

Who defines our needs?

Aligning Measured and Perceived Humanitarian Needs

April 2025 | Global

Key Messages

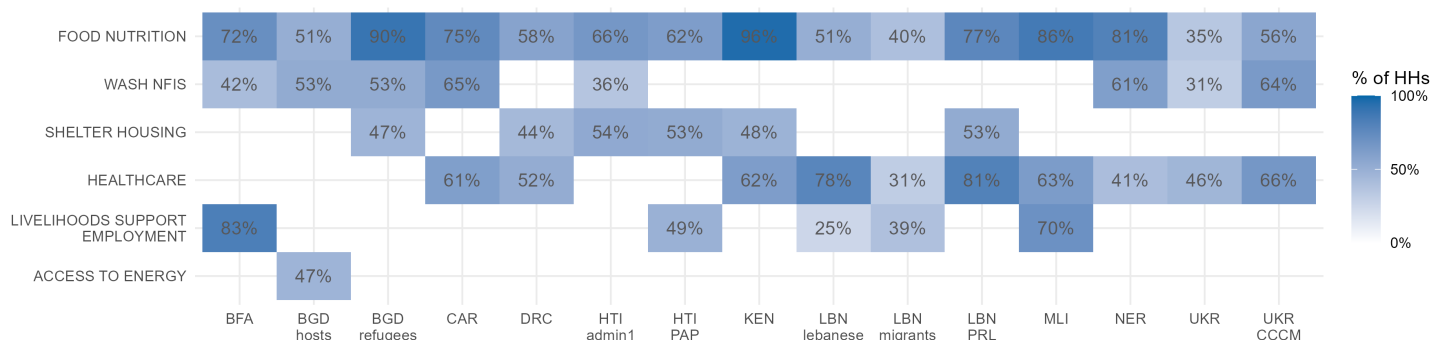
- Communities often prioritise needs such as food, health, and livelihoods, while measured needs highlights sectoral gaps in education, WASH, and shelter—revealing discrepancies between self-perceived and measured needs. Some priorities raised by affected populations, such as social cohesion and well-being, may not be fully captured by existing humanitarian frameworks.
- Perception data offers valuable insights into how populations experience vulnerability. Integrating tools like the HESPER scale enhances our understanding of evolving, context-specific self-perceived needs.
- Humanitarian actors must complement standardised need analysis frameworks with self-reported priorities, ensuring interventions reflect the diverse experiences shaped by gender, geography, and other contextual factors.

In 2024, REACH conducted Multi-Sector Needs Assessments (MSNAs) across more than 17 countries to provide a comprehensive analysis of humanitarian needs. As part of IMPACT's approach, the Multi-Sectoral Needs Index (MSNI) was calculated to support aid prioritisation, assigning each household a severity score for both sectoral and multi-sectoral needs. However, while the MSNA offers a structured and standardised framework for measuring needs,

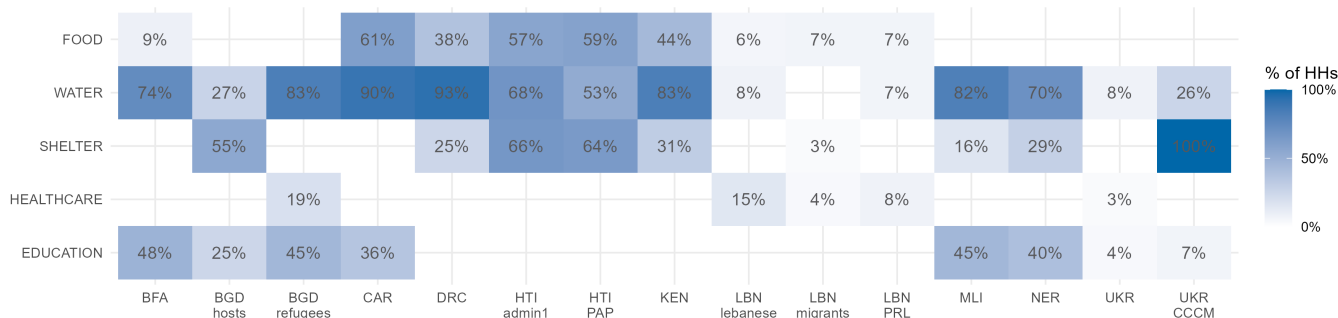
it does not always capture the full complexity of how communities perceive needs and experience multi-dimensional challenges. A cross-crisis analysis conducted in 2023, compared the prevalence of sectoral gaps (Living Standard Gap - sectoral severity ranking of 3 or above) with the priority needs reported by affected populations across 10 countries, revealing significant differences.

