DATA FRIENDLY SPACE

Humanitarian Leadership Academy

# How are humanitarians using artificial intelligence in 2025?

## Mapping current practice and future potential: full insights report

August 2025

# Contents page



Cover image: Save the Children

# Glossary of terms

**Given the interdisciplinary nature of this research, the following glossary defines key terms used throughout the report for readers from diverse professional backgrounds.**

**Artificial Intelligence (AI)** - Computer systems that can perform tasks typically requiring human intelligence, such as understanding language, recognizing patterns, and making decisions.

**Bias (in AI)** - Systematic errors or prejudices in AI outputs

**Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)** - Community-based advocacy and service groups

**Classical AI** - Traditional AI approaches using machine learning, neural networks, and rule-based systems.

**Climate-affected contexts** - Areas impacted by environmental disasters

**Co-design/participatory design** - Involving end-users in technology development

**Commercial AI agents** - General-purpose AI tools like ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, Perplexity.

**Conflict-affected contexts** - Areas affected by armed conflict or violence

**Data sovereignty** - Rights and control over data collection, storage, and usage.

**Digital divide** - Unequal access to digital technologies and skills

**Digital literacy** - Skills needed to use digital technologies effectively

**Do No Harm** - Core humanitarian principle ensuring interventions do not inadvertently cause harm.

**GDPR** - General Data Protection Regulation - Information privacy regulation in the European Union (EU) and the European Economic Area (EEA).

# Glossary of terms

**Generative AI (Gen AI)** - AI systems that create new content (text, images, etc) such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, Perplexity.

**GIS** - Geographic Information System

**Governance vacuum** - Widespread AI usage without corresponding organizational policies or frameworks.

**Humanitarian actors** - Organizations, agencies, and individuals involved in delivering humanitarian assistance, including UN agencies, NGOs, civil society organizations, governments, and local communities.

**Human oversight** - Human monitoring and control of AI systems

**Humanitarian principles** - Core values of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

**Implementation gap** - The disconnect between individual AI adoption and organizational integration.

**(I)NGO** - (International) Non-governmental Organization

**Key informant interviews (KIIs)** - In-depth interviews with selected survey participants

**Locally led -** Humanitarian action designed, implemented, and managed by local actors rather than international organizations, emphasizing community ownership and decision-making power.

**Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) -** Ongoing assessment of program effectiveness

**Needs assessment** - Systematic evaluation of humanitarian requirements

**OCHA** - Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

# Glossary of terms

**Paradox** - A statement or situation that contradicts itself, yet upon closer examination, may be true or contain a deeper truth. It often challenges our expectations or common sense. In this report, the humanitarian AI paradox describes how widespread individual AI adoption coexists with limited organizational integration, mixed effectiveness perceptions, and fragmented governance approaches, revealing deeper systemic challenges in humanitarian technology adoption.

**Protracted crises** - Long-term humanitarian emergencies

**Purpose-built AI solutions** - AI tools designed specifically for humanitarian contexts

**Shadow AI** - Unsanctioned use of AI tools by employees without formal organizational approval or oversight

**Thematic analysis** - Qualitative research method using iterative coding

**UN agencies** - United Nations operational organizations

**WASH** - Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Image: Save the Children

# 1. Executive summary

## The Humanitarian AI paradox: a striking disconnect between individual and organizational AI practices

The Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA) and Data Friendly Space (DFS) present this joint report on current usage and applications of artificial intelligence (AI) in the humanitarian sector.

Drawing on insights from **2,539** survey respondents from across **144** countries and territories, this exploratory research represents the first comprehensive baseline study of AI adoption across the humanitarian sector, capturing a timely snapshot of how AI is currently being used, understood, and experienced by practitioners worldwide.

AI usage in the humanitarian sector is global: **93%** of respondents report using or having used AI tools, with **70%** integrating them into daily or weekly workflows.

Yet, despite this global uptake of AI tools, humanitarian attitudes toward AI effectiveness are mixed. Less than half of respondents agree that AI has improved operational efficiency, while only **38%** believe it has led to better decision-making. Nearly **30%** remain neutral or uncertain about AI's benefits, suggesting usage is driven more by accessibility and necessity than conviction.

Compounding this complexity, organizations appear to lack the infrastructure, policies and training programs necessary to support responsible scaling. Only **8%** of respondents report AI as widely integrated in their organizations, while just **22%** have formal organizational AI policies in place.

This pattern, which we term the '**humanitarian AI paradox,**' emerged from the tensions and contradictions voiced by practitioners themselves, and describes the disconnect between widespread individual AI adoption and organizational readiness, compounded by mixed individual attitudes about AI's effectiveness.

# Key findings

**Our analysis reveals five critical themes that define the current humanitarian AI landscape.**

1. **Individual AI adoption outpaces organizational readiness:** While humanitarian workers are rapidly taking up AI tools, most organizations remain in early experimentation phases, creating risks around governance and ethical oversight.

2. **Accessible AI tools, limited specialist expertise:** Conversational AI interfaces have lowered barriers to AI adoption, yet despite widespread uptake by humanitarians, sophisticated AI expertise remains scarce across the sector.

3. **Fragmented AI training approaches:** The majority of humanitarian workers receive little organizational AI training, relying instead on self-directed learning that may be inadequate for humanitarian-specific contexts.

4. **AI governance vacuum:** The prevalence of individual AI usage without corresponding organizational policies creates significant risks around data sovereignty, privacy protection, and alignment with humanitarian principles.

5. **Commercial AI tool dominance:** Heavy reliance on general-purpose commercial platforms rather than purpose-built humanitarian solutions raises questions about contextual appropriateness and data security.

# Research implications

## This research identifies urgent challenges requiring coordinated sector response.

The '***humanitarian AI paradox***' reveals that while individual innovation drives rapid adoption, the sector needs aligned approaches to governance frameworks, training, and ethical guidelines to inform AI decision-making in humanitarian contexts.

Among these areas, training and capacity strengthening emerge as the sector's highest priority for collaborative exploration, together with access to AI tools and platforms (including purpose-built humanitarian systems), funding, resources, and governance mechanisms.

The findings suggest the sector is at a critical juncture where structured dialogue and action plans addressing these challenges could help identify pathways for more effective humanitarian response while maintaining core humanitarian principles.

### Notices and disclaimer

This report has been prepared to promote learning and dialogue and is not intended to form prescriptive policy advice. Findings are based on survey data and interviews from May-July 2025, supported by a literature review, representing a snapshot of AI adoption during this period. Organizations should conduct their own assessments based on specific contexts, requirements, and risk tolerances. This research was conducted independently without external funding. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, the authors and organizations accept no responsibility for decisions made based on the information contained in this report.

For transparency, Data Friendly Space (DFS) owns the GANNET AI platform mentioned in this report, but neither DFS nor the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA) endorse any specific AI tools, platforms or organizations referred to in this report. AI tools were used to support this research project including workflows, survey design, analysis, reporting and reviewing. No personal data was shared with AI tools or third parties and the project is compliant with GDPR regulations. Images included in this report are used for illustration purposes and do not depict research participants or AI initiatives.

# 2. About this research

## This collaborative research - involving a global survey, key informant interviews, and a rapid literature review - was designed with community participation at its core.

This community-centered approach recognizes that meaningful insights about AI in humanitarian work must come from practitioners themselves, including underrepresented voices from low-resource settings, fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

This research occurs at an inflection point for the humanitarian sector. In March 2025, the UN announced a humanitarian reset in response to what Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher describes as a "*profound crisis of legitimacy, morale, and funding*".[1] This is documented in ALNAP's Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, which describes the sector as "*entering financial crisis*."[2] With global international humanitarian assistance falling 11% in 2024 - the largest cut ever recorded - and potential government funding drops of 34-45% by the end of 2025, organizations face resource constraints that fundamentally shape AI adoption approaches.

Given these challenges and rapid AI development, coordinated approaches to AI adoption are essential. The sector cannot afford to navigate this transformation without understanding current practice and future potential.

The global engagement witnessed throughout this research demonstrates a strong appetite for learning and alignment on values across geographical regions, organizational types, and AI experience levels. This research provides a foundation for informed AI decision-making, policy development, and resource allocation that aligns with humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

**Further reading | AI in the humanitarian sector: historical context**

Lucy Hall has written a companion piece available on the HLA website [3] for readers seeking broader context on AI in humanitarian action - including the historical development of humanitarian technology, the emergence of generative AI, and how this research builds on existing sector initiatives.

# 2.1. About the partners

**This collaborative project is believed to be the world's first comprehensive snapshot of AI adoption across the sector in 2025, combining HLA's extensive global learning networks with DFS's technical expertise in humanitarian AI and data.**

As AI continues to reshape industries worldwide, its role in humanitarian response remains an emerging and vital area of exploration.

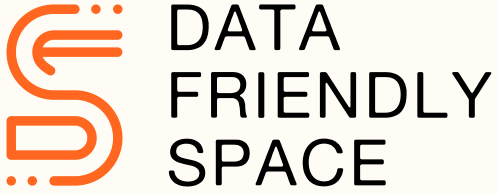
## About the organizations

The mission of the **Humanitarian Leadership Academy** is to accelerate the movement for locally led humanitarian action – one that reimagines how response happens and how those delivering it are best supported.

With over a decade of strengthening the capacity of humanitarians worldwide, a powerful network of allies, and a thriving community of alumni, we bring together local and global partnerships to drive real change. Our digital learning platform, Kaya, connects 875,000 learners, and our social media presence engages 1.2 million people, making high-quality learning accessible worldwide.

**Data Friendly Space (DFS)** provides trustworthy digital tools and actionable data that enable social impact organizations to fulfill their missions more effectively and respond to crises with greater precision and speed.

As an international NGO that stands at the intersection of humanitarian action and technological innovation, our capabilities span artificial intelligence, data ecosystems, and humanitarian data analysis, supported by specialized teams that bridge research and development with practical implementation.

## About the project team

This project was co-led by three team members using agile approaches, each bringing specialized skillsets and experience.

### Ka Man Parkinson

Ka Man is a Communications and Marketing Specialist at the Humanitarian Leadership Academy with 20 years of experience in the international education and non-profit sectors. In her role at the HLA, Ka Man leads on community building initiatives, including the HLA's Humanitarian Learner survey she co-led in 2024, with the aim of connecting and amplifying diverse voices and inspiring action. Ka Man is based in the UK.

