The Humanitarian Inclusion Standards: Evidence of Uptake, Influence and Impact



The Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities (HIS) were developed in 2018 under the Age and Disability Capacity Programme and now comprise one of eight standards in the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP, an initiative of Sphere, the global initiative to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance).

In a rapidly changing humanitarian landscape shaped by funding pressures and efficiency demands, this report examines how the HIS fit within the broader humanitarian system. It looks at how they are currently used, and what can be done in the future to sustain their relevance and uptake – not least in the context of a wider review of humanitarian standards, including the 2019 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, the 2024 revision of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), and the upcoming Sphere review due in 2028.

HelpAge International

cbm global disability inclusion

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The HIS remain unique in advancing the inclusion of older people

A central finding of this report is that the HIS remain unique and particularly valuable for advancing the inclusion of older people in humanitarian action. While disability inclusion now benefits from a wider range of guidance (especially the IASC Guidelines) the HIS provide an important, accessible framework for organisations and practitioners who are newer to disability and age inclusion. However, awareness and use of both the HIS and the IASC Guidelines remain limited across much of the humanitarian sector. But at a time when inclusion is under pressure, the HIS continue to offer a vital foundation for maintaining minimum standards and making the case for disability and older age inclusion.

HIS integration with other HSP standards is uneven

The report reviews how the HIS relate to other humanitarian standards within the HSP. Most of the recently revised standards include at least a reference to the HIS, but the extent of integration varies. Some, such as the Minimum Standards for Education (INEE) and the Child Protection Minimum Standards (CPMS), more systematically mainstream disability inclusion and use the HIS as a supporting resource. Others (related to camp management, livestock, market analysis, and crop-related livelihoods standards etc), acknowledge older people and people with disabilities more selectively and rely on signposting to the HIS rather than embedding inclusive practice in depth. This uneven integration suggests there is scope to strengthen the role of HIS content across related standards in future revisions.



Jorge Panchoaga / Fairpicture / HelpAge International

How the HIS compares to other major frameworks

The 2024 CHS revision strengthens participation and rights-based approaches, but it also weakens the HIS's earlier alignment with the CHS structure, making the HIS appear out of date. The IFRC Minimum Standards for Protection, Gender and Inclusion are also discussed as a complementary framework that cross-references the HIS and covers some thematic gaps, such as cash-based interventions and disaster risk reduction. Most notably, the IASC Guidelines are presented as both complementary to and, in practice, sometimes competing with the HIS. Compared with the HIS, the IASC Guidelines are more detailed, more strongly anchored in the UN system, and supported by an active dissemination network. This has given them greater visibility and influence, particularly on disability inclusion, though they pay far less attention to older people.

HIS are valued, but need positioning as a unique tool in humanitarian crises

Despite these challenges, the HIS are important within the humanitarian architecture. They remain the only standards with a dedicated focus on older age inclusion and continue to serve as a practical, principle-based resource for organisations seeking to improve inclusive humanitarian action. At the same time, the sector has evolved significantly since 2018, and the HIS now face challenges of limited visibility, overlap with newer guidance, and partial integration into related standards. Their future relevance will therefore depend less on complete replacement and more on stronger dissemination, clearer positioning alongside other standards, and better integration into ongoing humanitarian reforms.

"HIS ensures safe spaces, respectful treatment and protection… persons with disabilities and older persons should be treated as rights holders."

Key Informant, OPD Trainer, Philippines

HIS uptake and awareness are uneven among users and potential users

This report examines who uses the HIS, how they are applied, and what this reveals about their current relevance and reach across the humanitarian sector. Overall, the findings show that awareness and use of the HIS are strongest among international NGO management and among organisations involved in the original ADCAP programme, while familiarity is much lower among national teams, local organisations, grassroots actors, and representative bodies such as Older People's Associations (OPAs) and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). This uneven uptake reflects broader inequalities in humanitarian coordination and capacity-building structures.

