

Challenges in humanitarian response implementation: a large-scale review of aid worker perspectives

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Aid workers offer important perspectives for understanding better the most pervasive challenges that arise when implementing emergency response programming in humanitarian settings. This large sample study provides a global review of these perspectives, derived from 4,679 applications to the National NGO Program on Humanitarian Leadership, in which aid workers were asked to respond to the following question: 'What do you consider to be the biggest challenges in the implementation of emergency response programming in today's humanitarian settings?'. Through a qualitative coding process, the research team identified 14 major challenges that were prevalent across the applicants' responses and cross-tabulated these with their demographics. Coordination (30 per cent) and operating environment (29.5 per cent) were the most frequently reported. The study found a significant association between challenges identified and certain demographic variables. The results supplement a body of literature that is largely composed of small-scale, context-specific studies in which disaggregation of data by demographics is not possible.

Keywords: aid worker perceptions, humanitarian aid, humanitarian challenges, humanitarian training, impediments to aid delivery

Introduction

Ongoing and emerging conflicts combined with the impacts of the climate crisis are driving humanitarian needs to record levels (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022). The gap between these needs and the resources available to meet them is the widest it has ever been (Reuters, 2022). From difficulties with coordination, to limited access, numerous other challenges impede the effective delivery of assistance to those that require it the most. Many of these challenges are widely discussed in humanitarian literature, yet most of what is understood about them is derived from small surveys, case studies, and expert interviews. Missing from the literature are large-scale, cross-context overviews of aid worker perspectives on the humanitarian challenges that are most pervasive across the globe.

A comprehensive understanding of aid worker perspectives on these challenges is critical; aid workers are actively engaged in needs assessments, planning, and delivering assistance directly to those in need. Their perspectives across different contexts can inform the development of tailored training and evaluation tools, contributing to more effective, efficient, and accountable humanitarian action. Aid worker perspectives are

also important to effectively support the commitment to localising humanitarian aid. To make aid as local as possible, it is essential that international donors and other supporters of the process understand the challenges humanitarian workers face, as revealed by aid workers themselves. Headquarters-based expertise alone cannot drive structural change in the humanitarian system.

This study examines the perspectives of 4,679 aid workers applying to the National NGO Program on Humanitarian Leadership (NNPHL) on what they see as the major challenges to implementing emergency response programming. The paper complements the existing literature on humanitarian challenges by providing a global picture of how a diverse group of aid workers view humanitarian challenges in their area of work—existing studies tend to focus either on one disaster/conflict context or on a single kind of challenge, such as coordination, across different settings. The large sample size also allows for analysis of how demographics interact with aid workers' perceptions of the challenges they confront. A larger sample size drawn from applicants working in the humanitarian sector globally affords an opportunity to examine how humanitarian challenges are viewed in varied geographic contexts. It also reduces cognitive bias inherent in smaller sample sizes. Below, we review the current literature on humanitarian challenges, detail the methods used in this study, present the research findings, and highlight areas of future research.

Humanitarian challenges in the literature

Challenges that impede humanitarian response are numerous and diverse, ranging from those that are technical in nature (failed coordination, for example), to more normative challenges, like localisation, which include technical aspects (direct funding to local non-governmental organisations (NGOs)), as well as elements of power and loss. Various scholars have investigated singular humanitarian challenges that appear across contexts. For instance, coordination (Charles and Lauras, 2011; Hensell, 2015; Ruesch et al., 2022; Cengiz Toklu, 2023), humanitarian access (Moslehi et al., 2015; Ismail, 2018; Lundqvist and Hultman, 2022), localisation (Bruschini-Chaumet et al., 2019; Erdilmen and Sosthenes, 2020), adherence to humanitarian principles (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2015; Norwegian Refugee Council and Handicap International, 2016; Broussard et al., 2019; Meyer and Richardson Jané, 2021), and security (Hoelscher, Miklian, and Nygård, 2017; Macpherson and Burkle, Jr., 2021) are explored in-depth across a range of humanitarian crises.

Other scholars assess the challenges to aid delivery that emerge in particular crisis settings. For example, Safarpour et al. (2020) identified a number of humanitarian challenges that impeded efficient delivery of aid in the aftermath of the Kermanshah earthquake in Iran on 12 November 2017. These challenges were identified from interviews with 21 people and were organised under two themes: managerial barriers (including limited education, problems with command and coordination, communication and information problems, and unclear rules or lack of their enforcement); and structural barriers (including security, overcrowding, inadequate assessment of need, what they

term the providing setting, and cultural barriers). Similarly, Nyahunda, Tirivangasi, and Mabila (2022) identified a number of challenges faced by humanitarian organisations providing services after Cyclone Idai struck Chimanimani, Zimbabwe, in March 2019, such as bureaucratic government procedures, lack of aid agency familiarity with the disaster-stricken areas, absence of coordination among humanitarian organisations, militarisation of interventions, politicisation of aid, limited resources, and inaccessibility of most communities due to poor infrastructure.

