

JUNE 2023

An unaccountable response perpetuates people's vulnerabilities

BRIEF



**GROUND TRUTH
SOLUTIONS**

Summary

From mainstreaming to the centrality of protection, all protection documents make one thing clear: strengthening accountability to crisis-affected populations secures protection outcomes. People affected by crisis share this view. Their feedback points to the simple fact that they do not feel physically and mentally safe and secure when aid programming is not transparent, and they cannot influence decisions about the programming that impacts their lives.

The following analysis of quantitative and qualitative feedback collected in 2021 and 2022 from crisis-affected people living in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Nigeria, Somalia, and Ukraine reveals an unsettling trend: where opportunities to participate are lacking, people feel insecure, their vulnerabilities heightened not reduced.

This brief examines people's lived experiences in parallel with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) policy statements and the Global Protection Cluster's technical guidelines, noting that while guidance is clear, community feedback shows that implementation and outcomes remain elusive.

Blurring the lines

The [fundamental link between protection and accountability](#) is not always understood or practised. While there are a plethora of reasons for this, the siloed nature of humanitarian reform concepts doesn't help. The [Independent Review of the Implementation of the IASC Protection Policy](#) argues that themes such as gender, disability, inclusion of older persons, and accountability to affected populations are "often treated by the humanitarian community as separate objectives" when they simply "fall under the broad umbrella of protection." In their necessary attempts to spotlight each of these themes, proponents of these topics have all established their own territory within the humanitarian system. While each topic's importance grows clearer, the siloed nature of protection and accountability has hindered practical implementation of such topics together.

While there have always been efforts to better identify overlapping themes, they are still rooted in humanitarian constructs. Rather than focus on the concepts related to each silo and how they intersect, this brief aims to blur the lines, trumping not sector jargon but community feedback.

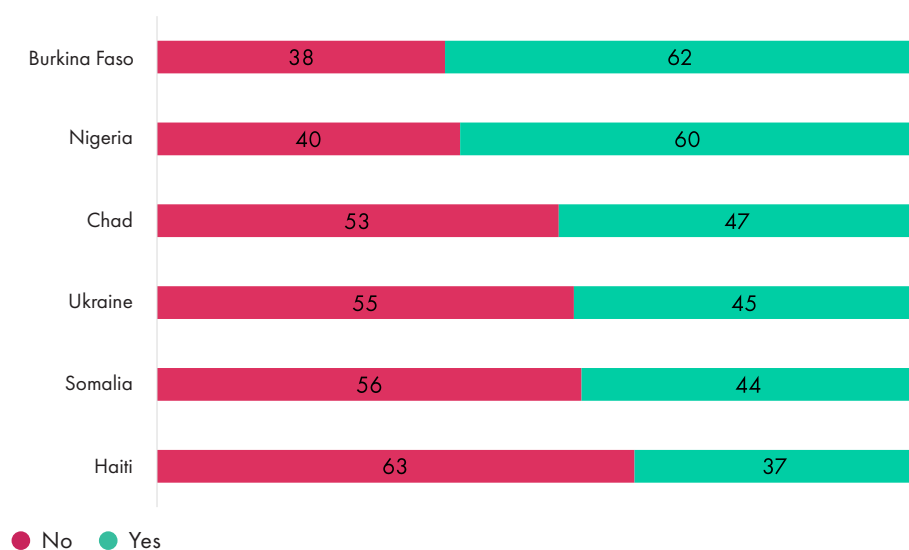
The findings and conclusions in this brief are not new. Yet looking at these issues from a combined protection-accountability perspective sheds new light on the need for meaningful community participation in decision-making, adapted and adapting assistance, transparent information, and complaint mechanisms that people trust.

[Ground Truth Solutions](#) (GTS) is an international non-governmental organisation that helps people affected by crisis influence the design and implementation of humanitarian aid. GTS has over a decade of experience engaging with communities to discover what they think about humanitarian assistance, while also gathering ideas on how things could be done better.

When people cannot participate, aid can create or accentuate vulnerability

Including communities in project design, implementation, and evaluation is key to ensuring humanitarian assistance helps and does not harm them. Yet most people surveyed by GTS do not even think their community was consulted. This feedback indicates that risk analyses are lacking a thorough evaluation of people’s vulnerabilities, one that can only be done well through systematic engagement with communities.

Do you think your community was consulted on humanitarian aid programming in your region? (targeting, needs assessment, proposed modalities, distribution schedule, etc.)



