DATA FRIENDLY SPACE

Humanitarian Leadership Academy

How are humanitarians using artificial intelligence in 2025?

Mapping current practice and future potential: initial insights report

July 2025

Key research takeaways

During May-June 2025, Data Friendly Space and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy conducted a global online survey on humanitarian adoption and aspirations across the sector.

This snapshot draws on responses from **2,539** global humanitarians across **144 countries and territories**, representing one of the most comprehensive global assessments into the current state of artificial intelligence (AI) usage and AI readiness in the humanitarian sector. Our aim is to ensure the findings reflect the full spectrum of humanitarian actors to reveal AI interest - or lack thereof - and adoption patterns across all types of humanitarian entities, spanning diverse contexts and uses.

1

Widespread interest but early-stage adoption

AI experimentation is common, but full AI integration is rare across humanitarian organizations.

2

Skills gap

While humanitarians are digitally capable, only 3.5% of survey respondents hold expert AI knowledge.

3

Uneven training

Across the board, organizations are not investing in training staff on AI, with 64% reporting little to none.

4

Limited governance

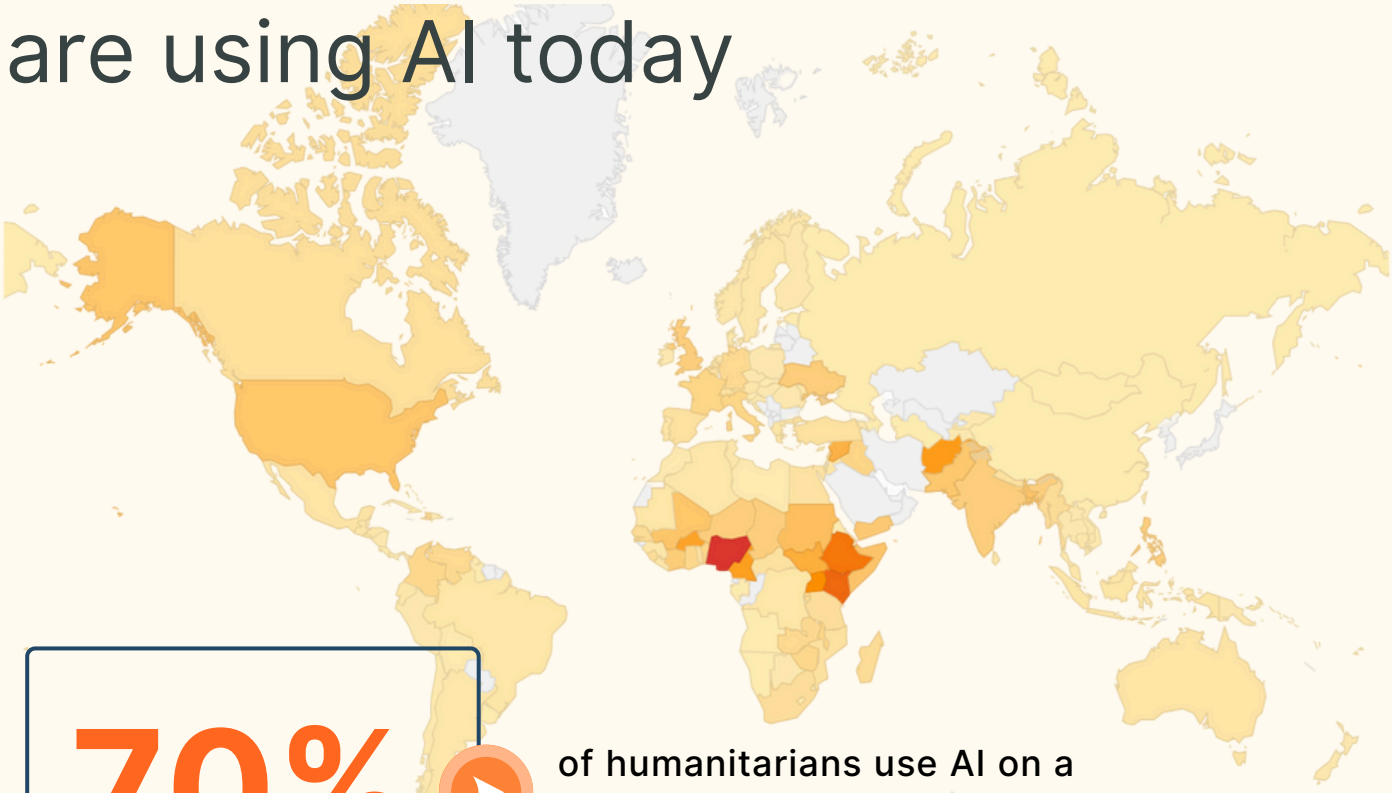
Fewer than 25% have formal AI policies, despite 70% of humanitarians using AI daily or weekly.