Many humanitarian challenges are inter-related, and several authors have examined them in tandem. For example, Barakat and Milton (2020), Krantz and Gustafsson (2021), and Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria (2021) studied localisation and how it inter-plays with obstacles to effective emergency assistance. Other authors have listed several challenges to supplying humanitarian assistance in war zones, including a lack of access to communities in need. Access challenges were intertwined with bureaucratic delays, poor communication, and politicisation of aid (Sowers and Weinthal, 2021). Other challenges cited as interrelated include access, staff security, and adherence to humanitarian principles (Kurtzer, 2019).

Two things are evident in the literature. First, there is no body of work that looks at the wide range of challenges across different contexts. Second, existing research is largely made up of small surveys, case studies, and key stakeholder interviews. While valuable in providing detailed information about a particular set of challenges at a particular time and in a particular place, these studies are not able to provide a global overview of which of these challenges are most pervasive. Smaller, more intensive studies contribute to discourse at a granular level, but larger global studies may reveal more clearly big-picture patterns and trends.

Materials and methods

This paper draws its data on humanitarian challenges from applications to the NNPHL, a humanitarian leadership course tailored towards mid-career² humanitarian aid workers. The NNPHL offers professional training for staff of national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) as well as for national staff of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). A consortium including Concern Worldwide, International Medical Corps, and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative designed and have implemented the programme globally since 2016. The three-month programme includes a self-paced online learning component, coupled with an intensive one-week, in-person course, and culminates with participant-led knowledge-sharing sessions with participants' respective organisation staff. Instruction for the course is in English. Funding from the United States Agency for International Development's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs allows all participants to enrol in the course at no cost.

The study was deemed a programme evaluation and exempt by the Harvard Longwood Campus Institutional Review Board. The research team examined a total of 4,679 applications across 13 application cycles between 2016 and 2022. Seventy per cent of applicants

during this period identified as male, whereas 30 per cent identified as female. It is not clear whether this discrepancy is generally reflective of the gender distribution within humanitarian organisations or whether it is due to other factors, including, but not limited to, how the NNPHL is advertised, its structure, or its subject material. Applicants also

Table 1. Applicant demographics

Applicant demographics (n=4,679)	Unweighted n (weighted percentage)
Gender	
Female	1,398 (29.9)
Male	3,268 (69.8)
Other	2 (0.0)
No response	11 (0.24)
Education	
Secondary/high school	45 (1.0)
Bachelor's degree	2,069 (44.2)
Master's degree	1,815 (38.8)
Doctoral degree	140 (3.0)
Other	96 (2.1)
No response	514 (11.0)
Professional experience	
1–3 years	891 (19.0)
4–6 years	1,393 (29.8)
7–9 years	908 (19.4)
10–13 years	617 (13.2)
14+ years	448 (9.6)
No response	422 (9.0)
Organisation type	
Government	131 (2.8)
INGO	1,708 (36.5)
NNGO/CBO	2,154 (46.0)
Private sector	223 (4.8)
UN/ICRC/IFRC	206 (4.4)
Student	68 (1.5)
No response	26 (0.6)
Region	
Africa	2,229 (47.6)
Americas	208 (4.4)
Asia	849 (18.1)
Europe	116 (2.5)
Middle East	1,268 (27.1)

Source: authors.

varied in levels of professional experience, defined as years working within the humanitarian sector: 1–3 years of experience (19 per cent); 4–6 years of experience (29.8 per cent); 7–9 years of experience (19.4 per cent); 10–13 years of experience (13.2 per cent); and more than 14 years of experience (9.6 per cent). The largest percentage of applicants worked at NNGOs/CBOs and INGOs, comprising 46 and 36.5 per cent of the total number of applicants, respectively. Furthermore, 4.8 per cent of applicants worked for private sector organisations, 4.4 per cent worked for United Nations (UN) agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), or the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), and 2.8 per cent worked for government agencies.

With regard to education, 44.2 per cent of applicants held a bachelor's degree or recognised equivalent, and 38.8 per cent had received a master's or equivalent postgraduate degree. Three per cent of applicants held doctoral degrees and one per cent indicated that they stopped schooling after secondary level. In addition, 47.6 per cent of all applicants resided in Africa, 27.1 per cent in the Middle East, 18.1 per cent in Asia, 4.4 per cent in the Americas, and 2.5 per cent in Europe. Of those applicants who reported their nationality (56 per cent), 94 per cent worked in that same country, while six per cent worked outside their country of nationality.

Data collection

Applicants completed a self-administered online form via Recruiterbox/Trakstar Hire, a recruitment software and applicant tracking system. In addition to collecting demographic information, the form included a series of open-ended questions on experiences related to providing humanitarian assistance. This study analyses applicant responses to the following question: 'What do you consider to be the biggest challenges in the implementation of emergency response programming in today's humanitarian settings?'. Almost all applicant responses were written in English, the primary language of instruction for the NNPHL programme. Less than one per cent of applicants provided responses in other languages, including Arabic, French, and Russian. These responses were translated into English using Google Translate and reviewed individually for accuracy.