IASC Guideline:

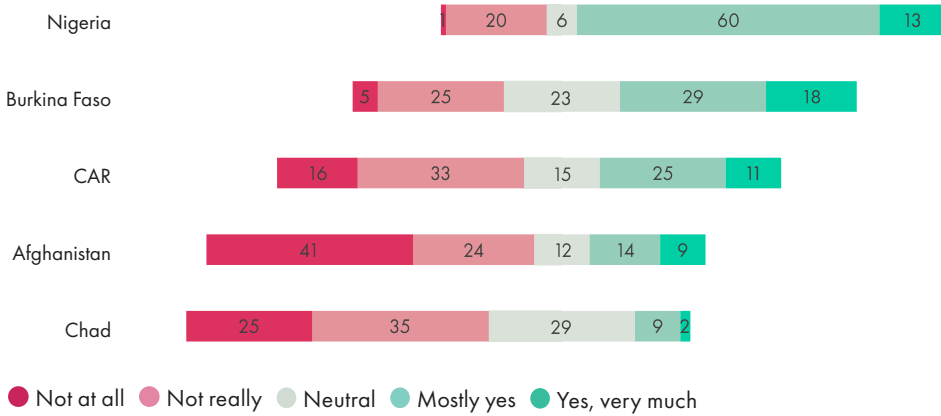
“Explore creative ways to enable representatives from a cross section (with respect to age, gender and diversity) of the community to participate in the monitoring and evaluation of results.”

Global Protection Cluster Toolkit:

“Consult beneficiaries to better understand their protection risks and identify how your organisation can avoid causing harm to the community through your intervention. Confirm the threats, vulnerabilities, and negative coping strategies identified in the Protection Analysis Report by consulting with the affected population of your area of intervention. Conduct a Beneficiary Assessment (Baseline) through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to assess the perception and experience of the affected population in terms of safety, dignity, access, and participation.”

Consultations themselves are not enough to mitigate people’s insecurity. They need to see that their opinions are influencing decision-making about the assistance that impacts their lives. In Chad, where people feel the least safe at distribution points in comparison to other countries surveyed, respondents are quick to suggest a range of improvements, with solutions varying importantly by region. To maintain orderly distributions that avoid overcrowding and the chance of theft, respondents in the Chari-Baguirmi region [called for police to control the site](#). Yet in Mandoul, some people are afraid of the security forces: [“We ask that security forces at the distribution site stop hitting us,”](#) said one male refugee. Instead, those in Mandoul called for distribution areas to be closed off and people organised into groups to avoid disorder. Hearing this feedback after distributions happened is often too late – people already experienced physical danger – and demonstrates that aid distribution processes are not always planned with communities to ensure they are adapted to their unique concerns and community dynamics.

Do you think your opinions about the assistance you receive are taken into consideration by aid workers?



Global Protection Cluster Toolkit proposes the following focus group discussion questions related to participation for baseline assessments:

- Have you been involved in decision-making processes around the services provided in your community by humanitarian organisations? If yes, how have you been involved?
- What could be done to better include your views and perspectives in humanitarian programming?

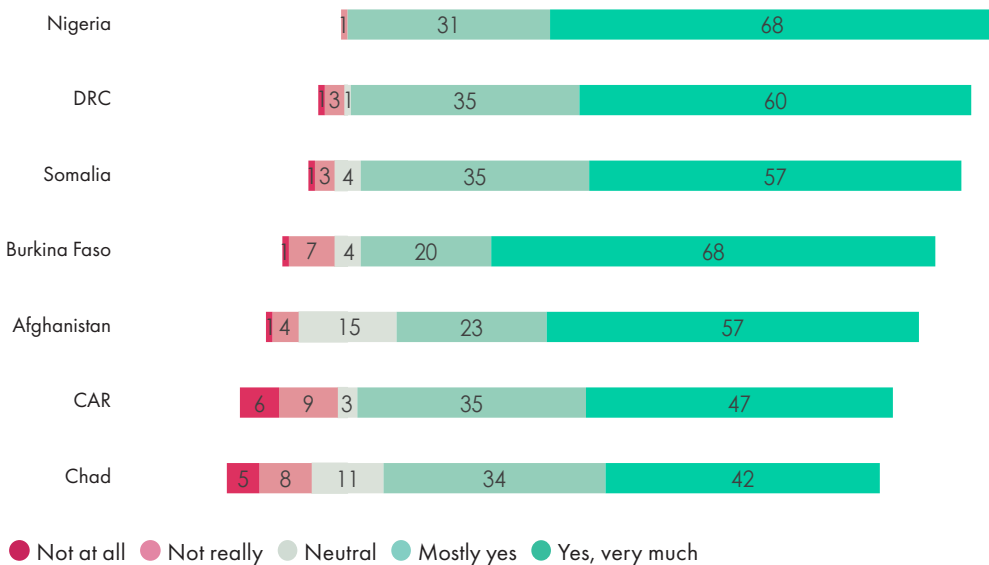
Global Protection Cluster Toolkit process outcome indicator related to participation:

- % of programmes decisions based on the participation of all targeted groups

DG ECHO Protection Mainstreaming Key Outcome Indicator and Monitoring Tool:

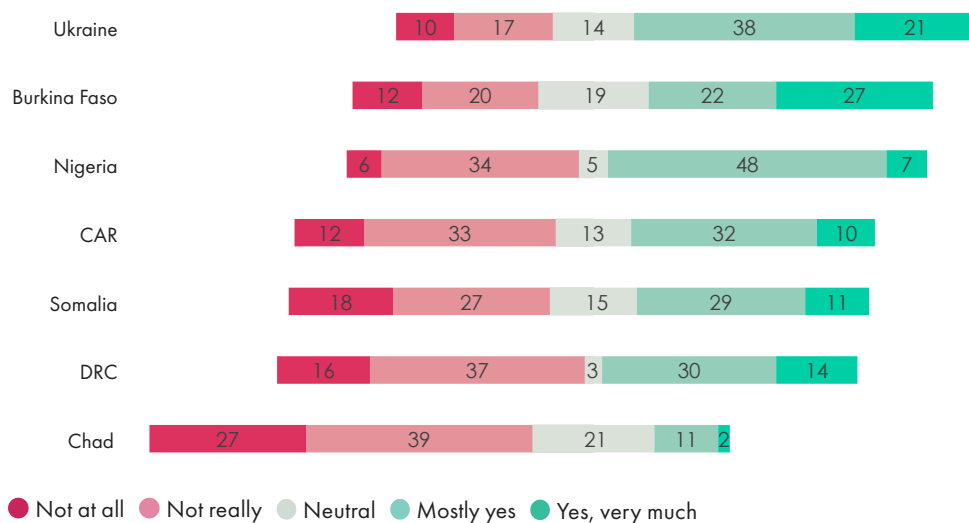
- Were your views taken into account by the organisation about the assistance you received?
- If no, would you mind telling me how is it that your views were not taken into account?

Do you feel safe at the site where you access aid and/or services?



A look at needs assessment processes provides another glimpse into the harm that can be done if humanitarians do not conduct a holistic, community-driven analysis but instead rely on sector-based assessments. In 2022, those who think aid meets their essential needs varied across countries but remained low (between 13% and 59%). In a conversation with a displaced man in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso, he confirmed that his community needed psychological support from humanitarians, but the conversation quickly switched to the need for food. [“We expect humanitarians to provide us with food. If you are fed and full, then you are comfortable,”](#) he explained. For him, meeting his basic needs was inherently connected to improving his mental well-being, as well as his community’s. This does not mean food assistance could or should replace professional psychological support and services, but it shows the potential of allowing community members to prioritise assistance. Area-based approaches provide an opportunity for this necessary realignment, yet in order to [“treat needs holistically within a defined community or geography,”](#) how needs and risks are assessed must be developed in consultation with crisis-affected people per context, not based on pre-determined, common indexes.

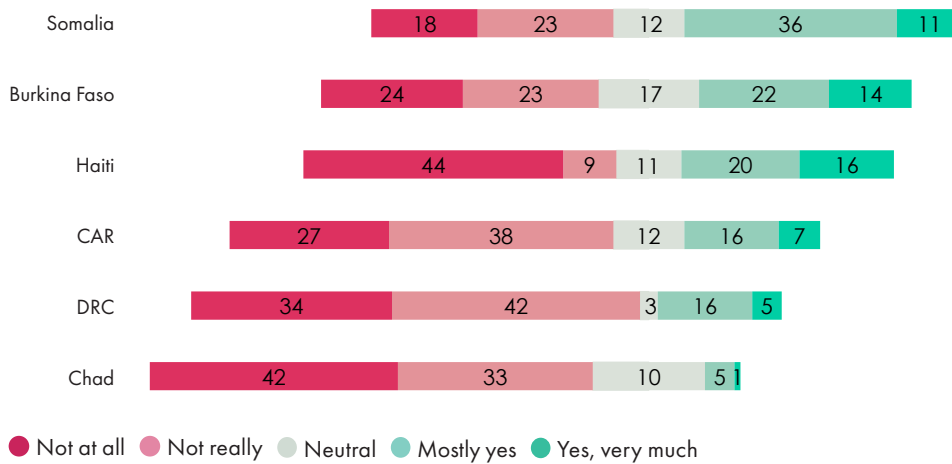
Does the aid you receive currently cover your most important needs?