### Madigan Johnson

Madigan is the Head of Communication at Data Friendly Space. She is a digital expert specializing in data-driven user behavior and experience, co-design, and storytelling, with a focus on the practical applications of artificial intelligence in social impact contexts. She contributes to DFS's mission on responsible AI implementation and human oversight in AI-powered humanitarian applications. Madigan is based in Slovenia.

### Lucy Hall

Lucy is a Data and Evidence Specialist in the Humanitarian Leadership Academy. With a professional background in data science, Lucy holds 10 years of experience in humanitarian program development and implementation. Her research at the HLA focuses on advancing locally led humanitarian principles and approaches, with a specific focus on how technology and innovation play a role in shaping this agenda. Lucy has published articles in respected humanitarian publications. Lucy is based in the UK.

# 2.2 Research approach and methodology

**This research adopted a snapshot survey approach to capture a timely overview of AI use across the humanitarian sector.**

Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, the study prioritized breadth of insight and diverse voices to surface real-world experiences and perceptions in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

## Data collection

- Global survey: 2,539 respondents from 144 countries and territories (May-June 2025).
- Key informant interviews: in-depth interviews in English selected from survey participants (July 2025).
- Multi-language accessibility: Survey available in English with translation in Arabic, French, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish, and Ukrainian.

## Sampling and distribution

- Survey promoted and distributed through HLA and DFS networks, social media platforms, and organizational newsletters.
- HLA produced a podcast episode to support the survey launch and to explain research rationale.
- Eligibility was intentionally broad - anyone self-identifying as connected to the humanitarian sector, across all roles, regions, and experience levels, including those not using AI.

## Key informant interviews

- Conducted by HLA in July 2025 with six survey respondents who opted in to follow-up research.
- Participants selected based on lines of inquiry from open survey comments, plus balanced demographic representation.
- 16 survey respondents invited, nine accepted, and six participated based on availability
- Respondents worked in diverse roles: data and information management, program manager, operations, WASH, and technology.

## Interview format

- 45-minute video calls using a semi-structured format, allowing respondents to expand their views and experiences of AI in their contexts.

# 2.3 Limitations

## Timing and scope

The three-month global timeframe may have limited depth of analysis, particularly regarding cultural and contextual nuances across different humanitarian settings.

## Survey language

Originally in English with AI-powered translations in six additional languages, potentially affecting accuracy, particularly with specialist humanitarian terminology.

## Digital access bias

Purely digital tools created potential bias in areas with limited internet access, particularly affecting conflict-affected contexts where infrastructure constraints and state digital limitations may restrict AI experimentation.

## Sampling bias

Distribution through DFS and HLA networks, notably Kaya platform users, likely resulted in respondents with higher digital literacy and more positive technology attitudes than the broader humanitarian workforce.

## Interview representation

Final sample underrepresented women and non-technical team members due to acceptance rates and availability constraints.

## Research team perspective

The team recognizes that their Global North NGO positioning and English as their first language may not fully capture local contexts and barriers faced by communities most affected by the digital divide.

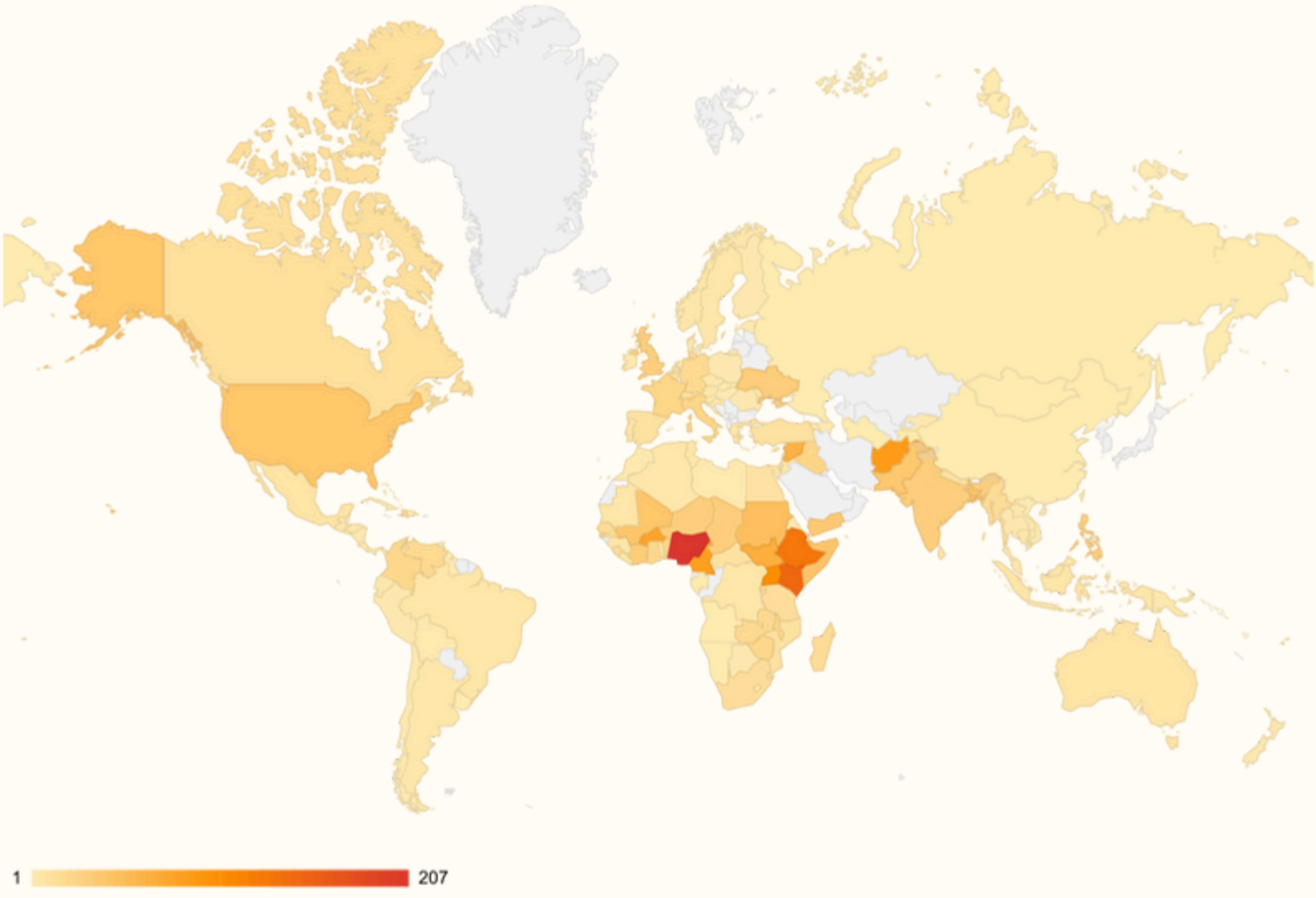
# 2.4 Survey respondent profiles

The survey captured responses from a diverse range of organizations, work areas, experience levels, and regions. The high representation from Sub-Saharan Africa (**46%** of responses) is particularly notable.

## Geographic region

*Based on work location*

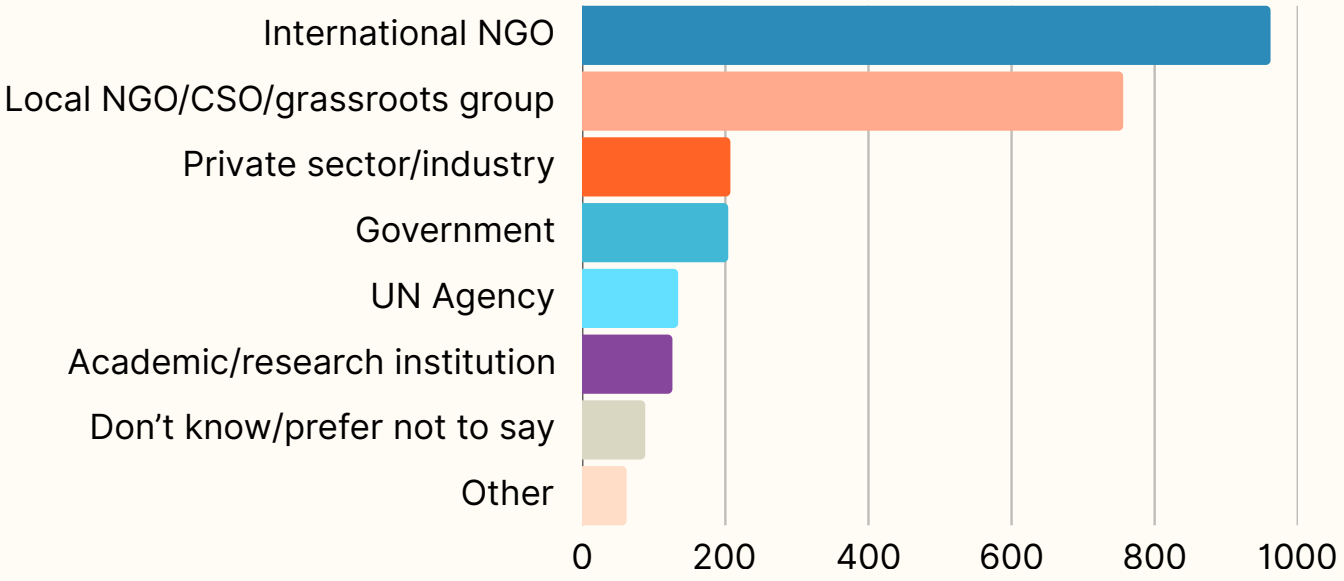
- Sub-Saharan Africa (45.8%)
- Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (17%)
- Asia-Pacific (11.7%)
- Global / multiple regions (7.4%)
- Prefer not to say (7%)
- Latin America & Caribbean (4.4%)
- Western Europe (3%)
- Eastern Europe (2.5%)
- North America (1.1%)