Data analysis

Data were analysed in SPSS Version 28.0.1.1 (14). Responses were reviewed using qualitative content analysis consistent with the Mayring approach (Mayring, 2014). Four members of the research team conducted thematic reviews of 80 qualitative responses selected using a random number generator. Eighty-five challenges emerged from this review. The team conducted further analysis, with each of the four researchers selecting another random sample of 100 responses and coding them independently using the identified list of 85 challenges as codes. This extended analysis revealed no new challenges, indicating that the codebook had reached a saturation point (Saunders et al., 2018).

The team further refined and consolidated overlapping challenges to produce a final list of 63 challenges. Each of the 63 challenges was then assigned a challenge category. For example, challenges such as local authorities restricting access, insecurity limiting access, or access negotiation were all grouped under the category 'access'. This process resulted in a list of 14 challenge categories. The Appendix lists the full set of challenges and their definitions. Note that challenges refer to the negative or failure of concepts like coordination, localisation, and accountability.

The entire data set was coded using the list of 63 challenges. Each response was also coded for the presence ('1') or absence ('0') of each of the 14 challenge categories. An additional dummy variable for 'other' was applied. If a respondent used a word or phrase that coincided with a challenge or challenge category, such as 'coordination' or 'lack of funding', the researchers coded the answer as such. Researchers did not code ambiguous responses. For instance, if an applicant used a vague term such as 'capacity' to describe a challenge, the research team assigned a code only if the applicant provided additional language that overlapped with an existing challenge or category definition. Some applicants mentioned issues such as 'food security' or 'communicable disease'. These types of responses were grouped under the category 'operating environment'. Because the category included many unique challenges that were not easily assigned to any of the other 13 categories, operating environment lacked the level of precision of many of the categories, which should be noted in the analysis of results. We include it here to be transparent about how we treated the data. When the coding was complete, the number and percentage of responses for each of the 14 challenge categories were computed before cross-tabulation with sociodemographic and other variables. The research team assigned weights to responses to adjust for the variation in the annual number of applicants.

Validation of thematic challenge definitions

Following the coding exercise, the research team conducted a validation exercise with an independent NNPHL cohort of mid-career humanitarians based at INGOs and NNGOs in Kenya, Lebanon, Somalia, and Yemen to ensure the challenge categories and challenges accurately reflected the perspectives of humanitarian aid workers. For the exercise, the researchers re-shared the application question that forms the foundation of this study: 'What do you consider to be the biggest challenges in the implementation of emergency response programming in today's humanitarian settings?'. The participants then received a brief synopsis of the study methodology, which highlighted the sample size, the identification of 63 challenges, and their organisation into 14 challenge categories. The researchers also clearly articulated the purpose of the validation exercise: to capture the participants' definition of each challenge in a few words, based on their lived experience of working in the humanitarian sector. The researchers communicated their intention to compare these definitions with those developed through the qualitative coding process.

Next, the research team presented the 14 challenge categories without definitions. Participants were asked to write down short, specific examples of challenges in their own

professional experience under each challenge category. The examples that they provided under each category were consistent with the research team's definitions. There were, however, areas of overlap that suggest that the challenge categories are not mutually exclusive. For instance, participants sometimes associated challenges related to security and bureaucracy with the challenge category 'access'. Similarly, there was some overlap between examples provided under 'politicisation of aid', 'humanitarian principles', and 'accountability'. The absence of a standard definition for some terms (a single definition of localisation, for example) meant that some interpretation was necessary on the part of the research team.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the data were initially collected to inform curriculum design and to ensure that the training programme addressed the actual challenges NNPHL applicants faced in their work. It was only *ex post facto* that we understood that the information was directly relevant to the wider humanitarian sector and decided to code the data. This means that we did not begin with a research question and follow through with relevant data collection and analysis. We took the extant programme data and analysed it to understand how applicants viewed challenges that impeded aid delivery. A further limitation relates to the applicant pool from which the data were collected. The NNPHL programme is marketed to mid-career humanitarian professionals who work for national or international NGOs. Therefore, the applicant pool is weighted towards these individuals and data may not fully reflect the perspectives of other actors (such as those in the private sector and government). Furthermore, NNPHL applicants are seeking to enhance their own professional skills, which biases the sample. Similarly, the distribution of applicants across regions is not uniform. This may result in a disproportionate number of challenges being cited in one region over another. In addition, the training programme is taught and marketed in English, which *de facto* excludes applicants without proficiency in English and increases the possibility for misinterpretation or incorrect translation during data analysis. Follow-on studies should consider translating survey forms into other languages.

The method of data collection also posed constraints. The open-ended format of the questionnaire allowed applicants to write as little or as much as they desired about what they perceive to be the most significant humanitarian challenges impeding emergency response. As a result, some applicants provided more detail than others. What is more, some responses used ambiguous terms such as 'lack of information/knowledge' or 'timeliness'. Ultimately, the researchers excluded ambiguous responses from the data set because of unclear meaning. This may have prevented ambiguous, but no less pervasive, challenges from being analysed. Developing thematic challenges that were broad enough to allow for statistically significant findings and nuanced enough to discern between responses was a challenge. Many of the thematic challenges can be drivers or symptoms of other challenges, complicating efforts to isolate single challenges and requiring a certain level of inference on the part of the research team.