Not involving communities in needs assessments and risk analyses, and not having their perspective to effectively adapt to their preferences risks prolonging their vulnerabilities. This is a reality for most: between 6% and 47% of people surveyed think the humanitarian assistance they receive allows them to live without aid in the future. People’s sense of self-worth and agency often hinges on self-reliance. [“We don’t want to be made into victims for a sack of rice,”](#) shared a respondent in Les Cayes, Haiti, while a man in Kalia Haripur, Bangladesh explained, [“No NGO can say that they helped a family by buying them 10kg of rice. They are profiting from whatever happens to people but not actually addressing their needs.”](#) Yet aid providers' current lack of a long-term vision means that people do not have the resources to plan ahead. A man in Pouytenga, Burkina Faso explained that this long-term uncertainty is pervasive and stressful because [“the day the person who helps you abandons you \[is\] the day you will fail too.”](#)

Many people affected by crisis think that longer-term solutions will help to reduce violence. When explaining what solutions are needed, a displaced woman in Nord Kivu, DRC shared, [“Humanitarian actors \[should\] help youth find work because the lack of work leads to rebellions and banditry in communities.”](#) Aid providers, development and peace actors have a responsibility to collectively know what people want for the long-term – which will become apparent through nuanced, community-based needs assessments – and then to support efforts in line with these aspirations, while being realistic about the constraints. Without listening to people’s ideas on how to support their long-term safety and security, the need for humanitarian assistance becomes a vicious cycle.

Does the assistance you receive enable you to live without aid in the future?



Inconsistent communication causes confusion, stress, and physical insecurity

Communication about who is on aid recipient lists and why is vital, yet fewer than half of all respondents surveyed in 2022 know how humanitarian organisations conduct the targeting process. A man in Port-à-Piment, Haiti, explained that the process of collecting aid is always frustrating: [“I’m there at the distribution, but you tell me my name isn’t on the list. I have to leave with nothing even if the \[targeting\] card is in \[my\] hands; why? I don’t have any explanation.”](#) In Burkina Faso, people told us that a key reason for their insecurity is their [fear that they will not receive any aid \(40%\)](#). Limited communication about who is eligible for an upcoming aid distribution or service provision adds an additional layer of stress to affected communities, heightening their feelings of vulnerability and insecurity.

Do you know how humanitarian organisations decide who receives assistance and who does not?



When people do not know if they are on the list or not, they might try their luck in the hopes they can collect some aid. Yet this can cause the number of people at aid distributions to swell to unexpected levels, and leave those facilitating the process unprepared to manage such crowds. Those who feel unsafe at aid distribution sites note overcrowding and physical violence as the main reasons for their sense of insecurity. Clear information sharing of who will receive aid and who will not can help reduce the risk of overcrowded and unsafe distribution sites. Community tensions related to unclear targeting processes also illustrate that communication remains

insufficient. Comments about corrupt selection processes are commonplace. A woman returnee in Buni Yadi, Nigeria lamented that “the community leaders are not giving their people equal opportunity to get selected for aid. They prioritise their relatives and close associates. Vulnerability status is not even a determinant for being selected.” Who gets prioritised is also a concern for people in Afghanistan. A woman in Kunduz explained, “The community leaders always get to be seen first, and they and their families get all the medication. When the health teams come to us, they rush with us because they have no time, and we don’t get a lot of help.” In the Central African Republic, one cash and voucher assistance (CVA) recipient explained that because the selection process “seemed like a lottery...You wouldn’t be happy at all for those who win and are happy.” Many respondents in the Central African Republic said they feel unsafe when chosen to receive aid and are discreet about their aid status to protect themselves.

IASC Guidelines:

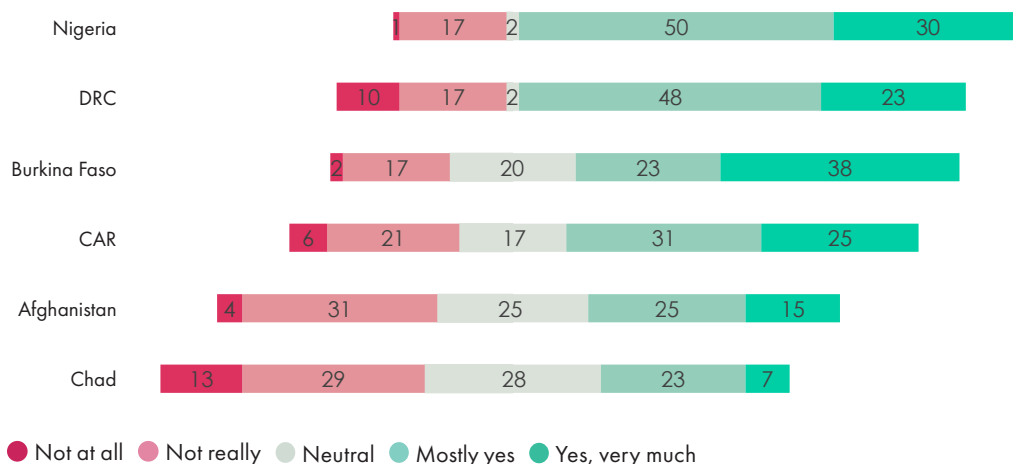
“Ensure that clusters/sectors develop a culturally appropriate and protection sensitive strategy for two-way communication with communities in a manner that enables access to information and direct engagement by/with a range of different groups within the communities.