# 2.4 Survey respondent profiles

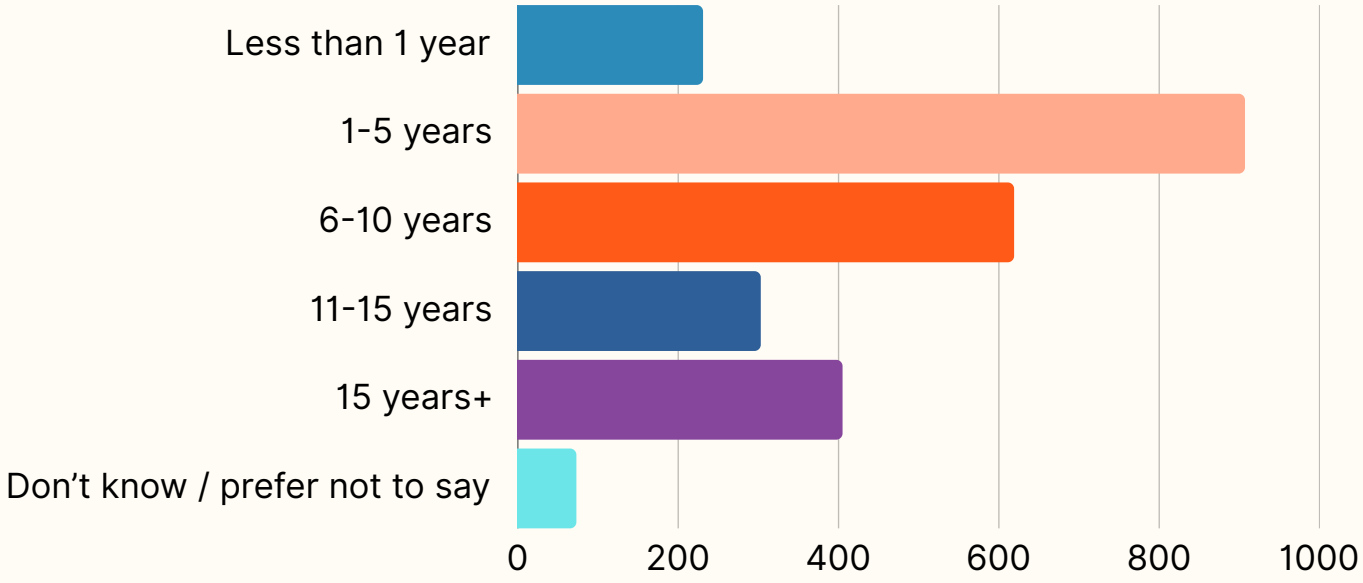
## Type of organization

While international NGOs were the dominant respondents, local NGO/CSO/grassroots groups were not far behind, allowing for a diverse spread of organizations represented.




## Respondents' years of humanitarian sector experience

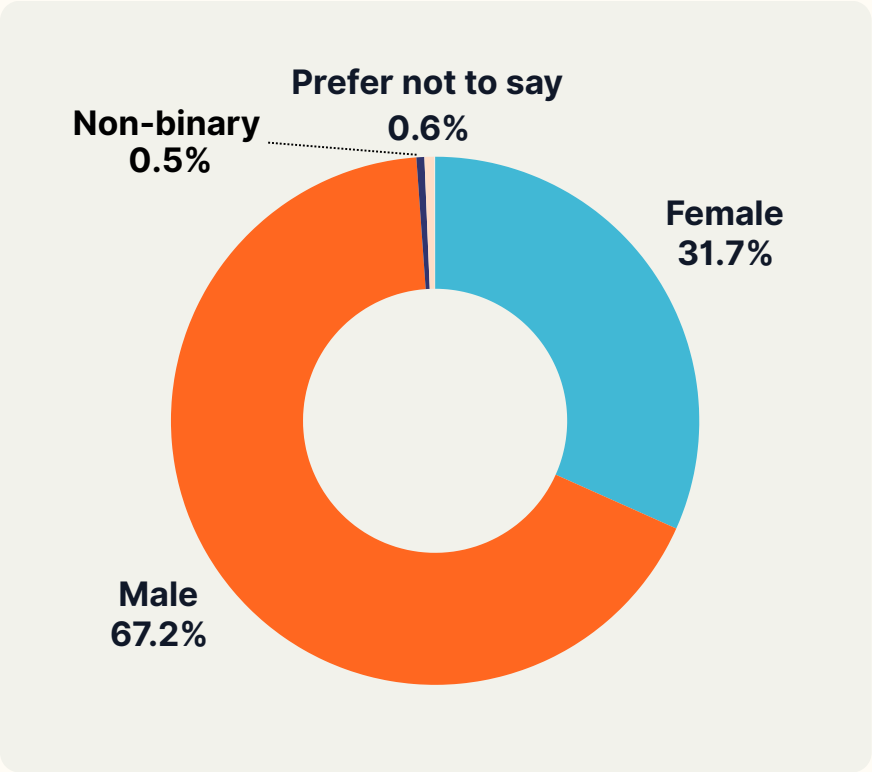
While less experienced respondents made up the majority, there was still representation among those with 10+ years of experience.



# 2.4 Survey respondent profiles

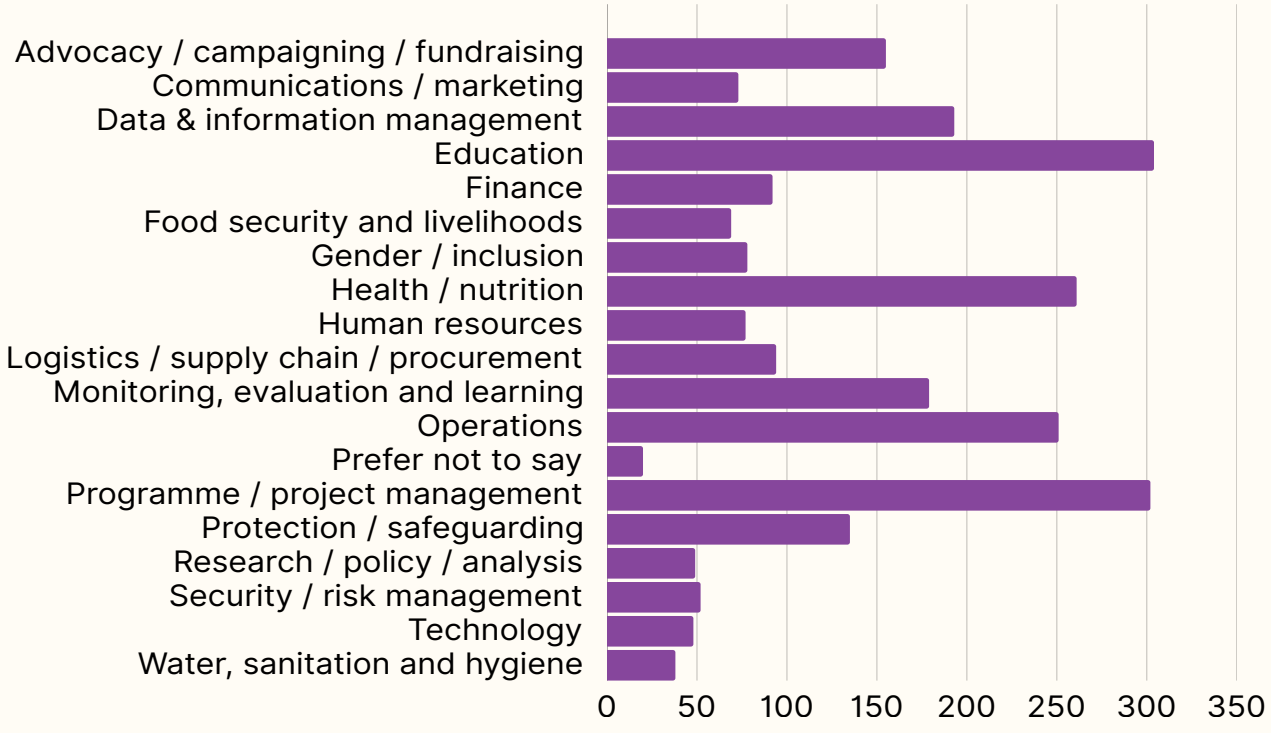
## Gender

The gender composition respondents follows the profile of the HLA's global humanitarian learner network, representative of the sector as a whole.




## Areas of work

Humanitarians from across different fields of practice responded in this survey, showing that AI is a widespread tool across disciplines.



## Explore our survey data: global dashboard

Data Friendly Space has created an interactive visual dashboard enabling users to explore the dataset in closer detail. All data has been anonymized.

Apply filters to explore the survey response data by:

- Organization type
- Gender
- Level in organization
- Country
- Area of work


This survey and dashboard provides the capabilities and potential for conducting future iterations of the survey, tracking respondents over time and capturing evolving perspectives on AI adoption in humanitarian contexts.

Scan the QR code to view the dashboard or access via the report website

# 3. Research findings: current humanitarian AI landscape in 2025

## Humanitarian community insights have revealed five interconnected and often contradictory themes that consistently emerged across contexts - what we term the ‘humanitarian AI paradox’.

Individual AI adoption drives training demand among humanitarians, yet without organizational support, workers resort to so-called ‘*shadow AI usage*’ [4] - unofficial organizational use of AI - which is creating governance gaps.

Humanitarians are using widely available free or low-cost commercial tools to support their work (e.g. ChatGPT, Claude, and Copilot). In contrast, there are low adoption levels of organizational AI approaches, including purpose-built humanitarian AI solutions.

Understanding these interconnections is crucial - addressing themes in isolation risks missing the systemic nature of the humanitarian AI paradox. The fundamental challenge remains: harnessing individual innovation while building institutional infrastructure for responsible, effective AI deployment in humanitarian contexts.