Results

In Table 2, we present the number and percentage of challenge categories (hereafter referred to as ‘challenges’) reported by applicants (n=4,679).

Table 2. Humanitarian thematic challenges reported by applicants

Humanitarian thematic challenge	Unweighted n (weighted percentage)
None reported	449 (9.6)
Other	367 (7.8)
Coordination	1,404 (30.0)
Operating environment	1,382 (29.5)
Funding resources	992 (21.2)
Security	953 (20.4)
Human resources	924 (19.7)
Programme design	919 (19.6)
Localisation/local dynamics	918 (19.6)
Access	918 (19.6)
Resources	653 (14.0)
Bureaucracy	500 (10.7)
Humanitarian principles	216 (4.6)
Protection	213 (4.6)
Politicisation of aid	211 (4.5)
Accountability	191 (4.1)

Source: authors.

Coordination (30 per cent) and the operating environment (29.5 per cent) were the most frequently reported challenges by the applicant pool. These were followed by funding resources (21.2 per cent) and security (20.4 per cent). Programme design, human resources, and localisation/local dynamics each accounted for 19.6 per cent of the reported challenges. Applicants cited access 15.8 per cent of the time, followed by resources (14 per cent), bureaucracy (10.7 per cent), humanitarian principles (4.6 per cent), protection (4.6 per cent), politicisation of aid (4.5 per cent), and accountability (4.1 per cent).

Humanitarian challenges across demographic variables

One of the advantages of a larger survey sample size is that it allows for identifying statistically significant relationships between the thematic humanitarian challenges and the demographic characteristics of the applicants. The research team conducted cross-tabulations for all thematic challenges against applicant demographic data, including self-reported gender, years of professional humanitarian experience, the type of humanitarian agency

worked for at the time of application, and the region of origin. The results with significant associations are presented here.

Humanitarian challenges by years of experience

Table 3 shows the thematic challenges cross-tabulated with years of experience.

Table 3. Cited challenges by years of experience (percentage)

Years of experience	1–3	4–6	7–9	10–13	14+	<i>p</i> -value
Coordination	24.8	33.8	34.6	36.3	30.0	<0.001***
Operating environment	20.7	21.0	17.2	21.1	21.4	<0.001***
Funding resources	20.7	22.9	23.5	25.4	26.6	<0.001***
Security	22.1	22.8	22.7	22.4	21.2	<0.001***
Human resources	17.6	21.8	22.9	24.3	23.2	<0.001***
Programme design	17.2	22.4	23.8	22.2	22.3	<0.001***
Localisation/ local dynamics	19.1	22.6	20.9	22.2	23.7	<0.001***
Access	14.8	17.5	19.7	17.5	17.0	<0.001***
Resources	11.1	14.7	16.1	18.3	19.9	<0.001***
Bureaucracy	9.9	12.1	13.5	12.0	10.7	<0.001***
Humanitarian principles	2.7	4.7	5.5	7.8	6.3	<0.001***
Protection	3.5	4.5	6.6	6.2	4.7	<0.001***
Politicisation of aid	2.5	5.5	5.3	5.2	7.1	<0.001***
Accountability	2.5	4.5	4.2	7.0	5.6	<0.001***

Note: * = *p*-value < 0.05; ** = *p*-value < 0.01; *** = *p*-value < 0.001.

Source: authors.

The applicant's years of experience was significantly correlated with each of the 14 humanitarian challenges. Those with one to three years of experience reported coordination as a challenge 24.8 per cent of the time, whereas those with 10–13 years of experience reported coordination as a challenge 36.3 per cent of the time. Years of experience and likelihood to cite coordination as a challenge were not always positively correlated. The more years of experience the applicant had, the more likely they were to cite funding resources as a humanitarian challenge. Applicants with one to three years of experience reported funding resources 20.7 per cent of the time, whereas those with more than 14 years of experience reported challenges with funding resources 26.6 per cent of the time. Similarly, the more years of experience an applicant had, the more likely they were to cite resources as a challenge: 19.9 per cent of applicants with more than 14 years of experience and 11.1 per cent of applicants with one to three years of experience.

Thematic challenges by region of origin

Table 4 shows thematic challenges cross-tabulated with region of origin.

Table 4. Cited challenges by region (percentage)

Region	Africa	Americas	Asia	Europe	Middle East	p-value
Coordination	28.7	37.5	36.4	47.4	25.4	<0.001***
Operating environment	19.4	16.8	15.9	13.8	18.9	<0.096
Funding resources	22.7	17.3	16.6	20.7	22.6	<0.002**
Security	20.9	11.5	11.9	21.6	26.6	<0.001***
Human resources	21.4	18.8	21.2	18.1	16.3	0.005
Programme design	18.8	27.9	23.4	29.3	16.4	<0.001***
Localisation/ local dynamics	18.3	26.4	23.3	24.1	18.1	<0.001***
Access	14.6	11.1	14.7	12.1	19.8	<0.001***
Resources	14.9	9.1	14.6	12.1	12.9	0.114
Bureaucracy	9.8	9.1	12.4	22.4	10.4	<0.001***
Humanitarian principles	4.3	3.8	6.5	9.5	3.7	0.005**
Protection	4.4	4.8	5.8	5.2	4.0	0.48
Politicisation of aid	5.0	3.8	6.1	6.0	2.5	<0.002**
Accountability	4.6	4.3	5.4	4.3	2.3	0.006

Note: * = p-value < 0.05; ** = p-value < 0.01; *** = p-value < 0.001.

