ratify, and act on the Australian-led, IFRC-supported Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel. The safety of personnel is a moral necessity.

More broadly, prioritising accountability to communities is a fundamental driver of operational excellence. It drives efficiency, leading to better decisions and fewer mistakes. It is a risk management tool, since the earliest warnings come from community feedback. It is a strong value proposition for donors, one that builds credibility. And it enables access and localisation through trust.

The strands of IFRC Renewal – deepening localisation, sharpening our focus and impact, sharpening trust, accelerating digital transformation, and becoming more innovative and agile – are all meant to hold us more accountable to those we serve.

I am confident that if we manage this transition well, the humanitarian sector can emerge leaner, stronger at the frontlines, and unflinchingly accountable to the people we serve. We know what works. The task now is to find the courage to do it.



### INTRODUCTION:

#### Jagan Chapagain

Secretary General,  
International  
Federation of Red  
Cross and Red  
Crescent Societies

“

*Young people do not withdraw trust from institutions they genuinely feel part of. The answer is to bring communities, especially younger people, into decisions and ownership.”*



“

*Reflecting unprecedented funding constraints, the 2026 Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) reduced the number of people targeted for assistance from 190 million in 2025 to just 87 million prioritised in 2026.”*



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# What is the gap?

Accountability to affected people (AAP) is a question of power. It concerns who shapes decisions, whose priorities guide responses, and who bears the consequences when systems fail.

The humanitarian system is now under severe financial and political strain, exposing the gap between its accountability commitments and the way resources, authority, and risk are actually distributed. The current moment is testing whether AAP is a core feature of the humanitarian system or a commitment that gives way under pressure.

The Humanitarian Reset was launched in 2025 by the current Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) in response to the humanitarian sector’s crisis of funding, legitimacy, and effectiveness. It promises to make affected people more central to humanitarian action while reducing inefficiencies, strengthening local leadership, and renewing commitment to humanitarian principles. Similar ambitions have been repeated for decades with limited results. This combination of reform fatigue and diminished confidence in political commitment has led many actors to view the Reset cautiously, concerned that it is an agenda driven more by austerity and donor priorities than by accountability to people affected by crisis.

The Reset is also unfolding in a period in which humanitarian principles are under pressure and international humanitarian law is routinely violated with few consequences for those responsible. Civilians and aid workers face escalating risks while those with the greatest influence over violence, resources, and political decisions often remain beyond meaningful scrutiny. AAP will remain constrained if these wider double standards continue to shape humanitarian action. Furthermore, humanitarian actors cannot credibly claim accountability while their organisations face few consequences for failing to uphold the norms they publicly endorse. Nor can they assert that accountability is a priority while their own commitments to local actors and affected people remain unfulfilled.

The report examines accountability across these interconnected dimensions. Standards, mechanisms, and reporting requirements have proliferated, but they have not consistently changed behaviour or produced consequences when commitments are ignored. The persistent obstacle is an absence of incentives, enforcement, and governance arrangements capable of making accountability an underlying feature of humanitarian action.

The clearest evidence comes from more than 200 organisations that have undergone verification against the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). Organisations perform strongest on internal systems, such as coordination and resource management, and weakest in areas which require direct engagement with communities, especially complaints, feedback and participation. This suggests that many organisations have established the policies, processes, and structures associated with accountability, but still struggle to translate them into the influence and responsiveness required to be truly accountable to affected people. Data from organisations that are independently audited against the CHS however, shows marked improvements across all nine commitments, demonstrating that sustained attention, monitoring, and verification drives progress.

A similar pattern emerges in the report’s analysis of localisation. Despite long-standing commitments, funding, authority, and decision-making remain concentrated among a relatively small group of international actors. Host governments, municipalities, local organisations, and community-led structures continue to operate within financing, compliance, and coordination systems largely designed elsewhere, while bearing much of the operational responsibility and risk. These dynamics have become particularly visible during the current funding crisis. Despite localisation being a central pillar of the Humanitarian Reset, local actors have often been sidelined from direct funding opportunities.

The report also turns the lens on accountability within humanitarian organisations themselves, including safeguarding, duty of care, whistleblowing, and organisational culture. These issues are increasingly urgent as violence against aid workers rises, staff wellbeing deteriorates, and funding cuts weaken the systems meant to protect people from harm.

Addressing these failures requires change in three areas where accountability failures identified throughout this report are most visible and most consequential: 1) the concentration of power away from affected people and local actors; 2) the gap between accountability commitments and the absence of consequences when they are not upheld in practice; and 3) the widening disconnect between humanitarian principles and the political realities in which humanitarian action operates.

## THREE LEVERS FOR CHANGE

### 1 SHIFT STRUCTURAL POWER CLOSER TO PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONS AFFECTED BY CRISIS.

Consultation and feedback are not enough if communities and local actors remain excluded from leadership and oversight. Funding, coordination, and partnership models must be designed for locally-led action rather than reinforcing dependence on international intermediaries. This is particularly true in the current humanitarian financing environment, where local NGOs remain largely excluded from direct support.

### 2 MAKE ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITMENTS ENFORCEABLE.

The humanitarian system has numerous AAP standards and commitments but lacks systemic, consistently applied consequences when those commitments are ignored. If voluntary compliance has not led to the changes required, stronger forms of enforcement are needed across four levels of the system:



#### Organisational level:

Compliance with the CHS should be mandatory for organisations working with crisis-affected populations, with independent verification, community feedback, and meaningful consequences for failures related to safeguarding, discrimination, abuse, retaliation, and duty of care.



#### Collective level:

Independent and peer review mechanisms to expose systemic failures and drive corrective action must be strengthened.



#### Community and partner level:

Affected people and local actors must have formal avenues to challenge decisions and assess whether commitments are being met.



#### Donor and funding level:

Funding and partnership eligibility must be linked to measurable accountability standards and performance.

### 3 RE-ANCHOR ACCOUNTABILITY IN HUMANITARIAN NORMS AND POLITICAL HONESTY.

The credibility of accountability efforts cannot be separated from the wider political environment in which humanitarian action operates. Communities are acutely aware of global double standards, selective outrage, inconsistent application of international humanitarian law and the impunity that often surrounds violations driving humanitarian suffering. Accountability therefore must also include consistent and credible application of humanitarian principles and clearer institutional criteria for when humanitarian actors will publicly speak out against violations of international law, regardless of the political identity of the perpetrator.

Humanitarian financing should be guided by need rather than geopolitics, donor interests, or institutional priorities. Yet shrinking resources, growing political pressures, and weakening respect for humanitarian norms are making those commitments harder to uphold. Humanitarian actors must be transparent about how funding decisions are made, what they can realistically influence, and where the limits of humanitarian action lie.

# PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE HUMANITARIAN ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT 2026

For over two decades, the Humanitarian Accountability Report (HAR) has served as a systematic check on how well the aid sector lives up to its core policy rhetoric: being fully accountable to the people it serves. It traces its roots back to the pioneering work of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP International), continuing today under the CHS Alliance.

Its practical value lies in looking honestly at the persistent gap between people-centred rhetoric and upwardly focused institutional incentives, offering a lens on whether the system is genuinely shifting power or simply maintaining the status quo. The HAR is meant to be a snapshot of the state of accountability today and evaluates this promise using data from the CHS alongside direct accounts from affected communities and a wide range of practitioners.

## DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE OF “ACCOUNTABILITY”

This report understands accountability as “the process of using power responsibly, and taking account of and being held accountable by different stakeholders, primarily those who are affected by the exercise of such power. Accountability means putting people and communities at the centre of decisions on issues that affect them.”<sup>1</sup>

AAP is a non-negotiable way of operating. As the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals recognised, people affected by crisis “are the sole reason humanitarian institutions and programmes exist,” and how communities experience aid is the most relevant measure of performance.<sup>2</sup>

Yet power within the humanitarian system today remains heavily concentrated among those who finance it. Humanitarian organisations operate within structures driven largely by donor requirements, funding pressures, compliance demands – constraints that have intensified amid deep funding cuts. The result is a persistent gap between the rhetoric of people-centred aid and a system whose incentives and accountability lines still point upward.

But the accountability challenges cannot be reduced to a simple divide between accountability to donors and to affected people. Humanitarian action operates within a web of interconnected responsibilities and relationships that shape whose priorities matter, how decisions are made, and who ultimately bears the consequences. AAP is therefore inseparable from accountability to norms, commitments, local actors, staff, and the wider systems within which humanitarian action operates.

## STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

To map these interlocking pressures, the HAR 2026 is structured as follows:



**Chapter 1** provides an overall framing of the current moment and examines how funding cuts, political fragmentation and violations of international norms are affecting not only aid operations, but also the credibility and values of the system itself.



**Chapter 2** examines accountability to the principles and pledges the sector has set for itself in light of the Humanitarian Reset and its renewed wave of reform promises.



**Chapter 3** assesses both progress and persistent failures in upholding specific commitments on accountability to people affected by crisis, drawing on evidence from the CHS.



**Chapter 4** explores accountability to local actors amid calls for responses that are driven by the people closest to crisis.



**Chapter 5** examines accountability to staff, harder to uphold amid rising violence towards aid workers, impunity for abuses and mounting mental health pressures across the sector.



**Chapter 6** considers how technology may shape the future of humanitarian action and AAP.



**Chapter 7** concludes with levers for change to make aid more accountable.



The report closes with a vision of the future of aid from youth living in places affected by crisis.

**Throughout the report, accountability to people affected by crisis remains the central reference point.** Their perspective is woven through each chapter through analysis of how current pressures are experienced on the ground, as well as through direct contributions and reflections from people affected by crisis. This is complemented by perspectives from a range of professionals from across the sector, reflecting the breadth and complexity of today's accountability landscape. These contributions reflect the views and perspectives of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the CHS Alliance.



## CHAPTER 1:

### IMAGE

Kholoud Al Gourani from Gaza, who has endured war, displacement, and uncertainty for decades.

© UN Women/  
Suleiman Hajji

# Accountability under pressure

This edition of the HAR is published at a time of unprecedented upheaval across the humanitarian system, with significant consequences for people living through crisis. At the start of 2025, the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) identified roughly 300 million people as needing humanitarian assistance, with 190 million targeted for support. By the launch of the 2026 GHO, however, the number prioritised had fallen sharply to just 87 million, leaving millions of people with life-saving humanitarian needs outside the planned response.<sup>3</sup>

Escalating violence, climate shocks, and access constraints are leaving millions of civilians trapped in increasingly protracted crises. Recent hostilities across the Middle East have triggered the most significant humanitarian supply-chain disruptions since COVID-19, driving up costs and delaying life-saving assistance far beyond the immediate conflict zones.<sup>4</sup> Funding shortfalls and growing geopolitical fragmentation are reshaping how aid is financed, prioritised, and delivered.

At the same time, adherence to core humanitarian principles of humanity, independence and impartiality, and the goals of dignity, and needs-based response are becoming increasingly strained under political and financial pressure.

*Accountability sits at the centre of this. It determines whether a system that claims to be guided by values and principles is willing to listen, share power, and direct resources in line with the priorities, needs, and rights of affected people.*

In periods of scarcity and difficult trade-offs, accountability is what keeps responses grounded in people's realities and sustains basic trust. The recent Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has reinforced this importance, as practitioners on the ground note how risk communication and community engagement are as critical as medical capacity for containing the disease.<sup>5</sup> Ebola treatment centres have been destroyed due to a toxic mix of deep mistrust, misinformation, and a lack of public understanding about the disease.<sup>6</sup> Without community trust, the medical response will not succeed.

This report arrives ten years after the World Humanitarian Summit, which elevated AAP as a central reform priority and generated substantial political momentum through the Grand Bargain.<sup>7</sup> There have been gains since then, albeit uneven and slower than the rhetorical ambition. The current moment has been described as a stress test of those reforms – whether they are resilient enough to hold under pressure, or whether AAP is an added layer on a system still primarily oriented toward donors.

## THE GREAT AID RECESSION

The abrupt loss of humanitarian funding in 2025, driven primarily by cuts from the United States – which provided 44% of Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) funding in 2024 – alongside reductions from other major donors, sent shockwaves across the sector.<sup>8</sup> Funding received through UN-coordinated humanitarian appeals fell from a peak of roughly \$43 billion in 2022 to \$20 billion by the end of 2025, the steepest contraction in a decade.<sup>9</sup>

The moment has been described as everything from a legitimacy crisis<sup>10</sup> to a great aid recession,<sup>11</sup> underscoring the scale of the disruption and its systemic implications.

The cuts have both constrained operations and exposed long-standing structural fragilities. Humanitarian needs have exceeded available funding for years, while the system increasingly relied on a small number of donors, despite longstanding recognition of the political and financial risks of that dependence.<sup>12 13</sup> During years of expansion, the sector could largely avoid confronting those vulnerabilities. That period has ended.

*The current pressures are not only exposing weaknesses in the humanitarian financing model, but also driving behaviours that sit uneasily with the sector's stated principles and commitments.*

Despite continued rhetoric on partnership and collective efficiency,<sup>14</sup> many organisations have responded by turning inward – prioritising their own survival<sup>15</sup> by centring on staff cuts,<sup>16</sup> programme closures,<sup>17</sup> and maintaining smaller versions of their same model, rather than using the crisis to pursue deeper structural change.

Many organisations are still relying on short-term measures to stay afloat, juggling funding and drawing on reserves to sustain stripped-back operations. There is little visibility, however, into how long organisations can sustain these arrangements or what the consequences will be for affected people if programmes are scaled back without warning. In the absence of clear plans and honest communication, the consequences are likely to be sudden and severe.

The pressure to preserve core delivery has already shaped what organisations choose to protect and what they treat as expendable. Community engagement and safeguarding have been among the first functions cut and time to engage with communities reduced.<sup>18</sup> This vulnerability reflects how weakly embedded accountability still sits within systems prioritising visible, quantifiable outputs, value for money and measurable delivery.<sup>19</sup>

*“Previous [ebola] outbreaks have shown that building community trust and engagement is critical to the response. That means working closely with local communities, community leaders, faith-based groups, women’s associations, youth groups and frontline health workers to strengthen awareness, early detection and safe practices.”*

Gilles Fagninou, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa<sup>20</sup>

*“Are international organisations still working here? Are they coming to collect GPS data and people’s details, only to disappear without delivering anything?... This is a very difficult time for us, and the people in this area include many from minority groups who are already vulnerable.”*

Talk to Loop respondent, Somalia<sup>21</sup>

Some have questioned whether accountability is an unaffordable luxury during this period of scarcity. Evidence suggests the opposite. AAP is a basic issue of efficiency, legitimacy, and risk management, particularly in periods of contraction. Lessons from decades of humanitarian action demonstrate that weak community participation has repeatedly been linked to waste, duplication, top-down programming, and interventions that are disconnected from community priorities.<sup>22</sup>

### **PRIORITISATION UNDER AUSTERITY**

In response to severely diminished budgets, humanitarian organisations are being forced to make prioritisation decisions over who they target and with what support.<sup>23</sup> The 2026 Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) narrowed its scope from roughly 300 million people identified as in need and 190 million targeted for assistance in 2025<sup>24</sup> to just 87 million prioritised people in 2026 – the lowest target in a decade.<sup>25, 26</sup> This narrowing of scope has fuelled concerns about what happens to people whose needs remain but who are no longer prioritised for humanitarian assistance, including whether those needs will continue to be assessed and addressed through alternative forms of support.

The sharp reduction in the number of people formally targeted for assistance is one visible consequence of shrinking resources. The other is a narrowing of priorities of humanitarianism. Over the past decade, the humanitarian-development-peace agenda, alongside the widening use of what counts as life-saving language, helped expand humanitarian action beyond meeting basic needs into areas such as resilience, livelihoods, and education.<sup>27</sup>

Today’s funding reality is forcing the sector back towards a much thinner notion of what counts as essential. Agencies are strategically, if reluctantly, accepting that large-scale funding for this broader work is unlikely to return, despite the disconnect with what communities would like the aid system to prioritise, as repeatedly evidenced by Ground Truth Solutions (GTS)<sup>28</sup> and others including Loop<sup>29</sup> and Upinion.<sup>30</sup>

The tension between immediate relief and longer-term support is not new, but the current crisis has starkly exposed the repeated failure to deliver on “humanitarian-development-peace nexus” commitments meant to bridge these areas and move responses beyond short-term emergency cycles.<sup>31</sup> Addressing these gaps will require stronger engagement and accountability from governments and development actors, yet many of the political, financial, and institutional barriers that have long prevented meaningful progress remain largely unresolved.<sup>32</sup>

There is a concern that the recent influx of US funding into OCHA-managed Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) is reinforcing this tension. An International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) – InterAction member survey found that while the rapid disbursement of funding through the CBPFs was essential to sustain urgent humanitarian operations, the compressed implementation timelines limited meaningful community engagement and participatory approaches.<sup>33</sup> The pressure to spend large allocations quickly as well as monthly reporting requirements also encouraged a focus on easily quantifiable outputs, such as commodity distributions and cash transfers, at the expense of services requiring longer-term engagement, including health, nutrition, protection, and community-based programming.<sup>34</sup>

*“Across conflict settings, the legal and normative safeguards intended to protect health, life, and dignity are being systematically eroded in plain sight and with impunity. This erosion reflects geopolitical fragmentation and the rise of transactional approaches to assistance and security, which undermines protection and accountability.”*

The Lancet, “Health in a world of crises and impunity” 2026<sup>41</sup>

*“There is impunity for many things... if we’re not dealing with that egregious lack of accountability at that level, then even if we were doing tremendously on participation, it would all be hypocrisy anyway.”*

Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop,  
Executive Director, HERE-Geneva<sup>42</sup>

The survey also revealed concerns that funding allocation decisions were highly centralised and insufficiently transparent.<sup>35</sup> GTS has similarly found that many communities perceive prioritisation decisions as arbitrary and exclusionary particularly towards the most vulnerable groups.<sup>36</sup> Local actors also reported having little visibility on how broader prioritisation decisions were made, and when consulted had little real influence over the outcome.<sup>37</sup>

This creates a fundamental contradiction:

*it is difficult to credibly claim to be accountable to affected people while operating within a system defined by hyper-prioritisation and narrowly defined, survival-only framings largely designed without the involvement of the people who will live with the consequences.*

## CONFRONTING IMPUNITY

It is important to recognise that these tensions do not exist in isolation from the wider political environment shaping humanitarian action. States continue to violate international law and human rights with impunity<sup>38</sup> putting civilians and aid workers at increasing risk, while sanctions and political responses are applied selectively.<sup>39</sup> When accountability fails at this level, participation and feedback have limited meaning. Without confronting these broader double standards, accountability risks becoming a technocratic exercise that holds frontline actors to standards not applied to more powerful institutions and states.

