




Introduction



**At crisis point:
Countering harmful
information,
defending humanity**



Introduction



**At crisis point:
Countering harmful
information,
defending humanity**

The *World Disasters Report* is the flagship publication of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), designed to drive policy change, shape thinking and strengthen practice across the humanitarian sector. This 2026 edition focuses on **harmful information** in humanitarian contexts.

The IFRC defines harmful information as “information that has the potential to cause, contribute to, or result in harm to an individual or entity”. The term focuses attention on the harm itself, rather than on classifying the type of information being spread, which is often difficult to discern and constantly evolving. Harmful information includes misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, hate speech and other damaging narratives (see [Annex I: Glossary, on page 353](#)).

Harmful information is a pressing and pervasive challenge across all sectors of society, and a critical issue for organizations operating in humanitarian crises. Its impact on people in need, communities, responders, institutions and public trust in humanitarian action is profound.

What makes information harmful? Is its impact escalating, and why? Why does it matter so critically in humanitarian contexts? What can be done about it? These are the central questions the *2026 World Disasters Report* addresses, offering key insights, practical guidance and recommendations to help the sector navigate this challenge with greater clarity, resilience and accountability.

Twenty years ago, the *2005 World Disasters Report* introduced a new paradigm: **information as a life-saving resource**. Influenced by the devastating loss of life in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, it exposed deep inequities in access to information and called for more equitable, meaningful exchange with communities. While it made minor reference to the issues of rumours and myths affecting humanitarian response, its central message marked a profound shift – **information was no longer only a support to aid, but aid itself**. Timely, accurate information was reframed as essential to survival, safety and dignity: a critical resource and a moral imperative, especially for communities with the fewest resources, for whom it may be the only form of disaster preparedness available.¹

In 2005, information was recognized as a form of disaster response. The concern then was one of omission – what people did not know – rather than the deliberate spread of damaging falsehoods. Twenty years on, that has changed. In 2026, this report frames harmful information as a de facto *crisis*: one that undermines access of populations to humanitarian aid, erodes trust, misleads communities, deepens vulnerabilities and destabilizes social cohesion. It is a crisis because it is chronic and evolving – escalating, mutating and persisting across time and contexts. Harmful information does not simply ‘strike’ once; it spreads, multiplies and compounds harm in many forms. It directly undermines the humanitarian sector’s ability to fulfil its core role: to alleviate suffering and protect life and human dignity, especially for people in the most vulnerable situations, while promoting respect for international laws and upholding humanitarian principles and standards. Because harmful information can obstruct access, distort needs, fuel mistrust and even incite violence, it is no longer a peripheral concern. Responding to it is not optional – it is integral to protecting people and upholding humanitarian purpose.

Managing harmful information is no longer just a communication challenge; it is an operational and ethical imperative that demands a whole-of-society response, encompassing public policy, institutional policies, preparedness, education and social awareness. Meeting this challenge requires a shift in how the humanitarian sector prepares for, mitigates and actively counters harmful information. The sector is neither

fully equipped to respond nor solely responsible, making collective response essential. Some 60 organizations provided written contributions to this report, underscoring how seriously its impacts are now regarded across the sector and beyond. Across consultations, all recognized the growing danger of harmful information and many voiced hopes that this report can help build understanding and drive action.

Historically, humanitarian standards and policies have often emerged in response to operational failures, access constraints or new technologies. Today, the challenge is no longer about the availability or accessibility of information, but about its reliability. This calls for clear sector-wide standards and guidance on how humanitarian actors should prepare for and respond to harmful information that are integrated into preparedness, risk assessment, protection and accountability frameworks and always adapted to local realities.

A focus on technology and the future of humanitarian intervention was the theme of the *2013 World Disasters Report*. It observed: “Humanitarians always lament the lack of information when they face hard decisions yet they take pride in acting during the ‘fog of war’. The advent of digital information and communication systems may reduce that fog but make the decisions even more consequential.”² What once inspired optimism – that technology could generate new information, provide early warning and place affected communities at the centre of humanitarian action as engaged participants – has increasingly been tempered by recognition of its limitations and risks. The sheer volume of witnesses, bystanders and malicious actors using these same tools to deliberately undermine humanitarian response and erode trust has, in many cases, not lifted the ‘fog of war’ but created a smokescreen or even a deeper darkness – one that shifts power, deepens vulnerabilities and undermines resilience.

Information as a basic need must disrupt this dynamic. What was acknowledged two decades ago must now be reaffirmed and actively put into practice.

Today, as the humanitarian sector confronts a new wave of technological change – artificial intelligence (AI) – the stakes are rising once again. AI is accelerating the production and spread of information at unprecedented speed and scale, lowering the barriers to entry for malicious actors to manipulate content and influence opinion. Governance frameworks are struggling to keep pace.

Understanding how both information and technology are evolving is now essential to shaping effective responses to harmful information in humanitarian contexts. What has changed in the two decades since information was first recognized as a life-saving resource? What can we now say about the impact of harmful information on humanitarian response – and, more importantly, on the people the response is meant to serve?