Source: authors.

We found a significant association between applicants’ region of origin and thematic challenges cited. Applicants from Europe (29.3 per cent), the Americas (27.9 per cent), and Asia (23.4 per cent) were most likely to cite programme design as a key humanitarian challenge, followed by those from Africa (18.8 per cent) and the Middle East (16.4 per cent). Top humanitarian challenges cited by applicants from Africa were coordination (28.7 per cent), funding resources (22.7 per cent), and human resources (21.4 per cent), whereas the top humanitarian challenges cited by applicants from the Middle East were security (26.6 per cent), coordination (25.4 per cent), and funding resources (22.6 per cent). Higher percentages of applicants from the Americas (26.4 per cent), Europe (24.1 per cent), and Asia (23.3 per cent) cited localisation/local dynamics as a key humanitarian challenge than applicants from Africa (18.3 per cent) or the Middle East (18.1 per cent).

Bureaucracy was cited as a top challenge by 22.4 per cent of applicants from Europe, followed by applicants from Asia (12.4 per cent) and the Middle East (10.4 per cent). Challenges related to humanitarian principles were cited by 9.5 per cent of European applicants, whereas applicants from the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas each cited them at rates of less than 4.5 per cent.

Thematic challenges by organisation type

Table 5 shows thematic challenges cross-tabulated with organisation type.

Table 5. Cited challenges by organisation type (percentage)

Organisation type	NNGO/CBO	INGO	UN/ICRC/IFRC	Private sector	Government	Other	p-value
Coordination	29.3	33.3	38.3	17.5	25.2	20.2	<0.001***
Operating environment	18.4	18.2	16.0	18.4	26.7	16.3	0.180
Funding resources	21.0	23.4	21.8	13.5	18.3	16.0	0.003
Security	20.8	22.5	20.4	11.7	13.7	13.6	<0.001***
Human resources	19.7	20.8	18.9	16.6	22.9	14.8	0.189
Programme design	19.9	21.1	18.4	12.1	20.6	15.2	0.017**
Localisation/local dynamics	21.0	18.9	20.4	15.7	19.8	15.2	0.120
Access	15.1	18.6	22.8	7.6	9.2	7.4	<0.001***
Resources	15.6	13.5	15.0	6.7	14.5	7.8	<0.001***
Bureaucracy	10.9	11.2	15.0	6.7	9.2	5.8	0.010**
Humanitarian principles	4.2	5.0	4.9	4.0	6.9	4.3	0.669
Protection	4.5	5.3	5.3	3.1	2.3	1.9	0.098
Politicisation of aid	5.1	4.3	3.9	2.2	3.8	3.5	0.357
Accountability	3.8	4.9	3.9	2.7	6.1	1.6	0.067

Note: * = p -value < 0.05; ** = p -value < 0.01; *** = p -value < 0.001.

Source: authors.

There was a significant association between the type of organisation for which an applicant works and several of the thematic challenges, including coordination, access, security, resources, bureaucracy, and programme design. Applicants working for the UN, the ICRC, or the IFRC were the most likely to cite coordination as a challenge (38.3 per cent), followed by applicants working for INGOs (33.3 per cent), NNGOs (29.3 per cent), government (25.2 per cent), and the private sector (17.5 per cent). Applicants working for the UN, the ICRC, or the IFRC were roughly three times as likely as their counterparts in the private sector to identify access as a challenge. Applicants working for an NNGO/CBO, INGO, or the UN system, the ICRC, or the IFRC were roughly twice as likely to cite security and resources as challenges as applicants working for the private sector or government. NNGO/CBO applicants cited resources as challenges the most frequently (15.6 per cent), followed by the UN/ICRC/IFRC (15 per cent), government (14.5 per cent), INGOs (13.5 per cent), and private sector (6.7 per cent). The UN/ICRC/IFRC group cited bureaucracy as a humanitarian challenge 15 per cent of the time, followed by INGO (11.2 per cent), NNGO/CBO (10.9 per cent), government (9.2 per cent), and private sector (6.7 per cent) applicants.

To get a sense of how the participant-identified challenges related to one another, the research team created a correlation matrix. The correlation matrix shows that the most tightly, positively correlated relationship is between security and access (correlation coefficient of 0.225), followed by programme design and coordination (0.172), human and funding resources (0.151), and accountability and humanitarian principles (0.109). All are significant at the 0.01 level.

