



UPINION

# Centering community voices in the humanitarian reset: Insights from Lebanon, Syria, Türkiye, and Yemen

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# Introduction

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These insights draw upon the opinions and experiences shared by Upinion's digital communities in Syria, Türkiye, Lebanon, and Yemen. Over 600 individuals participated in this conversation in May 2025, sharing how they experience the impacts of humanitarian funding cuts, and what changes they believe are needed.

This conversation takes place at a critical moment for the humanitarian sector. Amid widespread funding reductions, actors are calling for a "reset" of the humanitarian system. While internal reforms and high-level strategy shifts are underway, many of these decisions remain disconnected from the people most affected by them. Upinion's findings highlight not only the life-threatening consequences of reduced aid, but also a clear demand: to be meaningfully included in shaping the future of humanitarian response. Communities are not just asking for more aid — they are calling for a system that listens, responds, and rebuilds with them at the center. While recognizing the practical limits of humanitarian assistance, this "reset" must prioritize creating meaningful partnerships that support communities in organizing their own capacity and influence, both on a local and national level.

# Methodology

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Upinion held a conversation through Upinion's Digital Engagement Platform (DEP), where it has been continuously engaging with individuals in Syria, Türkiye, Lebanon, and Yemen. Upinion has developed this online platform that allows to securely connect and stay in touch with marginalised or hard-to-reach communities in crisis and displacement-affected contexts. This in-house developed platform enables Upinion to engage real-time with people in the same way they connect with their friends and families, using messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

Important to mention is that the DEP enables Upinion to send tailored, verified information to respondents about relevant services or initiatives in their area, thereby turning the conversation into an information exchange. This sets the study's methodology apart from traditional surveys,

as participants become active agents engaged in and influenced by knowledge exchange, rather than being simply providers of data.<sup>1</sup>

## Key findings

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### The real-life consequences of funding cuts

#### *What communities prioritize in humanitarian aid*

- When asked about preferred types of aid, **62%** (n=656) of respondents prioritized basic needs support, and **62%** prioritized housing and shelter, often choosing both simultaneously. These types of support were described as essential for survival, not luxuries or extras. Many emphasized that without shelter and basic sustenance, nothing else matters given the current dire living conditions. Aid needs to focus on addressing "the most fundamental necessities first".
- There were some geographic differences in priority: Respondents in Lebanon leaned more towards basic needs, while those in Türkiye prioritized housing and shelter more often.
- When facing funding cuts, communities believe humanitarian decision-makers should scale up the delivery of basic aid, specifically mentioning food, healthcare, and other life-sustaining support as the minimum requirements for survival.
- Reconstruction and support for voluntary safe return were also frequently mentioned among refugees. Communities stressed the need for support to return with dignity and security.

#### *Community reactions to statements downplaying the impact of the funding cuts*

- Community members expressed widespread frustration and anger when presented with the statement that humanitarian funding cuts did not have such a tangible or drastic effect on communities in crisis. Responses ranged from disbelief and sadness to anger.
- *"Funding cuts are not just critical — they are deadly."* This urgent warning resonated across respondents' testimonies, emphasizing that the cuts are not just disruptive, but cost lives.

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<sup>1</sup>For more information on the onboarding of participants and Upinion's DEP, please contact [augustine@upinion.com](mailto:augustine@upinion.com).

- Some challenged decision-makers to come and live for a couple of days in their shoes, to see their own family suffering from hunger and homelessness, and to reevaluate the situation then, stating they should be ashamed of the decisions they took.
- Many stressed that this problem is bigger than just the funding cuts, highlighting that aid was already insufficient before the cuts, turning the current situation into a "survival crisis". Some added that the issue also involves an overarching lack of sustainability and transparency in the humanitarian system.

"When you see your child crying from hunger and pain, then you will know how important this aid is." - Syrian male community member in the Marmara region, Türkiye.

## Community participation in decision-making

### *Feeling of being heard by decision-makers*

- Community members feel a persistent disconnection from those who design or manage aid programs: When asked if they felt decision-makers were hearing their voice, **56%** (n=612) said "No". The rest were split evenly between "Yes" and "I don't know" (**22%** each).
- Regarding participation in decision-making processes within the past 12 months, a significant majority – **85%** (n=605) of respondents – said they were not included at all in any processes. Only **10%** said yes.
- Among the few who said they were included, examples comprised conversations with Upinion or questionnaires from the Red Crescent. Very few had concrete examples of direct involvement, though one person mentioned making recommendations at the Brussels conference as part of a civil society organization:

"At the Brussels conference last year, I made recommendations as a voluntary member of the Syrian General Federation of Civil Society Organizations, as chair of the Governance Committee." - Syrian male community member in the Marmara region, Türkiye.

### *How communities want to be included*

- People desire direct communication with donors and decision-makers, suggesting methods like meetings, feedback tools, voting, or platforms like Upinion. They suggested establishing monitoring mechanisms for aid distribution and clearer opportunities to provide input on needs.

