

# Towards more inclusive, effective and impartial humanitarian action

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## Key messages

Failing to include people who are marginalised and discriminated against is not a failure of inclusion but a failure of humanitarian action. Humanitarian actors' commitment to impartiality must go beyond non-discrimination: it requires proactive and intentional inclusion that seeks to respond to the most urgent cases.

Evidence shows that humanitarian responses often fail to effectively assist and protect the most urgent cases, which can unwittingly exacerbate existing marginalisation and discrimination. Such failures may be seen as an unintended consequence of good intentions. In reality, they are often the result of a lack of political will from operational agencies to engage and take into account harmful norms and power dynamics before and during crises.

Inclusion is often misunderstood conceptually and operationally by mainstream humanitarian actors. A clearer policy framework is needed that positions inclusion as a central element of principled humanitarian action, identifying clear roles and responsibilities, and linking inclusion to existing policies on protection, accountability to affected people, participation and localisation.

Currently, operational organisations and donors prioritise scale (reaching many people in need) over severity (those most in need) or quality (most relevant response). Operational actors and donors need to refocus on quality, equity and impartiality as measures of success.

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# Introduction

Failing to include people who are marginalised and discriminated against is not a failure of inclusion but a failure of humanitarian action. Humanitarian actors' commitment to impartiality requires a focus on prioritising the most urgent cases and non-discrimination. Evidence shows that humanitarian responses often fail to effectively assist and protect those most urgent cases. They can also further exacerbate existing marginalisation and discrimination (Barbelet and Wake, 2020; Barbelet et al., 2021).

Inclusion is at the core of impartiality because individuals that have been marginalised over time – and whose voices and opportunities for meaningful participation historically stymied – are at a higher risk and more vulnerable to crises (Carter, 2021).<sup>1</sup> As such, they often make up the most urgent cases that must be prioritised according to the principle of impartiality. Instead, recent HPG research found that, for example, almost all the 79 individuals with diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) who were interviewed in north-east Nigeria had never participated in humanitarian assessments and did not know how to provide feedback to aid workers (Barbelet et al., 2021). Another study, in Jordan, found that non-Syrian refugees were not only excluded from the refugee response but also negatively impacted by the adoption of policies focusing solely on Syrian refugees (Gray Meral et al., 2022). Additionally, delayed consideration for inclusion and effective participation in the Rohingya response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, has further exacerbated years of denial of the rights of Rohingya to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Lough et al., 2021).

Such failures may be seen as an unintended consequence of good intentions, such as efforts to reach as many people in need as possible. In reality, it is often the result of a lack of political will from operational agencies to engage and take into account harmful norms and power dynamics before and during crises.<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge the immense operational challenges that humanitarian actors face in responding to complex crises, and also the sensitive nature of inclusion and exclusion. However, the sector can no longer continue to fail to include whole population groups

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<sup>1</sup> With regards to impartiality, 'humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions' (OCHA, 2012: 1).

<sup>2</sup> This does not require humanitarian actors to address the root causes of crises. There is an ongoing debate on whether humanitarian action should be transformative with regards to certain harmful norms. Daigle (2022) argues that humanitarian action can fall into four categories when it comes to engaging with gender and other norms: harmful/discriminatory, sensitive, responsive and transformative. Daigle concludes that, while it may fall out of the scope of humanitarian action to be transformative, at the very least it needs to be sensitive and at the very best responsive (also see Monjurul Kabir et al., 2022).

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and unwittingly contribute to exacerbating exclusion and other forms of discrimination as a result of treating inclusion as an option or a special interest. Humanitarian action that is not inclusive is not impartial or effective, nor does it fulfil the humanitarian imperative.

Based on a three-year study on inclusion and exclusion in humanitarian action, this policy brief outlines the changes and steps necessary to move towards more inclusive, impartial and effective humanitarian responses.<sup>3</sup> It calls for recentering humanitarian action on effectiveness, relevance and impartiality by adopting a strategic vision for tracking exclusion and supporting more inclusive humanitarian action.

## A clear policy framework for inclusion

Three years of research has highlighted that inclusion is not well understood by policy-makers, practitioners and response leaders in the humanitarian sector.<sup>4</sup> Despite efforts in the past few years, with the adoption of two inclusion charters at the World Humanitarian Summit and the rollout of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidance on disability inclusion in humanitarian action, existing guidance on specific forms of discrimination based on single characteristics such as sex or age is generally not implemented in humanitarian responses. Alongside this, current policy frameworks and guidelines lack a holistic approach to inclusion beyond single forms of discrimination. As a result, inclusion is perceived as an add-on, a ‘nice to have’ and something to ‘do later’. The core principle of impartiality – a central element of inclusion – is rarely critically evaluated and too often assumed. The linkages between inclusion, participation, accountability to affected people (AAP) and localisation are also missing in