Discussion

While the challenges identified here are not new to the literature, the ability to compare them and see their relative salience across contexts is a principal contribution of this study. A key finding of our analysis is that globally, coordination is the single greatest perceived barrier to the effective implementation of emergency response among aid workers applying to the NNPHL programme (30 per cent). In comparison, other challenges discussed at length in the literature, such as accountability—see Konyndyk and Worden (2019) and Hilhorst et al. (2021) for examples—are, perhaps surprisingly, not as salient (4.1 per cent). Of the applicants who referenced challenges related to coordination, 60 per cent explicitly used the word ‘coordination’. Others cited duplication of effort (12 per cent), poor communication (12 per cent), logistics challenges (11 per cent), or competition among actors (5 per cent). The widely agreed upon definition of coordination may have contributed to how frequently the term itself occurred in the dataset.

In contrast, the term ‘localization’ or ‘localisation’ is rarely explicitly mentioned as a humanitarian challenge. It occurred in applicant responses only 15 times, despite its code being applied 918 times in the dataset. Other responses coded with localisation noted challenges related to local dynamics (language and cultural barriers), international organisations’ failure to include affected communities in programme design, poor knowledge of the local context, power disparities expressed as leadership positions held, aid dependency, and mistrust of aid groups, among other examples. While the broader localisation agenda focuses on funding, capacity, and coordination, the findings of this study underscore the complexity of how the localisation challenge manifests in the self-expressed views of aid workers. The failure to localise aid is expressed as a failure to understand adequately the context in which aid workers are operating and to include local communities in programme design.

We also assessed whether any demographic variables are associated with the challenges selected. We found that region of origin, years of experience, and organisation type are all variables that may influence which challenge an applicant perceived to be the most significant. By region of origin, coordination was the most frequently reported challenge everywhere except the Middle East, where security was the most frequently cited. Intense armed conflicts in the Middle East, including in Syria and Yemen, could play a role in the high prioritisation of security by applicants from the region. For instance, both Syria and Yemen appear on the list of the top 10 highest security incident contexts over the past decade (Aid Worker Security Database, 2023). Yet, this does not explain why security was not the highest priority for applicants from Africa where several countries

also experience such high risks (Stoddard et al., 2021). Statistics on the frequency of security incidents in different humanitarian settings may not provide a complete understanding of why security is a salient challenge in those contexts. Frequency of security incidents changes swiftly over time and how these incidents are defined and measured are not uniform. The perceptions of aid workers may provide a supplemental means to understanding security as a humanitarian challenge.

Funding resources were a major concern of applicants from Africa (22.7 per cent) and the Middle East (22.6 per cent) but were not among the top three challenges perceived by applicants in the other regions. Further large-scale reviews of humanitarian challenges may provide a clearer understanding as to why applicants from certain regions are more likely to cite funding as a significant challenge.

Interestingly, applicants from the Americas (26.4 per cent), Europe (24.1 per cent), and Asia (23.3 per cent) cited localisation as a key humanitarian challenge more often than applicants from Africa (18.3 per cent) or the Middle East (18.1 per cent). Follow-up research is needed to comprehend why this is the case, but it is possible that the ways in which localisation is understood or interpreted may explain these variations. For instance, some may see localisation as fundamentally a challenge related to access to resources, whereas others may view it as a challenge related to culture, identity, and independence. What is clear across the localisation literature is that there continues to be a lack of clarity regarding to what the term refers (Robillard, Atim, and Maxwell, 2021). Those applying for training in humanitarian leadership are clearly seeking to develop their own professional skills too, which introduces bias into the perceptions of which challenges impede their ability to deliver aid. This could also explain why more people cite problems associated with human resources than localisation.

An applicant's years of experience was significantly correlated with each of the 14 thematic humanitarian challenges. Notable variation existed for coordination, funding resources, human resources, and resources generally. Intuitively, these findings make sense. Generally, the more years of experience an applicant has, the more time they have had to experience these challenges, perhaps repeatedly. It is also plausible that the more years of experience an applicant has, the more responsibility they take on. This could provide those applicants with more years of experience with greater exposure to information and the complexities of these challenges.

It is also worth mentioning that not one of these humanitarian challenges exists in isolation and that there is significant association between them. We found a strong correlation, for example, between security concerns and humanitarian access challenges. This is not at all surprising and is consistent with the literature. For example, Barakat and Milton (2020), Krantz and Gustafsson (2021), and Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria (2021) studied localisation and how it interplays with obstacles to effective emergency assistance. Other authors listed several challenges to providing humanitarian assistance in war zones, including a lack of access to communities in need. Access challenges were intertwined with bureaucratic delays, poor communication, and politicisation of aid (Sowers and Weinthal, 2021). Other challenges cited as interrelated include access, staff security, and adherence to humanitarian principles (Kurtzer, 2019).