Image: Getty

# 3.1 The AI implementation gap: individual adoption outpacing organizational readiness

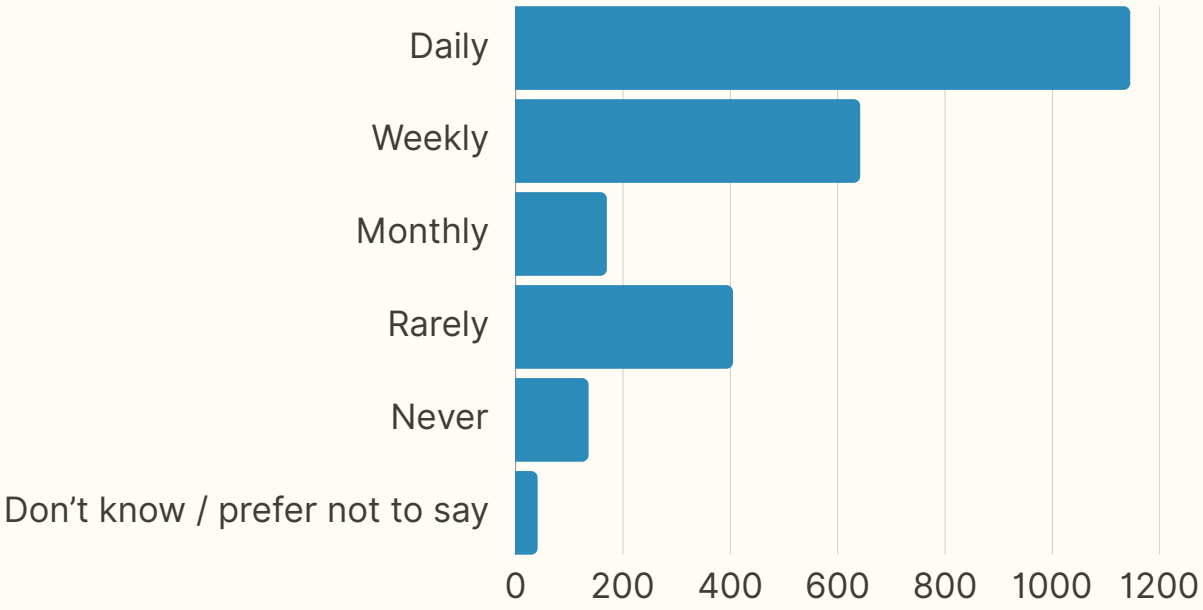
**The implementation gap between individual and organizational AI adoption forms the foundation of the humanitarian AI paradox, revealing how humanitarian workers drive change from the ground up, often lacking organizational frameworks and support.**

Understanding this gap requires examining multiple dimensions: current adoption patterns, leadership dynamics, implementation barriers, and regional variations that shape how AI is being integrated across the sector.

## Widespread individual adoption

**93%** of survey respondents are currently using or have tried an AI tool in their work. Humanitarians worldwide are rapidly integrating AI tools into their daily workflows, with **70%** using AI in their work daily or weekly.

### Frequency of AI tool usage for work among humanitarians



Humanitarians from all organizational types, from large international NGOs to local community organizations, are personally using AI and embedding AI tools into their workflows. AI tools are being used to support and enhance efficiency in critical areas including professional communication, data analysis, report writing, needs assessments, and more.

These high levels of individual adoption stand in sharp contrast to organizational readiness. Notably, humanitarians are predominantly using their judgment and discretion for how tools are used, often within teams and not as part of an official organization-wide approach.

> **We use AI for preparing the needs assessment...to create an Excel template to remove duplicate entries in our beneficiary list. This helps us to do this process very quickly and effectively which helps us to prevent double assistance, and to reach more vulnerable beneficiaries. We don't upload the data directly to AI as it should be protected and not be shared. I do this process within my team, and share my AI knowledge with my own team members.**
> - Interview participant working for an INGO in Yemen

Image: Adobe

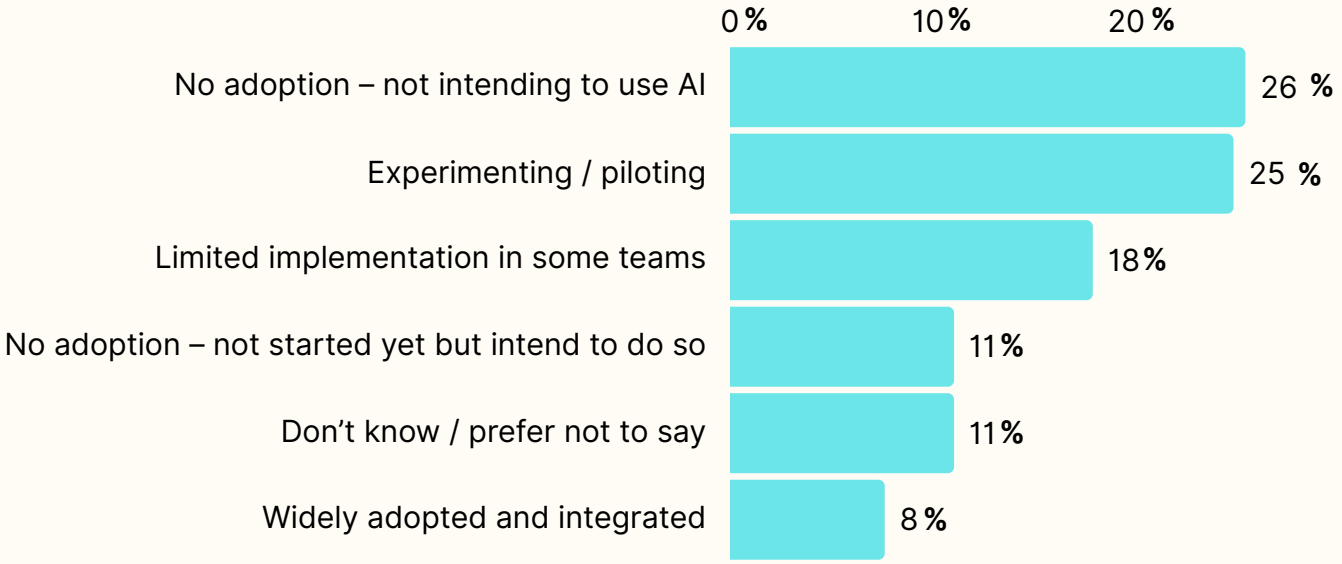
## Organizational AI adoption remains early stage

This contrast between individual and organizational adoption reveals complex dynamics around leadership perspectives and implementation challenges.

Only **8%** of respondents report AI as widely integrated across their organizations, indicating that full-scale implementation remains uncommon.

**25%** of organizations operate in the experimentation or pilot phases, suggesting active exploration without committed deployment. Another **26%** have not yet initiated any AI adoption efforts but plan to do so, while approximately **11%** explicitly state no intention to adopt AI technologies.

### Organizational AI adoption




> **I use AI personally in my work but there isn't any organization-wide adoption or sanctioned tools. One thing I do a lot is dictate into my mic and then have AI polish it into a better organized email or document, which saves me a lot of time.**
> - Survey respondent

## Leadership perspectives: the decision-maker dilemmas

Leaders face challenges in navigating a way forward for organizational AI usage, with wide variation in attitudes and approach - with some respondents expressing adoption before real readiness, whereas in other organizations there is adoption without leadership engagement.

**41%** of survey respondents believe senior leadership holds AI decision-making authority, yet among 317 senior leaders, only **21%** report organizational AI policies.

> **There is hype and interest within the organization, but there is a big gap... the public discourse is fueling AI. Middle and higher management are jumping on the bandwagon to position us as a modern organization.**
>
> - Interview participant working for an INGO in Italy

Despite widespread adoption across the sector, approximately **21%** of humanitarians have never or rarely incorporated AI into their workflows, predominantly from middle to upper management positions.

Interestingly, **40%** of those respondents who are AI '*skeptics*' - those who rarely or never use AI in their work - come from international NGOs, which may reflect institutional caution rather than technological inability. Data privacy and security concerns dominate their reluctance, with managers particularly wary of exposing sensitive data.

> **Humanitarian organizations often collect sensitive data (e.g. refugee status, health records). Using AI on such data can risk breaches or misuse if not properly secured.**
> - Survey respondent

The lack of organizational clarity - particularly evident in respondents from INGOs and UN agencies - creates leadership challenges in balancing innovation with compliance. This reveals a critical disconnect: while staff expect leaders to guide AI adoption, most leaders haven't established the frameworks to do so effectively. These implementation challenges manifest differently across regional contexts, with infrastructure realities creating both barriers and unexpected opportunities.

## Organizational and regional variations in the implementation gap

Organizational type appears to influence adoption patterns and concerns. Of the respondents that state they do not intend to adopt AI, local organizations (including NGOs, civil society organizations, and grassroots groups) demonstrate heightened concerns regarding ethical implications and security risks. This difference may reflect these organizations' closer proximity to affected communities and their direct accountability to vulnerable populations.

Local organizations can face a dual challenge: operating with inherently limited budgets while simultaneously lacking the technical infrastructure and resources necessary for effective AI implementation.

This creates a compounding effect where organizations that could potentially benefit most from AI efficiency gains, those working directly with affected populations in resource-constrained environments are least able to access these technologies.

> **We are hoping to seek funding to adopt AI in ways that would transform how our structures operate in all its activities, as well as encourage others and the community at large to adopt - due to the gains we are seeing even with limited adoption of AI within our structure.**
> - Survey respondent

Implementation barriers manifest differently across global contexts, with infrastructure constraints creating particular challenges in hard-to-reach areas.

> **Connectivity and infrastructure challenges limit the deployment and effectiveness of AI in my organization by restricting access to real-time data, computational resources, and reliable communication. These limitations can lead to data gaps, system failures, and exclusion of vulnerable populations from critical services.**
> - Survey respondent

Interestingly, a theme emerging through the open comments and surveys - supported by high levels of research engagement from Global South humanitarian workers (**75%** of survey respondents are from Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA, and Asia-Pacific regions compared to just **4%** from Western Europe and North America) - suggests that resource constraints may conversely be driving interest in AI-driven innovation.

> **Sometimes, weak internet or power problems make it harder to use AI tools, especially in remote areas. But we try to find solutions, like using offline tools or lighter apps that work with low internet. These challenges push us to be more creative and find better ways to bring AI to the people who need it most.**
> - Survey respondent

This highlights another facet of the humanitarian AI paradox: in low-resource settings, while infrastructure barriers can limit AI implementation, the accessibility of conversational AI tools and motivated AI adopters can reduce barriers to engagement and provide opportunities for creative experimentation.

> **We are working with AI chatbots on the aprendIA platform in the continuing training of teachers and this is already highly appreciated by the educational authorities of our country, the DRC, at the provincial and national levels**
> - Survey respondent

This implementation gap, combined with skills, training, and governance challenges explored in the following sections, shapes the complex landscape of humanitarian AI adoption. Beyond regional variations, resource constraints create additional barriers to closing the implementation gap.

## Investment challenges

**43%** of respondents considered their organization to have 'very low' levels of budget allocated to AI research, technology infrastructure, and training programs, compared to just **2.3%** who considered it to be 'very high'.