5

Diverse but fragmented tool use

Many AI tools in use but no cohesive ecosystem, with 69% using commercial agents such as ChatGPT

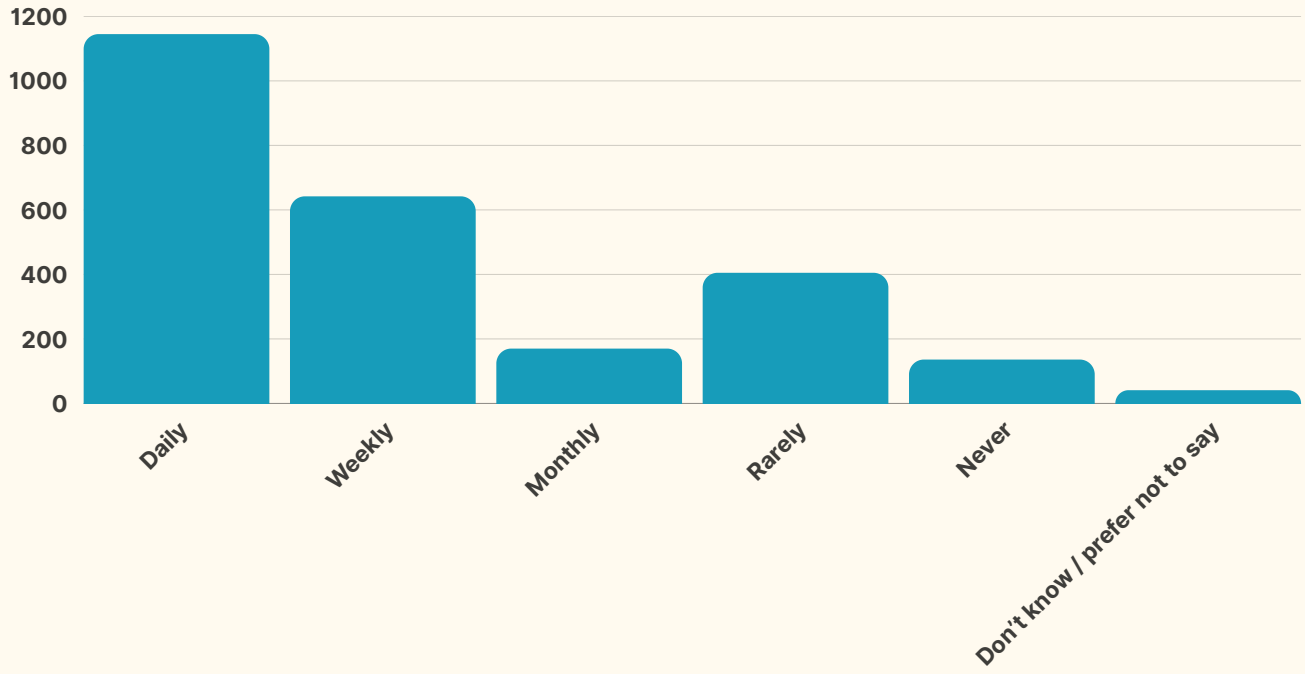
Humanitarians around the world are using AI today



70% of humanitarians use AI on a daily or weekly basis

**Heat map shows the geographical distribution of survey respondents who are currently using AI. Darker colors represent higher concentrations of respondents.*