While the challenges identified in this study are discussed widely in the humanitarian literature, the results paint a novel, global picture of aid worker perspectives on the challenges they face across demographic factors. The results furnish a baseline for evidence that over time may reveal broad trends in these challenges. This can help supplement the contextual understanding provided by smaller, qualitative studies and supply key insights for both humanitarian policy and programming. We recommend that large-scale, follow-on surveys ask additional questions to understand better why certain challenges are more salient than others, as well as why certain demographics are associated with the challenges selected and others are not.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand what aid workers consider to be the biggest challenges to the implementation of emergency response programming in today’s humanitarian settings. While the challenges identified by the applicants in the dataset are not new, how they are ranked (in terms of number of times each challenge is cited) is a novel contribution to the humanitarian challenges literature. We found that globally, challenges related to coordination, the operating environment, and security were the most frequently cited. We further highlight how the characteristics of the aid worker population are associated with perceptions of which challenges are most salient. We found significant variation in how aid workers perceived humanitarian challenges based on the type of organisation at which they worked, the number of years of professional humanitarian experience they had at the time of application, and their region of origin.

This study provides a unique dataset that fills a gap in existing literature by identifying a broad set of challenges humanitarian workers identify as impeding their ability to deliver aid across the world. We further offer an alternative, replicable methodology that complements small surveys, case studies, and key stakeholder interviews, provides additional understanding of humanitarian challenges, and pinpoints which humanitarian challenges are most frequently cited by aid workers themselves. Perception-based data is a rich resource for future inquiries related to humanitarian action, as perceptions shape the way aid workers interpret meaning in their environment and play a role in decisions made about humanitarian programming. Follow-on research should be pursued to yield insights into why certain challenges are more notable than others, as well as to explain the variation in how aid workers perceive these challenges.

Appendix

Table A1. Full set of challenges and their definitions

Category	Challenge
1. Accountability	<i>Respondent explicitly cites a lack of accountability.</i>

Category	Challenge
2. Coordination	<i>Respondent explicitly cites complications or failures coordinating humanitarian assistance between aid agencies and with local governments, paramilitary organisations, or other groups. Coordination can be defined as the management or sharing of information and resources between different actors.</i>
	Duplication of effort: respondent explicitly mentions duplication of assistance or refers to an overlap in efforts.
	Poor communication: respondent mentions ineffective, poor, or non-existent communication between actors.
	Logistics challenges: respondent explicitly mentions logistics challenges. These often encompass the procurement, transport, storage, and tracking of aid.
	Competition among actors: respondent mentions competition among actors for resources, donor funding, operating space, mandate, or public visibility.
3. Security	<i>Respondent mentions security-related issues such as staff security, insecure operating environment, or protracted conflict.</i>
	Staff security: respondent explicitly mentions staff security or attacks, threats, or other hazards that targeted aid workers.
	Insecure operating environment: respondent generally mentions insecurity or explicitly mentions an insecure operating environment constricting aid delivery.
	Protracted conflict: respondent mentions a link between an ongoing war or armed conflict and increased humanitarian needs.
4. Access	<i>Respondent explicitly mentions difficulties that actors face in making contact with and delivering aid to populations in need.</i>
	Local authorities do not cooperate or restrict access: respondent explicitly mentions local authorities hindering aid agency access to populations.
	Insecurity or other environmental hazards hinder access: populations in need cannot be accessed because of ambient conflict or other environmental factors.
	Negotiation of access: respondent explicitly mentions the need to negotiate with non-state armed actors or other armed groups to reach at-risk areas, raising questions about how much humanitarian actors should compromise to deliver assistance while adhering to core humanitarian principles.
5. Resources	<i>Respondents generally cite a lack of material resources.</i>
	Increased humanitarian needs globally: respondent mentions humanitarian needs outpacing available resources. Mention of increasing number of humanitarian crises and diversity of crises (such as conflict, climate, or famine).
	Inadequate internal organisation capacity: respondent explicitly mentions a lack of organisational capacity, defined as an ability to develop and carry out programming.
	Remote management of teams: respondents explicitly mentions remote oversight of staff as a challenge to effective humanitarian assistance.
6. Funding resources	<i>Respondent generally cites problems with non-existent, scarce, or inconsistent funding.</i>
	Lack of funding: respondent explicitly mentions a lack of or limited funding.
	Lack of financial systems: respondent mentions that a lack of financial infrastructure, such as banking systems, impedes the mobilisation of funds and payment of staff.