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- 3 The study is within HPG’s Integrated Programme (HPG, 2019), which has produced an initial review of literature and practice outlining the state of play for inclusion (Barbelet and Wake, 2020); four country case studies focusing on different contexts, crises and elements of inclusion in north-east Nigeria, in the Rohingya refugee response in Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh, in the refugee response in Jordan and in the responses to crises in Mindanao, Philippines (see Barbelet et al., 2021; Lough et al., 2021; Gray Meral et al., 2022; Fernandez et al., forthcoming). A final report analyses the findings and key policy and practice implications across the case studies (Lough et al., forthcoming). Three research workshops were conducted in February and March 2022 to inform the writing of this policy brief. As a result, it takes inspiration from all the participants at these workshops, as well as the many researchers involved in the case studies and authors of previous reports.
- 4 The authors use the terms ‘response leaders’ or ‘response leaderships’ to include any actor that is leading a response, which could be: national governments, communities, local and national civil society, regional organisations, Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs), Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), senior leaders in United Nations (UN) Agencies and non-governmental organisations. The diversity of response systems requires this more generic terminology. When the authors refer to specific actors, these are named.

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both policy and practice. Clarifying inclusion as a concept, including the policy and practical implications for all aid actors, would substantially strengthen efforts to make humanitarian action more impartial and effective.

Inclusion does not mean targeting everybody and catering to every single need. It means intentionally identifying and including those who are socially excluded due to harmful norms and pre-existing power dynamics; understanding and addressing barriers to accessing assistance and services for a diverse population; supporting active participation of all people affected by crises in their diversities; and catering to diverse, unmet essential needs and requirements.<sup>5</sup> Inclusive humanitarian responses entail analysing the variety of ways a crisis affects different people and what this implies for prioritising resources and designing responses. It means ensuring that those who are too often in the minority, invisible and not heard are the first ones to be taken into account and listened to in a response. This is not a technical exercise but a politically sensitive one where imbalances of power and denial of rights inform where aid actors should act first.

Inclusion is also not about moving away from saving lives or adopting a development agenda. It is about critically asking whose lives the humanitarian response is saving, critically reflecting on whether the response is being impartial in practice, and assessing assumptions made about impartiality. Indeed, acting ‘without discrimination’ passively will lead to people being left out, neglected and ‘pushed behind’. Evolving from a passive approach to the proactive and intentional inclusion of diverse and marginalised or discriminated-against populations is necessary to uphold the principle of impartiality.<sup>6</sup> If not, humanitarian actors may be saving some lives while actively pushing behind the lives of those harder to reach, invisible and unheard.

The IASC as well as humanitarian organisations and donors must clarify their policy framework and position on inclusion.<sup>7</sup> For too long, commitments to inclusion (such as the inclusion charters adopted at the World Humanitarian Summit) are approached as special initiatives or as sideline

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5 Here we use the term ‘unmet essential needs’ instead of ‘specific needs’. While often used, ‘specific needs’ has been strongly associated with discriminatory practices and promoting the misconception that the needs of women or people with disabilities or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) people are homogeneous, non-essential or too specific to be catered for by mainstream services and assistance. Each individual has a different needs profile depending on their unique identity and situation. While humanitarian action will never provide assistance on an individualised basis, it can do better at meeting the full diversity of needs by accurately representing the risks and needs commonly associated with specific marginalised groups, or those resulting from discrimination, in assessments and prioritisation exercises, as well as fulfilling requirements to access and participate.

6 Daigle (2022) has highlighted that impartiality is often interpreted as treating everybody the same and therefore as an obstacle to engaging on gendered norms, roles and power relations or to tailoring programmes to the various needs of women or gender-diverse people.

7 At the time of writing, the IASC was going through a restructure, replacing Results Group 2 on Accountability and Inclusion with a task force solely dedicated to AAP while mainstreaming a commitment to ‘leaving no one behind’. It was unclear at the time how the IASC was going to implement this commitment.

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projects to the core humanitarian endeavour. Inclusion is also often buried inside a protection mainstreaming policy or only focuses on a single issue such as the IASC's guidelines on inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action (IASC, 2019). Instead, new policy frameworks should position inclusion as central to effective and impartial humanitarian action and should clarify that the humanitarian imperative equitably applies to all, especially for those individuals that have been discriminated against and socially excluded as a result of harmful norms linked to their age, disability status, ethnicity, religion, social status, or SOGIESC.

Inclusion policies should clarify how humanitarian action can put the 'leave no one behind' commitment into effect in a way that operationalises its impartiality and demonstrates how the gap between the Sustainable Development Goals and humanitarian action can be bridged. Policies on inclusion should highlight that exclusion and other forms of discrimination, even unintentional ones, are in fact an active process of individuals being pushed behind, often due to a lack of political will. As such, inclusion policies must recognise the political sensitivity of inclusion and impartiality as an act of rebalancing power structures in crisis-affected communities by prioritising resources to marginalised populations.<sup>8</sup> Inclusion policies must highlight that such politically sensitive issues cannot be met only by technical solutions but should utilise the range of tools available to humanitarian actors, including effective community engagement, advocacy, humanitarian diplomacy and negotiations supported by greater political will and leadership.