Ensure that information dissemination includes, as a minimum, accessible and timely information on cluster/sector strategies, targeting criteria, geographical focus, services provided and entitlements, programmatic changes, and community feedback and complaints mechanisms.

Translate messages into local languages and deliver them through context-appropriate, protection sensitive methods and channels such as, face-to-face meetings, notice boards, radio, television, mobile phones, email, internet, call-in centres and public fora, community outreach workers, religious leaders, training and awareness-raising sessions, social groups and community centres.”

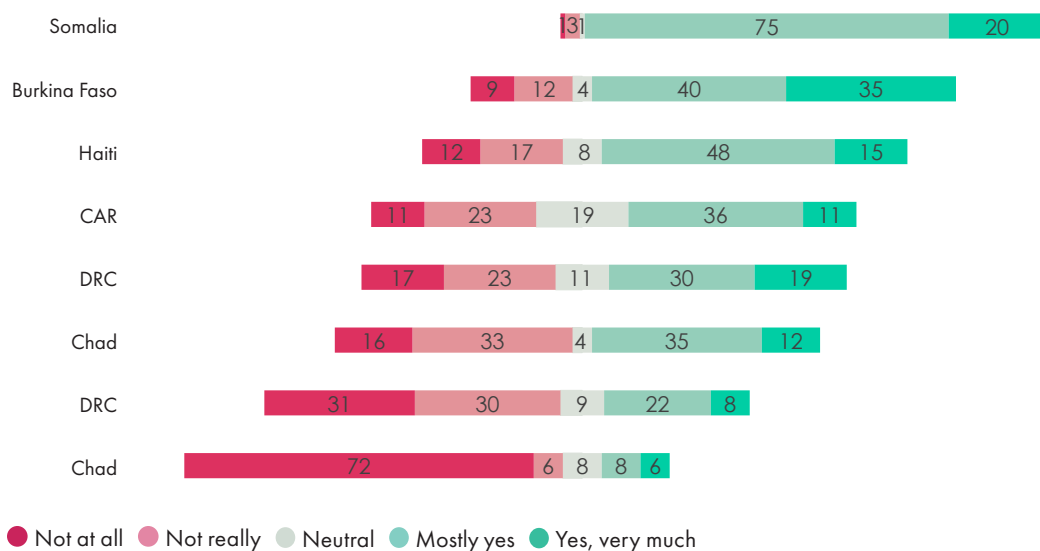
Information-sharing is one part of it, but again, first determining aid recipient selection criteria with communities is a key component that people say is missed. In Chad, where only 30% of respondents think aid goes to those who need it most, a woman called for aid providers to include representatives of different groups of people: “A youth leader, leader of older persons, female leader, male leader, and community leaders. The leaders of each category must be appointed to participate in all the meetings and activities in the camp so that each community feels involved and satisfied.” Existing guidance is clear that consulting a diverse group of people within a community mitigates the risk of improperly defining vulnerability criteria based on assumptions or biases, but people continue to feel like their lived realities are sidelined.

Does aid go to those who need it most?



Beyond the targeting process, not all people feel informed about available humanitarian aid and services. In Haiti, where few (14%) feel well informed, a lack of information means people miss out on aid. [“I only find out about aid distributions after the fact,”](#) shared a man in Port-à-Piment. People feel anxious because they do not know what type of aid and services are available, where to get them, and at what frequency. Information might be shared at the start of a programme but not updated. After aid recipients were selected for CVA in the Central African Republic, respondents told us they lost hope because the distribution took place months after they were informed of their selection. [“I ask humanitarian organisations to strictly respect the agreed frequency of aid delivery,”](#) requested one returnee in Kaga Bando. A lack of communication about delays increases people’s sense of mental and physical insecurity, especially for people who are rationing their aid and trying to plan for the future, and can lead to negative coping mechanisms.

