



ICVA Opinion Piece: Response to the 2022 State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) Report

Background

The [2022 State of the Humanitarian System \(SOHS\) report](#) is a welcome insight into how well the ambitions of the sector are being translated into reality in a complex and changing environment. Most importantly, it shows where and how the system is still falling short of meeting these ambitions. The SOHS has a focus on monitoring changes in the shape and size and performance of the international humanitarian system. It shows that the humanitarian system is growing in the face of increasing need, and that it is performing, but could be performing better.

As the SOHS report highlights, the period (2018-2021) covered is markedly different from the previous period (2015-2017) in that it has tested the implementation of reforms rather than producing new initiatives and commitments to change. The sector is following through on various commitments to some extent, but the message of the report is clear - not enough progress has been made. Commitments alone are not enough, and it is difficult to turn words into actions to implement lasting change when working in such complex settings and amongst increasing global challenges. Lack of clear and aligned incentives to work collectively is a common theme throughout. The SOHS report focuses on how the system itself appears resistant to change, with the largest and most powerful stakeholders having the least incentives to change their ways of working.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the key disruptor throughout the period covered by this report and receives due attention. Although the continuing pandemic has challenged our ways of working and offered opportunities to reconsider assumptions underpinning humanitarian assistance, so far it has also largely been seen as a missed opportunity for fundamental change, particularly in relation to localization. During the pandemic, data on funding shines a light on a reversal of positive trends, for example in the marked decrease of direct funding to local action in 2021 compared to previous years. This raises the question of how we can better advocate and prepare for future where the importance of local action is truly recognized within the structural, financing and partnership approaches of all humanitarian actors.

The SOHS report shows increasing pressure on the **space for principled humanitarian action**, with a particular focus on concerns around government-imposed restrictions. The report highlights examples of creative, collective approaches that balance preserving presence with promoting protection. These issues are at the center of the challenges facing operational actors. The SOHS report confirms the challenges facing the sector around upholding norms, and the politicization of aid. Our sector needs clear, evidence-based advocacy that supports principled action and upholds the humanitarian imperative. The SOHS notes that in recent years the impacts of bureaucratic impediments are starting to be seen as more of a collective priority for the system. Similarly, issues related to sanctions and counter-terrorism measures are being treated more clearly as the priorities they are. Over recent years there has been a concerted push by NGO consortia to raise these issues further on the collective policy and advocacy agenda and it is positive to see these efforts reflected in the SOHS report.

The SOHS report shows that despite positive indications of future improvements and leadership in this area, **meaningful accountability mechanisms for crisis-affected people** continue to elude the system. We note with appreciation the efforts by the research team for the SOHS to deepen the participation of affected people in the SOHS research. The SOHS highlights how NGOs and supporting networks have led work to strengthen collective accountability globally and in operational settings, however collective approaches remain hampered by lack of understanding, leadership and resourcing. NGO consortia such as



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ICVA have a role to continue to push for a system-wide shift in how humanitarians engage with crisis-affected people and support their dignity.

The SOHS report shows more attention is being paid to the **quality of humanitarian programming**, demonstrated by increased reference to Sphere Standards and use of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) to track and evaluate performance. Efforts to monitor quality show that continued investment is needed in improving and upholding the quality of assistance provided. The SOHS identifies that some complex humanitarian contexts the quality of response has regressed, largely due to the challenges of the operating environment. Any reduction in the quality of assistance should be of great concern to the sector and deserves further attention.

The SOHS places **locally led action** as one of the major areas of focus. The reported growth in the size of the humanitarian sector is due to increase in the number of local and national organizations recognized as participating in the system. However, six years since the World Humanitarian Summit, the SOHS shows that, largely, patterns of power and control in the humanitarian system remain unchanged. Despite commitments, the system has not moved far enough, and the COVID-19 response was a missed opportunity for localization. Overall, we face a situation where rhetoric has outpaced action.

The SOHS highlights a clear change in the language used by the sector, particularly around accountability to affected people and local action, yet also notes that *“although the language, commitments and tools around these have moved on, meaningful wholesale progress has not happened.”*

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