HIS are better known strategically/ organisationally than by frontline implementers

Survey results indicate moderate overall use of the HIS, with 65% of respondents reporting that they had used or applied the standards, but with major variations by organisation type, role, and sector. Usage was highest among INGOs, local NGOs, and OPDs, but much lower among government and UN respondents. Management-level practitioners were more likely than field-level staff to report using the HIS, suggesting that the standards are often better known at strategic or organisational levels than in front-line implementation. Protection actors were the most likely sector users, while respondents working in education, nutrition, shelter, and food security were less likely to know or use the standards. Consultations in Bangladesh, Kenya, and Ukraine reinforced these findings, showing especially low awareness among local and grassroots actors and limited engagement by OPAs and OPDs, some of which remained disconnected from humanitarian coordination altogether.

Influence of ADCAP programme has been critical for sustaining HIS use

Organisations such as HelpAge International, CBM Global, Islamic Relief, and Concern Worldwide have continued to apply the HIS in different ways. HelpAge has used them as a training and coordination tool across multiple country programmes, often integrating them into humanitarian proposals, local working groups, and e-learning. CBM Global uses the HIS more as a broad reference framework, though in some contexts it has shifted towards other tools such as the IASC Guidelines. Islamic Relief and Concern Worldwide provide the strongest examples of institutionalisation: both organisations have embedded the HIS into staffing structures, programme design, monitoring systems, data collection practices, and organisational strategies. These examples show that the HIS can move beyond being a reference document to becoming a driver of organisational change when backed by leadership, training, and dedicated systems.

ADCAP alumni and associated training platforms have helped extend the standards' influence. Former programme participants continue to advocate for the HIS in new organisations, helping to spread their principles beyond the original consortium. DisasterReady e-learning modules remain an important dissemination channel, and targeted promotion has shown that there is still strong demand for HIS-related learning content. However, there have been missed opportunities, including outdated course material and weak links between current digital resources and the final HIS. Elrha's use of the HIS within its Humanitarian Innovation Fund further illustrates how the standards have shaped innovation agendas in disability and older age inclusion.

"As far as I know the [HIS] are not part of the organisational culture. We are now trying to change that by persuading our board members of the importance of the standards."

Key Informant
ADCAP Alumni

HIS have had a tangible influence on attitudes and practice

This report reveals that the HIS appear to have had a tangible impact on both attitudes and operations. Survey respondents reported that the standards had helped shape how they think about inclusion and had influenced practical approaches, especially among implementing staff. The HIS have informed research design, advocacy, donor policy, and local government engagement, but perhaps most importantly they have improved humanitarian operations on the ground.

Examples include more systematic home delivery for people unable to access distribution points, accessible infrastructure design, adapted schedules for older caregivers, better use of disaggregated data, and stronger inclusion of older people and people with disabilities in programme design and volunteering roles. In several contexts, HIS have influenced broader legal frameworks, government plans, and sectoral strategies. These changes suggest that the HIS are not only a conceptual or policy resource but also a practical tool for improving service quality and equity.

What survey participants say has supported HIS uptake and utilisation

Overall, the HIS are valued because they provide legitimacy, a shared framework, and practical benchmarks for age- and disability-inclusive humanitarian action. They help organisations strengthen advocacy, integrate inclusion into operational procedures, build staff capacity, and promote participation of older people and people with disabilities. Examples from countries such as the Philippines and Moldova show that the standards have supported real changes in local government budgeting, accessibility assessments, and inclusive programming. Dedicated funding, strong organisational commitment, and continued use within advocacy and coordination networks also help sustain uptake.

No strong case for HIS revision

The report concludes that there is no strong case for a full revision of the HIS. Instead, most stakeholders called for the HIS to become more practical, simplified, and easier to apply, with stronger use of examples, case studies, and actionable guidance. At the same time, some contexts – especially Ukraine – highlighted the need for targeted updates to reflect different operating realities, including more digital and technologically enabled approaches to participation and inclusion.

Content gaps must be addressed

Several important content gaps were identified. Respondents felt the current HIS do not sufficiently address climate-related crises, anticipatory action, climate-induced displacement, extreme weather, or environmental approaches. Other missing areas include localisation, intersectionality, psychosocial disabilities, children and youth, women, assistive technology, cash programming, and coordination with governments. In addition, many of the linked reference materials in the HIS are now outdated or inaccessible, with only a small proportion of resource links still functioning. This reduces the practical usefulness of the standards and creates barriers for users seeking follow-up guidance.