What comes next remains uncertain.

The Emergency Relief Coordinator’s (ERC) Humanitarian Reset explicitly calls for more people-centred aid and stronger accountability to local actors<sup>40</sup> (see Chapter 2), but scepticism remains high after decades of reforms that promised transformation while leaving core structures largely intact.

As the formal humanitarian system retreats, more bottom-up systems of mutual aid and community response that have existed alongside it all along may become more visible and influential. This is already being seen in some contexts, if under significant constraint. The future is likely to be uneven, with some locally driven adaptations, community-led responses and pockets of international reform. These may fall short of the sector’s stated ambitions but nevertheless continue pushing parts of the system towards more accountable and grounded ways of working.

*“You can’t sell yourself on a promise of dignity and resilience and all these buzzwords that we’ve been using as the UN-led system for years, raising millions of dollars off the back of that rhetoric, to now say, ‘Well actually, that was never our responsibility. We’re humanitarians, we save lives, and everything else is sort of someone else’s problem.’”*

Meg Sattler, Director, Ground Truth Solutions<sup>43</sup>



## Doing good in bad times



**Bao Han Tran Le**

Head of Accountability Practices and Reporting, Accountable Now



*But accountability is not a luxury for when things calm down. Pressure and uncertainty are precisely when it matters most.*

You do not need me to tell you how difficult it is to carry out civil society and mission-driven work right now. The sector is facing funding cuts, rising costs, weaponised oversight and shrinking operating space in a world that feels uncertain at best.

As civil society, we are constantly asked to defend the value of our work while resources decline and while global leaders who claim to stand for values of democracy, liberty and equality are acting in contradictory ways that harm marginalised communities. In moments like these, considering and taking stock of our own practices can seem like a distraction or a side quest to all that's happening around the world.

But accountability is not a luxury for when things calm down. Pressure and uncertainty are precisely when it matters most. It is what makes our work credible, resilient and worth defending. It strengthens trust with communities, reinforces relationships with partners and supporters and prevents urgency from becoming an excuse for poor decisions and harm. If transparency, reflection and responsiveness disappear when conditions are hardest, we risk reproducing the same unaccountable dynamics we seek to challenge.

Accountability should not only exist when someone else is checking. It is not about meeting donor requirements or satisfying procurement processes, but about acting as responsible stewards of entrusted resources. It is not about installing safeguarding policies to qualify for the next proposal, but about a clear commitment to keep people safe. It is not about passing standards to secure a check mark, but about honestly examining our processes and asking where we can improve.

And lastly, accountability isn't something we do to keep the lights on. In periods of repression and scarcity, the focus can narrow on survival. But how we survive matters. We must learn from both our successes and failures. We must adapt our work through listening to feedback, course corrections and informed decision-making. And we must build coalitions, support one another, and be trusted as credible agents of change. This requires making space for scrutiny and being willing to examine where we fall short, where our practices diverge from our stated values and where power operates unchecked within our own organisations.

In moments like these, accountability is not a distraction from doing good. It is what allows us to do it better.

## “ Voluntary accountability is not accountability

For 25 years, the sector has debated and experimented with accountability. Yet it remains elusive because humanitarian accountability looks nothing like the real thing. The system has no one to blame but itself.

At its simplest, accountability means power holders are constrained by norms, must justify their actions to those affected by their decisions and can be sanctioned if they fail in their responsibilities or abuse their power. This raises three questions: accountable to whom, for what and how?

Accountable to whom? International agencies answer to donors, states, peers, local agencies and affected communities. Despite insisting they are centred on affected people, they act as if donors matter most. Money talks. Upward accountability approximates real accountability; downward accountability does not come close.

Accountable for what? After Rwanda, accountability was tied to high-quality aid that meets needs and confers dignity. Affected communities understand it more broadly: the right aid, at the right time to the right communities; involvement in critical decisions; and responsiveness to feedback and complaints. Agencies fall short of accountability as defined by affected communities and by their own standards.

Accountable how? Humanitarians have generally preferred a solipsistic accountability where they decide how they are doing. Over the last decade they are increasingly relying on technological rather than human mechanisms: better to use hotlines and digital tools rather than face-to-face contact. They also rely on metrics, which are renowned for distorting relationships. Humanitarians will do almost anything to avoid listening directly, and responding to, affected communities.

Effective accountability also requires sanctions. If there is no cost to abusing power, those in power have little pressure to change.

What do humanitarians call a regime in which they are not sufficiently responsive to affected communities, organisations and communities define needs differently and in which there are no effective mechanisms to sanction those in power? “Voluntary” accountability. Agencies decide when, where and how they will be accountable. Voluntary accountability is an oxymoron.

This farce continues because those in power prefer no accountability if they can get away with it. Humanitarians also justify it through the belief that they have little to learn from affected communities. Expert knowledge treats local knowledge as inferior. Paternalism assumes affected communities do not know their own best interests or have the capacity to achieve them.

Moral principles and commitments are not enough. The sector needs incentives that leave agencies no choice but to be attentive to affected communities. It starts with sanctions and costs, shaped by affected communities, for failing in duties and abusing power.

But agencies cannot police themselves. This is the role for an independent third party. If agencies have to worry about how they are judged by affected communities, they may finally account for decisions, incorporate local perspectives and pay closer attention to quality aid that restores dignity.



**Michael N. Barnett**

Professor, George Washington University, CHS Alliance Board Member

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*Moral principles and commitments are not enough. The sector needs incentives that leave agencies no choice but to be attentive to affected communities.”*



## What is at stake for people with lived experience?



**Peter Kidi**

Poet and advocate



*Our lived experience becomes a story to listen to rather than expertise to value.”*

As someone who grew up in Kakuma Refugee Camp, I have seen both the resilience of displaced people and the limitations of a system that frequently speaks on their behalf instead of trusting them as equal partners.

Refugees are often invited to share their testimonies but are rarely included where power truly sits – in governance structures where strategies, budgets and policies are decided. Our lived experience becomes a story to listen to rather than expertise to value.

This is what must change.

Meaningful inclusion requires more than consultation or symbolic participation. People with lived experience must be represented on governing boards, advisory bodies, and in leadership positions across the humanitarian sector. Progress has been made in expanding representation within governance structures, including in organisations such as the CHS Alliance.

These shifts matter because they challenge long-standing assumptions about who holds expertise and who is best placed to shape humanitarian policy and practice. Expertise is not derived solely from professional qualifications or institutional experience. It also comes from surviving crises, navigating displacement, and building resilience within communities under difficult conditions.

There is also a broader question of trust. Communities affected by crisis already organise, innovate, mediate conflicts, educate their children, and support one another long before international actors arrive. Humanitarian systems should recognise, trust and invest in that leadership rather than treating affected people as passive recipients of aid.

If the sector is serious about localisation, accountability, and dignity, lived experience must move from the margins to the centre of decision-making. This is not simply a question of representation. It is about dignity, agency, and the right of people affected by crisis to shape the decisions that affect their lives. Only then can humanitarian action become more responsive, equitable, and accountable to the people it exists to serve.

## “ Accountability is a choice

There is no shortage of research, reporting, and evidence to analyse when the humanitarian system falls short of its promises. Yet this rarely translates into genuine accountability and change.

This is clear from previous editions of this very report: Again and again, the system does not truly listen to – or adapt for – the people it serves.<sup>44</sup>

We see it as humanitarian leaders enact hyper-prioritised response plans, deciding what to cut or save without meaningful input from communities in need. We see it with localisation, when aid agencies and donors cite decade-old commitments, but sidestep them when they're inconvenient.

We see it in the continued complicity of donor governments in wars of aggression and annihilation in Gaza and Iran,<sup>45</sup> and the failure of humanitarian and UN agencies to push against politics that harm the people they serve.<sup>46</sup>

We must also consider the doctrines of neutrality and secrecy that many international organisations use to shield themselves from speaking up and acting on information. Humanitarians operate under a “glass house syndrome” – prioritising reputation and funding, fearful that legitimate public criticism delegitimises the entire sector.

Those who gather information in crises – whether humanitarians, journalists, or researchers – must think beyond the operational accountability of resource allocation, logistics, and log frames, which all generate more data than change.

We must consider narrative accountability: what stories are told or not, who controls the language used, whose silence is part of the structural violence of conflict.

We also must consider moral accountability: what gives people we serve a say, agency, and justice on their own term.

We need to accept accountability not only on what we have done, but what we have failed to do.

We owe those we report on to enforce their agency, and to be in solidarity with them on their own terms. This includes:

- Making people affected by crisis the primary audience of our reporting and of accountability. They should have the final say in what counts as humanitarianism and what doesn't.
- Consistently and vigorously recording the facts on achievements and failures – not just evaluations that do not name culprits, but real honesty including clear critiques when humanitarian actors fail to live up to their own rhetoric, or when they give themselves more power than necessary to fulfil their mission.
- Ensuring that independent reporting from the ground is not a luxury. The humanitarian system's tendency for self-marking contributes to its accountability crisis. Whether by journalists or people and communities affected, the system needs independent voices.

Finally, accountability must be enforceable. This conversation about accountability in the humanitarian system is not new; it is one that is often repeated and, just as often, neglected. If there are no consequences for failing to live up to your commitments, then the cycle repeats.<sup>47</sup>

Independent reporting and evidence-gathering can inform, but accountability only happens when the system chooses to use that information to change. Now, in a world moving in deeply troubling directions, and in the middle of a crisis of funding and legitimacy, this choice matters more than ever.

From the position of a newsroom, this means more rigorous and factual reporting grounded in the experiences and priorities of people at the heart of those stories. It also means embracing, in the words of Marx: a “ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.”

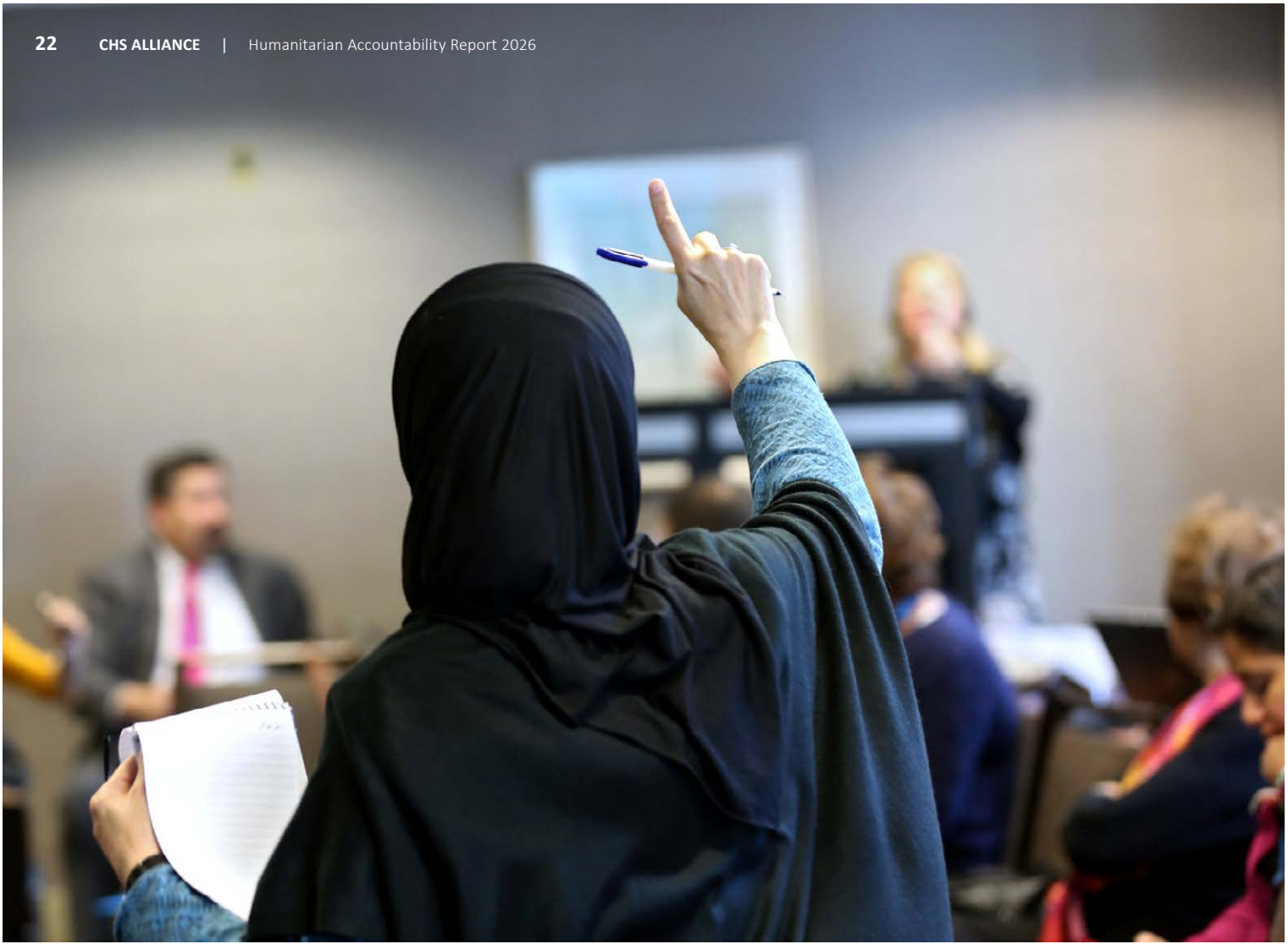


**Tamмам Aloudat**

CEO, The New Humanitarian

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*Humanitarians operate under a “glass house syndrome” – prioritising reputation and funding, fearful that legitimate public criticism delegitimises the entire sector.”*



## CHAPTER 2:

# The Humanitarian Reset: a potential catalyst amid uncertainty and unfulfilled reform promises

### IMAGE

Civil society strategises around achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

© UN Women/  
Ryan Brown

Humanitarian actors are accountable not only for delivering aid, but for upholding the values they publicly claim to represent and the commitments they have endorsed. Today's Humanitarian Reset is the latest test of whether the sector is willing to confront the political and institutional incentives that have repeatedly undermined past reform efforts.

The Reset emerged in 2025 in response to deep funding cuts and growing doubts about the humanitarian system's legitimacy and effectiveness.<sup>48</sup> Framed by the ERC Tom Fletcher as a moment to reimagine humanitarian action,<sup>49</sup> the Reset is intended to adapt the system to an era of constrained resources while addressing longstanding critiques about its distance from affected people and overreliance on international actors. In principle, this creates

an opportunity to place AAP more centrally within humanitarian action.

At its core, the Reset proposes four areas for reform: prioritising more rigorously in an era of scarcity, reducing institutional inefficiencies, rebalancing power by moving authority closer to national and local actors and more forcefully defending humanitarian principles.<sup>50</sup>

AAP is positioned as a central pillar, with renewed emphasis on ensuring community perspectives shape priorities and response planning, alongside stronger reporting expectations.

Yet the Reset enters a sector marked by deep reform fatigue.<sup>51</sup> Humanitarian actors have spent decades endorsing accountability, participation and localisation,<sup>52</sup> yet continue to sideline local actors and deprioritise the needs and dignity of affected people.<sup>53</sup> This history shapes how the Reset is now being interpreted. For some, financial constraints may actually drive meaningful reform.<sup>54</sup> For others, the Reset is primarily a vehicle for managing decline of a shrinking system. The language of putting “people at the centre” often remains vague,<sup>55</sup> and the Reset’s interpretation of AAP is frequently reduced to inter-agency feedback mechanisms rather than confronting who controls resources, priorities and decision-making authority.

Questions of ownership further complicate the picture. The Reset is mainly shaped by large global actors and donor pressures,<sup>56</sup> raising concerns that it could reinforce rather than disrupt existing power imbalances. Many local humanitarian leaders say they have little contact with the Reset process nor clarity about what it will mean in practice.<sup>57</sup>

The Reset is also unfolding within a political environment increasingly defined by donor conditionality and geopolitical influence. States and donors controlling financial resources continue to shape where assistance is delivered, to whom and under what conditions.

***Humanitarian funding is increasingly tied to national security and foreign policy priorities rather than humanitarian need, exposing dynamics that have long existed within the system but are now becoming harder to ignore.***

*“The way forward is to operationalise principles as decision rules, reaffirm humanity and impartiality as non-negotiable, apply neutrality and independence contextually to enable access and acceptance, and embed do no harm, solidarity, and accountability into enforcement and practice.”*

The Lancet, ‘Health in a world of crises and impunity’ 2026<sup>60</sup>

New US foreign assistance restrictions introduced in early 2026, for example, have come with political and ideological conditions that compromise many accountability commitments.<sup>58</sup> They include tighter reproductive health conditions and prohibitions on “gender ideology” and Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programming. Some agencies have decided not to accept US funding when it comes with these constraints or where compliance would compromise their mandates or principles. Others have responded more quietly by removing references to gender, equity and diversity from websites, proposals and programmes.<sup>59</sup>

As financial pressures intensify, organisations are increasingly forced to navigate difficult trade-offs between maintaining principled humanitarian action and securing the resources needed to continue operating and supporting people in urgent need. The ease with which some previously described foundational commitments can be abandoned under pressure raises questions as to how deeply embedded they ever were. Greater transparency is needed about what conditions are being accepted, what commitments are being scaled back, and the implications for humanitarian independence and impartiality.

## “ The humanitarianism we have allowed



**Dr Jemilah Mahmood**

Executive Director,  
Sunway Centre for  
Planetary Health; Grand  
Bargain Ambassador

“

*Humanitarianism was never meant to be charity. It was meant to be the organised refusal to accept that some lives matter less than others.”*

Many of us have spent years in this sector, working in the aftermath of earthquakes, in camps for the newly displaced and in hospitals and schools under bombardment.

We have also sat in conference rooms in Geneva and New York debating funding, access and reform. We entered this work believing that the suffering of strangers demands a principled, organised effective response, and that together we could deliver it.

Recent crises have exposed the fragility of those beliefs. Gaza has revealed the erosion of humanitarian norms. Sudan has exposed the world’s selective attention to suffering. Afghanistan has shown the limits of externally driven systems. Across the sector, there is a growing discomfort with the gap between what humanitarianism claims to do and what it is actually achieving.

The crisis isn’t just financial, it is also one of relevance, trust and legitimacy. We feel the weight of a system that was designed to respond to human suffering, but increasingly feels like it is consumed by its own ways of operating.