AI Usage Frequency

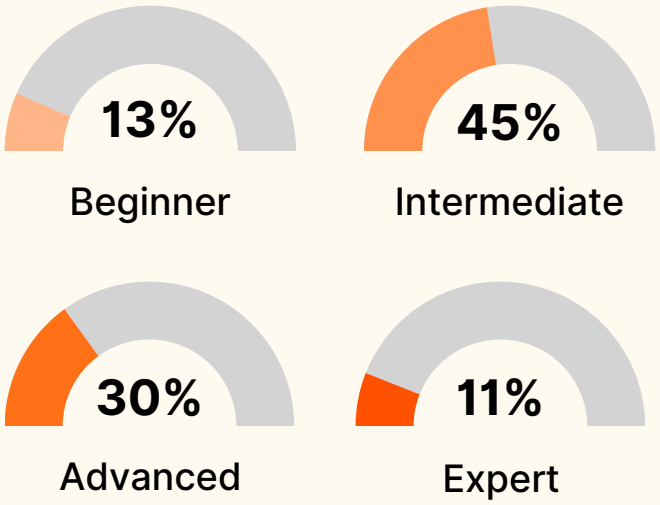


Deeper dive: individual AI skills

Expert AI-specific skills lag behind digital capabilities

Most respondents rated their digital capabilities as intermediate or advanced, yet reported even stronger confidence with AI-specific tools at beginner and intermediate levels. This could suggest that AI may be more intuitive than traditional technologies, potentially serving as a new entry point for technology adoption and helping less digitally confident staff build broader technical skills through tools that better align with humanitarian workflows.

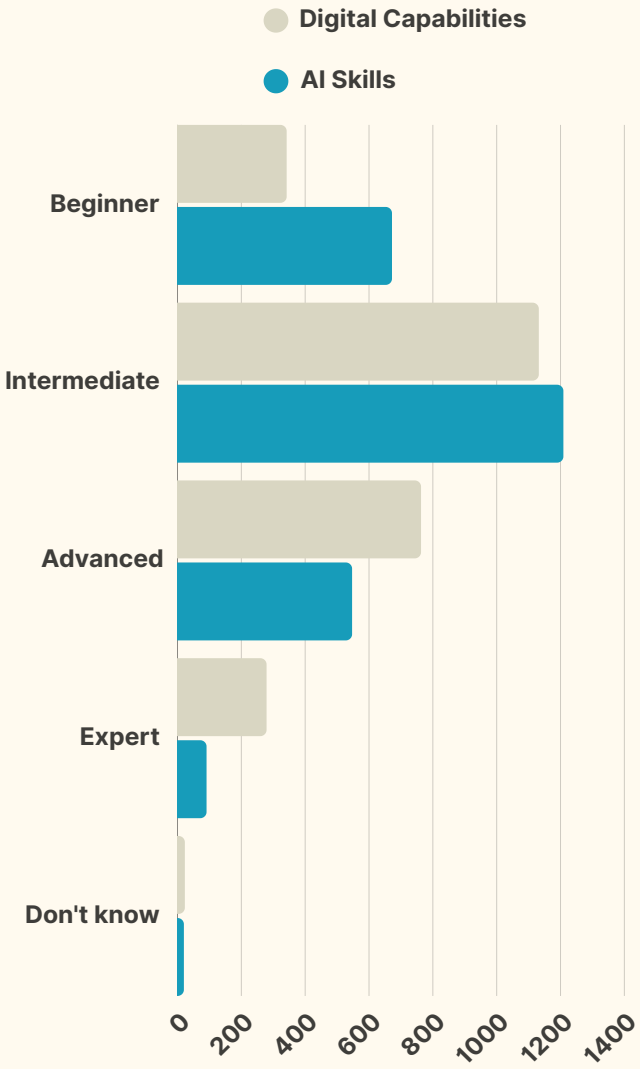
Self-reported digital skills



*1% of respondents reported don't know or prefer not to say

Digital skills vs. AI skills

Humanitarians report significantly higher AI skills than general digital capabilities at beginner and intermediate levels, but when it comes to advanced and expert levels, there is a knowledge gap.



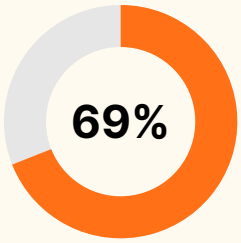
AI training must address varying levels of digital literacy to ensure no one is left behind in this digital transformation. There needs to be recognition for AI's digital accessibility and to utilize this as an entry point for broader digital capacity strengthening.