The scale and speed of harmful information today far exceed anything previously experienced. Navigating this flood of misleading, instrumentalized and targeted content has become critical to maintaining trust, protecting people’s safety and ensuring humanitarian response reaches people in need.

The report draws on lived experience and offers practical recommendations for preparedness, response and addressing harmful information in humanitarian contexts. Covering a wide range of crises – health emergencies, disasters, migration, climate shocks, armed conflict – it identifies key risks and provides guidance for strengthening resilience, fostering engagement and building trust. It includes community intelligence research contributed by 40 volunteers from 10 National Red Cross and Red Crescent

Societies, supported by the IFRC and academic partners. The report provides asks, aims and recommendations grounded in actual crisis response; these are practical, shaped by lessons learned and illustrated with real-world responses. It presents an analysis and typology of harm (see [Chapter 1, section 1.7, on page 46](#)), illustrating how harmful information impacts humanitarian action – and indicates the type of harm associated with each ‘Contributor Insight’ box. This underscores the need for a stronger evidence base to guide strategies for measuring and addressing the harms and impacts of harmful information to inform responses and policy.

In this landscape of harmful information, the report places **trust, proximity, community and resilience** at the centre of its analysis.

From the IFRC’s perspective, self-protection is a critical component of resilience building, regardless of the vulnerabilities individuals face. Even in the most complex environments, human capacities are the starting point for addressing risks.

The IFRC defines resilience as: “the ability of individuals, communities, organizations or countries exposed to disasters, crises and underlying vulnerabilities to anticipate, prepare for, reduce the impact of, cope with and recover from the effects of shocks and stresses without compromising their long-term prospects.”³

Academic critiques caution that framing resilience as a responsibility solely at the levels of individuals or communities risks obscuring systemic failures and reinforcing inequalities. This is particularly relevant in humanitarian contexts and within the information ecosystem: resilience cannot rest only on the shoulders of the people already most affected. It must be supported by broader systems that reduce vulnerability, enable equitable access to information and uphold rights. This requires investments in public trust, inclusive governance, meaningful accountability mechanisms and fair access to digital infrastructure and digital literacy. Without these foundations, resilience efforts risk becoming superficial – placing undue burden on the people and communities already most at risk.

The report is composed of eight chapters:

- the information ecosystem, the erosion of trust and global-local narratives ([Chapter 1, on page 29](#), [Chapter 2, on page 69](#) and [Chapter 3, on page 103](#))
- the consequences of harmful information on humanitarian responses ([Chapter 4, on page 137](#))
- regulation and rights ([Chapter 5, on page 167](#))
- community-first approaches ([Chapter 6, on page 211](#))
- challenges related to the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement ([Chapter 7, on page 257](#))
- a forward-looking reflection on resilience in the humanitarian sector ([Chapter 1, section 1.7, on page 46](#)).

Each chapter is written to stand alone while contributing to a coherent whole, recognizing that most readers will engage with selected sections rather than read the report in its entirety.

[Annex I on page 353](#) provides a glossary and [Annex II on page 359](#) focuses on the role of data in humanitarian decision-making.

It should go without saying – but now, more than ever, it must be said unequivocally: those working in humanitarian action understand the stakes of harmful information – the ability to reach people in need, to be trusted to act impartially and to save lives. Mistrust is deepening. Needs are outpacing resources. Access is under threat. Harmful information is not just compounding these challenges – it is actively undermining humanitarian action, distorting public understanding and putting lives at risk. And yet, the humanitarian commitment endures. **Humanity must be the disruptor** – a counterforce to apathy, manipulation and inaction. Law applies. People are in need. The question is no longer whether the sector wants to respond, but whether it is adequately supported, resourced and protected to do so.

In a crowded and contested information space, principled humanitarian action cannot be sidelined. It requires more than statements of intent. It demands investment, collaboration and clear standards that span from policy to practice to the very front lines of humanitarian response. The ability to act with integrity – and to be trusted to do so – depends on it.

“**Rumours stop with the wise. With skills and abilities, we can address the issue. While other teams were retreating, we could continue rescuing people because we knew how to handle it.**”

Community member, China

This insight underscores the essence of this report: a call to confront the threat of harmful information directly and to reaffirm the role of humanitarian actors in assisting and protecting people, supporting their agency and restoring trust even in the most fractured environments.

Our shared humanity must guide the way forward – to meet today’s challenges with resilience, integrity and purpose.

Endnotes

- 1 IFRC's *World Disasters Report 2005: Focus on information in disasters* emphasized the divide between those who have information and those who do not, noting that too little information was being shared with the very people who aid organizations aim to support. It examined both the quality of the information – right and wrong – and the need for more effective communication.
- 2 IFRC. *World Disasters Report 2013: Focus on technology and the future of humanitarian action*. (2013) p.189. www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/WDR-2013.pdf
- 3 IFRC. *IFRC Framework for Community Resilience* (2014), p.6. www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/IFRC-Framework-for-Community-Resilience-EN-LR.pdf