Part of the problem is that humanitarian reform over the years has focused on the technical shifts and not the political shifts needed. Take localisation: after nearly a decade of discussion the Grand Bargain commitment to direct 25% of funding to local actors is far from being met. CHS data shows we are still not meeting the other commitments on accountability, meaning we are far removed from the Grand Bargain commitments to any Participation Revolution.

This comes down to a question of power.

For the international NGOs: have they become too centralised and too protective of their own survival? And for national and local organisations like mine: are we ready to step into leadership with the governance and accountability that genuine power requires?

Humanitarianism was never meant to be charity. It was meant to be the organised refusal to accept that some lives matter less than others. Reclaiming that purpose will require more than another reform agenda. It should feel urgent. It should feel honest. And perhaps it should feel angry – angry at the gap between what is possible and what we have collectively allowed.

## “ Reset or rebrand: Can a donor-driven Humanitarian Reset ever be truly community-centred?”

I have spent seven years working in the humanitarian sector, first as the founder of a Refugee-Led Organisation (RLO), and now as a regional lead of R-SEAT in East Africa engaging with governments, donors, and UN agencies. From both vantage points, I see the same pattern repeating itself: the system says it wants to become more “people-centred” but still falls short of that ambition.

Current discussions about the humanitarian financial crisis – what to cut, what to prioritise, who can absorb large amounts of funding quickly – are taking place among a small group of donors, UN agencies, and major NGOs. Refugees and refugee-led organisations are largely excluded from these decisions.

At the same time, many organisations are eager to showcase community engagement because it appeals to donors. In practice, this often means placing a refugee on a panel or in a meeting so organisations can claim inclusion while that person has no real influence on outcomes.

My work at R-SEAT has focused on building National Advisory Mechanisms which are structures where governments engage refugees directly on policy and national positions. Similar models already exist in parts of the Global North, where refugees, through their expertise, sit on formal advisory bodies and official delegations. In East Africa, we are working to build similar mechanisms with host states and refugees.

When refugees participate in this way programmes become more relevant and funding is used more effectively because priorities are shaped by the people most affected. This is especially important as donors increasingly narrow support to what they define as “life-saving.” From a refugee perspective, education for girls can itself be life-saving in contexts where schools provide protection from violence and exploitation. Refugee participation also matters in challenging system and structural barriers. When refugees are in the room, they will insist on addressing them.

For decades, NGOs largely decided what programmes would exist and refugees were expected to fit within them. Refugee-led

organisations are no longer waiting to be included in systems that have failed to deliver meaningful change.

Many activities, including food or water distribution, can often be managed more effectively by communities themselves than by large international agencies that have operated in the same places for decades. Yet organisations accustomed to making decisions on behalf of communities can perceive genuine power-sharing as threatening.

That is why the current moment could also be an opportunity. For the first time, the system is being pushed to change by austerity rather than voluntary reform. International organisations are being forced to rethink how they operate, which could create space for more serious localisation and refugee leadership. But I am not yet confident this will happen. The same people who have made the system unsustainable, unfit for purpose and disconnected from the reality of people on the ground are the ones designing this new system. Many organisations are restructuring so they can continue to exist, not so they can shift power.

Meanwhile RLOs are growing, even in very restrictive environments. They are not waiting for solutions from outside.

The real test is whether the Humanitarian Reset will recognise this reality. Will refugees and local communities help shape how the system changes? Will more authority and resources move to refugee-led and community-based organisations? If the answer is no, then this Reset risks becoming a rebranding exercise to help existing institutions survive.



**Ishimwe Jean Marie**

East Africa Regional Lead, Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT)

“  
For decades, NGOs largely decided what programmes would exist and refugees were expected to fit within them. Refugee-led organisations are no longer waiting to be included in systems that have failed to deliver meaningful change.”

## “ The Reset must recognise us not merely as recipients of aid, but as agents of change



**Meena Paudel**

Chairperson, Nepal Disabled Women Association (NDWA)

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*We are not merely waiting to be helped. We are responders, organisers and agents of change.”*

As Chairperson of the Nepal Disabled Women Association (NDWA), my work in humanitarian preparedness and response has exposed a persistent failure in humanitarian action: persons with disabilities are still too often treated as passive recipients of aid rather than contributors with knowledge, capacity and leadership.

We are not merely waiting to be helped. We are responders, organisers and agents of change. Years of working alongside communities affected by floods and earthquakes – including persons with disabilities, lactating mothers, older persons, and families who have lost livelihoods – have shaped my understanding of what meaningful accountability and inclusion should look like.

Early in my work, I saw how assumptions weakened humanitarian response. Persons with disabilities were approached with pity rather than dignity, and responses focused narrowly on distributing relief with little attention to diverse needs. This overlooked not only the disproportionate impact of crises on persons with disabilities, but also our resilience, skills and ability to contribute to response and recovery.

Over time, I came to understand that inclusion cannot be tokenistic. Persons with disabilities must be meaningfully involved at every stage, from planning and policy to implementation and evaluation. Our voices must not only be heard but acted on. This is the essence of “nothing about us without us,” grounded in participation, representation, and ownership.

Yet the gap between policy and practice remains wide. Despite global commitments under the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the Sustainable Development Goals, and Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines, women and persons with disabilities are still rarely recognised as responders and leaders.

I have advocated for practical, context-specific inclusion: accessible shelters, toilets and distribution points; appropriate assistive devices; disability mapping; and recognition that disability itself is diverse. Inclusion means understanding individual needs, whether diapers, mobility devices for people with spinal cord injuries, or supplies for people affected by leprosy. One-size-fits-all responses are not inclusive. They are exclusionary.

Our inclusion is not optional. When persons with disabilities are meaningfully involved, humanitarian responses become more effective, accountable and sustainable. Our leadership strengthens the system and helps ensure no one is left behind. Nothing about us without us.

## “Community engagement without broader accountability is meaningless

Saying these are not good days for accountability under international law is an understatement. The women of Tigray, Ethiopia, many of whom suffered horrific sexual violence during the war between November 2020 and November 2022, still remain without justice.

After four years of asking the Federal Ethiopian Government for the results of its investigations into the June 2021 murders of three Médecins Sans Frontières staff members, MSF released its own report identifying the perpetrators. The Ethiopian government did not respond. Impunity for war crimes remains widespread.

In 2023, I led the interagency humanitarian evaluation (IAHE) of the humanitarian system's collective response to the conflict in northern Ethiopia. This is the only mechanism designed to assess whether UN agencies and their operational partners fulfil their mandates and commitments during large-scale crises.

The evaluation revealed a consistent pattern: limited transparency around meetings between senior UN officials and Ethiopian leadership, a dysfunctional humanitarian country team, and reluctance among agencies to speak publicly about access constraints and abuses. In some cases, relationships with federal authorities appeared to lack necessary independence, raising broader concerns about accountability in politically constrained environments. When I sought to interview agency heads as part of the evaluation, I was told this was not standard practice, highlighting limits to scrutiny at the highest levels.

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to see how AAP can be sustained if treated in isolation from these wider dynamics. Community engagement means little when humanitarian organisations avoid confronting the broader accountability questions shaping their actions.

Some UN country directors linked to problematic roles in Ethiopia later moved into other senior positions. The IAHE report, which identified major systemic failures, was not even discussed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee that commissioned it, let alone acted upon.

Looking at accountability solely through a people-centred lens risks missing the point. Humanitarian actors must have the broader concept of accountability at the core of their mandates. This must also include protection, advocacy for those whose rights have been violated, and clear explanations for strategic and operational decisions.

If the Humanitarian Reset is to deliver meaningful change, it must go beyond narrow people-centred approaches and confront deeper questions of power, responsibility and consequence. Otherwise, humanitarian action risks becoming little more than subcontracted service delivery rather than a system grounded in the responsibilities that give it legitimacy.



**Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop**

Executive Director,  
HERE-Geneva

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*Community engagement means little when humanitarian organisations avoid confronting the broader accountability questions shaping their actions.”*



### CHAPTER 3:

## Upholding commitments to people affected by crisis: piecemeal progress

Progress towards a system more accountable to the people it serves highlights a more complicated reality than either progress narratives or outright critiques suggest.

On the one hand, accountability to people in crisis is now far more visible, structured and institutionalised across the humanitarian system. Its benefits<sup>61</sup> are widely recognised across the literature,<sup>62</sup> and accountability is now recognised as a defining feature of effective humanitarian action. Yet many barriers tied to power, incentives and decision-making remain.<sup>63 64</sup>

Over the past decade AAP has moved to the centre of humanitarian policy as a central feature of successive reform agendas, but with modest effect.<sup>65</sup> The Grand Bargain's "participation revolution"<sup>66</sup> which pledged to involve people receiving aid in decisions

affecting their lives, never materialised.<sup>67</sup> OCHA's Flagship Initiative on collective AAP (see textbox below), improved coordination and increased the visibility of community feedback, but struggled to shift strategic priorities or underlying power dynamics.<sup>68</sup> Former Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) Mark Lowcock's earlier call for an Independent Commission for Voices in Crisis (ICVIC) argued that humanitarian agencies were "marking their own homework" and faced few consequences for failing to listen to affected people.<sup>69</sup> Yet the initiative itself failed to gain traction, in part because it was ironically perceived as top-down and disconnected from existing AAP efforts.

*"We are often forgotten when it comes to making decisions. Yet we live here just like everyone else! If we were included in the provincial assembly, we could talk about our real problems; access to land, healthcare and education."*

Kapula, 39, Kailo, Democratic Republic of Congo <sup>72</sup>

*"Without sustained political engagement and commitment, accountability itself cannot be exercised; in its absence, change remains performative."*

The Lancet, 'Health in a world of crises and impunity' 2026 <sup>74</sup>

*"The aid organisations that are supposed to help people have become ineffective. Even when you need food and water, they bring items like jerrycans, chlorine, and diapers, which we see as meaningless and disrespectful to our real situation."*

Talk to Loop respondent, Somalia <sup>73</sup>

*The collapse or failure of these initiatives reinforce a consistent pattern: strong rhetorical support for AAP, but far less willingness to create mechanisms capable of redistributing power or enforcing those commitments.*

### WHAT GETS MEASURED GETS DONE

Yet where there has been sustained system-wide effort, there is evidence of progress, including in data from the growing number of organisations verified against the CHS.

The CHS was developed in 2014 as a collective sector-wide commitment towards a common measurable accountability framework. It shifted attention from what organisations deliver to what people affected by crisis have a right to expect. More than 200 organisations have now verified their performance against the CHS, with growing uptake among national NGOs. However the largest humanitarian players have still not verified against this collective framework.

This structured and consistent approach to measuring against the CHS people-centred commitments, is driving change. **Graph 1** shows the sample of organisations who have been externally audited by the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI).<sup>70</sup>

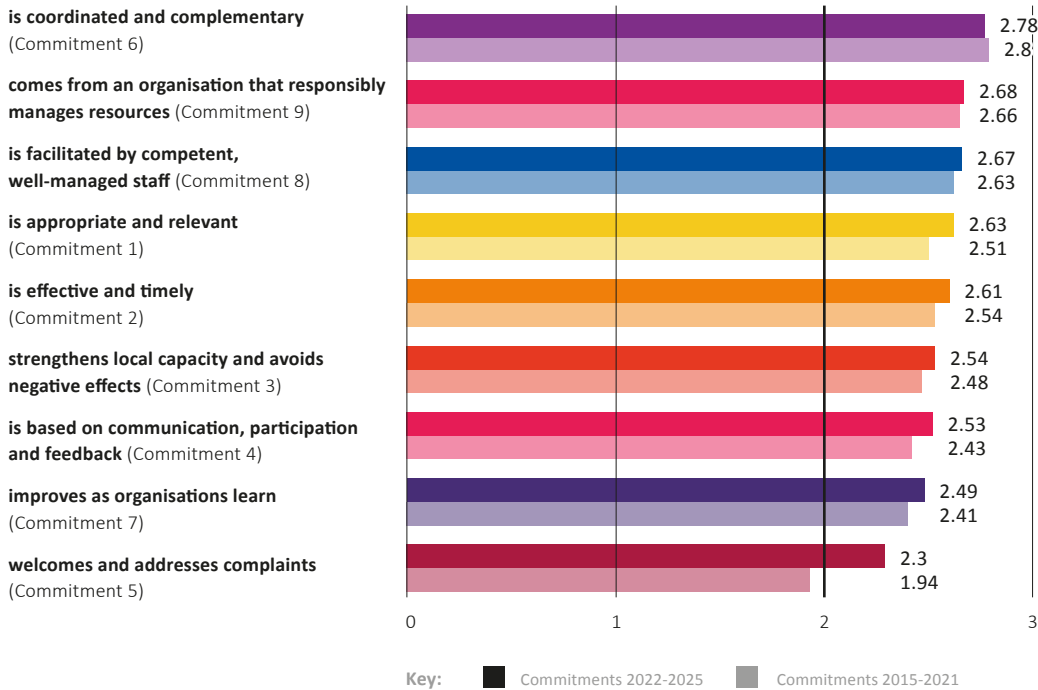
The data from a three-year cycle from initial audit to renewed audit shows marked improvements across all the commitments. This demonstrates that sustained attention, monitoring, and verification drives progress.

Yet data from all 200 verified organisations<sup>71</sup> reveals another consistent pattern (see **Graph 2**). The humanitarian system remains strongest at managing its internal systems rather than sharing influence over priorities and decisions. This is reflected in consistently high scores for Commitment 6 (Coordination) and Commitment 9 (Resource Management), long-standing pillars of humanitarian performance. By contrast, the weakest scores remain in areas requiring meaningful community influence, particularly Commitment 4 (access support that does not cause harm) and Commitment 5 (report concerns and get them addressed).

### GRAPH 1: AVERAGE SCORES BY COMMITMENT, COMPARING 2015-2021 AND 2022-2025

Data from CHS Verified Organisations.

Communities and people affected by crisis can expect assistance that:

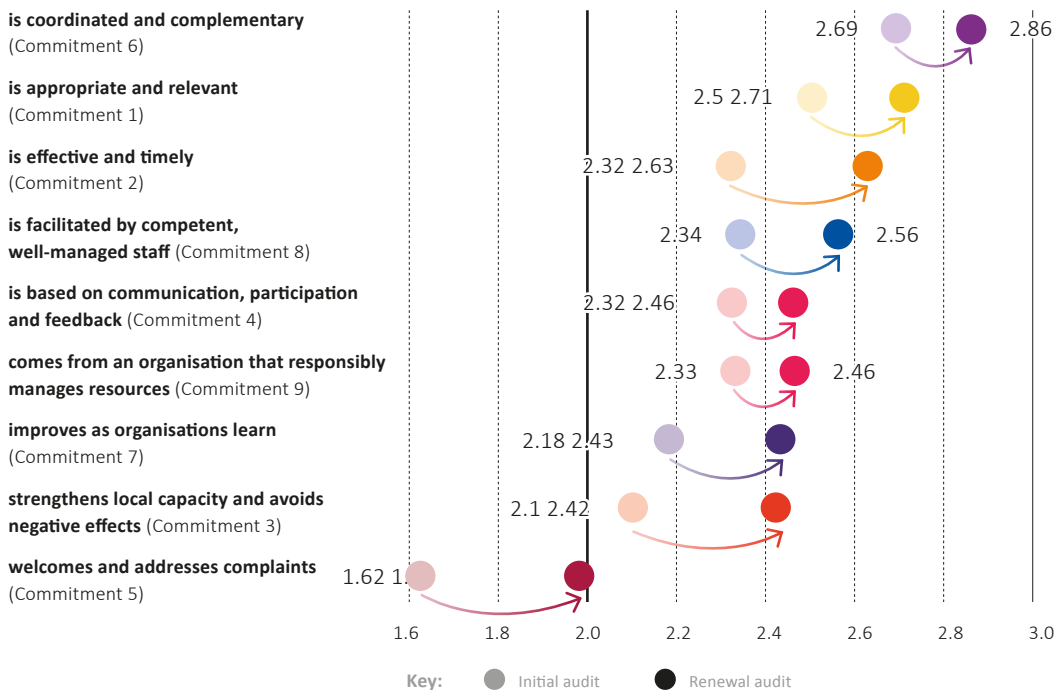


Source: Data from CHS verifications (all options) for 95 organisations from 2015 to 2021 and 120 unique verifications from 2022-2025.

### GRAPH 2: AVERAGE CHANGE IN CHS COMMITMENT SCORES BETWEEN INITIAL AND RENEWAL AUDITS

Data from CHS Verified Organisations. Measuring change over time coverage scores at Initial and renewal audit using the CHS

Communities and people affected by crisis can expect assistance that:



Source: Data from HQAI for organisations with both initial and renewal audits from January 2023 to September 2025. Scores shown are the average aggregated scores at the initial audit compared to those at the renewal audit.