Humanitarians are embedding AI into their workflows

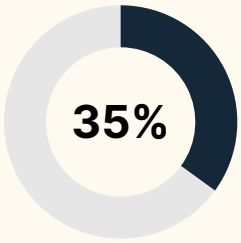
Humanitarians are using diverse AI tools but commercial agents such as ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot are currently dominating humanitarian applications

Current AI tools

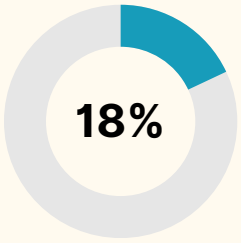
While current tool adoption shows an overwhelming focus on commercial AI platforms, respondents tell us that they are also using AI tools for translation, communications, and data analysis.



use **commercial AI agents** (e.g. ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude)



use **AI translation and language tools** for their work



use **AI-powered data analytics tools** in their analysis

Common humanitarian AI use cases

- **Report writing**
- **Data summarization**
- **Translation**
- **Proposal development**
- **Research assistance**

Commercial tools: a balancing act

Commercial agents enable access but come with data risks, can miss cultural and contextual nuances, and downplay ethical concerns. Purpose-built humanitarian solutions are less accessible, but could mitigate such liabilities.

Future tool priorities

Looking ahead, humanitarians are prioritizing the expansion of AI capabilities in data analytics and forecasting, monitoring and evaluation, and risk and needs assessment. This expansion must be accompanied by responsible implementation.

Humanitarians face barriers using AI at an organizational level

The humanitarian AI paradox

Our survey reveals that while humanitarians are rapidly adopting AI tools and showing the sector's readiness for AI transformation, organizations lack infrastructure, policies, and training for responsible scaling. This gap creates risks around data protection, ethics, and effectiveness - critical concerns in contexts requiring neutrality, humanity, and accountability.

Most organizations have yet to fully integrate AI into their work

The humanitarian sector remains in the **early AI adoption stages**, with most organizations in **experimentation** or **pilot phases** rather than achieving full integration into their work.

26% of respondents report their organizations either have **no adoption** – not started yet **but intending to do so**.

25% report that their organizations are in the **experimentation or piloting phase.**

Only **8%** report AI is **widely integrated.**

Main barriers to organizational adoption of AI

Technical expertise

Funding constraints

Data quality & availability

Key enablers of AI organizational adoption

Ethical frameworks

Training

Institutional infrastructure

> **Currently use of AI in our organization is individual-driven and not quite a discussion in the office. Not that the organization is for or against use of AI but there are generally no guidelines that I know of at the moment.**
>
> - Survey respondent

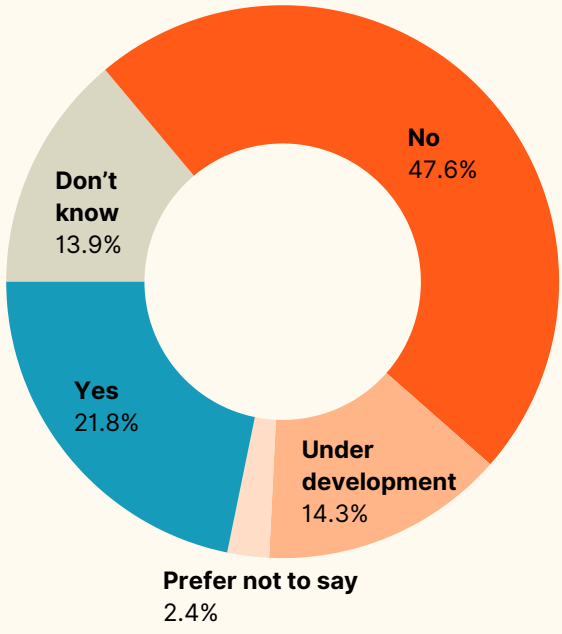
Humanitarians want support for ethical and responsible AI use

Less than a quarter of respondents told us that their organization has established AI policies

Our survey highlights a significant gap in organizational frameworks for ethical and responsible AI use in humanitarian contexts where accountability and protection standards are paramount.

Organizational AI Policy

Only **21.8%** of organizations have an AI policy in place. The absence of formal AI policies can create a governance vacuum where individual humanitarian workers are making AI adoption decisions without institutional guidance or oversight.