Comparison of the Top 3 self-reported and measured needs - source: MSNA 2023

Top 3 self reported needs - when asking communities to self-report their priority needs



Top 3 measured needs - when asking communities to answer a series of questions about their different sectoral needs*



BFA - Burkina Faso / BGD Host - Bangladesh Host Communities / BGD refugees - Bangladesh Refugees / CAR - Central African Republic / DRC - Democratic Republic of Congo / HTI Admin 1 - Haiti Country-Wide / HTI PAP - Haiti Port au Prince Area / KEN - Kenya / LBN lebanese - Lebanon Lebanese populations / Lebanon Migrants / LBN PRL - Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon / MLI - Mali / NER - Niger / UKR - Ukraine
* Needs are measured using IMPACT's MSNI framework, and based on household-level data.

Across most crises, communities perceived health and food security as the most urgent needs. In contrast, measured sectoral gaps highlighted a broader range of needs, often split between WASH, food, shelter, healthcare, and education. For instance, while education is frequently identified as a sectoral gap—especially in the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali)—affected populations rarely cited it as one of their top 3 priority need. Conversely, in countries such as Burkina Faso, Haiti, Lebanon, and Mali, communities have emphasised livelihood support and employment as key household priorities. At the same time, these needs are not included as sectoral gaps in the current MSNI approach.

Tell Us What You Need, But As We Define It

[Previous studies have explored these disparities](#), offering more insights into perceived needs across various

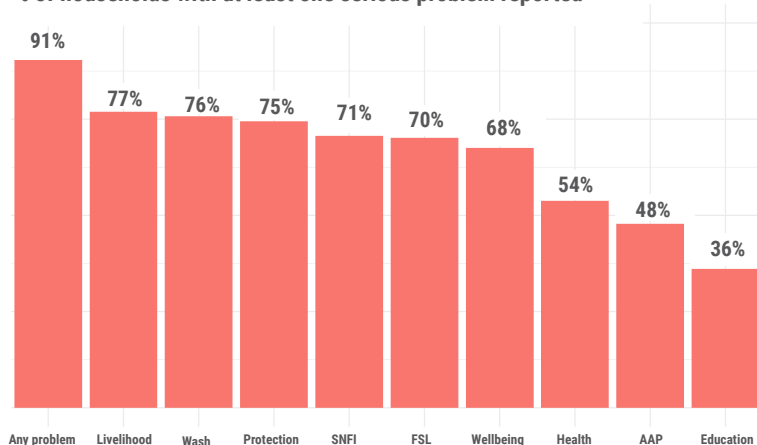
contexts, including [post-disaster and conflict-affected settings](#). For example, a 2023 IMPACT learning paper compared two sources of perception data in Somalia, illustrating how the framing of questions can significantly influence responses from affected populations. **The 2023 MSNA data indicated that food, shelter, and healthcare were community priorities. However, when an open-ended question on needs was posed via a radio debate, responses shifted toward peace, security, and community action.**

In this 2023 learning paper, the research team recommended a more nuanced interpretation of perception data—emphasizing that directly engaging affected populations on their priorities leads to a more comprehensive understanding of needs. To enhance humanitarian programming, perception data should be systematically integrated into decision-making processes rather than treated as an isolated source of evidence. Additionally, responses to needs should be more integrated, recognising that affected communities do not categorise their priorities into predefined sectors, such as WASH, shelter, or protection. By placing self-reported needs at the core of decision-making, humanitarian actors can adopt a more holistic, cross-sectoral approach that fosters collaboration across agencies and between international and national actors.