## COMMENTARY ON THE CHS DATA



## More than survival: reclaiming the right to a future in Somalia



*The humanitarian sector is moving at two speeds. The CHS data reveals that we have made progress in traditional areas in coordination and resource management, but remain weakest at what matters most: listening and responding to the people we serve.*

*This “accountability ceiling” persists because the aid system is designed for donors rather than the displaced families. Agencies operate within a professional environment shaped by donor language, coordination meetings, reporting frameworks and technical processes. The humanitarian system rewards coordination with other agencies, while the slower work of listening to displaced communities is often underfunded and undervalued.*

*This gap is being widened by a shift toward “survival-only” aid. Communities do not separate survival from safety or future opportunity, so cutting so-called “non-emergency services” ignores what people value – recovery, dignity and their future prospects – and weakens accountability.*

*The human cost is staggering. By late 2025, financing shortfalls forced the closure of over 400 Somali learning spaces, abruptly stripping educational support from 87,000 children.<sup>75</sup> In Somalia, education is not a luxury but the anchor of stability during crisis. Children make up 60% of the newly displaced and face increased risks of family separation, child labour and forced marriage.<sup>76</sup> Yet the child protection sector faces a 91% funding gap, exposing the disconnect between what communities say they need and what the system funds.<sup>77</sup>*

*For local NGOs, the current moment feels like a fight for survival. Severe cuts have forced many organisations to withdraw from their own communities, with some losing 60% of their income.<sup>78</sup> By October 2025, 75% of Somali NGOs had closed field offices and 95% had laid off staff.<sup>79</sup> When the Zamzam Foundation shut its health centres, 51,000 people lost access to care.<sup>80</sup> By mid-2025, 300 feeding centres had closed, reducing life-saving nutrition programmes by 60%.<sup>81</sup>*

*Rebuilding requires aligning resources with what communities say they need – including protection and education. Local NGOs need predictable funding, and decision-making power so trade-offs are not imposed unilaterally. Until this happens, “listening” will remain performative rather than transformative.*



**Nimo Hassan**

Director, Somali NGO Consortium, ICVA Chair



*Communities do not separate survival from safety or future opportunity, so cutting so-called “non-emergency services” ignores what people value – recovery, dignity and their future prospects – and weakens accountability.”*

## COMMENTARY ON THE CHS DATA



## When pressure drives reform: can Somalia's accountability gains last?



**George Conway**

UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and Deputy Special Representative to the UN Secretary General, Somalia

*The most notable improvement in global CHS data is in the presence of complaint and feedback mechanisms. Yet the lowest scores remain in areas related to genuine community influence. This gap between the mechanics of accountability and actual community influence resonates with the experience in Somalia.*

*Prior to recent reforms, the international response in Somalia was largely topdown and detached from community realities. The 2022–23 drought response marked a turning point. A major scale-up, supported by significant US funding, averted catastrophe, but also exposed widespread patterns of aid diversion. This created a shared sense of exposure that opened space for collective reform. Crucially, Humanitarian Country Team leadership framed this not as isolated misconduct but as a system-wide failure, requiring structural change.*

*One core problem was the absence of a coherent approach to community feedback. Formally, the system could claim accountability through dozens of agency-specific hotlines and complaints channels, sometimes more than 70. But many numbers did not work and functioned more as compliance tools than real channels for accountability.*

*Another issue was a siloed cluster system detached from community realities. Multiple, uncoordinated assessments and targeting approaches produced fragmented, opaque assistance, with little transparency about who received what and why.*

*Reform required practical, collective solutions. Data sharing and a systemwide referral mechanism streamlined feedback so that actors no longer relied on post-it notes and text messages to refer cases. Clusters retained strategic coordination and quality assurance roles while shifting the primary community interface to area-based coordination (ABC), led as far as possible by local actors. This flip aimed to anchor response planning in continuous, trust-based community engagement.*

*Progress was neither quick nor uncontested. Resistance from clusters and agencies was notable, particularly around data sharing and*

*control of resources. But as funding fell from around \$2 billion at the peak of the drought response to roughly \$400 million by 2025, the expansive, decentralised cluster system became unsustainable.*

*These constraints created both the need and the political space for change. Sustained leadership, external scrutiny and pressure from aid diversion exposure helped a more coordinated approach to feedback and area-based planning gain traction.*

*The Humanitarian Reset has matched reforms that were already underway in Somalia, reinforcing that this is not an outlier experiment but a necessary adaptation to a changed humanitarian landscape. However, the model remains fragile. Severe underfunding risks forcing top-down prioritisation that undermines area-based, community-driven planning. Evidence from 2024 and 2025 shows communities often prioritise livelihoods, services, and infrastructure over short-term distributions, creating tension with the global “life-saving only” push.*

*Local actors are also being asked to assume greater coordination responsibilities without adequate support. While funding mechanisms such as the Somalia Humanitarian Fund are evolving, gaps remain.*

*What stands out is that these reforms were less driven by external standards like the CHS than by pressure. Aid diversion, external evaluations, donor scrutiny and shrinking finances raised the cost of maintaining the status quo and made change unavoidable.*

*The open question is whether this moment of enforced change can sustain real, systemwide AAP, or whether, as pressures ease, the system will revert to more familiar patterns.*

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***Sustained leadership, external scrutiny and pressure from aid diversion exposure helped a more coordinated approach to feedback and area-based planning gain traction.”***

The wider literature reinforces this divide. Across much of the system, participation remains procedural, demonstrated through visible mechanisms – feedback boxes, hotlines, seats at the meeting table – without significantly influencing priorities, or strategic direction.<sup>83</sup> ALNAP describes the agenda as siloed and technocratic, insufficiently embedded in organisational culture. Progress remains uneven and heavily dependent on leadership, funding, and context rather than consistently institutionalised.<sup>84</sup>

The latest OCHA evaluation on AAP reaches similar conclusions. While the proportion of countries consulting affected people rose from 68% to 85% between 2023 and 2025,<sup>85</sup> engagement often occurred after key decisions had already been made.<sup>86</sup> Even where collective mechanisms existed, there were few formal processes to ensure that community input shaped outcomes – or to explain when they did not.<sup>87</sup>

Humanitarian responses therefore continue to diverge from community priorities,<sup>88</sup> particularly around needs that extend beyond immediate survival.<sup>89</sup>

Research from the CALP Network points to similar disconnects around aid preferences. Across nearly all settings reviewed since 2022, agencies did not consistently ask people what forms of assistance they preferred, rarely explored the reasons behind those preferences, and even when preferences were asked, did not always design responses accordingly.<sup>90</sup> In particular, despite cash consistently being identified as a preferred form of assistance by affected people, and despite its prominence within the Humanitarian Reset as a means of delivering more timely and efficient support, multipurpose cash assistance had plateaued at just 5.7% of total humanitarian requirements by March 2026.<sup>91</sup>

Part of the problem is that AAP remains largely voluntary and weakly enforced, compared to accountability systems to donors. Much of the accountability architecture, including the CHS itself, depends heavily on organisational willingness to improve rather than external enforcement. Few consequences exist when agencies fail to respond to feedback, ignore complaints, or – as discussed in Chapter 2 – disregard their own commitments.

*“Almost three decades since the creation of an independent humanitarian ombudsman was first proposed, the sector has steadfastly rejected any external accountability and has instead busied itself for years working on accountability commitments without actually producing accountability.”*

ODI, September 2025<sup>92</sup>

The evidence around accountability, outside of the CHS also remains limited, with the bulk of literature documenting processes and barriers rather than demonstrating concrete impact.<sup>92</sup> Although the CHS was designed as a collective framework, verification remains largely voluntary, and many major IASC organisations still do not systematically measure or publish their own performance against it.

As a result, the sector continues to lack a systemic and holistic approach to assessing whether accountability commitments are changing how aid is experienced in practice.

The situation is being further exacerbated by funding cuts that are weakening the information gathering functions on which accountability depends. Reduced monitoring, shrinking analytical capacity and independent media, all limit scrutiny, transparency, and informed choices.<sup>93 94</sup>

What emerges is a system full of contradictions. AAP is more visible than ever in policy, yet a systematic, structured approach to demonstrating its impact remains difficult to demonstrate.<sup>95</sup> Feedback mechanisms continue to expand, but their influence in shaping priorities remains weak. Two decades of reform have strengthened processes, while enforcement and consequences remain largely absent. The humanitarian system still devotes more energy to improving its own mechanisms than to transferring influence and control to the communities it serves.

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*The humanitarian sector's self-image as people-centred sits uneasily with its operational reality, limiting the uptake of reforms that would redistribute decision-making power. Previous reform efforts have encountered similar constraints, and the Flagship did not overcome them.”*

## THE FLAGSHIP INITIATIVE

Adapted from *Flagship Initiative Final Report* <sup>96</sup>

Launched in 2023 under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the Flagship Initiative was a three-year effort to pilot a more people-centred, locally driven model of humanitarian response across a small number of countries.

It aimed to move beyond fragmented, project-level approaches to AAP by embedding community engagement into system-level decision-making, linking feedback to prioritisation at cluster and Humanitarian Country Team level.

Its final evaluation found some tangible gains as a result of the initiative. It strengthened inter-agency coordination, raised the visibility of community perspectives and demonstrated that collective AAP can be operationalised at scale when backed by leadership and dedicated resources.

However, these advances did not translate into sustained changes in how decisions are made. The initiative struggled to institutionalise clear processes to ensure that community input consistently shaped strategic priorities or that feedback loops were closed when trade-offs occurred. As a result, while it built elements of the infrastructure for collective AAP, its influence on power, prioritisation and resource allocation remained limited.

The Flagship's core strategy, demonstrating that community-defined priorities should reshape the system, proved insufficient to overcome entrenched incentives, organisational interests, and scepticism within the humanitarian architecture. Although communities and some local authorities engaged positively, the wider system did not generate the critical mass of support needed to sustain or scale the approach.

Resistance was both institutional and cultural. Many actors contested the premise that affected people are not already adequately consulted, leading to significant pushback. Efforts to shift from established, cluster-based planning models also faced opposition, including concerns about the absence of a fully developed alternative to existing needs analysis tools and the implications for donor metrics such as People in Need figures. In practice, planning processes largely defaulted to existing approaches.

More fundamentally, the evaluation points to persistent political economy constraints, alongside cultural and behavioural factors within the system. The humanitarian sector's self-image as people-centred sits uneasily with its operational reality, limiting the uptake of reforms that would redistribute decision-making power. Previous reform efforts have encountered similar constraints, and the Flagship did not overcome them.

The conclusion is that while the Flagship Initiative demonstrated viable approaches to more locally led and people-centred response, it did not establish the conditions required for system-wide change. Without stronger, coordinated commitment across donors, UN leadership and operational agencies, and without addressing underlying incentives and norms, efforts of this kind are likely to continue yielding only partial results.

## “ The system can shift. Here’s where it already has.

Global debates on AAP can be polarising. Either the system is accountable to people, or it continues to ignore and fail them. Either communities shape aid, or decisions are made in backrooms. Recent progress suggests the reality sits somewhere between these extremes.

There are examples of effort, adaptation and good practice showing that communities’ priorities can shape response adaptation and decision-making when there is leadership, investment and willingness to change.

As part of the then ERC’s commitment to strengthen community engagement and accountability, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)-funded AAP envelopes in 2023 and 2024 injected almost \$9 million into collective AAP approaches in 16 countries. This is one of the clearest counterexamples to the claim that the system is simply failing when it comes to accountability. It shows that ways of working can integrate respect for people’s rights and agency. These projects, alongside the Flagship Initiative and a more people-driven Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC), have altered how country teams integrate accountability into planning and implementation.

In Sudan, CERF funding catalysed a multi-channel, multi-partner system that reached people fleeing violence or caught in dangerous contexts. It enabled real-time responses and referrals to urgent requests, feedback and complaints, while ensuring community engagement informed cluster and Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) decision-making and the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP).

In Burkina Faso, women-led committees were equipped with phones to improve access to reporting channels and services for survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse. In Myanmar, outreach was adapted to different literacy levels and languages. In Syria, women- and volunteer-led community groups designed and still staff the feedback system, validating feedback and response plans and enabling programme adaptations.

These practices add depth to narratives that label feedback mechanisms as tokenistic or technical. At the collective level, AAP continues to be championed through system reform narratives and major financing instruments, including the Humanitarian Reset. The US \$2 billion award in 2026 hard-wires AAP into its design, signalling that communities’ priorities, preferences and participation are no longer an add-on assigned to an AAP expert. Pooled fund managers and donors can now draft AAP commitments into programmes, reflecting deeper internalisation of the agenda.

These steps do not negate the frustrations of NGOs and community practitioners, nor do they deliver the Participation Revolution that would see communities and national NGOs leading responses. The systemic barriers remain unresolved. But they point to a different kind of collective change, where AAP is built into funding allocations, Humanitarian Coordinator (HC)-led initiatives, HCT decisions, and programme design. They offer nuance to the debate, sitting somewhere between a failing system and accountability achieved.



**Rachel T. Maher**

Accountability to Affected  
People Advisor, OCHA

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*There are examples of effort, adaptation and good practice showing that communities’ priorities can shape response adaptation and decision-making when there is leadership, investment and willingness to change.”*



## Listening is not enough: why accountability needs flexible funding



**Madara  
Hettiarachchi**

Director of Humanitarian Programmes and Accountability, The Disasters Emergency Committee



*These cases show accountability moving beyond consultation into visible changes in how aid is delivered, enabled by funding flexibility.”*

While many humanitarian response plans now consult people affected by crisis, participation often remains procedural and performative, occurring after strategic decisions are finalised. Often, organisations have listened to feedback from aid recipients but cannot adapt their work accordingly. Restrictive funding can bind agencies to pre-planned activities even when community feedback points elsewhere.

The Disasters Emergency Committee’s (DEC) flexible funding model aims to move away from restrictive approaches that limit adaptation during crises. Its funding can be reallocated across locations, sectors and modalities without lengthy approval processes, allowing member charities to respond quickly to what communities say they need rather than simply collecting feedback.

Following the 2023 earthquakes in Syria, DEC charities and local partners changed how cash assistance was delivered in real time to overcome sudden access constraints caused by disruption to financial systems and restrictions imposed on some parts of the country. In Poland, as the Ukraine refugee crisis evolved, assistance was quickly redirected to newly vulnerable groups identified through ongoing engagement with affected populations. In Afghanistan, members adapted programmes and areas of work to navigate political restrictions that prevented female staff from working on certain activities. Some shifted from livelihood activities to psychosocial services so they could continue addressing community needs while ensuring staff safety.

These cases illustrate accountability going beyond consultation, resulting in visible and material changes in how aid is delivered, enabled by funding flexibility.

The DEC’s model is based on sustained dialogue and high levels of trust. By reducing administrative demands, agencies can spend less time on compliance-heavy paperwork and more time listening, adapting and maintaining relationships with people affected by crisis. That is what meaningful accountability depends on.

This is also a case of honouring the commitments the DEC has placed on accountability for people affected by crisis. That flexibility depends on a shared understanding of accountability across the network. The DEC uses the CHS as its common framework, and all DEC members are externally audited against it. This provides independent verification of accountability practices and gives donors and the Secretariat confidence to allow agencies greater flexibility to respond to what communities say they need. It creates the conditions for communities to play a more meaningful role in shaping assistance.

## “ Being accountable to crisis-affected people means asking “whose priorities count?” and then drastically changing the way we work

From Rwanda to Haiti to Syria to Palestine, accountability to crisis-affected people has failed. The IAHE’s system-wide evaluation synthesis is only the latest in a long line of reports confirming what Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) has argued for more than a decade: a system intent on marking its own homework will never be truly accountable to its constituents.

This year, GTS analysed insight from 14,000 people across 12 countries on what people surviving some of the world’s cruellest crises want from aid systems.<sup>97</sup>

People questioned whether the right aid was reaching the right people, whether communities could shape decisions affecting them, and whether local leadership was respected. Furaha\*, displaced in Minova in the Democratic Republic of Congo, echoed a familiar concern: “Unfortunately, you bring aid without consulting the community to understand their real needs.” Tatiana in Ukraine demanded greater transparency: “Aid must be public; the public must know how much has been received and where it is going.”

Our data showed again that, even against modest accountability standards, the international system is underperforming. People in crisis tend to see aid as accountable when it promotes justice, upholds rights and supports long-term recovery. This sits uneasily with aid actors who still define accountability as needs assessments, feedback collection and information-sharing about predetermined programmes.

Progress on community demands to address conflict, violence, climate shocks and long-term precarity remains poor. People in crisis expect basic humanity, not checklists or multi-agency hotlines. They see international obligations holistically: protection from violence, rights and stable futures. Yousef from Deir al-Balah in Gaza told us: “The world must stand with us and help us realise our rights as human beings.” Solange in Bangui in the Central African Republic proposed “that the community be genuinely involved so that we move away from dependence towards development.”

People impacted by crisis tend to dream bigger than those employed globally to find solutions for them. Community-driven solutions move more quickly from emergency to longer-term sustainability. Mutual aid networks have been essential during deep crises and severe aid cuts, but people in Gaza, Ukraine, Somalia and Chad also said these groups are exhausted and need stronger support. Communities also stressed education, which informants in Palestine described as life-saving fearing the destruction of their culture.

Humanitarian actors tend to react to community insight in one of two ways: eye-rolling indifference, dismissing it as unrealistic during funding cuts; or recognising it as critical guidance from the people whose priorities matter most. The latter requires imagination, relinquishing power and confronting uncomfortable truths about why the aid system so rarely listens.

Accountability is a big word that humanitarianism treats like a little one. People affected by crisis want consequences for those who abuse power and betray trust. Yet accountability in aid is still treated as voluntary: something to sign up to, claim progress on and then carry on as before.

A pared-down version of the existing aid system is not working for or with people. Less aid could deepen suffering, but this moment also creates space for transformation. Communities in crisis want reimagination and rebuilding, not simply less of the same.

As Big Aid soul-searches, accountability needs to come from outside the system itself. A humanitarian system intent on holding onto power cannot also credibly hold itself accountable.

This is a make-or-break moment for humanitarian accountability. So, which will it be?



**Meg Sattler**

Director, Ground Truth Solutions

“  
*Accountability is a big word that humanitarianism treats like a little one. People affected by crisis want consequences for those who abuse power and betray trust. Yet accountability in aid is still treated as voluntary: something to sign up to, claim progress on and then carry on as before.*”

\* All interviewee names changed for privacy.



## CHAPTER 4:

### IMAGE

In DRC, women refugees rebuild lives, with determination and hope.

© UN Women/  
Catianne Tijerina

# Localisation and the accountability gap

For more than a decade, the humanitarian sector has pledged to move resources and decision-making closer to affected communities. The current funding crisis is exposing a contradiction at the heart of these localisation promises.

As international agencies scale back operations, local actors are increasingly expected to absorb frontline delivery, coordination and operational risk without a comparable transfer of funding, authority or control. When local actors struggle to absorb these pressures, the failure is too often framed as lack of capacity rather than the predictable result of underinvestment.<sup>98</sup>

Through the Grand Bargain, donors and agencies committed to directing 25% of humanitarian funding “as directly as possible” to local and national actors. According to ALNAP’s Global Humanitarian Assistance (GHA) report, in 2025 multilateral organisations

received almost half (47%) of primary donor funding, whereas local and national actors received only 4.3%.<sup>99</sup>

Concerns about fiduciary risk, compliance and capacity continue to justify limited direct investment by donors who also prefer to go through intermediaries in order to minimise their own administrative burden. Weak and inconsistent tracking of funding flows limits transparency on how funding moves through the system and makes it difficult to hold actors accountable for these commitments.<sup>100</sup> A system unable to trace what reaches local actors cannot credibly claim to be serious about shifting power.