Limited investment constrains AI adoption across organizations, creating a cycle where organizations cannot justify AI investments due to limited expertise, while being unable to develop expertise without initial investment.

### Organizational AI investment levels

| | 1: Very low | 2: Low | 3: Moderate | 4: High | 5: Very high | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Budget allocation** | 43.1% | 21% | 15.5% | 3.5% | 2.3% | 14.6% |
| **Staff training** | 38% | 24.9% | 18.7% | 5.5% | 3% | 9.8% |
| **Infrastructure & technology** | 33.2% | 24.7% | 21.6% | 6.9% | 3.3% | 10.3% |
| **Research and development** | 35.2% | 22.3% | 19.9% | 7.5% | 4.1% | 11% |

Analysis of responses in the survey by level in the organization shows that while leadership attitudes toward AI effectiveness are generally positive - with nearly half agreeing that AI improves operational efficiency - **73%** of leaders report very low budget investment in AI initiatives.

> **We have developed some chatbots for migrants and have explored the use of AI in multiple other projects but never found the perfect use case that justified using AI due to the high cost, ethical, and security concerns too.**
> - Survey respondent

## External compliance interfacing with organizational governance

Even where an individual or organization uses AI tools, external stakeholders' policies may prevent or prohibit this practice. Donor compliance or HR practices were examples cited by survey respondents.

> **A barrier to using AI at work is donor compliance and strict requirements on the projects.**
> - Survey respondent

Image: Save the Children

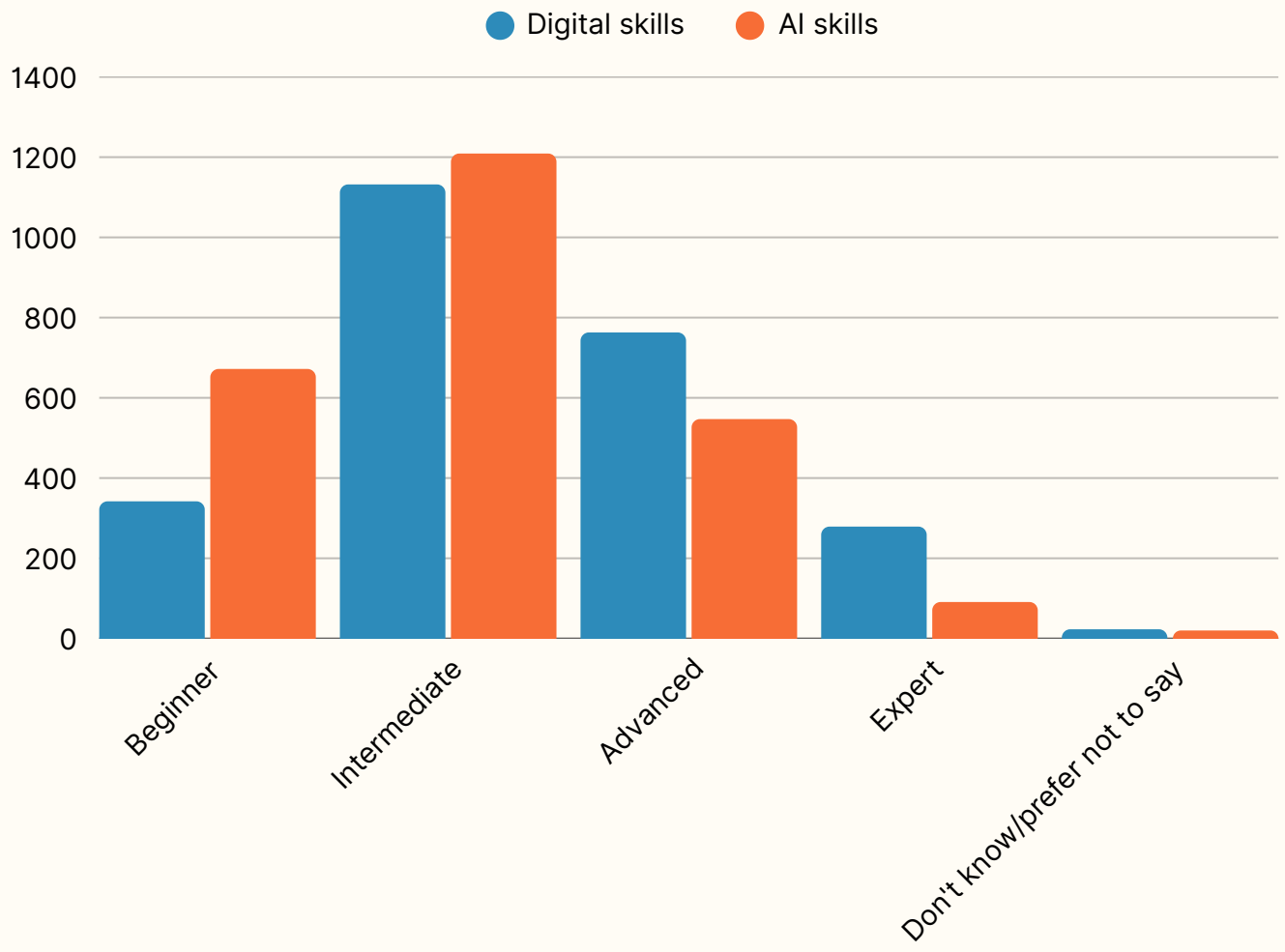
# 3.2 The AI skills paradox: accessible tools, limited specialist expertise

**Our research reveals that humanitarian workers have widely varying levels of AI readiness and capability.**

Only **3.6%** of survey respondents consider themselves to have expert-level AI skills, reflecting the informal, self-directed nature of most AI adoption in the sector.

### Individual digital skills vs. AI skills

Humanitarians report strong general digital capabilities, yet AI skills show a different pattern, with most respondents rating themselves at intermediate levels.



This suggests that humanitarians are technically confident and developing AI skills, though their abilities have yet to catch up to their overall capabilities. Practical necessity and intuitive interfaces can enable rapid skill development even among those who struggle with traditional digital systems.

> **At first I'm not familiar with AI use but later on, after being introduced to us, I started getting familiarized with AI. It's user friendly.**
>
> - Survey respondent

## Usage patterns vs. effectiveness perceptions

Despite widespread individual usage, humanitarian attitudes toward AI effectiveness are mixed. Only **47%** of survey respondents agree with the statement that AI has improved operational efficiency, while just **38%** believe it has enhanced decision-making. Nearly **30%** remain neutral or uncertain about AI's benefits, with a quarter disagreeing that AI improves efficiency.

This disconnect between usage and conviction reinforces the notion that accessibility and practical necessity drive adoption more than demonstrated value.

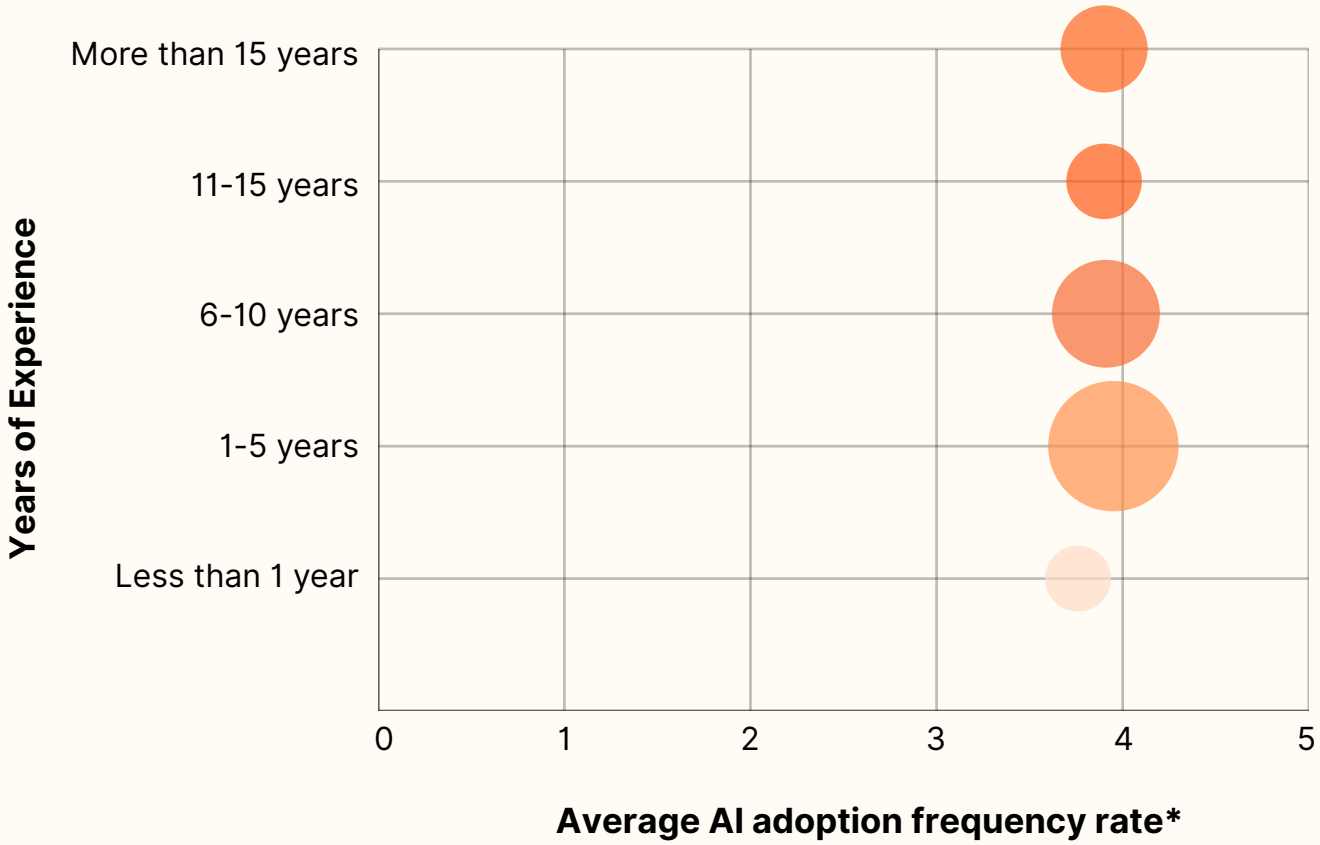
> **I remember the first time I relied on AI to create a multi-sectoral survey. The results were frustratingly inconsistent...I felt frustrated. Over time, however, I learned how to guide AI effectively. All of such understanding transformed AI from a frustrating tool into a powerful asset, significantly improving efficiency in my work.**

> **Whenever me or my colleagues try and use AI, for data analysis or creating content for presentations, it always falls flat. The analysis isn't right and I have to redo it...**

> **Support mechanisms that would help me would be integrating AI in processes that structurally change the ways of working.**
>
> - Survey respondents

## Years of experience vs AI adoption frequency

AI adoption remains consistent across humanitarians' experience level working in the sector. The highest adoption is among those with 1-5 years' experience, though those with more than five years show similar rates. Those with less than a year's experience report the lowest adoption rates, though adoption remains meaningful.




