

From Voices to Choices:

Expanding crisis-affected people's influence over aid decisions



A summary of the report



People affected by crisis make decisions every day about how to use their capacities and the resources available to them to best meet their needs. However, when it comes to the aid provided by the formal humanitarian sector, crisis-affected people continue to report having extremely limited ability to influence the aid decisions that affect them. After decades of talk and commitments to put people at the center of aid, we, as a sector, continue to fall short.

The purpose

This report seeks to support efforts to put crisis-affected people in the driver seat of humanitarian action. It analyzes inertias internal to the formal humanitarian sector that have held back transformative change and explores how trends external to the formal sector may help to break these inertias and catalyze shifts in power.

Accepted but unachieved

The formal humanitarian sector knows what it “should” do. It knows that meaningful participation of crisis-affected people in aid decision-making is essential to ensuring the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of aid interventions, and to respecting people's individual dignity and right to determine their own lives. It also knows that local expertise is essential to understanding the context and working within the complexity of crises. Over the past two decades, there have been many commitments and guidelines to support more transformative engagement of crisis-affected people and local actors in aid decision-making, and formal sector actors are increasingly seeking to listen to the voices of crisis-affected people. However, there are powerful inertias within the incentive structure, power dynamics, bureaucracy and worldview of the formal humanitarian sector. These have prevented reform efforts from producing the transformative change necessary to put people at the center of choices about aid.

Disruptive potential

Powerful external trends are changing the ecosystem in which the formal humanitarian sector operates, and will continue to, over the coming two decades. Together with emerging agents of change, these trends will produce cracks in internal formal sector inertias, which could provide crisis-affected people with greater influence over the assistance they receive. Growing interconnectivity between people and communities globally, supported by the spread of technology, transnational communities, urbanization and the coming of age of today's youth, will provide **more choices for people to organize their own response.** It will also expand avenues for people to connect with formal and non-formal aid providers who are willing to meet their priorities and enable people to demand more from formal sector actors. People will have greater ability to amplify their own voices and narratives to influence aid decisions, both domestically and internationally, whilst local actors will have greater access to, and an advantage in, alternative funding opportunities and partnerships.

Aid worldview

The culture, values, beliefs and language that make up the worldview of the formal humanitarian sector frame how the sector operates. People affected by crisis are often presented as passive recipients reliant on international assistance. But people are their own first responders. They may seek out support from the formal humanitarian sector, but even more—so they seek it out from family, friends, religious institutions, businesses, local government and civil society. The aid worldview also places greater trust and less scrutiny on international actors than local actors. Technical experience and Western management practices are valued more than contextual understanding, lived experience and local expertise, promoting an environment in which the formal sector fails to equally value the knowledge and experience of its own national staff in decision-making, let alone that of crisis-affected people.

Internal inertias (with high influence on the formal humanitarian sector)	External trends (with high influence on the broader ecosystem)	Emerging agents of change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentives and power structure of the formal humanitarian sector • Donor interests • Bureaucratic and risk averse aid system • Aid worldview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interconnectivity • New technological solutions for aid • Technological empowerment • Urbanization • Youth and education • Environmental change • International migration • Changing nature of conflict • Resurgence of sovereignty and nationalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis-affected Middle Income Country Governments (MIC) • Alternative Actors (private sector and local, national and Southern international NGOs)

Urbanization, environmental change and protracted conflict will increase the complexity of response, magnifying the importance of contextual understanding and local expertise. The tolerance of parallel systems and the need for intermediaries will decline, especially as technology enables systems to be streamlined, crisis-affected MIC governments increase their role in response management and needs vs. resource pressures demand efficiency. Local actors will have greater power to leverage in partnerships as their funding options expand and as governments demand a nationalized response. This will provide **increased competitive advantage for local actors** and shift incentives within the formal sector to support real moves towards subsidiarity and genuine partnerships, supported by new technologies that help expand trust and a political environment that inspires solidarity.

However, these trends will also produce new patterns of need and concentrated vulnerability. Inequalities in access to technology and education will leave many people behind. Urbanization, environmental change and conflict will exacerbate both needs and inequalities, leaving many with fewer choices for managing greater risks. People will continue to move across borders, but international migration laws will likely harden, trapping many people in dangerous circumstances.

The resurgence of sovereignty may result in both increased resource pressures with funds reduced or more politically apportioned, and more access constraints as governments restrict local civil society and international assistance. This will lead to large numbers of people being left behind who will continue to need support from the formal humanitarian sector. Their influence over the aid choices available to them will depend in large part on **formal sector actors pursuing more transformative participation**. The odds of this may improve if cracks that have already appeared in the aid worldview widen as a result of crisis-affected people increasingly being able to present their own narratives to aid power-holders and the general public, and as formal sector actors work in greater genuine partnership with local actors. If these cracks widen, transformative participation and new technologies will amplify the effectiveness of choice-enabling approaches (such as cash transfers).

Implications for the Formal Humanitarian Sector:

These trends will precipitate fundamental changes in how the formal humanitarian sector works. Some of these changes, such as a reduction of parallel systems, fewer intermediary roles for international aid actors, and working with and through national and local systems, will happen regardless of what formal sector actors chose to do.

Other changes lend themselves towards incentivizing and encouraging formal sector actors to make choices that will result in more influence and decision-making shifting towards crisis-affected people and local actors.

Formal sector actors have choices to make about whether they will adapt to these changes in ways that support greater subsidiarity and genuine moves towards more people-centered aid, or if they will attempt to further centralize power. International aid actors who currently play intermediary roles have reason to be concerned – both that they will be squeezed out and about the impact that attempts to further centralize power will have on the voices and choices of crisis-affected people. Formal sector actors who dramatically increase the value they place on local expertise and contextual understanding, pursue genuine power-sharing partnerships with local actors, and support transformative participation will be more likely to remain relevant, present and effective.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, the formal humanitarian sector knows what it “should” do; the arguments have changed little in decades. Formal sector actors know that they have a role to play in relinquishing their own control and promoting an enabling environment for crisis-affected people and local actors to influence and make decisions. Humanitarian business-as-usual is changing. Formal humanitarian sector actors can choose to use this moment to focus on those being left behind: by stepping back and following the lead of crisis-affected people and local actors, co-designing interventions together with them, amplifying the power of their voices and supporting the expansion and realization of their choices. Only then will crisis-affected people finally sit at the center of aid.

About IARAN

The Inter-Agency Research and Analysts Network (IARAN) is a collaborative hub of humanitarian professionals, and it’s our aim to make the humanitarian sector more strategic. We operate to support NGOs in managing future uncertainty using techniques like scenario analysis, to examine the different ways it could unfold over the next one to fifteen years, allowing them to be more responsive, resource efficient and impactful.

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