*“Coordination takes time, resources, people and money, and if we don’t have that as a starting point, I don’t believe we’re having an honest conversation... asking actors to do it unresourced, unsupported is, frankly speaking, quite unreasonable.”*

Gemma Connell, Officer-in-Charge, Humanitarian Sector Division, OCHA<sup>101</sup>

*“It’s these very relationships [between local actors and the communities] on which international partners depend for smooth and efficient delivery. But in most cases, this kind of informal trust building ...sitting with families, drinking endless cups of tea or coffee... doesn’t get included in log frames or budget lines. So... this becomes another form of unseen and unaccounted for work.”*

Vijayalakshmi Viswanathan, Lead, NEAR Flagship Research<sup>102</sup>

The Humanitarian Reset now introduces another wave of localisation commitments made harder within a context of aggressive contraction and hyper-prioritisation. Local organisations, many operating without reserves or institutional buffers, absorbed some of the earliest and sharpest impacts of the funding cuts. Evidence from Start Network members suggests local organisations lost an average of one-third of their income, with some losing as much as 60%, forcing programme suspensions, layoffs and deep uncertainty.<sup>103</sup> UN Women similarly found that 90% of women-led organisations in crisis settings had experienced funding cuts, with half at risk of closure.<sup>104</sup>

Meanwhile, Caritas notes that sudden funding cuts and delayed disbursements created significant reputational risks for local actors. Abrupt programme suspensions were often perceived by communities as a withdrawal of commitment, eroding trust in local organisations despite decisions being driven elsewhere.<sup>105</sup> While NEAR found that some INGOs adopted strong partnership practices during the funding crisis, including joint planning, flexible funding, and support for local partners, these approaches varied significantly across contexts.<sup>106</sup>

The uneven response, combined with limited public transparency about how partners were being supported, reinforced concerns that localisation commitments remain donor-dependent, inconsistently applied and secondary to upward accountability and institutional survival.

The situation is concerning as communities frequently rely first on local authorities, mutual aid groups, faith-based organisations, national NGOs, refugee-led organisations and informal solidarity networks.

These actors often hold the deepest trust, longest-term presence and strongest contextual understanding, yet are pressured to conform to international systems that can undermine the very attributes that make them indispensable.<sup>107</sup>

At a time when the sector is under pressure to find efficiencies, sidelining these systems becomes even harder to justify. NEAR research shows that responses where local actors exercise greater influence over funding and decision-making tend to produce more accurate targeting, stronger trust and more durable outcomes.<sup>108</sup> The issue is therefore not simply inclusion, but whether humanitarian responses are organised around the actors best positioned to sustain them.

## **COUNTRY-BASED POOLED FUNDS AND THE RESET’S LOCALISATION PROMISES**

UN-managed Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) have become a central pillar of the Humanitarian Reset and are often presented as a practical route to provide more funding to local actors. According to Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), in aggregate, CBPFs granted 46% of funding to local and national actors (LNAs) in 2025.<sup>109</sup> One example is the Sudan Humanitarian Fund, which in 2025 expanded its support to over 1,000 mutual aid groups like Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) across Sudan, with 66% of funding reaching them directly. Yet HPG finds, in most contexts, CBPF funding reaches a small group of already institutionalised organisations.<sup>110</sup>

Rather than advancing localisation, there is a perception that the Reset, and particularly its reliance on US funding for CBPFs, represents a setback.

*“It is morally unacceptable that local actors are considered good enough to die on the front line, but not good enough to manage funds.”*

National NGO Forum in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 20 May 2026 <sup>122</sup>

*“The international humanitarian aid system is a tiny piece [of the response]. Any Reset worth the name has to accept that and find its place alongside mutual aid, local government and movements, not above them.”*

Véronique de Geoffroy, Executive Director, Groupe URD <sup>123</sup>

*“Analysis shows that local and national actors are often bearing the heaviest burden when funding shrinks. Risks are pushed downward, and local organisations are expected to deliver more with fewer resources and less influence. This is not only unjust, it is unsustainable.”*

Michael Landau, President, Caritas Europa <sup>124</sup>

An ICVA/InterAction member survey found that grant terms and conditions, including the requirement to absorb large volumes of funding within a short period,<sup>111</sup> and heightened compliance expectations favoured UN agencies and large international NGOs. Several INGOs<sup>112</sup> reported departing from their usual practice of partnering with local actors because of the allocation’s design.<sup>113</sup>

According to OCHA’s dashboard, only 4% of the current US funded CBPFs have directly reached national NGOs, with a further 12% reaching them indirectly by mid-2026.<sup>114</sup> And while the CBPFs have developed a microgrants policy with flexible grants of up to \$10,000 with minimal administrative requirements, these efforts have done little to alter widespread perceptions that humanitarian financing remains inaccessible to many local organisations.

In May 2026, the National NGO Forum in the Democratic Republic of Congo issued a sharp critique of how Reset rhetoric is not aligned with reality, noting that despite being on the frontlines of the current Ebola response, they are excluded from direct funding on the grounds of lack of capacity.<sup>115</sup> In their accompanying message to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), they note that under the recent US funding, Congolese national NGOs have received less than 6% of resources and only indirectly.<sup>116</sup>

More locally governed alternatives<sup>117</sup> already exist, but remain marginal within the dominant humanitarian architecture. For example, NEAR’s Change Fund has provided rapid, stopgap support to frontline organisations during the disruption caused by US funding cuts.<sup>118</sup>

The START network<sup>119</sup> and Feminist Humanitarian network<sup>120</sup> have similarly demonstrated more locally led approaches through peer-based support systems and locally managed funding. Similarly, mutual aid networks in places like Sudan offer another model entirely operating through decentralised solidarity networks that often function outside the formal system.<sup>121</sup>

While it remains unclear how far these approaches can scale or reshape the wider system, their growth points to the emergence of more locally rooted and potentially more sustainable models of response.

The current funding crisis is also creating momentum for long-overdue reforms to the international funding architecture, including efforts to streamline duplicative due diligence through initiatives such as CHS passporting and the Charter for Change Due Diligence process. If due diligence passporting is designed to widen access rather than simply streamline compliance for organisations already inside the system, these reforms could lower barriers for a broader range of local actors.

The Humanitarian Reset has once again placed localisation at the centre of humanitarian reform. Yet the current funding crisis is exposing how difficult the system still finds it to deliver on those commitments in practice. Local actors are increasingly expected to sustain frontline operations and absorb operational risk even as funding, authority, overheads and strategic control remain concentrated within international structures.

## “ If accountability only flows upward, power never shifts

Back in 2016, at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, I remember discussing the Grand Bargain in an atmosphere that felt full of promise. Today, I am still in Istanbul, and the humanitarian system is still debating the same questions of power, trust and partnership that we were grappling with ten years ago. The progress that once felt possible has been limited, and localisation feels like a distant promise.

One major challenge is how we define risk. International donors and partners often view national NGOs as too risky to fund, subjecting us to heavy due diligence and complex documentation that can be impossible for smaller organisations to navigate. Yet local actors take on the most significant operational risks. During the devastating Kahramanmaraş earthquake, we were on the ground, seeing firsthand how people felt unheard or invisible, while international actors were still tied up in partnership processes and funding approvals.

And yet, we continue to be treated as channels for community access rather than partners who shape the response. Real change requires donors to fund differently: more directly, more flexibly and with genuine trust in those of us who understand the local context and language far better than any outside actor.

At the same time, national NGOs also have responsibilities. We must continue strengthening our own systems, capacities, and accountability practices so we can operate as equal and reliable partners. This should not be framed as local organisations failing to meet standards, but as part of the shared work required to build mutual trust across the system.

That also requires a different understanding of accountability. The current system is designed largely around upward accountability to donors. We need a more balanced, 360-degree approach in which organisations are also accountable to affected communities and to the national partners they work alongside.

This means creating systems where national NGOs can assess their international partners and where that feedback shapes funding decisions and performance reviews. I have seen this work in practice with a foundation supporting us in Turkey, where we are able to evaluate our partners directly, creating positive pressure that strengthens the system as a whole. This principle is also at the heart of the CHS and why we are proud to help lead the CHS Country Cooperative in Turkey.

Accountability should not stop at reporting upward to donors. It must also run outward to affected communities and across partnerships within the humanitarian system itself. Without that shift, accountability remains one-directional and continues to protect existing power imbalances.



**Zeynep M. Sanduvac**

Board Member and Programs Coordinator, Nirengi Association; Lead, CHS Country Cooperative in Turkey

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*We continue to be treated as channels for community access rather than partners who shape the response.”*

## “ Localisation means recognising our value



**Jonas Habimana**

Founder and Executive Director, BIFERD NGO, Lead, CHS Country Cooperative in DRC

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*Shifting power must mean shifting resources, not simply offloading responsibility.”*

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), power in the humanitarian system is often discussed in terms of funding. But money alone does not determine power. Real power comes from being rooted in the context, understanding the daily realities of crisis and maintaining direct relationships with affected communities.

Yet a persistent myth continues to shape the system: that international actors have capacity, while local actors do not. Our experience proves otherwise. When volcanic eruptions hit Goma in 2021, and again when the city came under attack last year, international agencies and UN staff evacuated for their safety. National NGOs stayed. We continued responding while much of the international community went back home. Local actors consistently carry the greatest operational risks, yet we are sidelined when funding becomes available.

As funding to the international system contracted in 2025, UN agencies increasingly handed coordination responsibilities to local organisations. This was framed as “localisation,” but too often it meant transferring responsibility without transferring resources. We were expected to lead without the funding, equipment, security systems or even internet access international actors considered essential to do the same work themselves. This creates the conditions for failure and allows international agencies to later claim local actors are “not able to lead.” Shifting power must mean shifting resources, not simply offloading responsibility.

For genuine accountability, I believe the following shifts are needed:

- **Direct and flexible funding:** Local organisations have already demonstrated that we can manage direct donor funding under rigorous due diligence requirements. The system must move beyond layers of intermediaries that dilute both resources and accountability.
- **Equitable due diligence:** Instead of subjecting us to multiple, complex donor-led due diligence processes, donors should use CHS verification as a “passport” for accountability and more equitable relationships.
- **Collective action:** Local actors are no longer only demanding change; we are building it ourselves. Through localisation labs, national coalitions and initiatives such as the CHS Country Cooperative in DRC, we are mapping our technical, operational and social capacities to demonstrate that the foundations for local leadership already exist.

Localisation is about recognising the value local actors already bring to humanitarian response and building a system that finally shares power accordingly.

## “ Let local humanitarians lead

In South Sudan, where I live and work, I am constantly told the humanitarian system is “changing.” New frameworks are launched, communiqués signed and conference panels renew commitments to localisation. Yet from the frontline of overlapping crises, it still feels as though we are talking about localisation far more than practising it.

The last year has brought real shifts. For the first time, about 44% of the country-based pooled fund in South Sudan went directly to local actors. Some international organisations have started scaling down expatriate-heavy structures and creating more space for local partners. OCHA has also supported capacity strengthening for local organisations, co-designed with national actors, helping us navigate compliance and due diligence systems that were never built with us in mind.

These gains prove the system can move when there is political will. But they remain exceptions.

The biggest barrier is still trust. We are told we are “too risky” to fund directly. Yet when fighting intensifies, floods hit, and international staff evacuate, local organisations stay and shoulder the work. We live the same insecurity as the communities we serve.

Where women’s rights organisations and local groups have received flexible, multi-year funding, the results have been striking. When COVID-19 spread or new waves of displacement hit, these organisations adapted quickly, shifting programmes without months of negotiations and approvals. Imagine if this kind of trust-based funding was the norm rather than the pilot project donors point to on conference stages.

If the sector is serious about localisation, multi-year core and programme funding for local and national organisations must become standard practice. Local actors, especially women-led groups, must hold meaningful seats in coordination forums. If we are absent when decisions are made, the response is not locally led. The system must also reduce the layers of intermediaries between donors and frontline responders. Where intermediaries remain necessary, resources and risk should be shared far more equitably.

Localisation is not about inviting us to sit politely at the table while others decide the menu. It means recognising that without local leadership there is no sustainable humanitarian response, and then having the courage to step aside. Next year, nobody should be allowed to speak on a global stage about localisation without concrete evidence that power, resources and decision-making have actually shifted.



**Anna Tazita Samuel**

Executive Director,  
Women For Change

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*Localisation is not about inviting us to sit politely at the table while others decide the menu. It means recognising that without local leadership there is no sustainable humanitarian response, and then having the courage to step aside.”*



## Strengthen the systems already sustaining communities in crisis



**Alejandro Posada Bermudez**

Research Fellow, Systems Change, ALNAP



*Too often, these debates focus on how international agencies can do more with less or maintain delivery under pressure. In doing so, they reinforce the idea that the international system is the centre of crisis response rather than one actor within a much broader ecosystem.*

As the international humanitarian system faces politically driven funding cuts, escalating needs, and growing frustration with stalled reform, many are asking what a “reset” system should look like.

Too often, these debates focus on how international agencies can do more with less or maintain delivery under pressure. In doing so, they reinforce the idea that the international system is the centre of crisis response rather than one actor within a much broader ecosystem. In reality, affected communities have always been the first responders. Through family networks, neighbourhood groups, faith communities and mutual aid systems, people organise rescue, care, protection and resource-sharing long before, alongside and often without formal humanitarian action. These systems predate the international humanitarian architecture and frequently operate beyond its reach. Any serious discussion of accountability must therefore examine how the international system interacts with, supports or undermines these existing structures of solidarity.

Yet informal and community-led structures are frequently judged as insufficiently accountable because they do not conform to donor compliance systems or professionalised humanitarian standards. Concerns about corruption, elite capture or financial mismanagement are used to justify restrictive funding, burdensome compliance requirements or exclusion altogether. Accountability becomes a gatekeeping tool rather than a relationship of responsibility.

This overlooks the fact that mutual aid systems often demonstrate strong and highly contextual forms of accountability. Because they are embedded in everyday social relations, they operate through visibility, reputation, reciprocity and mutual dependence. Misuse of resources is often immediately visible within communities living with the consequences. Accountability may not be bureaucratic, but it is direct, socially enforced and continuous.

More fundamentally, this framing fails to recognise affected people as responders in their own right rather than passive beneficiaries. Accountability cannot be limited to whether aid reaches communities. It must also consider what humanitarian action does to the systems through which communities support one another. Mutual aid systems are often decentralised, adaptive and horizontal, in contrast to the hierarchical structures of the international system, which are largely designed around control, performance management and donor assurance.

An accountability framework that takes mutual aid seriously therefore requires a shift in focus. It means moving beyond accountability to aid recipients or projects towards accountability to survivors as responders and to the social infrastructures that sustain them. That includes being answerable for how humanitarian presence, funding decisions, partnership models and coordination structures affect mutual aid systems themselves.

Accountability is not only a technical question of compliance and reporting. It is also a question of power and positionality. It asks whether international humanitarian actors see themselves as operating within, rather than above, a wider ecosystem of response, and whether their systems strengthen or constrain the forms of solidarity already sustaining communities in crisis.

## “ We were never meant to decide: why lived experience must shape humanitarian aid

When I was growing up in a refugee settlement, we looked at international aid workers like small gods. They arrived in big branded cars, dressed well and moving with an ease that felt unimaginable compared to our lives. As a child with no shoes and little prospect beyond primary school, I wondered whether they were ordinary human beings or people from another world.

At the time, the only roles available to refugees inside the humanitarian system were community workers or assistants. We mobilised communities, collected information and relayed messages between agencies and displaced people, but had no influence over project design, budgets or major decisions. We earned around \$20 a month while project officers earned thousands.

Displaced professionals were the feet of the system, but never the head. Participation meant labour without power. We were never meant to decide.

Today, as a practitioner, economist and researcher working in displacement settings, I draw heavily on my own experience as a displaced person. I have worked inside the UN in multiple countries, participated in high-level policy discussions and now lead a refugee-led initiative in Uganda supporting refugee businesses.

From this journey, first as a child in a settlement, then as a professional inside the system and now as someone working from the outside, my conclusion is simple:

If humanitarian aid is going to be truly accountable, then people with lived experience must hold real decision-making power. Not as tokens or community informers, but as professionals who design, lead and assess the work done in our name.

I have seen multi-million-dollar projects arrive with local actors added to proposals only superficially. When we eventually read the documents, many projects bore little resemblance to the realities communities faced. When they ended, communities were left asking where the money had gone because they saw so little change in their lives.

After decades of this, people begin to question whether the goal is truly to solve problems or to sustain them for fundraising purposes.

When projects are disconnected from local realities and affected people have no power to approve, reject or reshape them, we cannot honestly speak about accountability. I have seen multi-million-dollar structures left to rot in refugee settlements in Uganda once projects ended, a level of waste and misallocation the humanitarian system can no longer afford in a time of austerity. When communities have real influence over decisions, this kind of disconnected spending is far less likely to happen.

Even when displaced professionals are hired into international organisations, inclusion is often cosmetic. They are showcased as examples, but when they question decisions or push for meaningful change, they are ignored, silenced or pushed out. I have experienced this personally.

As long as most decisions are made by people who have never stood in a food distribution line, slept hungry, walked barefoot or worried about expulsion from a camp, accountability will remain shallow. True accountability cannot only be about donor priorities. It must also reflect the aspirations of the people humanitarian action is meant to serve.



**Epa Ndahimana**

Humanitarian Inclusion Advocate

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*As long as most decisions are made by people who have never stood in a food distribution line, slept hungry, walked barefoot or worried about expulsion from a camp, accountability will remain shallow.”*

## “ Making due diligence work for local partners



**Joé Hein**

NGO Humanitarian Action Focal Point, Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes, de la Défense, de la Coopération et du Commerce extérieur, Luxembourg

“

*The sector should avoid building new, competing mechanisms that demand even more from already stretched organisations. The CHS offers a common framework that puts people at the centre while giving donors credible evidence of quality and accountability.”*

As the Humanitarian Reset pushes the sector to become leaner and more efficient, donors have a responsibility to reduce the administrative burden they place on partners. Luxembourg has taken that challenge seriously.

Without a dedicated internal due diligence department, Luxembourg has had to find smarter ways to assess risk, uphold standards and support partners without adding another layer of bureaucracy. That has meant looking for ways to harmonise donor requirements rather than multiply them.

A pilot project with Danida and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) provided a clear proof of concept. It showed that a single HQAI CHS audit enabled a Bangladeshi NGO to meet the compliance requirements of FCDO, ECHO, Luxembourg and Danida at the same time. This “one audit, multiple recognitions” model strengthens quality and accountability while cutting the duplication that wastes resources and too often sidelines local actors.

Luxembourg is now advocating for CHS verification to serve as a passporting tool. Independently verified evidence should help local NGOs gain more direct access to major funding streams, rather than forcing them through repeated, donor-specific due diligence processes.