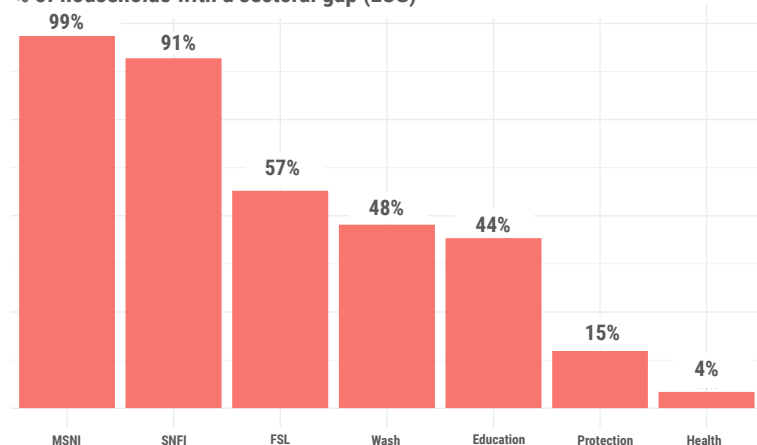
As part of these reflections, the 2024 MSNA questionnaire in Mali and DRC integrated the HESPER scale, a self-perceived needs assessment tool designed for humanitarian contexts. Consisting of 26 questions, the HESPER scale enables households to report severe problems directly across various aspects of their lives. By integrating this tool, IMPACT aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how affected populations perceive their needs. It ensures that perception data and technical measurements are valued in key analyses and decision-making processes.

Comparing measured and self-perceived needs - DRC 2024 MSNA

% of households with at least one serious problem reported



% of households with a sectoral gap (LSG)



When the prevalence of needs differs between measured and self-perceived needs

In Mali and DRC, some disparities emerged when comparing MSNA results—representing measured needs—with the HESPER scale findings - highlighting self-perceived needs. As mentioned above, MSNA results for Mali highlighted education (45%), WASH (28%), and Shelter/NFI (21%) as the primary sectoral gaps. When asked about their primary self-perceived issues, households provided varying responses, with WASH (50%), food security (47%), and shelter (33%) ranking as the most commonly identified critical issues.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that the visibility

and immediacy of certain types of aid, such as food assistance, may shape household responses. Food distributions, for example, are often among the most tangible and directly experienced forms of humanitarian support. However, rather than interpreting this as a limitation of self-reported needs, it may also be seen as an indication that communities recognise the added value of these forms of assistance. While structural needs in sectors like health and education may be addressed through services rather than direct distributions, in the Mali context, the prioritisation of food assistance could reflect both its perceived impact and the extent to which communities associate it with humanitarian response. Conversely, communities may recognise broader dynamics as a critical concern in their lives without necessarily seeing

How do communities define their needs – [a Mali case study](#)

To further investigate the differences between measured and perceived needs, REACH conducted a structured qualitative study in February 2025 in Mali. As part of this approach, 12 semi-structured, gender-segregated focus group discussions were conducted in the cities of Kita and Koro. During the activity, participants reviewed two charts summarizing sectoral needs in their respective areas, based on the 2024 MSNA. One chart reflected needs identified through the HESPER scale, while the other was based on the MSNI analytical framework. Most participants found the HESPER-based chart more accurately reflected their understanding of their population's needs, often because it highlighted their sector of focus more prominently than the MSNI analysis.