Several priorities for strengthening uptake and relevance emerged. These include improving translation and localisation, ensuring that any language version is accompanied by active promotion, and expanding training through stronger capacity development and possibly accredited training-of-trainers models. Stakeholders also argued for fewer, more integrated resources that combine standards with operational guidance, while still preserving the distinct focus on older people and people with disabilities. The upcoming Sphere review process and wider digital transformation of the Humanitarian Standards Partnership are presented as important opportunities to improve searchability, integration across standards, and visibility of HIS content.

Conclusion

Despite challenges outlined, the HIS are still viewed as a highly valuable and essential framework for inclusive humanitarian action. Respondents stressed that the standards continue to provide a shared language, common benchmarks, and a rights-based foundation for ensuring that older people and people with disabilities are not overlooked. The HIS were seen as particularly important for accountability, disaggregated data collection, accessible service delivery, and participation in decision-making. In contexts where inclusion risks being deprioritised, the standards remain a key reference point for advocating for accessible services, assistive devices, inclusive planning, and recognition of affected populations as active contributors rather than passive beneficiaries.

Overall, the HIS remain an influential and valuable resource (if one whose use is unevenly distributed). Their strongest impact has been in organisations with sustained investment in training, leadership, and systems change. Where embedded, the HIS have helped shift inclusion from a specialist concern to a shared organisational responsibility. Their longer-term value lies in their ability to support this kind of systemic transformation – embedding inclusion in practice, monitoring, policy, and advocacy so that older people and people with disabilities are recognised not as peripheral groups, but as equal participants in humanitarian action.



Ben Small / HelpAge International

Recommendations

The HIS remain the only dedicated standards for older age inclusion in humanitarian action and continue to hold significant value even as the humanitarian architecture evolves. Their greatest future contribution lies not in wholesale revision, but in selective updating, stronger dissemination, better integration with other standards, and more practical implementation tools. The recommendations therefore focus on three areas.

Update HIS content where necessary:

- **Update the HIS to accommodate the revised CHS (2024).**
- **Provide new signposting to other standards and guidance that fill content gaps in the HIS where possible.**
- **Work with other standard holders to strengthen their content on disability and older-age inclusion.**
- **Review and update the resources section of the HIS drawing initially on resources developed by CBM Global and HelpAge since 2018.**

Develop a stronger dissemination strategy:

- **Increase awareness and use of the HIS among OPAs, OPDs, local NGOs.**
- **Strengthen the capacity of OPAs and OPDs so they can better appreciate how to use the HIS as a resource for their advocacy.**
- **Identify and focus on promoting HIS to priority audience(s) then turn the HIS into practical steps for those implementing humanitarian responses.**
- **Strengthen capacity through training.**
- **Custodians, standard-setting bodies and INGOs to develop case studies of good practice and publish these alongside the HIS, to support advocacy and training, particularly around effective translation/adaptation in different contexts.**

Use the HIS more actively as an advocacy tool to keep disability and older-age inclusion central to humanitarian policy and practice:

- **Use the HIS explicitly in advocacy to stop the erosion of inclusion as a humanitarian sector issue, particularly on the inclusion of older people.**
- **Mainstream content from the HIS into other standards and improve signposting between them to increase HIS visibility.**
- **Review the indicators developed for the HIS and make them available as a monitoring resource.**
- **Use the HIS as example of advocacy for formal monitoring and enforcement through existing (CRPD) and required (older age) legal frameworks.**
- **Make the case for disability and older-age inclusion to be maintained and included in institutional donor policy, strategy and funding requirements.**
- **Influence new donors (e.g. philanthropists, impact investors) as they enter the humanitarian space to demonstrate the value of the HIS and other standards as essential resources.**

Find out more:

www.helpage.org/what-we-do/humanitarian-action/the-humanitarian-standards-partnership/

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

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