

Broke or broken? A necessary discussion about the humanitarian funding gap

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Chapter 2: rewriting the humanitarian narrative

The humanitarian funding gap is a direct threat to our collective ability to meet the basic needs of communities affected by conflicts and disasters. While all options should be considered to mobilize the necessary funds, innovative funding alone will not suffice to reconcile the increasingly divergent trajectories between needs and funding. At the same time, recurring access issues and the growing number of voices denouncing an outdated post-colonial aid system raises a difficult question: is the funding gap a symptom of a more serious problem? How can we restore a humanitarian narrative that is acceptable to all and seen as synonymous with a global public good?

In the recent Council Conclusions on the funding gap,¹ EU Member States unanimously reaffirmed their commitment to devote at least 0.7% of collective GNI as ODA by 2030, and welcomed the plan of a new target for increasing humanitarian aid. With this renewed commitment and new proposal, Europe reaffirmed its role in addressing humanitarian needs across the world. This is a good step forward, even if symbolic: many of the EU's larger economies already committed to reaching the Conclusions' target before 2030.² However, one cannot help but wonder whether the international pull factor of this EU initiative will get enough traction in the time left before the rise of humanitarian needs becomes overwhelming.

As described in our previous paper, non-DAC countries seem reluctant to agree on a target and to contribute to the collective effort in a concerted way: the humanitarian storytelling – as an incentive to a wider range of institutional donors and private actors – is simply not appealing enough. The humanitarian narrative has evolved over the years and has been trying to address criticism through more accountability, more efficiency, more innovation or by better addressing root causes. Some progress was made there, but without triggering any in-depth review of our traditional humanitarian narrative.

These dynamics may eventually reveal an inconvenient truth: from a narrative perspective, humanitarian action is not a sector on the offensive anymore. Since its inception in the late 19th century, it has carved its way from principles into humanitarian laws, normative conventions and dedicated country donor budgets. Humanitarians are now seeking to protect these developments as a common good against inhumanity, without necessarily taking stock of the growing divide between the traditional argument proposing adjustments meant to preserve the status quo and the rising awareness that the world has changed.

Louder voices have been calling for a societal, political and geopolitical transformative agenda,³ and for the revision of a humanitarian narrative perceived as conservative and defensive.⁴ They largely contributed to the sector's awareness – on paper at least - of the need for rebalanced partnerships with the Global South, and for greater consideration of the aspirations of affected communities. But will it be enough to make a difference?

Ultimately, many would argue that the need for more resources is not the issue: the tenfold increase in humanitarian needs (from 35 million people in need in 1999⁵ to 350 million in 2023) legitimately questions the extent to which the sector is overstepping its mandate's boundaries and covering non-life-saving imperatives. Although not directly addressed in this document, the issue of prioritization may be of interest as it is likely symptomatic of a supply-driven system that continuously creates justifications for its own ever-widening involvement.

RECENT EVOLUTIONS OF HUMANITARIAN AID

From Henry Dunant's initial proposition in 1863 to the early 2000s, humanitarian action as we know has been shaped by contemporary Western history⁶: two World Wars, a Cold one, decolonisation conflicts, the fall of the Soviet system and the perception of a victorious liberal ideology. At the end of the twentieth century, humanitarianism seemed to have established itself as the vector of truly universal values, as represented in the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

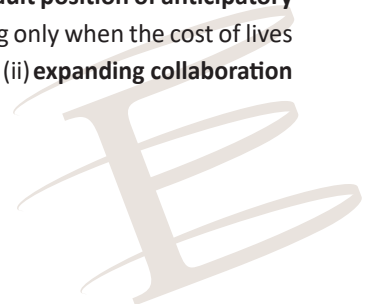
Nevertheless, during the past two decades alone, the humanitarian aid sector has undergone the most significant structural changes in its history: while the scale of interventions has skyrocketed, the sector's very essence and its ability to meet the needs of suffering populations have both been challenged. The gradual preponderance of protracted conflicts has led most humanitarian agencies to adjust their programming tools to longer-terms responses, motivated as well by the inability of development actors to maintain their footprint in volatile contexts. Insecurity has become a key marker of the sector, which until this point had benefited from a broadly spontaneous respect for humanitarian space by most of the parties in presence. On the contrary, denial of access and targeting of humanitarian workers by both State and non-State actors has become the norm in many operating environments, hindering the ability of aid agencies to reach communities in need in a timely manner.

In budgetary terms, the aid system, which represented an estimated USD 1.7 billion sector in 1999,⁷ has been transformed into a 31.3 billion dollars industry by 2021.⁸ This called for a **rationalization of the sector** (reform of the humanitarian coordination system in 2005, horizontal integration), coupled with the necessary **professionalization of its actors** to face the explosion of needs and funding. Institutional donors played a key role in this evolution through their own structuring and increased requirements, which led aid agencies to strengthen their control systems and optimize their capacity to manage and raise funds. As a result, mid-size entities grew larger, and large agencies turned massive, with the capacity to oversee enormous programs and to take increasing financial risks, as recently illustrated by ICRC's projection of a 25% funding shortfall in 2023.