Do you feel informed about the humanitarian aid and services available?



Even when people say they feel better informed, such as CVA recipients in Nigeria, they lack essential details. A host community member in Damaturu Central, Nigeria shared, [“We are only informed of the distribution date but not the duration of the programme.”](#) Communicating information about the duration of assistance is crucial, especially in situations of acute need, so people can plan for when assistance will stop. This is the case in Somalia where less than half of these surveyed feel aid providers are transparent about their plans. [“Somalis say ‘things kept in the dark usually have a bad odour’. If you want to make things fairer then it has to be done transparently,”](#) shared a female respondent.

Global Protection Cluster Toolkit:

"Quantifying people’s protection needs is articulated in terms of threat, vulnerability, and capacity." The GPC’s definitions of threats and vulnerability are linked to information and communication: "Threat is the potential for physical or psychological harm and potential barriers to access humanitarian aid and the information needed to make informed decisions by beneficiaries. Vulnerability relates to factors that increase the likeliness of facing threats. This is affected by factors such as gender, age, ethnic/religious group, disability, and the ability to access reliable and verified information. Capacities are the strengths both individuals and communities have to keep themselves safe: e.g. designated safe spaces, community plans, linkages with protection-sensitive institutions, awareness of rights and responsibilities, and the ability to communicate with their peers and with aid agencies."

Global Protection Cluster Toolkit process outcome indicators related to information:

- % of beneficiaries reporting they understand how humanitarian services were prioritised and selected (targeting criteria)

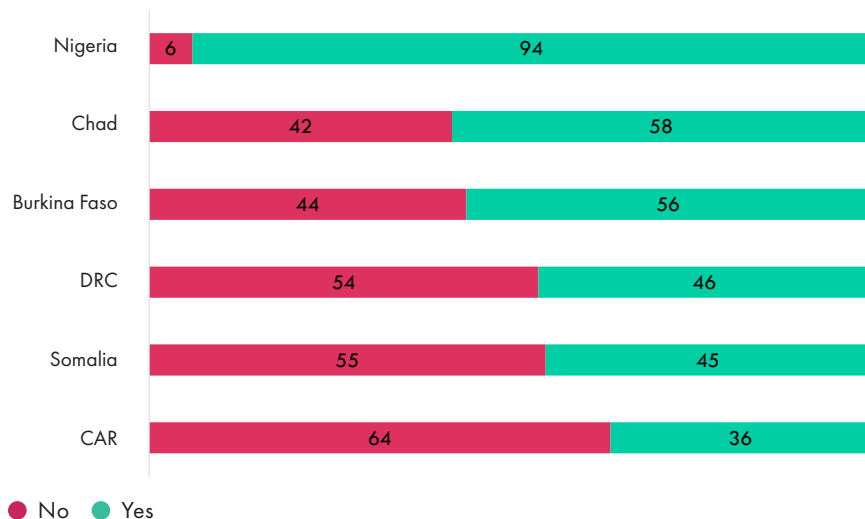
DG ECHO Protection Mainstreaming Key Outcome Indicator and Monitoring Tool:

- Did you feel well informed about the assistance/service available?
- If no, what could the aid/service provider have done to better inform you about the assistance/services available to you?

Low trust in feedback mechanisms prevents reports of serious incidents

When things go wrong, people need to know how to complain about humanitarian assistance. They need to feel safe and secure doing so. They must be informed about how they will receive a follow-up; and then follow-ups need to happen. Feeling informed about complaint mechanisms varies across responses, with between 36% and 94% of people interviewed reporting that they know how to submit complaints to humanitarians.

Do you know how to make suggestions or complaints about the aid/services you receive?



Humanitarians everywhere have poured tremendous amounts of resources into establishing streamlined complaint and feedback mechanisms, especially those that can effectively manage issues of sexual exploitation and abuse. While these efforts are critical, the organisations who set them up do not always ask community members about how they traditionally raise complaints and what type of complaint protocols are culturally appropriate. Setting up hotlines or complaint boxes can be an imposition of humanitarian 'ways' and 'best practices' on communities whose own feedback processes are ignored. And when these new mechanisms are not well explained, it can be impossible for people to trust them. For instance, people might not know who will pick up the phone or read their notes in the complaint box, leading them to not use the mechanisms for fear of reprisals. A female refugee in Moyen Chari, Chad shared, "[We are afraid to state the abuses for fear of being taken off the list.](#)" In other cases, feedback sources are not accessible for everyone in the community, such as those who are illiterate or those who do not own a phone.