Ethical concerns

- **Protection and privacy concerns**
- **Environmental impact of AI**
- **Autonomy, human dignity and dependency**

Respondents highlighted **protection and privacy** concerns and AI's influence on humanitarian decision-making as significant**.** Concerns were also expressed about a potential **over-reliance on AI** rather than participatory approaches to needs assessment.

The **environmental impact of AI** was also concerning to many. With increasing humanitarian contexts attributed to climate crisis, the resources needed for AI use worried those with more AI experience in debating and using AI.

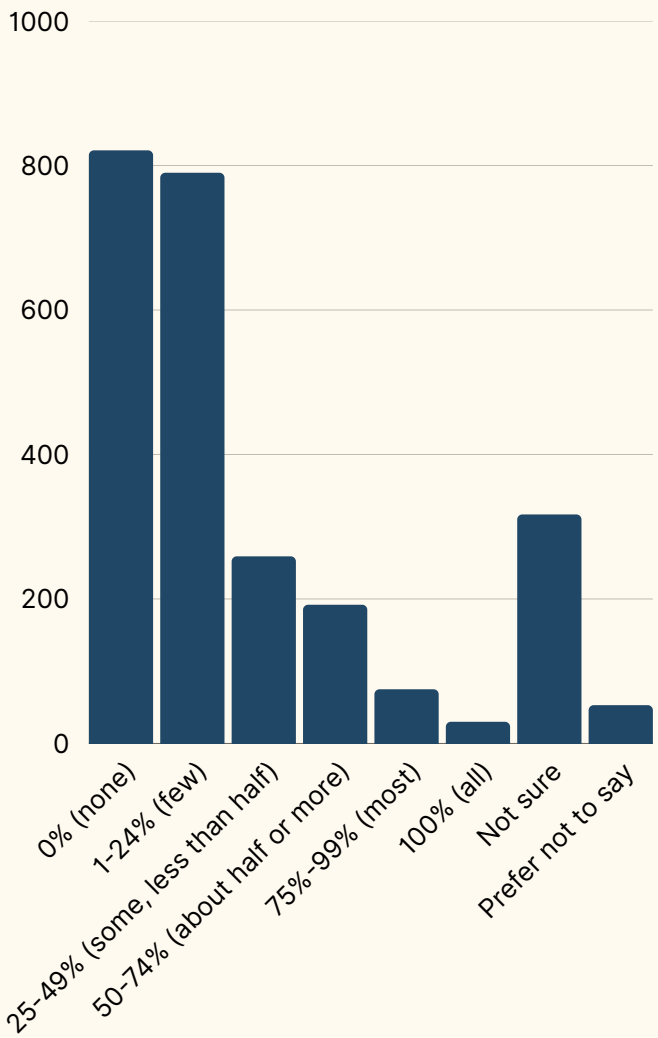
> **AI doesn't exhibit emotional intelligence while taking decisions or providing feedback on issues. Therefore, I am worried about AI adoption in making sensitive decisions on humanitarian matters.**
>
> - Survey respondent

High AI learning demand, low organizational support

Humanitarians lack opportunities to develop the specialized knowledge needed for ethical and effective AI use in crisis response

Academics and research institutions have received more AI training than other humanitarian actors. International and local actors receive similar training levels, though this may change as international organizations expand AI training initiatives to reach more colleagues.

Organizational AI training coverage



64% of respondents report that their organizations provide little to no training in AI tools

For those who have been offered training, the main method is through online courses, workshops or self directed.

Closing reflections

The findings reveal a sector in transition, where individual innovation is outpacing institutional capacity.

While this creates immediate challenges around governance and ethical use, it also demonstrates the humanitarian sector's readiness for AI transformation. The path forward requires coordinated investment in training, infrastructure, and governance frameworks that can harness AI's potential while maintaining humanitarian principles.

We thank the 2,539 humanitarians who contributed their time and insights to this research. Your participation provides invaluable evidence to guide the sector's AI transformation, ensuring technological advancement serves humanitarian goals while upholding our core values of humanity, neutrality, and accountability.

Notes and credits

Research team: Madigan Johnson (Data Friendly Space), Ka Man Parkinson and Lucy Hall (Humanitarian Leadership Academy). **Image credits:** Save the Children (cover), Getty Images (back page). Findings are presented for information purposes - our aim is to spark conversation on humanitarian AI learning and training. Full report launches August 2025.
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