"I want to be included through seminars and social platforms such as yours" - Syrian male community member in South Lebanon.

"I want to be included through opportunities to meet or communicate with donors to ask for an increase in the amount of aid." - Syrian male community member in the Mediterranean region, Türkiye.

- Some noted they are tired of participating without seeing results, emphasizing that participation without action is discouraging, and implementation is more important than consultation.
- Community members expressed a desire for direct contact with support providers to listen to their needs, or channels like mail or websites for submitting requests or raising issues. They hope that when contacting organizations with requests, they will be asked what suits their needs.

"Support providers should have direct contact with individuals and listen to their needs, or there should be an email address or website where individuals can submit their requests or raise their issues." - Syrian female community member in the Southeastern Anatolia region, Türkiye.

"When we contact a UN organization to make a request, we hope to be asked what suits our needs." - Syrian female community member in Lebanon.

### *Willingness to speak directly with policymakers*

- If a real-time conversation with policymakers and senior UN officials was organized tomorrow for respondents to share their views and opinions on issues affecting them:
  - **50%** (n=587) said yes, they would participate, indicating readiness to speak directly with decision-makers immediately.
  - **25%** said they would maybe participate, suggesting openness with hesitation.
  - **16%** said no, they would not want to participate.

This indicates that there is a clear desire among community members to be heard and to make decision-makers aware of their realities in direct communication.

## The future of the humanitarian sector

### *Anticipated effects of humanitarian funding not being restored*

- When asked about the potential impact of a future where humanitarian funding would not be restored, most respondents described the effects as catastrophic, warning that communities already in crisis will lose their minimal safety nets. Anticipated consequences include hunger, lack of medical care, homelessness, trauma, and the collapse of social support.
- The future of Syria and the devastating impact on rebuilding efforts were frequently mentioned. People warned that without aid, there would be no viable path to recovery after war.

"By cutting this funding, you have destroyed an entire society, if not practically, then psychologically" - Syrian male community member in the Southeastern Anatolia region, Türkiye.

### *Changes communities believe are needed most*

- When asked about the structural changes in the humanitarian system and priorities for this "reset", communities were clear about what they want to see prioritized:
  - **50%** (n=599) want more focus on addressing root causes of poverty and crisis, not just temporary solutions.
  - **45%** want more emphasis on long-term solutions, such as job opportunities and education and rebuilding systems.
  - **41%** call for increased humanitarian budgets.
- In Yemen, these priorities were particularly strong, with **75%** (n=60) choosing root causes and **60%** long-term solutions, showing deep awareness that aid alone cannot fix chronic instability.

# Recommendations for community inclusion

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## 1. Radically increase genuine community inclusion and decision-making power

- **Ensure that aid is adaptable and connected to the realities and interests of communities.** Recognizing the repeated sense of exclusion expressed by community members, the foundations of the aid system need to be rebuilt in favor of meaningful community ownership and participation– not just as a reaction to the shift in the humanitarian discourse, but as a genuine commitment toward durable change.
- **Facilitate needs-based engagement between support providers and communities.** Communities seek to be recognized as active agents capable of articulating their own needs and solutions, rather than as passive ‘recipients’. They call for mechanisms and structured opportunities to shape priority setting, shifting the paradigm toward meaningful, sustained engagement where communities inform priority needs and methods.
- **Move beyond consultation without action.** Communities report growing fatigue with engagement efforts that do not lead to tangible outcomes. There is a strong demand for visible implementation and follow-through, not just superficial inclusion in discussions. This means involving communities at all stages of the decision-making process, including the design, implementation, and evaluation.

## 2. Build horizontal, two-way relationships, and enable knowledge-sharing and capacity transfer

- **Promote the systematic transfer of knowledge, capacity, and funding to local and community levels.** This includes equipping individuals with the tools, information, and agency to take on leadership roles in their contexts, moving beyond mere consultation by enabling real influence through meaningful localisation.
- **Reframe the role of communities from “data providers” to knowledge partners.** Humanitarian actors must foster relationships where communities are seen as engaged in and influenced by knowledge exchange. They must move beyond one-off data

collection to foster collaborative relationships, ensuring communities are actively involved in how their knowledge is used, how decisions are made, and how outcomes affect their lives.

- **Create direct, accessible channels for two-way communication between communities, donors, and decision-makers.** Similarly to the model of Upinion's Digital Engagement Platform, the humanitarian sector must prioritize bi-directional communication, where timely verified information can be shared with communities. They must be involved in continued feedback loops with organizations and relevant stakeholders reporting back to them on the results of collaborative partnerships and consultations.



# Contact

Noor Lekkerkerker  
CEO  
[noor@upinion.com](mailto:noor@upinion.com)

Augustine Hacques  
Researcher  
[augustine@upinion.com](mailto:augustine@upinion.com)