As exclusion results from current and historical processes of marginalisation, inclusion also demands recentering humanitarian action within a rights-based approach. Commitments to the centrality of protection and rights-based approaches in the sector have already been made but are rarely translated or operationalised. Such commitments require critically examining what data should inform responses (needs versus rights denial), who to work with (human rights organisations and inclusion-specialised organisations globally and locally),<sup>9</sup> and how a rights-based approach could drive prioritisation differently.

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8 People are excluded actively by societies and communities. Giving more attention to people who have been marginalised and discriminated against as well as ensuring their access to assistance, services and protection necessarily becomes political and sensitive as it disturbs the prevalent political economy of societies and communities. For greater insight into such issues see Jaspars et al. (2020). The authors do not describe inclusion as transformative (addressing root causes and supporting sustainable change) but recognise that the sole action of prioritising certain demographics for assistance will inevitably disrupt power dynamics, even if momentarily.

9 Inclusion-specialised organisations refer to organisations that focus on single, specific forms of discrimination in the humanitarian sector, including: HelpAge International, Edge Effect, CBM Global, Humanity and Inclusion, Minority Rights, CLEAR Global/Translators without Borders, UN Women, as well as local and national civil society organisations representing and led by people with disabilities, people with diverse SOGIESC, older people's associations, ethnic associations, etc.

Policies on inclusion must consider multiple elements:

- **Inclusion as impartiality:** ensuring that humanitarian action reaches and focuses on the most urgent cases, through the use of inclusive assessments, the analysis of drivers of exclusion and the use of disaggregated data.
- **Inclusion as equitable access:** ensuring that individuals affected by crises have equitable access to services and assistance.
- **Inclusion as diverse needs:** ensuring that humanitarian responses address and cater to diverse needs including in tailoring programmes.
- **Inclusion as participation:** ensuring that all individuals are able to effectively participate in humanitarian responses.

Policies on inclusion should warn against the current hierarchy in attention given to specific forms of discrimination. In doing so, inclusion policies should outline how forms of discrimination based on different individual characteristics intersect to create specific vulnerabilities, capacities and needs, and the necessity to adopt intersectional analysis and approaches to inform humanitarian action.<sup>10</sup> Currently, gender inequality and discrimination based on disability receive more – albeit still inadequate – attention, as opposed to forms of discrimination based on age, ethnicity, language, social status, minority status, religion and diverse SOGIESC.

Inclusion should be considered within the framework of ongoing humanitarian reform agendas such as participation, AAP and localisation.<sup>11</sup> Common to all these agendas is that they challenge structural power imbalances that undermine effective and impartial humanitarian action. They also centre on rights: right to self-determination, right to participation, and the universal and non-discriminatory principles of human rights. Inclusion must be participative, accountable and local. At the same time, participation, accountability and localisation must also be inclusive. For instance, localisation efforts can easily reinforce existing power imbalances or import new ones, while more should be done to diversify AAP efforts that rely solely on community leaders. For instance, efforts have been made to recognise that women's rights and women-led organisations often face greater barriers to engage in humanitarian action amongst local organisations as a result of endemic patriarchy. However, less effort has been made to intentionally support the leadership of local organisations of persons with disabilities, older people's associations, organisations led by people with diverse SOGIESC or ethnic and religious minority associations.

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<sup>10</sup> Some operational organisations have published guidance on intersectional approaches – see, for instance, Monjurul Kabir et al. (2022) and Bhardwaj (2018).

<sup>11</sup> See Dietrich Ortega et al. (2020) for more evidence and analysis on how these different reform agendas link together.

# A response framework for inclusion

Inclusion is often delayed and deprioritised in large-scale humanitarian responses (Barbelet et al., 2021; Lough et al., 2021; Gray Meral et al., 2022). Whether implicitly or explicitly, efforts towards inclusion tend to be undermined by a focus on scale (quantity of people reached) over depth (quality of the response). As a result, not only are whole population groups left behind in the interim, but as crises evolve it becomes harder to shift bad habits and flawed assumptions, especially as funding decreases and the politics of crises become more complex (see Fernandez et al., forthcoming). The research also found that leadership – including from HCs and senior managers in operational organisations – to ensure inclusive and impartial humanitarian responses is too often missing. Roles and responsibilities remain unclear, compounding a lack of adequate monitoring and tracking of exclusion in humanitarian responses.