*Individual AI adoption scores were modified to reflect numerical scores and then averaged across respondents. In this case: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = monthly, 4 = weekly, and 5 = daily

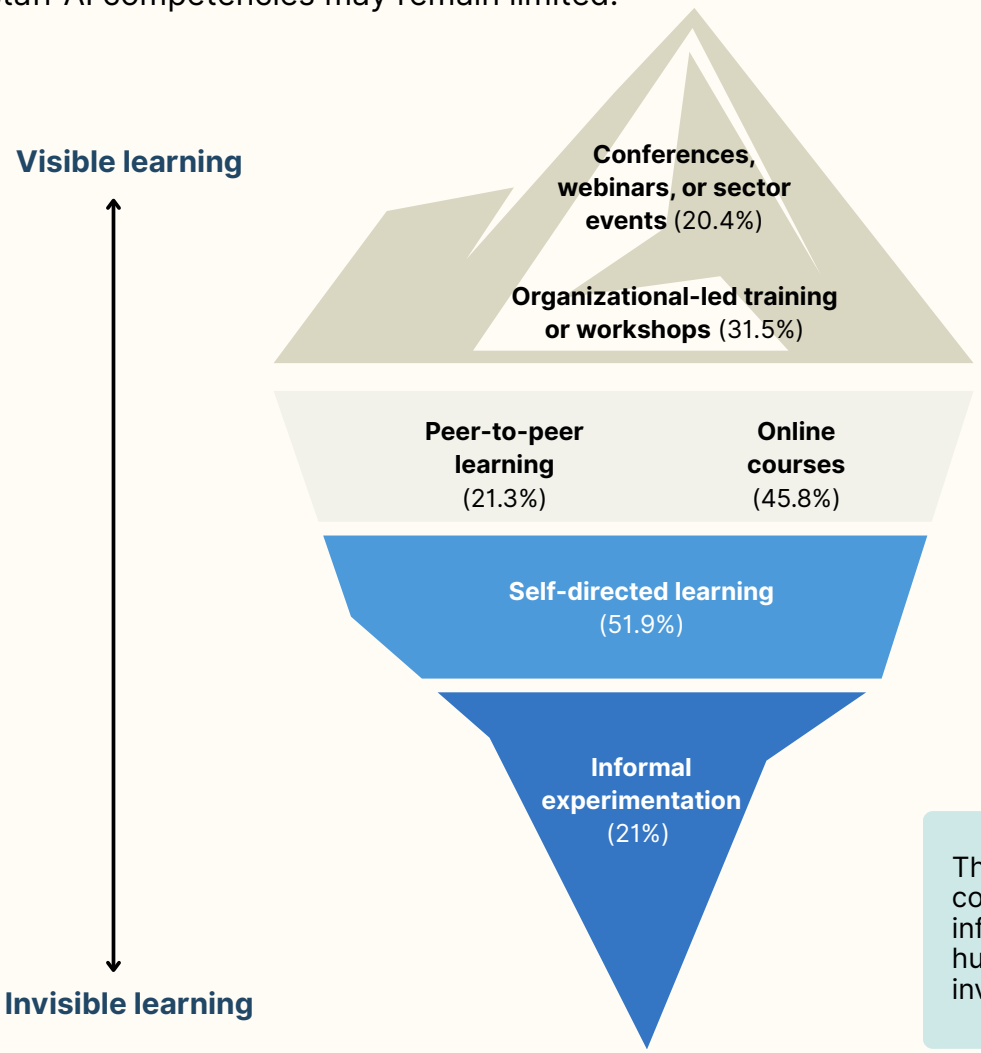
**Further reading | Persona clustering: archetypal AI users in humanitarian work**
Madigan Johnson from Data Friendly Space has created a set of humanitarian AI user personas informed by patterns identified in this research. They are fictitious composite characters mapping out common user behaviors including AI and digital skills, learning styles, attitudes, backgrounds and motivations. The personas may be used as a practical framework for discussing AI adoption patterns within organizations and understanding the diverse ways humanitarian workers engage with AI tools. This resource is available to download from the DFS website. [5]

# 3.3 The humanitarian AI training disconnect: individual learning without institutional support

**64%** of survey respondents report little to no organizational-directed training or learning in AI. **73%** of respondents have identified training opportunities to be the most crucial organizational AI support mechanism over the next 12-24 months.

This gap between organizational-led AI training demand and provision highlights the urgent need to better understand how humanitarian actors are engaging with AI learning at both the individual and organizational level: what motivates them, how they learn, and what gaps remain.

Humanitarians are motivated to upskill in AI independently, so organizational understanding of staff AI competencies may remain limited.




This **'AI learning iceberg'** conceptual illustrates how informal AI learning by humanitarians may be invisible to organizations.

## The training and learning paradox

Self-directed learning dominates (**52%**), but there is also a paradox: while only **21%** report peer learning, survey comments and interviews revealed extensive informal knowledge sharing.

This dynamic, evident in interview responses and open survey comments, links to a broader theme of uncertainty or fear where AI may be framed as a threat to job security and/or professional credibility.

In local organizations, there appears to be less stigma around AI experimentation. Survey respondents who provided use case information and details of their organization were largely employees of local organizations, and took the opportunity through this research to share their AI experiments and successes.

In contrast, the majority of interview participants from INGOs/UN agencies participated only with assurances of anonymity, expressing concerns such as: *"I'm not authorized to discuss AI on behalf of my organization."*

Interestingly, over **80%** of survey respondents (from all organization types) opted to take part in further research and events on AI usage, demonstrating high interest and appetite for discussion spaces. This further highlights the need for more organizational leadership on AI to strengthen cultures to enable humanitarians to use AI tools effectively in their work.

## Training access by organizational type

Humanitarians in international organizations don't necessarily have better training access compared to smaller organizations, as may have been expected. **33%** of international NGO respondents reported no training, this only rises to **38%** for local NGOs. Once training begins, engagement levels converge, suggesting access rather than willingness drives the difference.

Outside the NGO space, survey respondents from academia and UN agencies show greater variation. The UN system shows uneven progress: **33%** of respondents said only 1-24% of colleagues received training, yet **17%** report over 50% staff coverage. This suggests that although institutional roll-out is gaining traction in some agencies, uptake remains inconsistent.

## Learning motivations

The scope of the survey did not include motivations for learning about AI, but insights on this emerged from the open comments, interview responses and previous research.

> **I am actively exploring how AI can enhance procurement and contract management functions. In my self-study and professional development journey, I have learned how AI and data analytics can help optimize procurement planning, track KPIs, and detect irregularities in procurement processes.**
> - Survey respondent

**Women** are more likely to pursue self-directed and informal learning, mirroring trends observed across other humanitarian learning platforms, where women often use digital resources to 'catch up' on sectoral advancements.

**Seniority** also matters: while senior leaders were less likely to engage directly in skills-based learning, they were active in webinars and sector events - suggesting a strategic interest in AI, even if not for daily application.

**Work focus** also shapes engagement: program and operations staff leaned into technical upskilling, while safeguarding and protection professionals showed high engagement with AI debates and sector events, reflecting their concern with ethical implications and social impact.

**Confidence building** is often prioritized over technical mastery, with available training offering valuable skills but tending to be generic rather than tailored to humanitarian realities. This training gap, combined with absent organizational AI policies, creates a governance vacuum compounding sector challenges.

These humanitarian learner insights align with patterns in the HLA Humanitarian Learner Survey 2024 [6], which surveyed 4.7k respondents and highlighted that humanitarians are driven to independently continuously enhance their skills to improve effectiveness in current and future roles. This humanitarian AI-focused research, conducted a year later, extends those findings by focusing specifically on AI learning patterns and confirms this learning commitment applies to AI adoption.

# 3.4 The AI governance lag: usage without organizational oversight

## Shadow AI: ‘unofficial’ integration into workflows

While 70% of survey respondents are regularly using AI tools for their work, many do so without organizational backing: 7% work for organizations that explicitly state no intention to adopt AI, while 17% belong to organizations that haven't yet adopted AI but plan to do so.

Humanitarians are integrating AI into their operations, though this integration is happening largely without institutional strategy, known as ‘*shadow AI*’.

This disconnect highlights how individual humanitarian workers are driving AI adoption ahead of organizational readiness, creating potential risks around data protection and governance, ethical use, and compliance with humanitarian principles.

> **I used my own funds to build the AI agent to make our AI usage safer. This means that it is not available to everyone all of the time, and can only be used for sensitive data.**
> - Interview participant from an INGO in Lebanon

This pattern mirrors broader industry trends where over one-third (**38%**) of employees acknowledge sharing sensitive work information with AI tools without their employers' permission and around half of employees are using unauthorized AI tools. [7]

The absence of formal policies creates particular challenges around ethical oversight, where individual users must navigate approaches without institutional guidance.

## Ethical prioritization in governance approaches

The absence of formal AI policies creates a governance vacuum where ethical concerns proliferate without structured responses. These concerns cut across all organization types but are most strongly articulated by local NGOs working closest to affected communities, who emphasize risks like data misuse, bias, and training models on sensitive community information.

UN agencies particularly emphasize concerns around misinformation, bias, data protection, and accountability, with many viewing training as an essential ethical mitigation strategy rather than just capacity strengthening.

