

DATA RESPONSIBILITY IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

INTRODUCTION

The management of data relating to crisis contexts, affected people and humanitarian operations allows the humanitarian community to respond more effectively and efficiently to needs. However, as organizations manage increasingly large volumes of data, they also face more complex challenges and risks. This is why ensuring the responsible use of data is so important.

Data responsibility in humanitarian action is the safe, ethical and effective management of personal and non-personal data for operational response. It is a critical issue for the sector to address and the stakes are high: the disclosure of sensitive data can lead to already vulnerable people and communities being further harmed or exploited. In addition to avoiding harm, responsible data management can lead to increased trust among humanitarian actors and with the people they seek to serve.

Data responsibility encompasses both data protection (safeguards that preserve the right to privacy with respect to the processing of personal data) and data security (measures that aim to preserve the confidentiality, availability and integrity of personal and non-personal data).

In recent years, the sector has seen the development of principles, policies and strategies for data responsibility. This includes system-wide guidance, such as the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action](#) (endorsed in February 2021 and revised in April 2023), as well as organization-specific guidance, such as the [ICRC Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) or the [UN Secretariat Data Protection and Privacy Policy](#) (agreed in March 2024).

Data responsibility is also increasingly integrated into other system-wide frameworks, including the [Handbook for Humanitarian Coordinators](#) (since February 2024), the [Core Humanitarian Standard](#) (since March 2024), and the [UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination Handbook](#) (since May 2024).

OCHA AND DATA RESPONSIBILITY

OCHA plays an important and unique role in humanitarian data management across its core functions of advocacy, coordination, financing, information management, and policy. Whereas many humanitarian organizations process data primarily for their own use, OCHA's data management is mainly focused on aggregation and analysis for the wider humanitarian community.

The Centre led the development of the [OCHA Data Responsibility Guidelines](#) which were agreed in October 2021 after two years of research and field testing. The Guidelines offer a set of principles, processes and tools that support actions for data responsibility in OCHA's work. They also address how OCHA should implement the IASC Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility at various levels of a response. OCHA's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan recognizes data responsibility as a key part of delivering on the organization's transformational priorities, and aims to position OCHA as a leader on this issue in the sector.

The Guidelines apply to all operational data managed directly by OCHA, managed on OCHA's behalf, or managed by humanitarian actors within activities coordinated by OCHA in different responses. This includes the following types of data:

- Data about the context in which a response is taking place (e.g., political, social and economic conditions, geospatial data, infrastructure) and the humanitarian situation of focus (e.g., security incidents, protection risks, displacement patterns and forecasts, drivers and underlying causes/factors of the situation or crisis).
- Data about the people affected by the situation and their needs, the threats and vulnerabilities they face, and their capacities.
- Data about humanitarian response actors and their activities (e.g., as reported in the who-is-doing-what-where operational presence and similar response tracking tools).

ACTIVATING ADOPTION OF DATA RESPONSIBILITY

Since 2019, the Centre has worked with a range of partners to publish a series of [guidance notes and tip sheets](#) on specific issues related to data responsibility in practice, such as data ethics, statistical disclosure control and cyber security. The notes have been translated into a number of languages including Arabic, French and Ukrainian. Most recently, in April 2024, we published a [Briefing Note on Artificial Intelligence and the Humanitarian Sector](#).

The Centre co-chairs the global [Data Responsibility Working Group](#) with the Danish Refugee Council, IOM and the UNHCR. We also encourage collective action on data responsibility through the [Humanitarian Data and Trust Initiative](#), which the Centre, ICRC and the Government of Switzerland launched in September 2020. Together, we developed a [Principled Framework](#) for Responsible Data Sharing Between Humanitarian Organizations and Donors.

To learn more about the Centre's work on data responsibility and to get involved, visit our [data responsibility page](#) or reach out to centrehumdata@un.org.