A transformative step would be to rebalance resources towards supporting issues of quality and equity such as inclusion and impartiality in the response. The number of people assisted, coverage and reach are important in large-scale crises. However, over the years, the dial has gone too far in the direction of quantity. Strategic objectives in humanitarian responses must rebalance their focus more towards the quality and equity of a response – in particular, how far it is inclusive, participative and accountable. In that sense, it is not about asking for more resources but about reprioritising how limited resources (human, financial and political) are allocated, so that they can ensure said quality and equity.

Such a commitment should be made by integrating inclusion and inclusive humanitarian action as part of the strategic objectives of the response. Inclusion must also be added to existing HCs' and HCTs' Compacts.<sup>12</sup> At the onset of emergencies, this means that an inclusion lens is adopted at the very least in analysis and information that inform the response. It also means that barriers to access based on discrimination are addressed to ensure equitable access to assistance services and protection for all, and that AAP, participation and community engagement are inclusive and pluralistic to ensure a diversity of people can feed back and hold the response accountable.<sup>13</sup> This also positions inclusion as the responsibility of all in the first phase of the emergency.

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<sup>12</sup> The 2021 *Handbook for the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator* highlights that HCs and Resident Coordinators (RCs) must ‘ensure that the humanitarian response addresses the diversity of needs and takes into account people in all their diversities’ (IASC, 2021: 53). Further guidelines on inclusion are highlighted on p.65 with specific attention to disability inclusion, age, and psychosocial and mental health.

<sup>13</sup> Barriers to access here do not refer to the challenges of humanitarian access but to issues of access due to different forms of discrimination based on individual characteristics.

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As an incentive, Operational Peer Reviews could then include the evaluation of response-wide impartiality. Issues of inclusion and exclusion could also be integrated as part of the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations of large-scale humanitarian responses. Integrating a review of impartiality as part of the Operational Peer Review process is critical to elevate the responsibility for impartiality, inclusion and exclusion to the HC and the HCT.

Strategies for linking inclusion with strategies on participation, AAP and localisation are critical to inform humanitarian responses coherently and efficiently. Indeed, the study found that exclusion arose when community leaders and gatekeepers facilitated or blocked assistance to and participation of different groups. This is further exacerbated by humanitarian responses that fail to see participation as a right, are shy to engage with complex community dynamics, and lack effective community engagement approaches. So it is important to ensure that accountability approaches are indeed inclusive, tailored to a diversity of needs and address barriers to participation, to accessing information and to the ability to communicate.

Community engagement strategies should consider adopting more pluralistic approaches to participation. Mixing representation for diverse groups in the population (women, older people, youth, etc.) into generic committees such as food committees is often deemed good practice; however, there is insufficient evidence to support the idea that these lead to more inclusive outcomes. Instead, increasing the diversity and number of channels of communication and adopting a pluralistic approach to community engagement could facilitate effective participation of diverse populations (see Lough et al., 2021). One example in the study relates to people living with disabilities in northern Nigeria, who preferred engaging with aid actors on their own terms as they felt their voices were lost in mixed-aid committees and did not result in better assistance and participation for people living with disabilities (Barbelet et al., 2021).

A pluralistic approach to community engagement recognises the multiplicity of communities within one geographical area and engages with representatives of these multiple communities. In clear terms, it means engaging directly with youth groups, women's groups, older people's associations, organisations supporting people living with disabilities, ethnic and religious minority groups, displaced groups and people with diverse SOGIESC. This is in marked contrast to an approach that simply integrates tokenistic representation in mixed-aid committees. As such, a pluralistic approach is about ensuring that efforts towards more locally led responses apply an inclusion lens to ensure local organisations representing marginalised groups are not themselves excluded from localisation efforts in humanitarian responses. Emerging response models on community-led responses altogether avoid 'doing community engagement' as a parallel activity (see Box 1).

### Box 1 Thinking outside the box on modalities for inclusion: survivor- and community-led crisis responses

The response framework for inclusion outlined in this policy brief can easily translate to all types of response mechanism including when government, local authorities or national and local civil society are in the lead. It is purposefully written in the language of current large-scale humanitarian response systems by the UN. However, in addition to these response mechanisms, survivor- and community-led response approaches have increasingly highlighted how they can contribute to effective crisis responses and complement more traditional top-down humanitarian responses (Corbett et al., 2021). While survivor- and community-led responses are not automatically inclusive, practices aim to facilitate the effective participation and inclusion of diverse members of communities, leading in some instances to increased community participation of more marginalised groups (*ibid.*) Such responses may lead to conflict on targeting and prioritisation, which should be based on negotiation and consensus-building. Because of their participatory nature, such response modalities get closer to supporting the rights of people affected by crises, the recognition of the existing capacities of people affected by crises and, with support and facilitation, can lead to more transformative outcomes when it comes to structural inequalities and power dynamics within communities. As such, survivor- and community-led responses should be considered in the panoply of more inclusive humanitarian responses.

