

# How are humanitarians using artificial intelligence?

## January 2026 pulse survey insights

**The humanitarian sector continues to face acute funding shortfalls and structural change amid accelerating global AI developments. AI is embedded in the humanitarian ecosystem, but largely driven by individual uptake of commercial tools. Working with vulnerable populations and sensitive data – and the imperative to *do no harm* – means responsible AI adoption and skills development are critical challenges for the sector.**

This briefing note presents key insights from the Humanitarian AI January 2026 pulse survey, conducted by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy and Data Friendly Space, representing the first follow-up to the 2025 global foundational study. The pulse survey generated 1,729 responses from 120+ countries and confirms the deepening of the *Humanitarian AI paradox* identified in the 2025 research: individual AI uptake continues to outpace organisational readiness, and the emergence of agentic AI is adding further complexity. Individual conviction in AI's benefits has surged – yet expertise and organisational integration remain largely static, pointing to an urgent need for action across AI literacy and skilling, governance, organisational integration, and regional equity.

## The Humanitarian AI paradox in January 2026: key stats at-a-glance

*Percentage change from May/June 2025 in brackets*

- ▶ **Individual AI use is rising:** **95.3%** have used AI tools for work (+2.2%) and **75.0%** use AI tools daily or weekly (+4.6%)
- ▶ **Commercial tools continue to dominate:** **67.8%** who are using AI to support their work use tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot (-1.6%). **29.8%** are now using AI agents.
- ▶ **Conviction in the benefits of AI is surging:** **64.6%** feel AI has improved operational efficiency (+17.7%), and **54.0%** believe AI has led to better decision making (+15.9%)
- ▶ **AI expertise is scarce:** **3.0%** consider themselves to be expert AI users (-0.6%)
- ▶ **Organisations provide training but expansion is limited:** **34.0%** have received organisational-led AI training (+2.4%)
- ▶ **Limited progress in organisation-wide integration:** **9.0%** report that AI is widely integrated in their organisations (+1.2%)
- ▶ **Slow movement on AI policies:** **23.3%** report having a formal AI policy (+1.5%)

## AI adoption is individually-driven and locally-embedded, and in urgent need of organisational support

**Individually-driven AI learning and adoption continue in 2026.** 54% of respondents said that they undertake self-directed learning, with half doing so through online courses. Around one-quarter report that no staff have received organisational training, although this is a slightly improved picture since 2025 (when almost one-third reported no training). In the survey's open comments, the most common keywords were *training* and *online courses*, reflecting the demand and interest in AI skilling.

**Humanitarians are integrating AI tools directly into their workflows.** As in 2025, top AI use cases remain language-based tasks using commercial tools like ChatGPT, such as writing and editing, research and planning, information capture and synthesis, and translation and multilingual communication. Programme and operational roles report daily AI usage rates exceeding 50%, alongside strong engagement among research, advocacy, and technical roles. A significant change in 2026: 30% are now using AI agents – technology that takes actions on behalf of users (agents were not recorded in the 2025 survey).

**AI usage frequency is increasing as global practitioners adapt and respond to operational demands.** Daily AI tool usage exceeds 50% across most organisation types and regions. This trend is strongest in Asia-Pacific, multi-regional roles, and Sub-Saharan Africa. At the country level, the most intensive daily usage continues to cluster in operationally demanding contexts, including Kenya (65%), Sudan (60%), and Bangladesh (59%).

**Use of more technical tools and purpose-built systems remains limited.** For example, less than 10% of respondents use AI tools for coding, machine learning, forecasting or satellite imagery, reflecting the specialist skills and organisational infrastructure required. Daily AI users show higher engagement with analytical tasks, including data analysis, programme design, and needs assessment.

**Despite widespread individual use, AI expertise levels appear to have stagnated.** 22% of respondents self-reported 'advanced' skills, while 3% considered themselves to be experts. This is a slight decline from 2025 self-reported levels, indicating that organisational support is required to deepen and scale workforce expertise.

The findings signal that humanitarians are actively building AI skills – but require organisational support to deepen and contextualise expertise, as well as to scale capabilities, including in low-resource and low-connectivity settings.

## Uneven institutionalisation: governance gaps emerging as a critical priority

**There is a widening gap between what practitioners are doing with AI and what their organisations have put in place to support, govern, and sustain that use.** Half of all respondents use AI tools daily, yet only 9% report that AI is widely adopted and integrated at the organisational level. 28% are still at the experimentation / piloting phase, 19% have limited implementation in some teams, and nearly a third report no organisational AI adoption at all. One in 10 said that their organisation does not intend to adopt AI.