Luxembourg has also tested this approach in practice. It has conducted a pilot scheme with HQAI to subsidise CHS audits for local partners in Palestine and has gone to the country level to understand how the model works in real contexts. In settings where Luxembourg does not have a direct diplomatic presence, CHS audits provide a reliable, independent assurance mechanism that complements existing bilateral safeguards.

At a time when the Humanitarian Reset could either simplify the system or create another layer of compliance, this matters. The sector should avoid building new, competing mechanisms that demand even more from already stretched organisations. The CHS offers a common framework that puts people at the centre while giving donors credible evidence of quality and accountability.

Luxembourg’s approach shows what it means for a donor to walk the talk: reduce duplication, trust independent verification, support local partners to meet shared standards and use due diligence to enable access rather than block it.

Luxembourg remains committed to evidence-based, efficient and fair approaches that strengthen trust, enable equitable partnerships and improve assistance to crisis-affected communities.



## CHAPTER 5:

# Accountability to staff in an age of impunity

IMAGE  
Action Against Hunger (ACF)

Accountability is not only about how organisations engage externally, but also about whether they uphold their own stated values through safeguarding, staff wellbeing, duty of care, whistleblowing protections and ethical leadership.

*The humanitarian system cannot credibly claim accountability to communities while internally tolerating abuse, discrimination, exploitation of power or impunity.*

These internal accountability concerns are unfolding alongside a broader deterioration in the protection of humanitarian workers themselves. One of the starkest examples has been the rise in attacks on aid workers, coupled with the persistent lack of consequences for those responsible.

In 2025, at least 326 humanitarian workers were recorded as killed across 21 countries, bringing the total number of humanitarian workers killed in three years to over 1,010, with nationals of crisis-affected countries making up the majority of victims.<sup>125</sup>

Beyond the terrible loss of life and impact on their families, these attacks violate the protections afforded to humanitarian personnel under international humanitarian law. Yet perpetrators continue to face limited political or judicial consequences.

*“1,000 dead humanitarians in three years – when did that become normal? ... And there isn’t the accountability around the people killing us, the people arming those killing us, and the people giving them the instructions.”*

Tom Fletcher, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator<sup>129</sup>

In 2024, the UN Security Council’s Resolution 2730 condemned attacks against humanitarian personnel, calling for greater accountability and judicial redress and signalling renewed international attention to the issue.<sup>126</sup> States have since reinforced the resolution by adopting a global Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, which includes increased accountability and justice for violations and practical measures to better protect aid workers and uphold international law, with 112 signatories to date.<sup>127</sup> But as these attacks continue, the gap between formal commitments and lived reality remains stark.

At the same time, funding cuts and organisational restructuring are reducing investment in security, safeguarding and risk mitigation, even as threats intensify. The result is a widening contradiction between the sector’s duty of care obligations and its operational realities, particularly for nationally recruited staff who continue to face the greatest risks with the fewest protections.

These patterns of impunity are also reflected internally in how the sector has addressed sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH). Despite repeated reform efforts, many staff and survivors still lack confidence that reporting mechanisms will lead to meaningful action. The CHS PSEAH Index data (the requirements for organisations related to PSEAH interwoven throughout the CHS) shows relatively strong performance in establishing organisational mechanisms including Codes of Conduct and policies, but significantly weaker performance in community engagement and trusted reporting pathways.

Since the safeguarding scandals of 2018 and 2019, the sector has introduced a range of system-wide reforms. Some have produced measurable results. The Misconduct Disclosure Scheme (MDS) for example, has blocked 677 staffing applications linked to previous misconduct investigations.<sup>128</sup> Stronger approaches to investigations, whistleblowing, and safer recruitment also signal progress towards greater transparency. But these efforts have yet to consistently address the existing impunity across the sector.

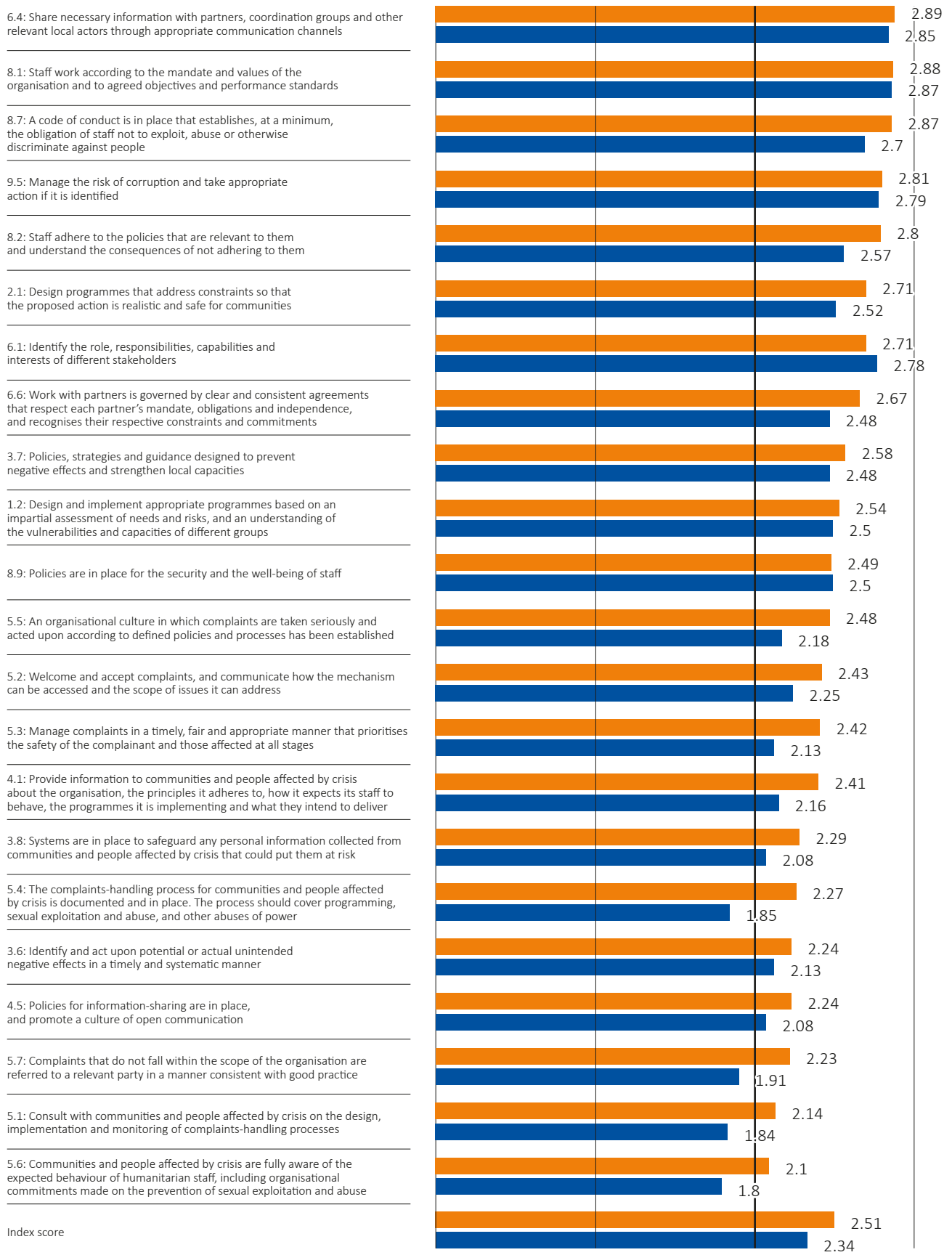
Beyond impunity, a different staffing challenge is emerging. Funding cuts have triggered widespread layoffs, hiring freezes and restructurings, particularly affecting local staff. Internal actions, including protecting headquarters capacity while cutting field operations, have deepened frustration among staff. For those who remain, heavier workloads, job insecurity and reduced organisational support are intensifying stress, burnout and disengagement.

National staff are often the most exposed. They typically have fewer protections, less access to psychosocial support and greater personal and family vulnerability within the contexts where they work. At the same time, reductions in staffing and operational capacity are weakening safeguarding, accountability and oversight functions across organisations.

Accountability within the humanitarian system is insufficiently applied to the conditions, protections and dynamics shaping its own workforce. A system that cannot protect its own staff, confront abuse internally or uphold consequences for harm will struggle to sustain accountability elsewhere.

### COMPARISON OF PSEAH TRENDS ACROSS TWO PERIODS (2015–2021 AND 2022–2025)

Data from CHS Verified Organisations. Average scores of CHS-verified organisations (all modalities), ranked by CHS 2020 PSEAH Index indicator

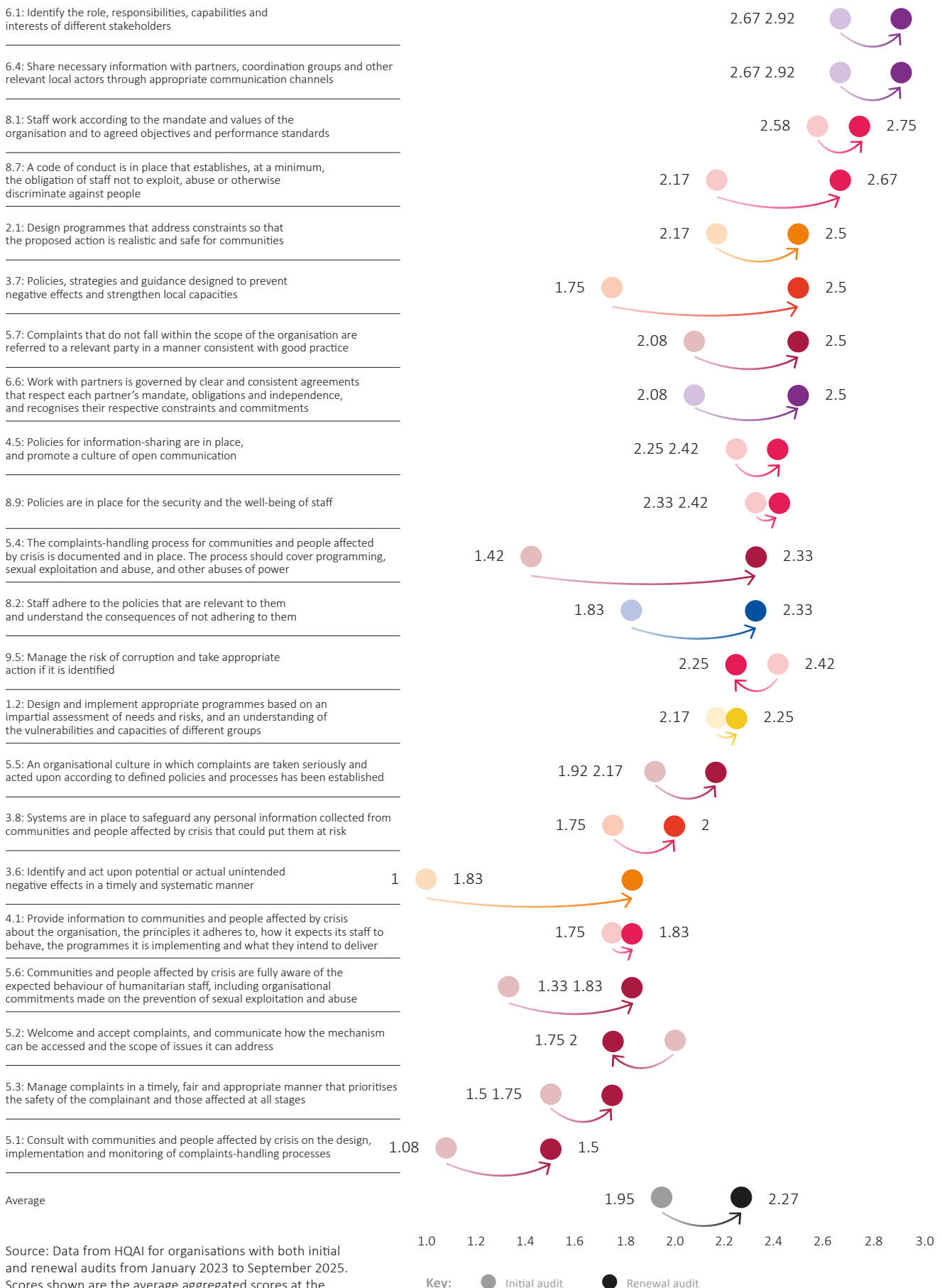


Source: Data from CHS verifications (all options) for 95 organisations from 2015 to 2021 and 120 unique verifications from 2022-2025.

Key: 2015-2021 2022-2025

## AVERAGE PSEAH INDEX SCORES BETWEEN INITIAL AND RENEWAL AUDITS

**Data from CHS Verified Organisations.** Measuring change over time: average PSEAH index scores between initial and renewal audit using the CHS



## COMMENTARY ON PSEAH CHS INDEX



## Use the tools we have to protect people from abuse



*The CHS PSEAH Index shows much-needed progress on protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. But it also shows where progress remains too slow, especially on direct engagement with partners and communities.*

*The humanitarian sector already has common, collective and practical tools to close that gap. The task now is to use them consistently.*

*We need greater transparency on the scale and nature of SEAH, which requires more open and comparable reporting. This is where the Harmonised Reporting Scheme helps. We need to put a stop to perpetrators moving between organisations, which the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme is designed to do. We need reporting systems that are safer and more centred on victims and survivors, which the new EMPOWER programme is helping to strengthen. We need more and better-trained investigators, who understand local contexts, which is the purpose of the Investigator Qualification Training Scheme. We need the rigour of the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQA) to audit organisations' progress against the CHS. And we need funders to apply more aligned, pragmatic due diligence approaches that drive accountability while saving resources. These initiatives directly address the gaps visible in the CHS data.*

*They also show why the CHS remains a bedrock for many other PSEAH frameworks, including the 2024 Common Approach to Protection from SEAH (CAPSEAH). CAPSEAH is built around zero tolerance to inaction, high-level principles, minimum actions and practical resources. It allows flexibility at local level while driving alignment, dialogue and efficiency across the system. In a sector where impunity remains a persistent risk, this matters.*

*CAPSEAH also reinforces and amplifies other initiatives that have grown to scale in recent years. For example, the Safeguarding Resource and Support Hub, the Community Outreach and Communication Fund, Empowered Aid and Project Soteria provide or signpost materials in multiple languages and formats. Together, they help build local capability, strengthen engagement between local and international actors and ensure solutions are shaped by those closest to communities.*

*The UK has played an important role in investing in and encouraging the use of these tools. I am proud of that work. Other organisations and funders should use them too, and where feasible, invest in them, including through the PSEAH Fund. These are practical ways to drive safer programming and stronger accountability.*

*Most aid workers serve with integrity. But SEAH continues to affect all types of projects, organisations and individuals, especially women and children. Even in a period of financial pressure, PSEAH cannot be treated as optional. The tools exist. Many are free. What is needed now is the collective will to use them, invest in them and close the gaps where they matter most.*



**Peter Taylor**

Deputy Director and Head of Safeguarding Unit; Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), United Kingdom



*Most aid workers serve with integrity. But SEAH continues to affect all types of projects, organisations and individuals, especially women and children. Even in a period of financial pressure, PSEAH cannot be treated as optional."*

## COMMENTARY ON PSEAH CHS INDEX



## Building safeguarding systems is not enough without addressing power



**Dr Mayumi Fuchi**

Board Member, HQAI;  
Head of Quality and  
Accountability,  
Human Appeal



*Low reporting should not be interpreted as success. It rather points to structural and cultural barriers that limit safe access, particularly for women, children, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups."*

*Data from the CHS PSEAH Index shows tangible progress in strengthening humanitarian safeguarding systems. Across many organisations, policies, codes of conduct, complaints procedures and partner requirements are now well established. Safeguarding is increasingly recognised as a core organisational responsibility, supported by clearer procedures and stronger oversight.*

*Building on this progress, CHS verification scheme has played a particularly important role in helping organisations translate commitments into practice. CHS PSEAH Index data shows that CHS renewal audits consistently score higher than initial audits across all PSEAH indicators, with the largest gains in areas weakest at baseline. Complementary research<sup>130</sup> also shows that organisations with higher CHS compliance, particularly CHS-certified organisations, tend to show stronger complaints mechanisms. Together, these findings demonstrate the value of continuous monitoring, clear benchmarks and independent assessment.*

*However, this data also points to a persistent pattern across the CHS and the wider humanitarian system. Improvements are strongest where accountability can be standardised and measured, and weaker where effectiveness depends on meaningful community engagement. Indicators related to community awareness, accessibility of complaints mechanisms and participation continue to lag behind those focused on internal systems. This reflects the challenge of operationalising accountability where it requires sharing power and adapting to local contexts.*

*Sector-wide evidence reinforces this concern. Despite widespread use of complaints mechanisms, there has been no reduction in incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse nor a significant increase in reporting.<sup>131</sup> Low reporting should not be interpreted as success. It rather points to structural and cultural barriers that limit safe access, particularly for women, children, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups.*

*Emerging research shows that organisational culture and power dynamics continue to enable sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>132</sup> Inequalities linked to gender, race and status can create environments in which perpetrators face few consequences, while hierarchical structures and entrenched norms often protect those in authority. These dynamics discourage reporting, as many victims fear they will not be believed or may face negative consequences. Without addressing these power imbalances, safeguarding mechanisms risk being present in form but weak in practice.*

*The next phase of progress will depend less on the presence of systems and more on how accountability is experienced by affected people. Contextualised, accessible and victim-centred approaches, including child-friendly and culturally appropriate feedback mechanisms, can help overcome invisible barriers to reporting. Organisations must also address the gendered and racialised power dynamics that shape whose voices are heard and whose concerns are acted upon. Strengthening safeguarding outcomes will require continued commitment to participation, learning and equitable power-sharing, so accountability is meaningful where it matters most.*

## “ Let’s stop recycling perpetrators throughout the system

Zero tolerance for inaction on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) must be non-negotiable. But responsibility cannot sit with individual organisations alone. Preventing and responding to abuse requires collective action across the sector.

The Misconduct Disclosure Scheme (MDS) is one of the clearest examples of what that looks like in practice. It moves zero tolerance beyond organisational rhetoric and into shared accountability and confronts the reality that SEAH exists within our own institutions. Its effectiveness depends on collective uptake. The more organisations that participate, the harder it becomes for perpetrators to move through the sector unchecked.

By embedding information-sharing into recruitment, the MDS helps disrupt one of the humanitarian sector’s most persistent failures: the recycling of perpetrators between organisations. In the current climate of job losses, restructuring and short-term contracts, staff mobility is increasing along with the risk that perpetrators move undetected between employers. Without safer recruitment mechanisms such as the MDS, individuals dismissed or sanctioned for misconduct can too easily re-enter the sector elsewhere.

