Perceptions of community involvement and challenges in humanitarian response in La Guajira

March 2024 | Colombia

KEY MESSAGES

This brief delivers critical insights and recommendations to strengthen humanitarian response and coordination in La Guajira, based on an Area-Based Assessment (ABA) conducted in the department. It aims to elevate community voices to enhance communication between the local population, humanitarian organizations, and local authorities. The document captures the local community's perspectives on the current state of humanitarian assitance in the department and proposes suggestions for its enhancement. Key among these suggestions is the call for a more stringent and contextually tailored application of humanitarian principles, with a special focus on the 'do no harm' principle[1]. Based on the insights from Key Informants (members of organisations and political and community leaders) and affected populations, REACH has developed the following recommendations:

- **To expand souces of information beyond community leaders** for more inclusive community engagement and comprehensive need assessments.

- **To clarify targeting and distribution criteria for humanitarian aid** to prevent tensions between groups and ensure equitable assistance.

- **To encourage the participation of community leaders, as well as local and national humanitarian actors,** in coordination spaces to foster collaboration and effective response.

- **To prioritize sustainability and exit strategies** to identify and replicate best-practices, such as establishing community commitees to manage projects post-implementation and encouraging community contributions to project financing.

Coverage Map:

CONTEXT

In response to the Venezuelan migration crisis, which reached its peak between 2015 and 2019, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), specifically the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), and the Interagency Group on Mixed Migration Flows (GIFMM in Spanish), launched a humanitarian response in La Guajira. This Colombian department, located on the border with Venezuela, has emerged as a critical entry point for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants (VRM). Numerous international humanitarian organizations have intensified their programmes to address the basic unmet needs of the host population and VRM, filling the gap the local government cannot handle. Eight years after the initiation of the humanitarian response in La Guajira, REACH has conducted and **ABA** in line with OCHA's **Flagship Initiative**, aiming to evaluate coordination dynamics between humanitarian organisations and communities, understand perceptions of humanitarian aid and its accessibility, and identify areas for improvement.

To achieve this objective, REACH carried out 17 qualitative interviews with Key Informants (KIs), 6 focus group discussions (FGDs), and 554 structured interviews in Households (HHs) during November and December 2023 in Maicao and Riohacha, two municipalities in La Guajira. The quantitative data are representative at the municipal level and by place of residence. The full version of the report can be accessed **here**.
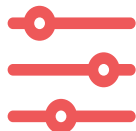
Enhancing Information Diversity

Some KIs have indicated that organizations have predominantly relied on community leaders for planning participatory research assessments, identifying target populations, and implementing humanitarian projects. Communication with communities is typically mediated by a leader (in the case of neighbourhoods or settlements) or a traditional authority (in the case of Wayúu communities), serving as the community's spokesperson. This approach has led to a sense of underrepresentation among many community members in humanitarian decision-making spaces and processes. Such limited engagement has bred suspicion within communities about the potential misuse of aid for the personal benefit of leaders and their associates, potentially causing tensions within the community.

"Traditional community leaders prioritise their relatives and those closest to them when delivering assistance that arrives in the community" (Indigenous community leader, Maicao)

Recommendation for organisations, agencies, Local Coordination Team (ICT) and GIFMM:

To diversify sources of information beyond community leaders: encourage the creation of community committees or coordinate with community action boards.

Unclear Criteria for Targeting and Distributing Humanitarian Aid

Some KIs have reported that mistrust in aid between community leaders and organisations is driven by a perception of unfairness in the targeting criteria or in the selection of prioritised areas for receiving humanitarian aid. 41% of interviewed HHs identified the need for transparency regarding access criteria as an area for improvement in humanitarian assistance. Tensions have arisen between or within communities due to perceived inequalities in aid distribution. Furthermore, 28% of interviewed HHs emphasised the importance of enhancing community participation to prevent conflicts within the community.

"One program (...) distributed food. Some benefitted. Others did not. This happened this year. Five months ago. Stones were thrown... at those who led the distribution. We never knew why some received it and others didn't." (Indigenous FGD, Riohacha)

Recommendations for donors, organisations, agencies, LCT, GIFMM and communities:

o **To clarify the criteria[2] for targeting and distributing humanitarian aid** to better accommodate host communities, enhance perceptions of fairness, and prevent exacerbating tensions within communities[3].

o **To enhance communication with and within communities** to improve their understanding of the humanitarian response.

Only 54% of interviewed HHs reported being aware of the term "humanitarian assistance". Among them, different meanings were attributed to the term*:

1	Delivery of goods		88%
2	Delivery of kits		69%
3	Support for migrants		64%

* Respondents could select multiple options, so the results add up to more than 100%.

Enhancing Community Involvement and Participation of Local and National Actors in Humanitarian Decision-Making

Some KIs expressed the need for a stronger connection between the humanitarian community and local community actors in coordination spaces. They reported that the mechanism of humanitarian coordination were unclear. The lack of a collaborative and participatory process in project planning was highlighted. KIs mentioned that communities were primarily involved in the needs assessments but not in the subsequent stages of the project development and implementation.

"They arrive with the project finished. They don't take my ideas into account. It would be good if they considered my suggestions." (Community leader, Maicao)

Recommendations for the ELC, GIFMM and local government:

o **To foster collaborative planning among communities, local governments, and organisations within humanitarian coordination spaces.** Resort to participarory methodologies and enhance the facilitation skills of members responsible for moderating these spaces or involve expert staff in facilitation.

o **To recognize and strengthen the capabilities of local organisations** to lead and provide humanitarian aid, emphasizing localisation approach.

Improvement in Sustainability and Exit Strategies for Humanitarian Projects

The identified areas for improvement center on the sustainability of humanitarian and development projects, underscoring the importance of durable solutions and capacity-building efforts. Participants of FGDs suggested that organisations could invest more in planning their exit strategies by incorporating activities to strengthen capacities or recommendations for more effective use of infrastructures. Aditionally, KIs highlighted a lack of attention to enhancing mitigation strategies and practices for seasonal flooding in humanitarian projects. They also mentioned effective practices that contribute to the sustainability of humanitarian projects, such as establishing community committees to oversee projects beyond their implementation and encouraging community contributions to project financing.

"They should create committees and train them. Let them be overseers, people who knock on the doors of the territorial entities. They should teach them how to take legal action, how to demand our rights." (Community leader, Riohacha)

Recommendations for donors, organisations, LCT and GIFMM:

o **To allocate resources** including budget, time, and personnel for the development of an exit strategy.

o **To apply strategies of co-responsibility of community and authorities** (e.g. counterpart[4]) in all phases of humanitarian projects to ensure the sustainability of interventions.

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).

ENDNOTES
[1] Wallace M. From Principles to Practice: A User's Guide to Do No Harm. 2015.
[2] Criterias based on migratory status or nationality.
[3] See the Overview of 'Conflict Sensitive Do No Harm Programming in Iraq' as an example at page 8.
[4] The counterpart is defined as the contribution to the project and its financing by local communities or authorities, which can be in the form of economic, material, or human resources, complementing the support provided by donors.