Key findings

- **Perceptions of needs differ across affected populations** - While some themes measured by the MSNA aligned with participants' perspectives, others required more nuanced, in-depth analysis to capture the realities on the ground fully. Targeted qualitative assessments can help refine and complement existing measurement tools to ensure a more accurate representation of needs.
- **Gender plays a crucial role in shaping needs and priorities** - Although both men and women recognised the impact of various challenges, their priorities differed significantly. Social norms also influenced how men and women experienced and discussed these issues, suggesting that traditional assessments may not fully capture gendered dimensions of need.
- **Needs are not static; they evolve over time** - Most standardised indicators measure needs retrospectively, yet participants emphasised the importance of seasonality and annual fluctuations. Without accounting for these variations, traditional assessments risk missing critical shifts in vulnerability throughout the year.
- **Context matters** - In Kita, where participants had limited exposure to the humanitarian sector, they identified numerous priority issues that did not align neatly with the established humanitarian cluster system. In contrast, the opposite was observed in Koro, where participants were more familiar with humanitarian structures and framed their needs accordingly. This highlights the importance of contextualising assessments to avoid reinforcing pre-existing categorisations that may not fully reflect local realities.

humanitarian programming as the primary avenue for addressing it, as studied in the 2023 Somalia case study. Taking these perspectives at face value can help ensure that humanitarian response aligns with what affected populations themselves identify as most relevant to their well-being and unmet needs.

Beyond sectoral categories, a significant portion of the surveyed population in Mali highlighted other serious challenges, including well-being (55%) and AAP (25%). While these issues are often considered cross-cutting within humanitarian responses—or sometimes overlooked entirely—they have been identified as key factors undermining efforts to improve household and community

well-being. Similar dynamics have been observed in DRC, where significant disparities exist between measured and perceived needs. While the 2024 MSNI analysis identifies SNFI (91%), FSL (51%), WASH (48%), and Education (44%) as the most common severe sectoral gaps, affected populations mentioned livelihood (77%), WASH (76%), and protection (75%) as some of the most serious problems they face. Additionally, specific indicators related to well-being and AAP—dynamics not analysed as sectoral gaps in the MSNI—are also highlighted as serious concerns by affected communities. When breaking down well-being issues, excessive alcohol consumption and harmful drug use are reported as serious problems by 54% of the surveyed population.

Reflections

Measured needs provide a critical detailed snapshot at the household level, but integrating perception-based needs through toolkits such as the HESPER approach offers a more holistic perspective. While large-scale quantitative need assessments, such as the MSNA, provide valuable standardisation and comparability, they may not fully capture how communities perceive and prioritise their needs. The discrepancies observed between sectoral gaps and self-reported priorities highlight the role of perception data and integrating it more systematically into decision-making.

Why are we observing such discrepancies between measured and self-perceived needs? Several factors may contribute to these gaps. First, affected populations may face severe needs, but they do not necessarily perceive humanitarian actors as relevant responders to those issues. Second, when communities articulate their priorities, they may be expressing both immediate, short-term needs and longer-term aspirations simultaneously—both of which are valid but may not align with conventional

humanitarian categorisations, as referred to in the Somalia 2023 study. Third, severity measurement frameworks often rely on indicators that are crucial from a macro-level or public health perspective but may not reflect what people themselves consider their most urgent concerns, as highlighted in the 2023 cross-crisis analysis.

Moreover, insights from Mali's qualitative study demonstrate that factors such as gender dynamics, seasonal shifts, and local context significantly influence how needs are experienced and articulated over time. Affected populations do not categorise their challenges into predefined humanitarian sectors, and their priorities may evolve in ways not always reflected in traditional assessments. Rather than viewing these different perspectives and measured versus self-perceived needs as contradictory, they should be seen as complementary. Analytical frameworks for measuring needs must continue to capture deprivation accurately. Yet, while standardised measurements help ensure resources are allocated to those most severely affected, humanitarian actors must also demonstrate that their interventions align with the priorities of affected populations.