Accounting for issues of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination is too often approached in a technocratic manner. Inclusion-specialised organisations and mainstream aid organisations can carry out the actions needed to support and facilitate self-organisations and the leadership of populations too often marginalised. However, response leaders must support such actions through humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy to ensure opportunities exist for marginalised populations and communities to self-organise and to make their messages heard. It is especially critical for response leaders to listen to and facilitate participation in the decision-making processes of organisations and leaders representing marginalised voices. In doing so, it is important to highlight that marginalisation does not mean that these populations have no capacity but rather that those with power are actively hampering that capacity.

Large-scale humanitarian responses must adopt a twin-track approach to inclusion. This entails inclusion being mainstreamed across sectors, where it is the responsibility of all actors, and local and international inclusion-specialised organisations being supported to deliver programmes dedicated to specific and diverse needs. Making inclusion a strategic objective of a humanitarian response and committing to the twin-track approach would be facilitated by dedicating space and resources (e.g. a working group or a task force, and financing) at the inter-sectoral coordination group level, to provide advisory support to response leaders and to support mainstream actors

and sectors across the response.<sup>14</sup> Such a forum should include other cluster leadership in addition to local and international inclusion-specialised organisations. Collaboration with human rights organisations, and development and peace-building actors, could further inform and support inclusive humanitarian action. Local organisations representing specific groups within a population play a critical role and should be supported to take leadership and influence the work of such a forum.

Inclusion at a large scale requires the more operational and well-funded sectors of a response (more specifically food security, camp coordination and camp management, and water, sanitation and hygiene) to adopt inclusive practices and track exclusion in their work. These sectors and the organisations supporting them cannot outsource inclusion to specialised agencies. Similarly, an inclusion task force could ensure that any country-based pooled funds are allocated in such a way as to support inclusive outcomes.<sup>15</sup> In addition to delivering programmes for specific and diverse needs, inclusion-specialised organisations can also support the mainstreaming efforts through advising response leaders and mainstream actors on how to revise their processes and programmes to increase inclusive outcomes.<sup>16</sup> Even if minimal actions are taken in the acute phase of an emergency, setting up the strategic and operational space to adopt an inclusive lens on the response ensures that additional steps and considerations can happen as crises become more protracted.

## Informing inclusion and tracking exclusion

A major challenge for more inclusive humanitarian responses is the lack of adequate data and its use to inform the response. Part of the challenge links with overreliance on quantitative data. This tends to result in a statistical tyranny of the majority, where the law of the average makes minority groups completely invisible and inconsequential in quantitative and representative data.<sup>17</sup> Being invisible in data means being invisible in the analysis that underpins the prioritisation of aid and funding, therefore being invisible in the response itself.

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<sup>14</sup> See the example of the Inclusion Task Force in Yemen in Lough et al. (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> At the global level, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has established pooled fund ‘contact groups’ for gender and disability that enable some technical support to country-based pooled funds.

<sup>16</sup> The Disability Reference Group recently produced a paper on existing models for technical advisory provision and is considering setting up a global mechanism (a help desk as well as deployable advisors) inspired by similar mechanisms for the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and gender-based violence.

<sup>17</sup> See also findings from HPG’s research on changing gender norms in displacement, which highlights that knowledge and evidence that could have informed more gender-responsive humanitarian action were undermined by a focus on quantitative data (Daigle, 2022).

Sex, age and disability disaggregated data is increasingly being collected in humanitarian responses. However, this too often fails to inform future responses as it focuses on counting numbers rather than analysing challenges faced by certain people in accessing humanitarian assistance. While needs assessments are necessary, they do not provide an understanding of people's vulnerabilities and capacities based on their ability to claim their rights, or an understanding of who may be excluded from community safety nets or government safety nets in crises, nor do they provide an analysis of how a crisis affects different people. They also do not provide an understanding of barriers and enablers to access assistance, services and protection for a diversity of people in crises nor an analysis of drivers of exclusion in crises.

Similarly, humanitarian actors focus on the data they have and do not interrogate gaps in data for specific demographic groups, instead taking the data at face value. Invisibility in data is too often interpreted as groups not being in need or not being vulnerable rather than as an exclusion in humanitarian responses. For example, in north-east Nigeria the study found that the absence of men and boys in data was interpreted as them not being vulnerable rather than as a result of men and boys being recruited by armed groups, killed, and detained by the government (Barbelet et al., 2021). There was also little reflection on what this implied for the impartiality of the response. Similarly, the Jordan study highlighted the exclusion of non-Syrian refugees from the refugee response – with only a recent understanding of the need for impartiality amongst key actors in the response (Gray Meral et al., 2022).

Generally, we found that there was little effort to track exclusion and proactively monitor response-wide impartiality. While many actors assume protection monitoring will catch people falling through the cracks of the response, evidence shows that only some aspects of exclusion are captured, and not adequately.