**Quotes from research respondents highlighting key ethical concerns around the use of AI in humanitarian work**

- **Data sovereignty and privacy:** *"There is not enough data on Sub-Saharan Africa on online platforms."*
- **Environmental impact**: *"The environmental and social impact on areas where data centers are based and the draining of resources in those areas."*
- **Community participation:** *"To ethically integrate AI in humanitarian work, it will be essential to involve local communities in the design and deployment of AI tools."*
- **Bias and discrimination:** *“AI systems often rely on historical or incomplete data, which can lead to unfair resource allocation or the exclusion of marginalized groups. This can undermine the core humanitarian principle of impartiality.”*
- **Human decision-making:** *"Overreliance on AI can replace nuanced human decision-making in areas requiring empathy and context."*
- **Dependency on technology**: *“AI might lead to diminished human judgment and critical thinking.”*
- **Opaque systems:** *“Many AI systems lack transparency and accountability, making it difficult to trace decisions or challenge errors, which can erode trust between humanitarian actors and affected communities.”*

## Competing priorities: ethics vs operational pressures

Despite widespread ethical concerns expressed in the survey and interviews, ethical issues ranked outside of the top three priority AI organizational support mechanisms. Only **43%** of respondents prioritize ethical guidelines and frameworks for future AI implementation, ranking fourth after training and capacity strengthening (**73%**), access to tools and platforms (**53%**), and funding and resources (**48%**).

Humanitarians view ethical considerations as important but secondary to immediate operational needs - a perspective reflecting the sector's chronic resource constraints and pressure to deliver rapid results in crisis contexts.

Closing this governance gap requires coordinated sector-wide action - individual organizations cannot address policy vacuums that span the entire humanitarian system.

> **The world seems to be euphoric and at the same time threatened by the emergence and flourishing of AI technologies. There have to be ethical issues to be looked into before scaling up the AI infrastructures…the international community through the UNs systems should come up with global governing laws that unequivocally deter the ill-motives to not misuse the AI infrastructure for the purpose of harming humanity in any form…**

> **With more AI use in humanitarian work, we must be careful about how data is used. We need to protect people's privacy and make sure no one is treated unfairly. It's also important that AI tools do not replace human care and understanding. If we use AI in the right way - with honesty, fairness, and care - it can help us do more good and reach more people.**
>
> - Survey respondents

These governance challenges are further complicated by the fragmented landscape of AI tools currently dominating humanitarian practice, examined in the following sections.

# 3.5 Humanitarian AI use case overview: commercial tool dominance in a fragmented ecosystem

## Commercial dominance drives fragmentation

**69%** of humanitarian workers utilize commercial AI agents (ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, Copilot), making these general-purpose tools the dominant form of AI in the sector.

Commercial AI platforms have enabled unprecedented global access to sophisticated AI capabilities, allowing individual humanitarians to experiment and innovate across diverse contexts.

Content generation is the primary application of these platforms for developing reports, proposals and training materials. Professional communication, particularly translation and email writing are also common use cases. Humanitarians are experimenting across multiple platforms: ChatGPT for reports, Google Translate for communication, specialized GIS tools for mapping, Excel for analytics, and more.

This dominance of commercial tools has however, created fragmentation - a complex system of different tools that brings coordination challenges and may undermine strategic adoption. This multi-platform experimentation is evident in complex operational use cases, where humanitarians combine different AI tools to address daily challenges.

> **To improve water source management and service delivery, our field teams used mobile AI tools (Google Earth, Bhuvan App, AI-integrated GIS tools) to map water access points and track usage patterns in remote rural clusters, satellite image interpretation and AI-assisted GIS mapping. Identification of frequently failing water points using pattern recognition. Use of machine learning tools for predictive maintenance planning, together with voice-to-text and AI translation tools for local reporting like Google Voice, Generative AI tools (like ChatGPT) to draft community notices, IEC messages, and training scripts.**
> - Survey respondent

# 3.6 Humanitarian AI use cases: purpose-built solutions in action

The following use cases, drawn directly from survey responses and interviews, demonstrate how humanitarian organizations are moving beyond commercial tool dependence to develop purpose-built solutions that address specific contextual challenges while upholding humanitarian principles.

## AI chatbot for training for child caregivers

**Organization:** International developmental and humanitarian organization focused on child welfare

The organization developed an AI chatbot to train caregivers and child/youth care professionals across Africa. Two versions were created: one for adult caregivers covering topics like safeguarding, mental health support, stress management, and navigating challenging behaviors, and another tailored specifically for youth. The youth version focuses on youth participation and empowerment, including employability and career guidance, with age-appropriate content and conversation flows.

**Implementation:** Built using Microsoft Power Virtual Agents (now embedded within Microsoft Copilot) through a technology partnership, the chatbot was piloted in Africa and later scaled across multiple countries. The system operates anonymously without user tracking to address privacy concerns.

**Key challenges addressed:**

- Infrastructure limitations and digital literacy gaps in remote areas
- Cultural localization requirements (adapting content for different cultural contexts, particularly religious considerations)
- Language barriers requiring expert translation of sensitive content into local languages and dialects
- User trust issues around privacy and technology adoption

**Impact:** After explaining the anonymous nature of the system, uptake increased by approximately 600%, demonstrating successful adoption once trust barriers were overcome. The project showcased how AI can be effectively implemented in the Global South to support vulnerable populations while respecting local contexts and cultural sensitivities.

# Humanitarian AI use cases: purpose-built solutions in action

## AI-supported community livelihood development programming

**Organization: Local humanitarian organization in Afghanistan**

The organization developed an AI-based data analysis platform to enhance women's community-based economic inclusion programming in rural Afghanistan. The system processes large volumes of feedback from female participants to improve program design and reduce dropout rates in challenging operating environments.

**Implementation:** Built using natural language processing (NLP) technology to analyze feedback collected through voice recordings and handwritten notes from training sessions, focus groups, and post-activity evaluations. The platform combines thematic analysis with predictive modeling that correlates demographic data (age, education level, number of dependents) with historical participation trends to identify women at risk of dropping out.

**Key challenges addressed:**

- Processing unstructured feedback data from multiple sources (voice recordings, handwritten notes) in local languages
- Identifying specific barriers to women's participation including limited mobility, lack of family support, and competing responsibilities
- Customizing programming to match women's preferences for vocational skills (tailoring, poultry farming, soap-making)
- Preventing program dropouts through early intervention and targeted support
- Operating in contexts with limited infrastructure and cultural restrictions on women's mobility

**Impact:** The AI-supported analysis enabled rapid identification of key themes and program adjustments, including optimized timing of activities to suit women's daily responsibilities and provision of additional support, such as childcare and transportation. These interventions resulted in a 30% increase in completion rates for skills development programs while allowing more responsive, data-driven programming that facilitated women's input incorporation into program design.

# Humanitarian AI use cases: purpose-built solutions in action

## AI-powered safety education for children affected by conflict

**Organization**: Local humanitarian organization supporting refugees from war in Ukraine

The organization developed AI-powered interactive educational games to teach children safety skills. The system creates context-specific learning experiences about conscious behavior during conflict and dealing with explosive remnants of war.

**Implementation**: Built using Python and AI-powered content generation to create visual novel-format games. These games include '*Game for Safety*' for children aged 12-17 focused on wartime safety behaviors, and '*Caution! Mines!*' for children aged 8-11 targeting knowledge about explosive remnants. The platform combines the organization's lived experience from conflict zones with AI-generated scenarios to create diverse, engaging educational content. Plans include developing real-time adaptive learning environments that adjust complexity and content based on individual user responses.

**Key challenges addressed:**

- Providing safety education for children in active conflict zones experiencing unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks
- Addressing cultural and linguistic sensitivities, particularly for Russian-speaking displaced persons from Donbas navigating Ukrainian-speaking territories
- Creating engaging educational content quickly with limited resources and connectivity constraints
- Working with traumatized and vulnerable populations requiring culturally appropriate, context-specific materials
- Balancing technological innovation with deep interpersonal understanding and empathy

**Impact:** Successfully created educational products that combine personal war experience with AI-generated content variations, enabling rapid development of "*truly new, unusual, but at the same time useful and interesting products.*" The approach allowed the organization to significantly expand their range of educational ideas while maintaining authentic, contextually relevant content for conflict-affected children. Future developments aim to create 'live dialogue' format learning where AI supports and develops the educational process in real-time.

# Humanitarian AI use cases: purpose-built solutions in action

## Offline AI assistant for operational security

**Organization:** International humanitarian organization in Lebanon

The ICT unit developed a fully local AI assistant to support operational activities while maintaining complete data privacy and security. The system provides secure AI capabilities that run entirely offline without cloud dependencies, addressing critical protection and privacy requirements for humanitarian operations.

**Implementation:** Built using an open-source language model with custom fine-tuning on organizational data including cybersecurity protocols, humanitarian response procedures, and sector-specific terminology. Deployed on local server infrastructure using offline inference tools. The system supports file input, tracks user interactions for continuous learning, and includes a feedback loop for improving accuracy based on user corrections without requiring full model retraining.

**Key challenges addressed:**

- Data privacy and security concerns requiring complete offline operation with no cloud dependencies
- Limited resources and funding constraints in humanitarian technology implementation
- Need for sector-specific AI knowledge including cybersecurity, humanitarian response protocols, and local terminology
- Staff training and capacity building requirements in technical and security domains
- Generating structured datasets and interpreting complex technical documentation

**Impact:** The system is used daily to interpret technical documents, explain security incidents, assist staff training, and generate structured datasets. The fully in-house approach ensures complete data transparency and control while providing practical AI capabilities. The project demonstrates how humanitarian organizations can develop sophisticated AI solutions through innovative local implementation and creative use of available technology infrastructure.

# 4. Looking ahead: realizing AI's humanitarian potential

**This research identifies challenges requiring coordinated sector response, but the solutions must be co-developed through dialogue between humanitarian practitioners, technology partners, donors and affected communities.**

Rather than prescriptive recommendations, we highlight key areas in our report's five themes requiring sector attention and the critical questions that need answering to move forward responsibly.

## 4.1 Bridging the implementation gap

Individual adoption has outpaced organizational readiness, with high proportions of humanitarian workers using AI in contrast to low levels of organizational AI integration.

How can organizations accelerate institutional adoption while preserving the innovation demonstrated by individual workers? What funding mechanisms could recognize AI's potential to enhance rather than compete with direct programming? How do we address infrastructure realities in humanitarian contexts while building AI capacity?

Future priorities suggest maturing our understanding key areas of expansion such as data analytics and forecasting, monitoring and evaluation, and risk assessments, indicating movement beyond simple task automation towards more strategic applications.