**The governance gap persists: AI policy development represents a clear priority area for organisations to address.** Only 23% of respondents say their organisation has a formal AI policy in place – a marginal increase since 2025. Another 16% report a policy under development, while nearly half (45%) report that no policy exists. For a sector that handles sensitive data in crisis-affected contexts, governance gaps pose an active risk.

**The presence of AI policies varies considerably among organisation types and by region.** While local organisations are the highest daily users of AI, only 13% of respondents in this category reported having an AI policy, compared to 22% in the private sector / industry, 31% in INGOs, and 39% in UN agencies.

Looking at regional differences, in Sub-Saharan Africa, where half of the respondents use AI daily, only 19% report having an AI policy. Asia-Pacific has rapidly growing daily usage (*breakdown of regional daily AI use rates overleaf*), and shows an increased presence of policies at 29% – yet more than four in ten respondents do not have one.

The findings highlight a critical governance gap across the sector against a backdrop of rapid individual AI adoption. What effective organisational AI governance looks like may vary by context, organisation type, and resource level – but common standards and shared approaches are needed across the humanitarian ecosystem to protect practitioners, their networks, and the communities they serve.

## Regional AI adoption is shifting

Between the 2025 baseline and the 2026 pulse survey, there is significant variation in daily AI usage rates across regions, reflecting differing levels of operational traction and adoption momentum. Regional shifts in daily AI usage are summarised on the following page.

## Regional changes in daily AI tool usage | Change from 2025 in brackets

- ▶ **Global/multiple regions** (7.4% of respondents): **55.9%** (+15.2%)
- ▶ **Asia-Pacific region** (11.4% of respondents): **55.3%** (+11.0%)
- ▶ **Eastern Europe** (2.8% of respondents): **55.1%** (+12.9%)\*
- ▶ **North America** (1.3% of respondents): **52.2%** (+14.3%)\*
- ▶ **Middle East and North Africa (MENA)** (16.2% of respondents): **51.1%** (+1.3%)
- ▶ **Sub-Saharan Africa** (47.3% of respondents) **50.0%** (+4.7%)
- ▶ **Latin America and the Caribbean** (5.6% of respondents): **39.6%** (-7.2%)\*
- ▶ **Western Europe** (2.4% of respondents): **39.0%** (-1.8%)\*

*Regional shifts should be interpreted alongside sample sizes, which vary considerably. Figures marked \* are based on smaller sub-samples and should be treated as indicative.*

The regional data as a whole reveals that AI adoption is not following a Global North-to-South diffusion pattern. The highest growth and most intensive daily usage are in regions with acute humanitarian needs. This is practitioner-led adoption, with implications for how the sector should be investing in training, governance, and support infrastructure – across the ecosystem as a whole.

## Moving humanitarian AI from individual practice to sector transformation: a leadership challenge for 2026

This research presents a global picture of a sector at a critical inflection point. Informal individual use must be integrated into organisation-wide governance and accountability, balancing growing confidence in AI with the need to manage operational pressures and responsible adoption. Evidence from both the 2025 foundational study and this January 2026 pulse check – 4,268 responses across two surveys spanning eight months – indicates that overall progress remains limited. This reflects the pressures facing the sector, at a time of hyper-prioritisation, acute resource pressure, and competing demands. Nevertheless, AI represents a fundamental shift in the operational landscape – one that requires deliberate and coordinated dialogue and action on governance, skilling, organisational integration, and contextualisation and localisation of tools and approaches.

**Note and disclaimer:** Version 1.0 of this briefing note was published in March 2026 and presents findings from the January 2026 pulse survey, building on the baseline May/June 2025 survey. Respondents are self-selected and self-reporting. Key data will be provided via a supporting dashboard available on the research landing page. Findings are presented for information purposes only to promote learning and dialogue and are not intended as prescriptive advice. Organisations should conduct their own assessments based on their specific contexts, requirements and risk tolerances. Enquiries: [info@humanitarian.academy](mailto:info@humanitarian.academy) or [hello@datafriendlyspace.org](mailto:hello@datafriendlyspace.org) [humanitarianleadershipacademy.org](http://humanitarianleadershipacademy.org) | [datafriendlyspace.org](http://datafriendlyspace.org)

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