Category	Challenge
7. Human resources	<i>Respondent mentions human resource issues, a lack of staff, or too few human resources to meet humanitarian programming needs.</i>
	Unqualified staff: staff qualifications inadequate for the type of expertise required for an effective, context-sensitive response. This also includes a lack of field experience.
	Inadequate training: respondent mentions that organisations fail to give their staff the requisite training to carry out a meaningful response.
	High staff turnover: respondent explicitly mentions that staff turnover was a problem.
	Leadership: respondent explicitly mentions poor, incompetent, inappropriate, or non-existent leadership, or gaps in leadership.
8. Humanitarian principles	<i>Respondent explicitly mentions challenges adhering to the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, independence, and impartiality in programme design and implementation. Personnel also mention staffers' lack of motivation or willingness to adhere to humanitarian principles.</i>
	Impartiality: respondent explicitly mentions issues with discrimination or another departure from the distribution of aid according to assessed need.
9. Bureaucracy	<i>Respondent mentions national policies/laws and administrative roadblocks that challenge programme creation and implementation.</i>
	Donor requirements: respondent mentions donor requirements for programme design and funding allocation as over-emphasising tangible deliverables, prioritising a specific aid sector or population in need over another, or otherwise delaying or limiting aid delivery.
	Local authority permits: respondent mentions that government permit requirements limit or prevent aid delivery.
	Excessive quality-control measures delaying aid delivery: respondent explicitly mentions that internal quality control measures, defined as a protocol designed to assess the effectiveness of programming and monitoring where funding goes, limit or delay the deployment of funds or delivery of assistance. Respondent also references government disclosure requirements about aid operations creating delays.
	Slow mobilisation of funds: respondent mentions that aid groups struggle to deploy funds quickly enough to implement programming and meet humanitarian needs in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.
10. Programme design	<i>Respondent mentions challenges with programme planning, needs assessment, information collection and management, evaluation, and advocacy mechanisms. Respondent also mentions general issues with programme duration, timelines, standardisation, and sustainability.</i>
	Mismatch between needs and intervention: respondent mentions that the programme design does not respond to communities' specific humanitarian needs.
	Contingency plans: respondent mentions that the organisation failed to develop alternative plans in case the main programme falls short.
	Gap between relief and development: respondent mentions a failure to consider how to transition from humanitarian response to development, or the lack of an 'exit plan'.
11. Operating environment	<i>Respondent references general challenges posed by operating in the country, such as general 'environmental factors', political factors, inhospitable geography, violence by non-state actors, and general supply chain disruptions.</i>

Category	Challenge
	Poor or damaged infrastructure: respondent explicitly mentions poor roads and other forms of infrastructure limiting the scope and reach of a response.
	Climate change: respondent mentions an explicit connection between climate change and humanitarian needs.
	Economic issues: respondent explicitly mentions general economic challenges in the country impeding aid delivery or complicating access to markets.
	COVID-19: respondent explicitly mentions the COVID-19 pandemic as a challenge.
	Communicable diseases (not COVID-19): respondent mentions a disease outbreak, excluding COVID-19, as complicating humanitarian response by scaling up needs or obstructing interventions.
	Poverty: respondent mentions pervasive poverty as exacerbating humanitarian needs.
	Food security: respondent mentions that food insecurity, caused by famine, food deserts, or high prices for basic foodstuffs, exacerbate humanitarian needs.
	Displacement: respondent explicitly mentions displacement as destabilising the operating environment by creating refugee, IDP (internally displaced person), and migrant flows, overwhelming camps and straining host community resources. Respondent mentions the heightened vulnerability of displaced people.
12. Protection	<i>Respondent mentions civilian vulnerability to specific targeting by armed groups or other threats without adequate protection measures. Respondent mentions failures to fulfil the 'do no harm' principle or adhere to international humanitarian law.</i>
	Gender: respondent generally mentions gender-related issues.
	Absence of women in programme design or implementation: respondent explicitly mentions women's lack of involvement in programme design or implementation.
	Gender-based violence: respondent explicitly mentions gender-based violence.
13. Politicisation of aid	<i>Respondent generally mentions the diversion of aid, government interference, or other means by which the local authorities co-opt humanitarian action for their own interest.</i>
	Unclear mandate: respondent mentions that aid actors struggle to balance or negotiate between humanitarian and political or other priorities.
14. Localisation/ local dynamics	<i>Respondent explicitly mentions localisation. Respondent generally mentions a lack of local implementing partners, high or unfulfilled community expectations, language barriers, or capacity issues with local NGOs and CBOs.</i>
	Community consultation in programme design: respondent mentions an organisational failure to consult the local community or otherwise solicit community members' feedback in relation to a needs assessment or other parts of programme design.
	Knowledge of the local context: respondent mentions a failure to understand the geopolitics, economic background, distribution of local power, and other critical features of the community in which they operate.
	Expatriates in leadership positions: respondent mentions that expatriates hold leadership positions in place of local authorities.
	Empowerment of communities: respondent mentions that the humanitarian response ignores the agency of community members. Respondent also mentions the failure to tap local expertise or knowledge.

Category	Challenge
	Mistrust of aid groups: respondent explicitly mentions that local communities mistrust aid groups.
	Cultural differences: respondent mentions that cultural differences between aid groups and local populations produce misunderstandings about what the community needs. This can prompt the obstruction of an intervention, the complete rejection of aid, miscommunication, or the faltering of projects after aid groups leave.
	Poor cooperation with local communities: respondent mentions that the local community displays reluctance to cooperate in programme implementation or continue the programme after the aid group departs.
	Exclusion of CBOs or NGOs in programming either by the government or international actors: respondent explicitly mentions that INGO or government programming excludes or minimises the participation of CBOs or NGOs.
	Aid dependency: respondent explicitly mentions that the local community develops a reliance on emergency relief without a concerted effort to develop the necessary infrastructure and expertise required to generate self-sufficiency.
	Local government capacity: respondent mentions that the local government lacks the necessary resources, organisational competence, staff, and other key institutions to meet the basic needs of the population or facilitate humanitarian programming.

Source: authors.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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- ² By NNPHL standards, 'mid-career' typically entails between four and 10 years of work experience in the humanitarian sector, although the programme does not enforce an experience requirement.

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