

HUMANITARIAN ACTION 101

Humanitarian responses assist people affected by disasters due to natural hazards or armed conflict, and seek to enhance the safeguarding of their rights. NGOs are guided by the humanitarian imperative to save lives and reduce human suffering wherever it happens.

State of Humanitarian Action

An ever-growing number of global crises have resulted in:

- 134.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance²¹
- 68.5 million have been forcibly displaced²²
- 83 million require emergency food assistance²³

While these numbers are staggering and difficult to fully comprehend, one must remember that individual human lives are behind the statistics, individual men, women, and children torn away from their daily existences by conflict or natural disasters they have no control over. Despite the increased needs of these vulnerable people, who lack the basics for survival (food, water, shelter, medical attention), resources devoted to global humanitarian responses remain wildly insufficient, the gap approaching \$10 billion each year.²⁴

Along with short term responses, humanitarian action also encompasses longer-term challenges to survival such as means to protect from violence, recurring natural disasters or prolonged conflicts and population displacements.

Most international large-scale humanitarian responses now focus on the needs of affected populations in conflict; crises that tend to last for years or decades and require political solutions. Responses to natural disasters require less and less support and assistance from international organizations as the capacities and response systems are now effective in most disaster prone countries and regions.

The Humanitarian Sector

The humanitarian sector, from its voluntary roots, has in the past 30 years dramatically professionalized, defining stringent technical, operational, and financial standards to be as effective and accountable as possible to the beneficiaries of its programs as well as to its funders. The humanitarian sector is employing an estimated 570,000 people globally, overwhelmingly originating from the countries that are experiencing conflicts and disasters.

Humanitarian Principles²⁵

Humanitarian organizations, in order to reach the civilians who do not have access to basic goods and services necessary for their survival, abide by four commonly agreed upon and ratified humanitarian principles:



HUMANITY

Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found.



NEUTRALITY

Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature.



IMPARTIALITY

Humanitarian action must be carried out based on need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions based on nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class, or political opinions.



INDEPENDENCE

Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military, or other objectives that any actor where humanitarian action is being implemented.

Adherence to these principles help ensure the impartiality of humanitarian efforts and ensure that humanitarians are able to reach those in greatest need.

Humanitarian Action 101

(continued)



Photo by Laura Eldon/Oxfam

The Global Humanitarian System

To facilitate predictable, effective, timely, and coordinated responses to humanitarian crises, United Nations agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) work together at the local and global level.

Key components of the global humanitarian system:

- **Inter-Agency Steering Committee (IASC)** – The primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance globally. It is composed of various lead UN agencies (such as the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Program, and others), and consortia of international NGOs (including InterAction).
- **The cluster system** – A means of assuring that all responding agencies align strategies, identify gaps in coverage at the technical sector level (health, nutrition or protection, for instance).

Challenges in Humanitarian Response

While subsequent papers cover specific issues impacting humanitarian action in greater depth, there are key topline issues that should be highlighted.

- **Restrictions on humanitarian access** – Affected populations' access to services is essential to an effective humanitarian response. However, host governments, nonstate groups, and even donor governments are increasingly hampering humanitarian actors' ability to access people in need through unnecessary regulations, restrictions, and compliance requirements. Additionally, restrictions on populations' freedom of movement and security concerns further hinder peoples' ability to receive assistance.
- **Disregard for international norms** – Parties to conflict and other actors have shown increasing disregard for humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. This results in physical attacks on humanitarian actors and civilians, direct attacks upon civilian infrastructure used to facilitate humanitarian response, and physical denial of access to vulnerable populations among other concerns.
- **Funding gap** – The gap between humanitarian needs and funding to meet those needs is an ongoing problem, but one that has grown more pronounced in the last decade.
- **Connectivity with preparedness and recovery** – While constrained by the above factors, humanitarian response is also hampered by insufficient preparation for cyclical or man-made crises and for connecting with development actors after the early recovery.