Humanitarian responses must be based on an analysis of barriers and enablers to access for a diversity of people in order to inform inclusive participation and AAP mechanisms, address diverse needs and tailor programming, and ensure equitable access to assistance, services and protection. This is about understanding how language, ethnicity, social status, religion, diverse SOGIESC, age and disability affect people's ability to access information, communicate, address diverse needs, access assistance, services and protection, realise their rights, and access community-based and other safety nets, as well as effectively participate in decisions that impact their lives.

In addition, humanitarian responses must integrate an analysis of drivers of exclusion to their understanding of needs and vulnerabilities. This includes analysing the following: longer-term structural patterns of discrimination and marginalisation, and how these interact with the crisis; new patterns of discrimination and marginalisation linked with the nature of the crisis; and how the humanitarian response risks exacerbating drivers of exclusion or requires adapting to address barriers to inclusion. Conflict can, for instance, create the exclusion of new ethnic groups or demographic groups (see Barbelet et al., 2021); for example, an earthquake might mean that people who do not own property do not get access to shelter support (see Barber, 2016).

Conducting such analysis does not mean humanitarian actors should address the root causes of social exclusion. Such analysis is there to allow humanitarian actors to account for social exclusion as part of their analysis of needs and vulnerability, as well as in designing humanitarian responses. It should involve collaborating and engaging with both local and international development, peace-building and human rights actors.<sup>18</sup> It should also involve collaborating and engaging with civil society organisations and organisations representing specific demographic groups, especially those who are often socially excluded. Finally, sociologists, anthropologists and other social scientists, especially in the country where a crisis is occurring, can provide critical analysis on longer-term trends of marginalisation and discrimination.

Tracking exclusion is also critical. It requires humanitarian actors to keep asking themselves: who are we not seeing? Who are we not hearing from? And why? Tracking exclusion can take many forms. First, in its simplest form, exclusion can be tracked by interrogating who is invisible in the data, invisible in beneficiary lists, invisible at health centres or in gender-based violence referral. This data can be used to analyse whether this invisibility is a sign of a relative lower vulnerability or a result of barriers, discrimination, marginalisation or exclusion. This can be done by further interrogating data that humanitarian actors already have from an exclusion lens. For instance, if health workers monitor who comes through the door and identify that few patients have some kind of physical disability, they should analyse whether this is the result of them not offering the right services (not responding to the needs of people with disabilities) or because people with different disabilities are unable to come to the health centre due to physical, cultural or attitudinal barriers.

Second, exclusion can be tracked as part of monitoring and evaluation processes. Exclusion can be integrated in clusters' monitoring indicators, such as an assessment of how clusters are addressing barriers to access.

Third, exclusion can be tracked by inclusive AAP mechanisms and effective participation. For such mechanisms to be effective, it must support self-organisations of marginalised groups in claiming their rights and holding humanitarian actors to account. This can only happen if participation is prioritised within responses – not just to get feedback on projects, but also because participation is a feature of rights-based approaches and a step towards more accountable governance.

Finally, operational organisations' headquarters and donors could request inclusion audits for large-scale humanitarian responses. Inclusion audits have been conducted with a focus on specific forms of discrimination such as disability in northern Nigeria across UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) programming (CBM UK and JONAPWD, 2019) or minorities in Somalia (Thomas and Otieno Opiyo, 2021). Such inclusion audits could focus on how well a response is doing in terms of impartiality, equitable access, addressing barriers, supporting enablers and addressing diverse needs.

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18 For a discussion on inclusion across the nexus, see Carter (2022).

# Role of inclusion organisations and donors in addressing the fragmented nature of current inclusion efforts

Inclusion has been commonly approached through specific forms of discrimination based on single characteristics: gender, disability, older age, etc. While such depth of expertise is required, mainstream aid actors have felt overwhelmed by a multitude of technical guidance on the inclusion of specific groups that tend to add up to a long list of considerations (Barbelet, 2018; Barbelet et al., 2018; Barbelet and Wake, 2020). This fragmented approach has allowed some slow and steady progress on certain aspects of inclusion (namely gender and disability)<sup>19</sup> but has not overall moved the dial on ensuring humanitarian responses are more inclusive, impartial and effective. In addition, while specific attention is needed for specific inclusion issues, in most cases a diversity of identity factors (sex, age, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) are at play and intersect to create specific vulnerabilities, capacities and needs. As such, more intersectional approaches to inclusion are also required to meet the reality for people in crises.

In the past few years, there have been efforts to address the fragmented nature of the inclusion agenda (Barbelet, 2021): to work through more intersectional approaches and for inclusion-specialised organisations to collaborate more effectively, including in collectively identifying and addressing the common challenges across inclusion issues. This policy brief has outlined such common challenges, which require inclusion-specialised organisations to continue advocating for inclusion as a critical element of effective and impartial humanitarian action and for inclusion to be the responsibility of all humanitarian actors.