IASC Guidelines:

"Ensure that visible and accessible feedback and complaints mechanisms are in place, tailored to the operational context and the preferences of communities, which can appropriately handle complaints about – i) violations of the law (such as sexual exploitation and abuse) or institutional policies/codes of conduct; and – ii) quality and appropriateness of humanitarian programmes.

Formalise feedback and complaints mechanisms through an official policy that defines the purpose and limitations of the mechanisms (e.g. steps involved in processing and responding to complaints, how to handle PSEA reports/complaints), addresses confidentiality and non-retaliation issues, is updated regularly and assigns clear roles and responsibilities (those who process feedback need to be different from those who establish and maintain mechanisms)."

Global Protection Cluster Toolkit:

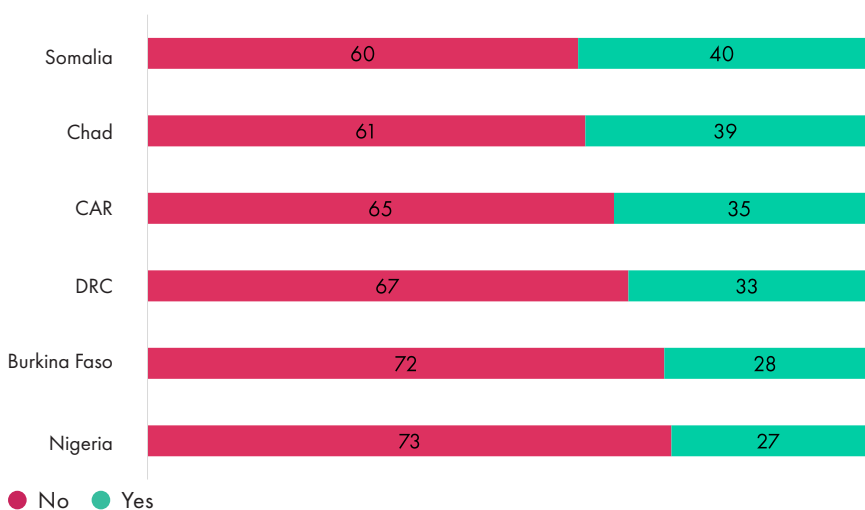
"Set-up appropriate mechanisms, through which affected populations can measure the adequacy of interventions, and address concerns and complaints."

Of course, cultural norms for sharing feedback and complaints might not always be inclusive and can contravene humanitarian principles – women might not be allowed to speak out, for example. What is typical for a community might not be their preference, or the most conducive to mitigating protection risks – community leaders might be the main point of reference but not trusted. In these cases, an anonymous way to give feedback to a third party can be critical. Yet aid providers will only understand the complexity of risks and vulnerabilities if they consult diverse community members, asking nuanced, detailed questions to co-design a solution.

Our data show that an inadequate number of people actually know about or use many of these mechanisms. Of those who do, few receive a response. Those who receive an unsatisfactory response might feel increasingly unsupported by the systems meant to help them. And even if people receive a response, not seeing a change based on their feedback is demotivating. [“Nothing happened afterwards,”](#) shared a respondent in Chernivtsi oblast, Ukraine. A refugee in Mandoul, Chad explained that [“the institutions responsible for ensuring communities’ protection do not follow through”](#) and highlighted an example of a seriously injured refugee who had not been receiving aid for more than a year. If people, particularly vulnerable groups, do not know how to complain or if they have lost faith in seeing a change in their situation after they submit feedback, they will not use them. Serious incidents will go under-reported, and humanitarians will be under-informed of the pressing concerns people face.

While some feedback received is likely not actionable or within humanitarians' power to change, a lot is. Mechanisms that do not respond to diverse community preferences, explain constraints, and feed into decision-making are not currently systematically addressing people’s mental and physical vulnerabilities throughout aid programming. They do not live up to their protection and accountability claims.

Have you filed a suggestion or a complaint to those providing aid?



[Global Protection Cluster Toolkit](#) proposed focus group discussion questions related to feedback mechanisms for baseline assessments:

- If you are unhappy about any aspect of the services/work delivered by humanitarian organisations in your community – including staff conduct or problems of access, safety, and dignity – do you know how to give feedback or complain?
- How do you provide feedback and complaints about services in your community?
- In your community, do you feel that the community’s feedback and complaints are being considered and responded to?

[Global Protection Cluster Toolkit](#) process outcome indicators related to information:

- % of the affected population reporting being aware of how to use the feedback and complaints mechanism

[DG ECHO Protection Mainstreaming Key Outcome Indicator and Monitoring Tool](#):

- If you had a suggestion for, or a problem with the assistance/service, do you think you could channel the suggestion or lodge a complaint?
- To your knowledge, have suggestions or complaints raised been responded to or followed up?