By requiring organisations to seek references covering the previous five years and ask specifically about sexual misconduct, the MDS supports more informed recruitment decisions while signalling that perpetrators cannot act with impunity or simply move on without consequence.

The HAR identifies a broader culture of impunity across the sector. SEAH remains significantly underreported, with many victims and survivors unconvinced that reporting will lead to action or fearful of the consequences of coming forward.

Those who do report often say they are doing so to prevent harm to others. The sector has a responsibility to ensure those reports lead to meaningful action. As a practitioner, I have lost count of the number of times I have heard that individuals known to have caused harm later secured employment elsewhere in the system. This must stop.

The humanitarian sector now has an opportunity to show that collective standards, transparency and shared accountability create safer systems. When organisations commit to common mechanisms, impunity becomes harder to sustain and trust becomes possible to rebuild.

As the humanitarian system narrows toward a “life-saving only” model, safeguarding cannot be reduced to a compliance exercise or administrative burden. Protecting people from harm is central to humanitarian action itself, and the MDS is a reminder that zero tolerance for inaction depends not just on policies, but on collective willingness to enforce accountability across the sector.



**Georgie Lund**

Safeguarding Coordinator,  
CARE International  
Secretariat

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*Without safer recruitment mechanisms such as the MDS, individuals dismissed or sanctioned for misconduct can too easily re-enter the sector elsewhere.”*



## A humanitarian system that fails its own workforce cannot claim to be accountable



**Tarini Ross**

Head of Humanitarian Programmes,  
Humanitarian Aid International (HAI)



*Protections routinely extended to international staff rarely reach national and community-based workers. The result is a system that normalises some risks while protecting others from them."*

Humanitarian accountability has a missing constituency. While the sector has made important commitments to accountability to affected populations, it continues to overlook those at the frontlines of response, particularly female workers who face additional gendered vulnerabilities.

As our global study covering 700 frontline workers across 60 countries found,<sup>133</sup> 96% of those facing risk were local staff. Yet, as the Charter of Rights for Frontline Humanitarian and Community Workers<sup>134</sup> recognises, these are the actors who remain invisible.

If the humanitarian system is serious about accountability, it must start with itself. A system that is not accountable to its own workforce cannot claim to be accountable at all. The sector still defines risk narrowly through security incidents, while frontline workers experience it more broadly through insecure contracts, lack of insurance, chronic stress, low pay and weak institutional support.

Too often, they are treated as cheap implementers and a disposable workforce. Security and staff welfare remain underfunded and tied to short-term project cycles even though risk does not follow project timelines. Protections routinely extended to international staff rarely reach national and community-based workers. The result is a system that normalises some risks while protecting others from them.

The Charter emerged from this disconnect and shifts the conversation from discretionary support to collective responsibility. Building on the Status of Frontline Humanitarian Workers study<sup>135</sup> and years of engagement on risk sharing and duty of care, it reflects what frontline workers themselves identify as essential: they are being asked to manage increasingly dangerous and complex responses without adequate investment in their safety or well-being.

The Charter sets minimum expectations on safety, fair compensation, mental health and grievance mechanisms. Its traction has come not from funding incentives, but from its relevance to local actors who see it filling a gap left by existing global commitments. Since its launch, 130 organisations across local NGOs, INGOs, networks, and donors have endorsed it.

Humanitarian Aid International (HAI), through its LOCAL coalition, provided one year of accident insurance to frontline workers and community volunteers at just \$14 per person.

Other shifts include hardship allowances, dedicated duty-of-care budget lines and expanded mental health support. These efforts are not yet systemic, but they show what is possible when priorities change.

## “ Deny, attack, reverse: what power does when held to account

Ten years ago, I reported a sexual assault by a senior leader at UNAIDS, the organisation where I had worked for more than a decade. I did so to prevent further harm to myself, to others and to an institution I believed in. This was not an organisation without rules. It had policies, procedures and codes of conduct designed to ensure accountability and address misconduct. I knew them well.

What I did not yet understand was how unevenly such rules can be applied when power is involved.

The initial response was denial. A deeply flawed internal investigation followed, marked by conflicts of interest, errors and omissions. It concluded there was insufficient evidence to substantiate my allegation. To “celebrate,” the organisation issued a press release that identified me in all but name and declared my assailant “innocent.” Colleagues and friends turned their backs on me.

This marked the beginning of a pattern many survivors recognise, often described as DARVO, which stands for deny, attack and reverse victim and offender. Attention shifted away from the harm and toward questioning my integrity, motivation and credibility. The vilification and retaliation are still ongoing. No action was ever taken to protect me or others from harm and retaliation.

But the assault had happened, and not only to me. Other victims came forward, prompting a second investigation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), the internal oversight body of the United Nations (UN). It lasted years. The findings were much delayed, but the allegation was substantiated. An apology followed, but years too late. The damage was done to me and to the organisation.

An independent review prompted by my case found “overwhelming evidence” of a “broken organisational culture” and a “toxic work environment.” Millions were spent on reputational risk mitigation, yet the reputational damage was global.

My case is not exceptional. It reflects an institutional playbook that publicly champions accountability while quietly prioritising self-protection when accountability becomes inconvenient. Reporting wrongdoing is presented as protected and encouraged, yet in practice it often leads to isolation, retaliation and career destruction. Investigations meant to establish facts become tools of institutional preservation. Leaders espouse zero tolerance for sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment (SEAH), but when these commitments are not upheld and enforced, SEAH is normalised and trust erodes.

A safer, survivor-centred system operates very differently. It puts people, not institutional mandates, first. It prevents harm, ensures accessible, safe and confidential reporting and support systems, properly trained investigators and leadership that invest in accountability.

Without a systemic shift in our current approach to SEAH, victims and bystanders will continue to face an impossible choice between silence and self-sacrifice while impunity continues to thrive. A system that protects institutions at the expense of individuals is not a safeguard. It is a failure by design.



**Martina Broström**

Manager, Complaints, Investigations and Survivor Support, CHS Alliance, writing in a personal capacity

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*My case is not exceptional. It reflects an institutional playbook that publicly champions accountability while quietly prioritising self-protection when accountability becomes inconvenient.”*



## Making duty of care to staff a pillar of humanitarian accountability



### Christine Williamson

Director and Lead Consultant, Duty of Care International

#### Contributors:

Steve Dennis, Alice Porter, Sabrina Prioli and Melissa Pitotti for the NGO Staff Wellbeing Network



*Until organisations are held responsible for the harm their decisions and omissions create, the same risks will keep falling on the staff with the least power to change them.*

Duty of care has too often been treated as an internal management issue rather than a core test of humanitarian accountability. That became harder to defend in 2025, as funding cuts, donor withdrawals, and organisational closures left thousands of staff without jobs, support or acknowledgment of the risks they had carried.

Those who remained were asked to do more with less in contexts that remained dangerous, exposing a contradiction in a sector built to protect people in crisis while failing to protect its own workforce. Harm to staff takes many forms and is not evenly distributed. In many organisations, it is produced through everyday working conditions: unrealistic workloads, managers without the time or capacity to intervene early and communication that breaks down and stays broken. In high-risk settings, the consequences can be far more severe. Aid workers, particularly nationally recruited staff, may face sustained exposure to danger, detention, injury or death, often where risks were foreseeable but poorly managed.

Insights from organisations such as Proper Support, based on reviews of more than 60 serious incidents affecting aid workers, indicate that failures in risk management are often a leading factor in staff harm. In many cases, there is no independent mechanism to review serious incidents, leaving organisations to assess their own decisions and limiting accountability and learning. Harm is shaped not only by context, but by organisational decisions and omissions. Yet the sector's accountability frameworks have paid little attention to this.

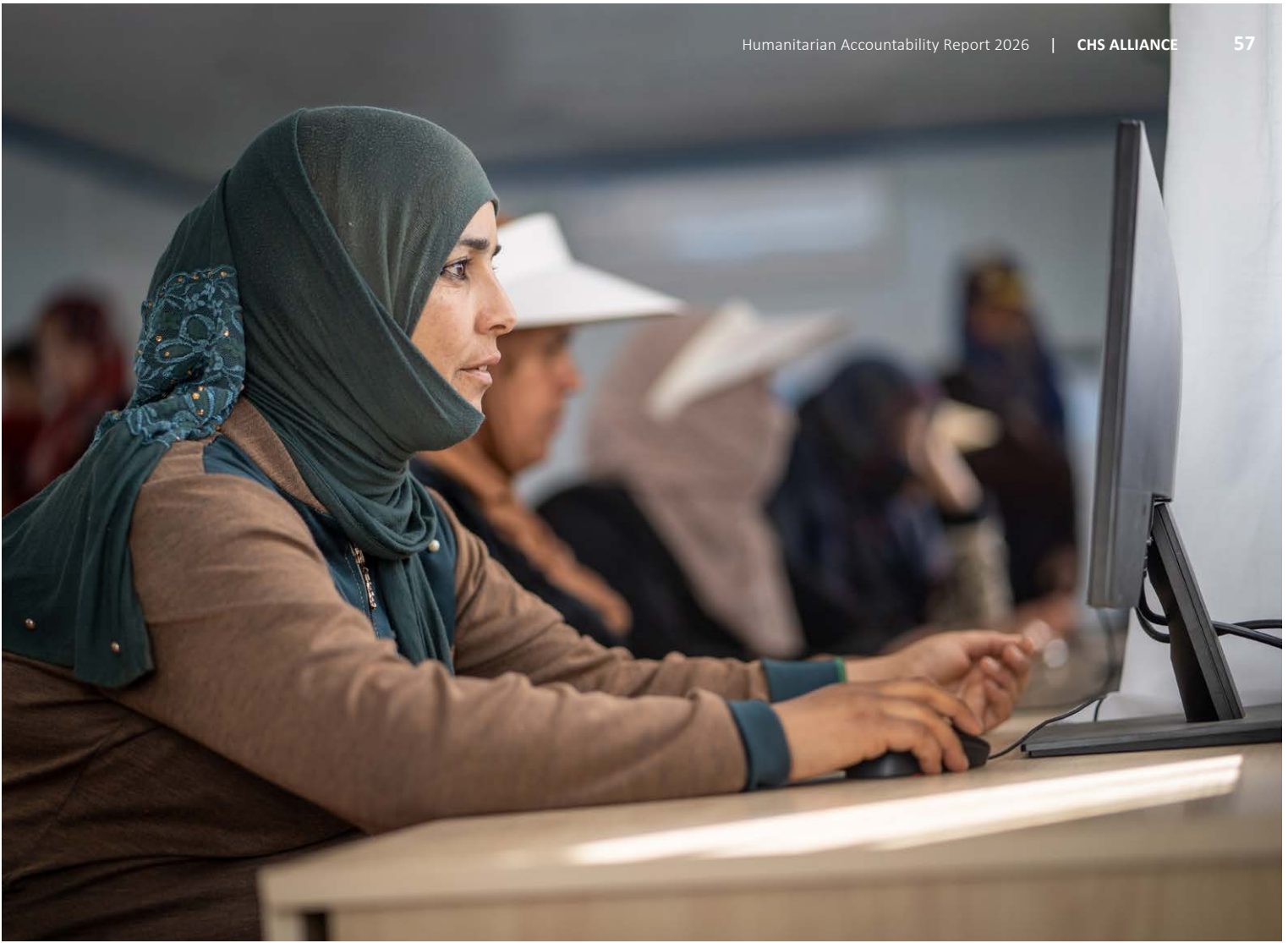
Recent research shows that psychological harm and distress are driven less by exposure to traumatic events than by organisational factors such as poor leadership, job insecurity and lack of resources.<sup>136</sup> These pressures fall disproportionately on nationally recruited staff, who carry the greatest operational risk while having the least protection and influence over the systems meant to support them.

Until organisations are held responsible for the harm their decisions and omissions create, the same risks will keep falling on the staff with the least power to change them.

The sector must make accountability to staff visible and enforceable. Duty of care cannot remain a siloed HR or security function. Organisations must identify foreseeable risks, take reasonable steps to reduce them, and provide support when harm occurs, with clear ownership at leadership level and scrutiny from donors and boards.

They must also resource the systems needed to meet those responsibilities. Manager support, communication systems and staff welfare are operational requirements, not optional extras. Those carrying the greatest operational risks, particularly nationally recruited staff, must also help shape organisational design, risk assessment and decision-making.

Without these changes, the same harms will remain built into the system. A humanitarian system that cannot account for harm to its own workforce cannot credibly claim accountability as a core principle.



## CHAPTER 6:

# Accountability in the digital age

So far, the report has focused on areas that have sat at the centre of humanitarian reform efforts for more than a decade. Yet rapid advances in technology and artificial intelligence are beginning to reshape humanitarian action and accountability in ways the sector is only starting to tackle.

Operational strain has accelerated interest in AI as organisations look for ways to manage growing volumes of information, maintain communication with affected communities, and sustain operations despite staffing cuts, access constraints, and shrinking resources. As ALNAP cautions, much of the discussion around AI in humanitarian action remains driven more by hype and assumptions about efficiency than by proven evidence of impact, and the risks are substantial.<sup>137</sup> Generative AI systems can reproduce bias, provide false information and misinterpret context.

In humanitarian settings, these failures can have serious implications, particularly in environments where trust is already fragile and information gaps can quickly fuel confusion, exclusion or harm.

The current funding crisis also shapes how AI is being introduced. The SAFE AI initiative warns that financial pressures risk driving unsafe or poorly governed adoption, particularly where organisations lack the expertise, oversight or resources needed to assess risks properly.<sup>138</sup>

### IMAGE

Empowerment through employment for Syrian refugee women in Jordan.

© UN Women/  
Christopher Herwig

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*The most consistent message across recent humanitarian AI guidance is that affected communities must remain central to how AI systems are designed, assessed and governed.”*

This creates a deeper accountability concern. Humanitarian actors already collect enormous amounts of feedback and community data, yet often struggle to ensure that information shapes priorities or decisions. AI may help organisations gather, sort, summarise and respond to information faster, but risks reinforcing a pattern of consulting and monitoring communities, while having limited influence over how trade-offs, priorities and resources are determined.

The wider information environment further complicates these dynamics. The IFRC’s World Disasters Report 2026 argues that harmful information has become a defining humanitarian challenge in its own right, undermining trust, distorting needs, obstructing access to assistance, and weakening social cohesion.<sup>139</sup>

The report describes harmful information not as a peripheral communications issue but as an operational and ethical crisis affecting the humanitarian system’s ability to protect life and dignity. AI is accelerating these pressures by increasing the speed, scale and accessibility of information production and manipulation.

These developments raise difficult questions about power and governance. Much of the infrastructure underpinning AI systems is controlled by a small number of private technology companies whose incentives do not necessarily align with humanitarian principles.

Humanitarian organisations may also have limited control over how data is stored, processed or reused. ALNAP notes that this opacity weakens accountability and raises concerns about privacy, consent and humanitarian independence.<sup>140</sup>

For these reasons, governance and accountability cannot be treated as secondary considerations to technological innovation. The most consistent message across recent humanitarian AI guidance is that affected communities must remain central to how AI systems are designed, assessed and governed. This includes participation in decisions about acceptable uses of AI, transparency about how systems operate, safeguards around data protection and consent and clear mechanisms through which people can question or challenge AI-supported decisions.

## “ AI can help humanitarians hear more. Will they listen?”

AI has created a buzz in the humanitarian sector, and for good reason. Used thoughtfully, it could strengthen accountability at a time when resource-constrained organisations struggle to keep up with the volume of interactions with communities.

AI systems can help sift through this feedback in ways that were previously beyond our capacity. The ability to triage complaints, provide individualised replies at scale and direct inquiries to the right person could significantly speed up resolution times. AI also offers the possibility of communicating more inclusively, in more languages and formats. It can help organisations respond in local dialects, simplify procedures and adapt content for people with low literacy or living with disabilities. It can open alternative channels for people who may not feel safe speaking in physical settings. Used well, AI could allow staff to spend more time on the time-intensive, human work of listening, understanding and following up in person.

Funding cuts have already weakened independent media, specialised communication roles, reduced AAP posts and gutted media development organisations. Against this backdrop AI promises the potential to “maximise impact.” That may be tempting, but the risks are real. AI systems can hallucinate or rely on outdated, biased, or inaccurate information. In humanitarian settings, false information about asylum, registration, border access, or available services can have life-altering consequences. For example, a chatbot incorrectly stating that humanitarian services are non-operational could shape decisions affecting people’s safety and future.

AI is also entering already crowded digital information ecosystems that are fast, borderless and shaped by algorithms. As these systems generate and circulate information at scale, they can distort what we see and hear.

Rumours travel faster, fringe concerns can appear more representative, and the loudest voices may dominate the conversation. As people navigate increasingly disordered information environments their confidence in information itself may erode; we find ourselves in a trust deficit and this should give us pause.

The accountability approaches developed remain essential and should not be sidelined for efficiency or rapid tech adoption. These foundations are even more important as AI expands; they help us understand how people access and trust information, ensure online engagement is grounded in offline realities and support communities to build resilience against rumours and misinformation.

We have also learned that participation is not the same as data collection. Humanitarian organisations already gather large volumes of feedback; the persistent weakness is using it to shape decisions. AI may help organise and summarise what people say, but will it change how budgets are allocated, programmes designed or trade-offs are made?

Without changes in decision-making structures, AI may increase interaction between communities and organisations, but only in a reactive way that leaves decision-making power unchanged.



**Katie Drew**

Senior Digital Project Manager, UNHCR

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*As people navigate increasingly disordered information environments their confidence in information itself may erode; we find ourselves in a trust deficit and this should give us pause.”*



## Do no harm in a digital age: accountability for humanitarian technology



**Omar Abou-Samra**

Senior Director, Programs Design and Development, Integrated Global Program, American Red Cross



*Without robust safeguards, ICTs can compromise our principles and unintentionally harm the very communities we seek to protect and empower.”*

For humanitarians, technology is essential to allow us to continue to deliver our missions and mandates, especially as needs continue to grow while resources decline.

After more than a decade of “digital transformation”, the sector has demonstrated that certain technologies can indeed be used to improve a variety of fields, from the utilisation of satellite imagery to map disaster impact and response, to connectivity for sharing life-saving information; from the automation of back-office functions, to the use of mobile money to support disaster-affected communities. Broadly, these Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have shown that, properly employed, they can help reach populations that might otherwise be underserved and provide critical support and services that might otherwise be unavailable. It is urgent to embrace these opportunities, which have not yet been fully realised.