All humanitarian actors must face the challenge of adopting intersectional approaches to inclusion<sup>20</sup> – ones that take into account not only one identity factor but how different identities can create specific circumstances for individuals. While most mainstream organisations will approach inclusion through a single issue, the opportunity should be seized to slowly incorporate other inclusion issues. Starting with one inclusion issue should be seen as an opportunity rather than as a challenge for more intersectional approaches.

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<sup>19</sup> See Daigle (2022) for a more in-depth discussion on progress and continued challenges. While gender and disability continue to be problematically addressed in humanitarian responses, the level of awareness and efforts towards considering gender and disability are far greater than those for age, people with diverse SOGIESC, and ethnic and language minorities.

<sup>20</sup> New guidance on intersectional approaches identify key enablers of intersectionality: autonomy, accessibility and diverse knowledge. Such guidance should be considered further and tested as a way to address the challenges faced by operational actors with regards to intersectional approaches. See Monjurul Kabir et al. (2022).

As such, inclusion-specialised organisations should ensure that in their specific focus they add as much intersectionality as possible to their guidance, training, advisory work and specific programming. For instance, this means ensuring that gender-specific guidance addresses issues resulting from discrimination on the basis of age, disabilities, ethnic minorities, language, social status, religion and diverse SOGIESC. This is particularly important for those issues that receive little to no attention: older age, language, people with diverse SOGIESC, and ethnic and religious minority rights. One practice that seems to help with intersectional approaches in crisis is to facilitate local representative organisations meeting each other in order to identify how they can tackle common challenges (e.g. older people's associations meeting with organisations of people with disabilities).

Intersectional approaches do not call for inclusion experts to become experts in all inclusion issues. On the contrary, expertise on specific forms of discrimination is critical to inform intersectional programming. Ultimately, intersectional approaches are about collaboration across different forms of discrimination rather than the generalisation of inclusion advisory skills and expertise.

In adopting a more holistic and intersectional approach to inclusion there is a danger that some forms of discrimination and thus individuals get pushed back in the agenda. Donors have played a negative role in confirming a hierarchy between different forms of discrimination, where gender and disability inclusion are – although still inadequately – considered in funding decisions and in donor policies, but issues such as language, older age, people with diverse SOGIESC or ethnic and religious minority rights are not. Such issues are often a blind spot, and thought of by donors as too hard or too sensitive to contend with. In doing so, donors maintain a sense of competition between different forms of discrimination rather than striving to ensure humanitarian responses are indeed impartial. Donors should therefore consider how they are favouring specific forms of discrimination and undermining intersectional approaches. Funding for specific forms of discrimination should always allow for and demand intersectional approaches.

Finally, donors should consider how they can also be part of rebalancing their funding from breadth and coverage to higher-quality responses by supporting local and international inclusion-specialised organisations. These organisations are often small and have limited capacity, and underfunding leads to higher turnover due to staff burnout. Such organisations require greater support to install more inclusive policies and practices in large organisations, government response mechanisms and local organisations prior to, during and after crises. Importantly, funding for this kind of work represents a small percentage of the cost of humanitarian response and yet is often the first to be cut (see Lough and Spencer, 2020).

# Recommendations

In order to incentivise and achieve more inclusive, effective and impartial humanitarian action, donors and humanitarian actors should:

## **Adopt strong inclusion policies and inclusive humanitarian policies.**

- **To the IASC:** Develop a policy on inclusion in humanitarian responses. The aim of this process would be to ensure clearer and stronger policies on inclusion across the sector based on the elements outlined in this policy brief.<sup>21</sup>
- **To the Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) of the IASC:** Adopt key indicators of success for all workstreams and task forces to hold the IASC to account on its commitment to mainstreaming ‘leaving no one behind’. Allocate adequate resources for advisory services, capacity support and monitoring. Use this opportunity to support the development of a clear IASC policy on inclusion.
- **To humanitarian organisations and global clusters:** Review humanitarian policies and adopt clear and strong policies on inclusion in humanitarian action informed by this policy brief and any future IASC inclusion policy. Ensure that these policies are translated into clear strategies that lead to change towards more inclusive humanitarian action in crisis response.