Recommendations

This look at community feedback reiterates the innate link between protection and accountability, as well as the clear programme operational changes that can be made to practically implement these two concepts together. Yet as it stands, regular consultations with communities and incorporation of their feedback are lacking across the board, leading to uninformed decisions that can create significant risks for communities. Gaps in information-sharing are causing communities – many of whom already feel weighed by trauma and other mental stressors – unwarranted anxiety about aid and may create environments that jeopardise people’s physical safety. Complaint mechanisms can contribute to a sense of insecurity if they are not determined with the community, or deemed unsafe, untrustworthy, or unreliable.

To crisis-affected people, assistance is either perceived as meaningful, safe, and effective or it is not. Programming must be rooted in communities’ desired outcomes. This will require affected communities to be involved in the project design, as well as the analysis process to identify potential to do harm and protection risks. Yet humanitarian programming needs to be structured and coordinated in a way that makes aligning aid with people’s realities feasible. Area-based approaches demonstrate an opportunity to avoid artificial divisions of needs into sectors and rather consider needs holistically, in the same way that affected people conceptualise their needs and the necessary steps to a more resilient future. Monitoring protocols should report if people feel that aid is delivered in a [safe, accessible, accountable, and participatory manner](#), according to affected people, and if assistance perpetuates their sense of mental and physical insecurity.

Since acting on community feedback remains irregular, incentives are necessary for organisations, clusters, and country teams to be more responsive to the needs of affected people. [Leaders should demonstrate how affected people are holding them to account](#), what they are doing with their feedback, and how they are achieving the outcomes communities call for. Those who do so should be recognised for overseeing assistance programmes that do no harm by meaningfully engaging with communities.

Without such changes in outcome tracking and evaluation of leadership performance, feedback from communities will continue to demonstrate that humanitarians are getting by without meaningfully consulting communities or acting on their views. This doesn’t just lead to bad programming but can create or perpetuate a series of compounding risks to crisis-affected people.

Author: Elise Shea, Research Manager (Policy)

Cover image: Garba Buzu IDP Camp, Maiduguri, Borno, Nigeria. September 2022.

Photographer: KC Nwakalor for Ground Truth Solutions

Methodology

Overview

This secondary analysis draws on perception data collected in nine countries where GTS conducted recent quantitative and qualitative data collection: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Nigeria, Somalia, and Ukraine. The quantitative data collections per country ranged in sample sizes from 1001 to 3209, with 15,361 people interviewed in total across these nine countries. For specific details on the methodologies used per country, please use the hyperlinks in the report to navigate to the relevant country's report where methodologies can be found at the end.

Data collection

Quantitative and qualitative data used in this report were collected in late 2021 and throughout 2022. Preference was given to face-to-face interviews, but where this was not possible (Ukraine, Haiti, and Afghanistan), people were surveyed over the phone.

Respondents

Respondents had differing relationships with aid: those surveyed in CAR, Nigeria, and Somalia were recipients of cash and voucher assistance; those surveyed in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Chad, and DRC were recipients of any type of humanitarian assistance; and those in Haiti and Ukraine included both those who had and had not received aid assistance in communities targeted by the response. Methodologies, including sampling strategies and modes of data collection, were tailored to local contexts to best capture how people perceive aid.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires differ per GTS country project, meaning that not all questions were asked in each country. This is why the graphics do not include data for each of the nine country projects. Of the themes covered in questionnaires, this analysis focused on aid relevance, resilience, safety, information, targeting, and participation.

	Question
Aid relevance	Does aid meet your most important needs?
Resilience	Does the assistance you receive help you to live without aid in the future (become self-reliant)?
Safety	Do you feel safe at the site where you access aid and/or services?
Information	Do you feel informed about the aid and services available to you?
Participation	Do you think your opinions about the assistance you receive are taken into consideration by aid workers?
	Do you think your community was consulted on humanitarian aid programming in your region? (targeting, needs assessment, proposed modalities, distribution schedule, etc.)
	Do you know how to make suggestions or complaints about the aid/services you receive?
	Have you filed a suggestion or a complaint to those providing aid?

Analysis

This brief presents a secondary analysis of quantitative and qualitative data already published in country-specific reports. While perception data per country is placed side-by-side for each of the themes, this analysis does not attempt to explain why one country is more positive or negative than another. This analysis does not aim to rate countries against each other but rather to focus in on a few countries per thematic to analyse the fundamental overlap between protection and accountability. Through an examination of data from diverse contexts, this analysis seeks to present how people's perceptions point to broader structural issues that humanitarian decision-makers should address.