Alongside these opportunities have come new risks, and every day compromises are being made in favour of convenience over protection and privacy. Without robust safeguards, ICTs can compromise our principles and unintentionally harm the very communities we seek to protect and empower. ICTs can entrench or exacerbate existing inequities by imposing a new “digital divide” between those who can and cannot access and leverage digital technologies to their advantage. Vulnerable groups whose agency is limited are disproportionately at risk.

To address these risks, we must extend the same rigour for accountability to our digital work that we use in our analogue activities to ensure the application of these tools is safe and respectful of those we serve.

Well-established humanitarian accountability frameworks including the Fundamental Principles and the “do no harm” imperative should be extended to our work with ICTs to support positive outcomes, including better data protection, enhanced privacy and efficient service delivery, while reducing the risks of data loss and mishandling, surveillance and protection risks stemming from digital exclusion and bias. Better application of community-centred approaches can help ensure that the use of ICTs is appropriate for and accessible to those in need.

Recognising the timeliness of addressing this accelerating challenge, the Red Cross Red Crescent is working on a Resolution for the 2026 Council of Delegates proposing multidisciplinary collaboration, shared learning, and joint work on capacity building and resources to support a holistic, clear vision for principled and accountable use of technologies in humanitarian action that will encourage better humanitarian outcomes for Movement components and the communities we serve.

## “ Community-in-the-loop: AI governance and the next accountability frontier

AAP has been built on the assumption that harm is visible and traceable: a flawed distribution, a missed household, a complaint logged through a feedback channel. The CHS codified that architecture, and the sector has spent two decades trying to make it work in practice.

AI changes the shape of the problem. When targeting, triage, and resource allocation are mediated by algorithmic systems, harm can occur silently, at scale and across multiple agencies at once. People are dropped from lists without knowing it. Eligibility shifts on the basis of inferences nobody articulates. The feedback loop, when it eventually catches up, catches up too late.

AI-assisted decisions are already shaping who receives assistance and who does not. Most of the governance attention is going to institutional risk: legal exposure, reputational damage, data protection. The question of what communities are owed when AI affects decisions about them remains deeply underdeveloped.

CDAC Network’s response, developed with The Alan Turing Institute and Humanitarian AI Advisory and funded by FCDO, is the Standards and Assurance Framework for Ethical AI in Humanitarian Action (SAFE AI),<sup>141</sup> launched May 2026. It builds in community-in-the-loop as a structural governance requirement as well as an ethical participation step. Affected communities should be involved in decisions about whether AI is deployed, in the design of redress mechanisms before rollout, and in defining in advance what harms are unacceptable. Participation must shape architecture rather than react to it.

Three propositions follow from this for the sector and its donors. First, a right to know: communities affected by humanitarian decisions need to be told when AI is involved and given meaningful ways to contest it. Second, a shared standard for operational governance at deployment level, SAFE AI: communities should be able to know whether one agency’s AI is held to the same standard as another’s, and individual agencies are accountable for the technical systems they put into the field, not only for the principles they have signed up to. Third, independent assurance and sector benchmarks: AI today will look very different to AI in the years ahead, and the sector needs scaffolding that will sustain communities’ trust through that change.

The CHS sets out what affected people are owed. The sector’s task now is to make those commitments operational and real in AI-mediated systems, where accountability has to be built in before deployment rather than retrofitted after harm becomes visible.



**Helen McElhinney**

Executive Director, CDAC Network; Founding Architect, SAFE AI Framework



*Most of the governance attention is going to institutional risk: legal exposure, reputational damage, data protection. The question of what communities are owed when AI affects decisions about them remains deeply underdeveloped.”*

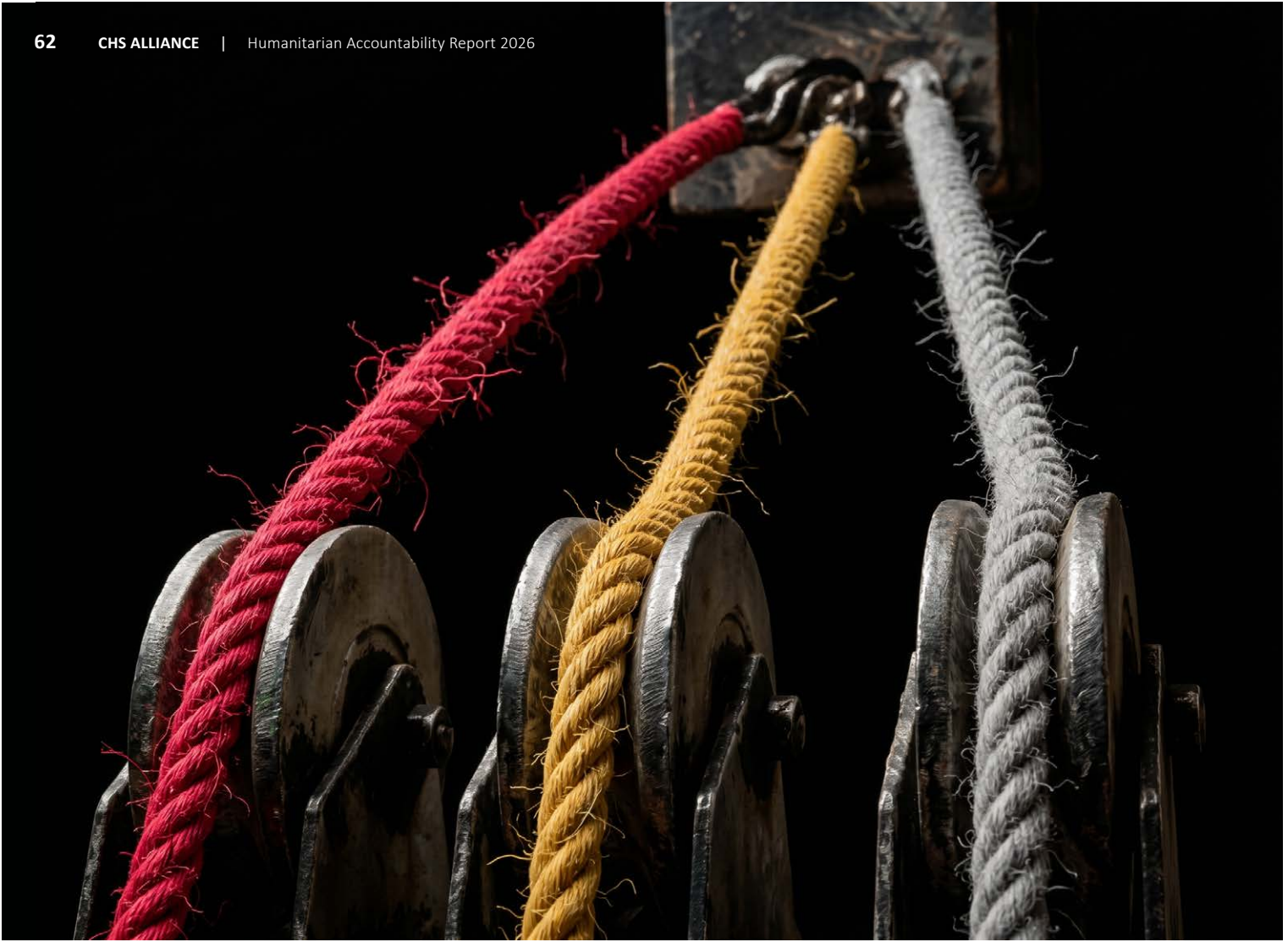


IMAGE  
AI generated

## CHAPTER 7:

# Looking ahead: three levers for change

These levers for change focus on three areas where accountability failures identified throughout this report are most visible and most consequential:

1. the concentration of power away from affected people and local actors;
2. the gap between accountability commitments and the absence of consequences when they are not upheld in practice; and
3. the widening disconnect between humanitarian principles and the political realities in which humanitarian action operates.

## 1. SHIFT STRUCTURAL POWER TO THE PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONS CLOSEST TO CRISIS

Consultation, participation and feedback are not accountability if communities and local actors remain excluded from the decisions that matter most. People who have experienced crises need to be engaged in leadership, governance, and advisory structures as a matter of course. The role of international actors should be to fill gaps, not assume default control.

Funding, coordination, and partnership models must be grounded in local realities rather than imposing bureaucratic systems that weaken the trust, flexibility, and local legitimacy that make community-based response timely and effective. International agencies must also stop transferring responsibility and risk to local actors without the resources, overheads, protection and decision-making authority needed to carry them.

Any intervention claiming to be “localised” or “accountable” should be able to show who defined the problem, who shaped priorities, targeting and programme design, and how communities can challenge or redirect decisions. It should also explain when community priorities could not be acted on and whether the intervention strengthened or weakened local coping systems.

## 2. MAKE ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITMENTS ENFORCEABLE

The humanitarian system does not suffer from a shortage of standards or commitments related to accountability. What it lacks are systemic, consistently applied consequences when those commitments are ignored. If voluntary compliance has not led to the changes required, stronger forms of enforcement will be needed across four levels:

**Organisational level:** Compliance with the CHS commitments should be mandatory for organisations working with vulnerable or crisis-affected populations. Organisations need to verify how they are meeting the commitments, based on feedback from partners and communities.

Humanitarian organisations must ensure that staff and volunteers can safely raise concerns, report misconduct, and challenge harmful practices without fear of retaliation. Violations related to safeguarding, discrimination, abuse, retaliation and failures of duty of care need to carry meaningful consequences rather than being managed as reputational risks.

**Collective level:** Strengthen independent or peer review mechanisms grounded in operational realities to increase scrutiny, expose systemic shortcomings and failures to uphold commitments, and increase pressure for corrective action.

**Community and partner level:** Affected people and local organisations must have transparent and trusted avenues to challenge decisions, trigger reviews and contest harmful practices. Local partners should have formal mechanisms to assess whether commitments are being met, including on issues such as the quality of partnerships, how decision-making authority is shared and how resources, compliance burdens and security risks are distributed across the system.

**Donor and funding level:** Donors and governments need to back these commitments by linking funding eligibility or partnership status to measurable accountability and performance standards.

Crucially, accountability commitments cannot be abandoned when resources contract. Investments in community engagement, safeguarding, complaints mechanisms should not be treated as discretionary costs, but as core functions essential to effective and efficient humanitarian action. They are essential to understanding needs, reducing waste, strengthening trust, improving targeting, and ensuring programmes remain relevant, effective and responsive to the people they are intended to serve.

## 3. RE-ANCHOR ACCOUNTABILITY IN HUMANITARIAN NORMS AND POLITICAL HONESTY

The credibility of accountability efforts cannot be separated from the wider political environment in which humanitarian action operates. Communities are acutely aware of global double standards, selective outrage, inconsistent application of international humanitarian law and the impunity that often surrounds violations driving humanitarian suffering. Accountability must also include the consistent and credible application of humanitarian principles and international law.

AAP becomes difficult to sustain when humanitarian actors defend norms forcefully in some crises while remaining silent in others. A more honest accountability agenda would acknowledge these tensions directly.

This includes clearer institutional criteria for when humanitarian actors will publicly speak out against violations of international law, regardless of the political identity of the perpetrator.

Humanitarian financing should be driven by need rather than geopolitics, donor interests, or institutional mandates. Communities should understand what shapes funding decisions, why some crises remain chronically underfunded while others attract sustained political attention, what humanitarian actors can realistically influence and where the limits of humanitarian action lie. Trust requires greater consistency between the values the sector claims to uphold and the realities communities observe around them.


*“Every crisis also presents an opportunity; if the right stakeholders, in sufficient numbers, seize it, there is reason for hope.”*

CHS Survey respondent<sup>142</sup>



## TWENTY YEARS OF FINDING THE SAME GAP: EXCERPTS FROM PREVIOUS HARS

Many of the priorities highlighted in this report have been identified repeatedly over the years. Their persistence helps explain the growing sense of fatigue across the sector. The quotes below span two decades of Humanitarian Accountability Reports, yet many of the findings and recommendations echo those contained in this report. If these levers are to produce different results, implementation will require stronger incentives, greater consequences for inaction, and approaches that move the sector beyond another cycle of familiar commitments.



→ **2005:** Most international NGOs showed a primary concern with accounting to donors, although they accepted that accountability to beneficiaries was crucial to their legitimacy... **Capacity to demand accountability therefore correlated directly with the relative power of stakeholders.** <sup>143</sup>

→ **2008:** Donor and aid agency staff also reported that they **feel hurried by tight time-frames for proposals and pressures to use funds quickly and, as a consequence, spend less time in communities...** frequently seen as the source of mistakes or the selection of interventions and activities that were unnecessarily costly that, with more local consultation, could have been avoided. <sup>144</sup>

→ **2010:** The most critical gap in organisational support to PSEA is that of visible senior management leadership to actively promote PSEA... while holding field managers accountable for implementation... **With a few exceptions community-level awareness-raising and complaints mechanisms are not in place.** <sup>145</sup>

→ **2011: Communities deplore aid that creates dependency and unsustainable projects.** The need for sustainable long-term programmes that lead to community empowerment, ownership, and self-reliance was strongly emphasised. <sup>146</sup>

→ **2013: Voluntary responsibilities tend to be 'trumped' by more defined forms of accountability,** notably of agency staff to their line managers to deliver on organisational priorities. <sup>147</sup>

→ **2015:** It will truly be a **change in aid culture when national service delivery becomes the norm,** and international service delivery needs to be justified. <sup>148</sup>

→ **2018: Local organisations are faced with a dilemma: change their structure to facilitate access to international funds, but lose their flexibility and agility in the process, or stay small and nimble but continue to struggle for funds.** Many local organisations feel that in striving to meet the requirements of working with international partners, they run the risk of losing what made them effective in the first place. <sup>149</sup>

→ **2020:** Despite frequent and repeated moments of attention given to the issue over the past two decades, **mechanisms for complaints are not well understood by the people they are designed for and do not regularly lead to responses, sanctions or improvements.** <sup>150</sup>

→ **2022:** Although efforts have grown in the past few years towards accountability to affected people and its critical link to localisation, there is **a real lack of tangible progress for the required shifts in power, roles, business models, decision-making structures of aid organisations,** and the need to dismantle persistent inequalities between international and local actors. <sup>151</sup>



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## Ready to lead: Aid grounded in our realities

Members of Save the Children International’s Adolescents and Youth Advisory Group, as well as children and youth representatives from Save the Children offices across Japan, Egypt, Nigeria, Lebanon, Yemen, Niger, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, and Iraq. Facilitated by Save the Children International.

We are young people from Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Japan, and other countries. Some of us work in the humanitarian sector. Many of us are active in our communities. We live every day with the consequences of how aid is designed, funded and delivered.

From where we sit, the problem is about who has the power to set the agenda, whose lives count, and who is held to account. Across our experiences, aid organisations and governments listen more to donors, politics and global trends than to the people living through crises.

Here is what we have witnessed and what we want to see changed:

- In Lebanon, a project distributed female kits to young women at a time when girls were struggling to access education. Even when it became clear that education was the more urgent need, we could not change the plan because it had already been approved by the donor.
- In Iraq, aid decisions are often shaped by politics. Projects may rebuild schools while people still lack clean water. Communities are asked for opinions, but they are rarely part of real decision-making.

#### IMAGE

Photo supplied by Save the Children International representing some of the authors

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*Above all, we want an aid system that genuinely values all lives equally. A drought in Somalia, an earthquake in Japan, a war in Yemen, or rural poverty in Egypt should not have to compete for recognition based on politics or geography.”*

- In Yemen, mental health remains largely absent from programmes despite the effects of war and stress.
- In Japan, after disasters, some well-meaning people still send old clothes and random items that were not requested.
- In Egypt, deep inequalities remain between rural and urban areas, with villages facing fewer educational resources and weaker healthcare.

At the same time, young people and affected communities are often present but powerless. Young people from Somalia travelled to COP29 in Azerbaijan and actively participated, yet we could not access the important negotiations or side meetings.

Looking at this, many of us have concluded that not all lives are valued equally. Some crises receive attention, cameras, and funding while others are ignored. Powerful countries and large organisations often face fewer consequences when they fail or misuse resources, while countries like Somalia are monitored far more closely over smaller issues.

## WHAT WOULD A DIFFERENT SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

We want aid that starts by listening and keeps listening. Ask people what is most urgent before projects are designed. Involve communities in planning and decision-making from the beginning, not only through consultations after key decisions have already been shaped.

We want aid that is locally led, not just locally implemented. Projects must be able to change when communities say this is not what they need. That means putting real power and resources in the hands of local organisations and young people while international actors support instead of impose.

We want aid that focuses on dignity and the future: clean water in Iraq, serious investment in mental health in Yemen, stronger public healthcare in rural Egypt, and protection from violence and early marriage.

Above all, we want an aid system that genuinely values all lives equally. A drought in Somalia, an earthquake in Japan, a war in Yemen, or rural poverty in Egypt should not have to compete for recognition based on politics or geography.

We are asking for aid shaped with us, not for us. As the next generation of leaders, we are ready to take responsibility for decisions grounded in our realities. We know the value of sharing power with our communities, and treating every life as if it matters the same.

“

**THE CHAIR THAT SAT EMPTY**

Poem by Peter Kidi

*In every meeting hall,  
under fluorescent hums and  
polished shoes,  
there stood a chair  
its back straight,  
its seat unclaimed,  
a neat card taped to it:  
“Refugee Voice.”*

*They spoke around it,  
over it,  
never to it.  
Paper shuffled like dry leaves,  
decisions inked without a single  
footprint from the camp.*

*One day,  
a man from the tents stepped forward,  
his hands trembling not from fear  
but from carrying too many stories.  
He lowered himself into the chair  
and the room froze.*

*“Sir, that seat is only symbolic,”  
they told him,  
as if a symbol could drink  
from dry wells,  
or feed a child on half rations,  
or carry the weight of eviction  
notices in a plastic folder.*

*So the chair stayed empty.  
Year after year,  
its metal legs gathered dust,  
its label curled at the corners.  
Only the silence sat there faithfully  
and it spoke louder than anyone  
in the room.*

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## HUMANITARIAN ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT 2026

CHS Alliance  
NGO Humanitarian Hub,  
La Voie-Creuse 16, 1202 Geneva,  
Switzerland

[info@chsalliance.org](mailto:info@chsalliance.org)  
[www.chsalliance.org](http://www.chsalliance.org)  
+41 (0)22 788 16 41