## **Rebalance humanitarian responses towards quality and equity.**

- **To the Emergency Relief Coordinator and HCs:** Introduce greater attention to inclusion and impartiality in the HC and HCT Compacts, incentivising greater focus on quality and equity as measures of success – as key indicators to be reviewed and evaluated as part of the Operational Peer Reviews and Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations.
- **To OCHA:** Reframe the Humanitarian Programme Cycle to be much more focused on inclusion (beyond disability inclusion) and participation with greater attention to impartiality. Support HCs and HCTs through training on inclusive responses as well as bringing coherence to increasing demands with regards to gender, PSEA, protection, AAP and inclusion.
- **To donors:** Critically review reporting requirements to focus on more streamlined reporting that concentrates on core issues for quality and equity: namely inclusion, impartiality and the

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<sup>21</sup> Such a policy should clarify that inclusion is a fundamental element of principled humanitarian action; adopt an inclusion definition including its different elements (impartiality, equitable access, diverse needs, participation and AAP); and outline the policy’s operational implications, as well as links to existing policies on disability inclusion, gender, protection, AAP and the Grand Bargain reform agenda towards more local leadership and a participation revolution. A policy paper would also need to outline the roles and responsibilities of different actors in the sector and collaboration across the nexus.

effectiveness of humanitarian responses. Revise indicators of success away from quantity, coverage and reach towards quality and equity in humanitarian responses.<sup>22</sup>

- **To HCTs:** Open a dialogue on how rebalancing towards quality and equity changes decisions on the prioritisation of limited financial, human and other resources. Make clear commitments to dedicating greater resources to issues of quality and equity in humanitarian responses.

### **Adopt strategic indicators and approaches to operationalise impartiality in humanitarian responses.**

- **To HCTs:**
  - Adopt a response-wide strategy and related strategic indicators on inclusion as core elements of the response linked with the principles of humanity and impartiality, and with efforts towards accountability, participation and the IASC commitment to the centrality of protection.
  - Employ a twin-track approach to inclusion that supports more inclusive programming led by mainstream humanitarian organisations as well as support for inclusion-specific programming led by inclusion-specialised organisations. This should include the establishment of an inter-sectoral inclusion working group or task force as well as the deployment of inclusion advisory services to the response.
- **To donors:**
  - Ensure adequate resources are provided to inclusion-specialised organisations and civil society organisations led by marginalised people to address diverse needs in crises, and deploy advisory and technical support to ensure mainstream actors are adopting inclusive programming (including through tailored responses).
  - Support diverse inclusion-specialised organisations to continue advocating for inclusive humanitarian action globally.

### **Inform inclusive responses by adopting a rights-based understanding of needs and vulnerabilities.**

- **To HCTs and crisis response leaders:**
  - Complement multi-sectoral needs assessments with an analysis of drivers of exclusion in the response and an analysis of barriers and enablers of access to assistance, services, protection, information, communication and participation.
  - Work closely and collaboratively with development, peace-building and human rights actors, as well as civil society representing a diversity of people (sociologists, anthropologists and other social scientists, in particular from crisis-affected locations) to analyse and account for patterns of discrimination and marginalisation.

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<sup>22</sup> While acknowledging that there are efforts to push for a value-for-money approach that focuses on impact, quality and equity, the reality remains that the quantity of people reached is more readily branded as a metric of success. See for instance Wylde (2022) who discusses the difficulty in measuring the value for money of social assistance programmes in fragile and conflict-affected countries due to a lack of data on effectiveness and equity, in particular how responses benefit different population groups differently.

**Track exclusion in humanitarian response as part of a renewed commitment to effective impartiality.**

- **To humanitarian organisations:**
  - Critically interrogate data as part of your monitoring processes to understand who is not seen and heard in the response and evaluate why. Adapt and tailor your programmes based on these findings to be more inclusive and impartial.
  - Ensure that specific indicators on inclusion, exclusion and impartiality are part of your evaluation standard operating procedures.
- **To donors:** Commission inclusion audits on donors' own international humanitarian programming and in large-scale humanitarian responses to ensure that no one is being pushed back.

**Uphold participation and accountability as a right for all people in crisis.**

- **To humanitarian organisations:**
  - Adopt policies, strategies and programming that uphold participation and accountability as a right, including by adopting community engagement approaches that support self-organisation and people claiming their own rights.
  - Adopt a pluralistic approach to participation and accountability that goes beyond engaging community leaders, and focus on engaging with a diverse range of communities and groups including through existing organisations representing a diversity of identities.
- **To HCTs and crisis response leaders:** Ensure that those organisations representing individuals that are marginalised are embedded in decision-making forums in the coordination of the response and are supported to effectively participate through access to high-quality funding. Where these organisations' capacity does not allow them to participate in response coordination, proactively engage with them and listen to them to inform the humanitarian response.

**Address the fragmented nature of inclusion work through more intersectional approaches and greater collaboration.**

- **To international, national and local inclusion-specialised organisations:** Adopt more intersectional approaches in guidance, training, advisory and targeted programming by integrating other inclusion issues. Collaborate and collectively advocate on common challenges undermining inclusive humanitarian action.
- **To donors:** Reduce competition and hierarchy between different forms of discrimination by supporting a greater diversity of inclusion-specialised organisations and demanding greater intersectional approaches in all your inclusion-specific funding allocations.

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