Image: Adobe

# 4.2 Leveraging the skills paradox

The high AI usage rates among humanitarians and low levels of expertise reveals an opportunity.

The accessibility of conversational AI interfaces suggests the sector can build on demonstrated adaptability rather than starting capacity building from scratch.

How do we harness this accessibility as an entry point for broader digital capacity building? What role should experienced humanitarian workers play, given that the research suggests their contextual knowledge may facilitate AI adoption? How do training approaches address both technical skills and the sophisticated ethical knowledge required for responsible AI deployment in crisis contexts?

> **Technology is very powerful and really can change and transform lives. So if we have the right donors who can support this. Let's put our heads together. By the end of the day we'll be able to support a lot of underserved communities by leveraging the technology.**
> - Survey respondent

Image: Getty

# 4.3 Coordinating training approaches

Organizations are providing or directing little to no AI training or guidance, when demand and motivation by humanitarians to develop AI skills is high. This signals the critical need for coordinated investment in sector-specific training programs. The demand clearly exists - the question is how to coordinate supply effectively.

How can training programs address beginner through expert levels while supporting smaller organizations through shared resources? What role should local organizations play, given their apparent leadership in trust-based learning cultures? How do we move beyond basic tool usage to encompass ethical considerations and humanitarian-specific applications?

The research suggests AI tools may be more intuitive than traditional digital systems, particularly for humanitarian workers whose communication-focused roles align with natural language capabilities, potentially offering new pathways for capacity strengthening.

> **Technology companies should offer training platforms to increase the adoption of their tools. It would be great if the HLA and other organizations could use their unique position to engage with Microsoft and Google more proactively...there is a need for dynamic leadership to negotiate with technology providers and the importance of creating sustainable models, and transfer them to governments for continued use.**
> - Interview participant working for a UN agency in Kenya


Image: Matt Sills

# 4.4 Closing the humanitarian AI governance gap

The sector cannot afford approaches where individual workers bear responsibility for ethical AI use without institutional support.

The governance vacuum - widespread individual adoption versus limited formal policies - raises fundamental questions about how to balance innovation with oversight. How can frameworks support rather than constrain the responsible experimentation already occurring across the sector?

What coordinated sector-wide approaches are needed to address shared challenges around data sovereignty, privacy protection, and alignment with humanitarian principles? How can the sector build on existing initiatives such as NetHope's AI Lighthouse for responsible AI initiative [8] while developing shared policy resources for smaller organizations that lack capacity for comprehensive framework development?

The expansion or establishment of dedicated humanitarian AI communities of practice - that are inclusive of the full spectrum of AI adoption levels and global reach - could support coordination, but would require significant resources and effort.

Recent research by CARE International emphasizes the critical need for greater Global South civil society participation in AI decision-making, identifying pathways including expanding AI literacy, increasing local representation across the AI lifecycle, and strengthening advocacy on contextualized impacts. [9]

Successful approaches should recognize different risk tolerances across organizational types - from highly structured UN agencies to innovative local NGOs - while establishing baseline standards that protect both humanitarian workers and the populations they serve.

> **By bringing all players together under a common front, we can drive greater efficiency, reduce costs, and accelerate the responsible adoption of AI. More importantly, we can amplify our ability to serve the most vulnerable communities with smarter, faster, and more targeted interventions.**
> - Survey respondent

# 4.5 Balancing commercial tools with purpose-built solutions

Commercial AI platforms have enabled rapid humanitarian adoption through their accessibility and intuitive interfaces, democratizing AI access across the sector regardless of organizational policies or budgets.

Both commercial and purpose-built solutions have important roles to play in the AI ecosystem. However, the sector's heavy reliance on commercial platforms raises questions about whether these tools can address specific humanitarian requirements like enhanced data protection, offline capabilities, and contextual understanding.

How can commercial AI providers and humanitarian organizations collaborate to address sector-specific needs? How can the sector balance the accessibility of commercial tools with strategic investment in purpose-built solutions? What partnerships could prioritize humanitarian requirements while remaining financially viable?

> **There is a need for more locally led AI design and engaging with technology companies to address these challenges, particularly in light of increasing displacement and urban poverty.**
> - Survey respondent

Image: Save the Children

# 5. Summary

## This research identifies challenges requiring coordinated sector response, but the solutions must be co-developed through dialogue between humanitarian practitioners, technology partners, donors, and affected communities.

This research reveals a humanitarian sector undergoing significant transition. Humanitarian workers demonstrate notable adaptability in adopting AI tools, often ahead of organizational structures and support. While individual uptake is high, organizations are catching up in infrastructure, policy, and coordinated support for responsible AI use.

What emerges is a humanitarian AI paradox shaped by five interconnected challenges: a gap between individual uptake and organizational readiness where widespread tool use coexists with limited formal expertise and inconsistent support. Training remains a concern, with many relying on self-directed learning that may not address ethical or contextual complexities. Lack of organizational oversight has led to widespread AI tool use outside formal frameworks, while commercial tool dominance has democratized access but created fragmented workflows where organizational awareness remains limited.

Individual experimentation drives demand for clearer governance and training, yet without organizational backing, gaps widen. This paradox offers clear opportunities: worker adaptability and motivation are strengths that can be harnessed, and foundations for coordinated, responsible AI use exist.

Image: Matt Sills

# 6. Closing reflections from the research team & future lines of inquiry

**We set out to learn about what AI means for humanitarians and humanitarian work. What we found was more complex than expected.**

Through this research, we've surfaced humanitarians' voices and learned they are not waiting for permission to engage with AI - they are already experimenting, adapting, and applying tools to serve crisis-affected communities. Yet this innovation unfolds within a fragmented ecosystem marked by funding gaps, ethical uncertainty and limited institutional support.

The humanitarian AI paradox encapsulates this tension: individual adoption has outstripped organizational infrastructure and strategy. This isn't failure - it's a signal that the sector is ready to engage but needs proper scaffolding to do so safely and equitably.

The global engagement in this research demonstrates that humanitarians are ready to engage in dialogue with trusted actors and help shape the future of humanitarian AI. As noted in the report, over 80% of survey respondents opted in to participate in follow-up research and webinars, showing desire for a community-driven humanitarian AI movement.

Image: Matt Sills

## Future lines of inquiry

This research exercise establishes a baseline for humanitarian AI adoption, providing the opportunity for longitudinal tracking of AI adoption trends, filling the sector's need to measure progress over time or assess intervention effectiveness. It also opens up several promising research directions for further exploration, including:

### Ethical AI frameworks

How can ethics-centered AI development and what has been termed '*ProSocial AI*' [10] guide purpose-built humanitarian solutions that embody sector values - from conception to deployment? This aligns with emerging philanthropic interest in locally led, context-aware AI innovation.

### Regional AI adoption patterns

How do specific regional contexts shape AI adoption in humanitarian work? With 75% of survey respondents from the Global South, this research revealed strong engagement and innovation, yet in the sector, regional variations in adoption drivers remain underexplored. Future research could examine deeper how these patterns inform more equitable and context-appropriate AI development across humanitarian settings.

### Humanitarian operational integration

How can humanitarian organizations move from pilot projects to scaled AI implementation in complex operational environments, particularly with infrastructural challenges? Research could explore what makes some AI implementations succeed where others fail, particularly examining the role of local partnerships, user-centered design processes, and adaptive implementation approaches that account for the unpredictable nature of humanitarian contexts.

### Trust and adoption dynamics

How and why is trust built in AI tools, particularly given the rapid uptake of conversational AI in the humanitarian sector where human relationships traditionally outweigh data? How can we measure this? This has implications for monitoring, evaluation, and decision support systems.

# References

1 UN OCHA. 2025. Humanitarian reset announcement by Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher. 10 March 2025. Available at: https://www.unocha.org/news/humanitarian-reset-10-march-2025

2 ALNAP. 2025. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2025. p.10. Available at: https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2025

3 Hall, L. 2025. AI in humanitarian action: historical context and current landscape. Humanitarian Leadership Academy. Available at: www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/resources/the-history-of-artificial-intelligence-in-humanitarianism

4. IBM. 2025. What Is Shadow AI? IBM Think. https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/shadow-ai

5. Johnson, M. 2025. Persona clustering: archetypal AI users in humanitarian work. Data Friendly Space. Available at: https://www.datafriendlyspace.org/resources/ai-survey-user-personas

6. Parkinson, K.M. and Grieder, E. 2024. HLA Learner Survey 2024: Initial Research Insights. Humanitarian Leadership Academy. Available at: https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/resources/hla-learner-survey-2024-initial-research-insights

7 Infosecurity Magazine. 2024. Third of employees sharing work info with AI tools without permission. Available at: https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/third-employees-sharing-work-info

8 NetHope. 2024. NetHope AI Lighthouse for Nonprofits: Your Guide to Responsible, Purpose-Driven AI. Available at: https://nethope.org/programs/discover-the-ai-lighthouse-your-guide-to-responsible-purpose-driven-ai-specifically-for-nonprofits

9 CARE International. 2025. AI and the Global South: Exploring the Role of Civil Society in AI Decision-Making. ALNAP. Available at: https://www.alnap.org/help-library/resources/civil-society-in-ai-decision-making

10 Walther, C.C. 2024. ProSocial artificial intelligence as a catalyst for holistic health: a multidimensional approach. BMC Global and Public Health, 2(1):76. Available at: https://bmcglobalpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s44263-024-00111-z

# Acknowledgments and credits

The research team would like to thank the 2,539 survey respondents from 144 countries and territories, and key informant interview particpants representing Italy, Kenya, Lebanon, Ukraine and Yemen. This research would not have been possible without your engagement.

We would also like to thank Izzy Quilter (Humanitarian Leadership Academy) for reviewing this report, and expert panellists for their support of the report launch event: C. Douglas Smith (Data Friendly Space), Ali Al Mokdad (independent), and Dr Cornelia C. Walther (University of Pennsylvania).

How to cite this research: Humanitarian Leadership Academy & Data Friendly Space (2025). Artificial intelligence in the humanitarian sector in 2025: mapping current practice and future potential.

## Contact

**Humanitarian Leadership Academy**
info@humanitarian.academy
humanitarianleadershipacademy.org

**Data Friendly Space**
hello@datafriendlyspace.org
datafriendlyspace.org

Published August 2025, v1.

Image: Getty