This evolution has led to an **increased disconnection between regular civil society entities and ever larger and more powerful international aid agencies**, capable of developing sound compliance systems, responding to increasingly demanding donors and designing highly advanced programming and multi-actor consortia. **The practice of massive global appeals has supported this process** of mobilizing donors and raising more funds.

This spectacular scale-up does have its drawbacks. Despite the increased focus on improving Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) over the past decade,⁹ and the fact that the humanitarian system has been saving more and more lives, caring for high numbers of wounded persons, and feeding a lot more hungry people in additional places than it has ever done before¹⁰ the international humanitarian system still lacks a reasonable overview of who is receiving aid or what difference it is making in terms of outcomes for affected populations. As a result, institutional donors increasingly question the overall cost-efficiency of the sector.

In 2019, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator recommended three innovative ways to address the situation¹¹: (i) **adopting a default position of anticipatory action** rather than responding only when the cost of lives lost and suffering is significant, (ii) **expanding collaboration**



with the private sector by creating new, sustainable revenue streams by, (iii) **combining approaches** that build resilience and reduce needs, while also improving the targeting, efficiency, and coordination of humanitarian responses to optimise the use of resources.

In 2023, these outcomes are still struggling to come to fruition, and many observers wonder whether they can be reached in a context of heightened geopolitical tensions, economic conservatism and an inclination towards isolationism.

PERCEPTION(S) OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

In organizations such as the United Nations or the European Union, **humanitarian aid continues to be recognized as a global public good** and benefits from several elements of protection within the international normative framework. The recent UNSC Resolution 2664 reaffirmed the superiority of universal humanitarian values over the most sensitive topics: global security, counterterrorism and sanctions regimes. At EU level, the humanitarian budget line is ringfenced in the Multiannual Financial Framework and protected from potential cuts of the NDICI due to the context or orientations. The invitation of the European Council to follow the example of Spain and set a humanitarian target at 0.07% of the GNI is another recent recognition of humanitarian aid as a necessary public good.

But humanitarian aid also faces many challenges in the conversations ahead.

Among humanitarians, and in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement, an urging narrative has emerged about the necessity to purge the system from its systemic neo-colonial roots. After igniting heated debates, the discussion progressively evolved into a more appeased exchange focused on empowering local communities and promoting equal partnerships. The decolonization agenda continues to call for power shifts and a profound revision of the humanitarian system and its practices. Moreover, many humanitarian workers have started questioning the overall sense of their commitment in an era of extreme

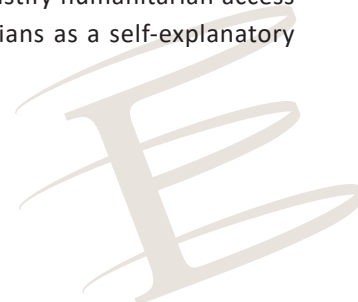
professionalization of the sector, with the perception of a widening gap between operational teams and their global policy counterparts.

Interactions with development actors have often been hindered by a persistent feeling that humanitarians would be unable to get out of their conservative and dogmatic “humanitarian comfort zone” in addition to the fear that they would prey on development funds. Progress on the nexus remains timid and still faces mandate-related obstacles. There is a persistent reluctance to transfer funds from development to humanitarian aid when crises unfold, and a fear that humanitarian finance earmarked for achieving the SDGs will be lost.

Dialogue with the military remains difficult as soon as it goes beyond the usual limits of each actor’s mandate. The introduction of triple-Nexus commissioned requests from the political spheres raised doubts on the part of both players and led to further defense of their respective privilege areas. Humanitarian actors’ perceived unwillingness to integrate their action in a priority Peace Agenda concludes most discussions. In practice, Force Commanders in peacekeeping operations rarely prioritize the recommendations of Civil-Military Coordination officers, even when the latter are senior enough to interact with the necessary authority.

From a private sector perspective, and as embodied by the famous feud between WFP and Elon Musk in 2021, the pristine reputation of humanitarian action is counterbalanced by the perception of a lack of efficiency or impact. The notion of social return-on-investment – meant as a driver of transformation – still divides the humanitarian community and is being questioned as a legitimate tool compatible with a purely needs-based approach.

At the political level, the substantial and increasingly public questioning of the universal nature of international humanitarian law and its principles has made it more difficult to justify humanitarian access and the protection of civilians as a self-explanatory absolute priority.



But far more concerning than the challenges faced by humanitarians, the past decades have been characterized by **an increasing disregard for International Humanitarian Law, including on the part of permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) members**. A growing number of conflicts have been marked by the targeting of hospitals, indiscriminate attacks on civilians and a manifested lack of trust in the mandate of humanitarian action. At the same time, governments of aid recipient countries have been increasingly using the global security agenda to justify restrictions on humanitarian access.

Critics of humanitarian universalism have also taken advantage of the variable geometry approach of IHL champions. As an example, the tacit acceptance by major IHL-champion States of the progressive annexation of Palestinian territories and the constant violations of the law of occupation by the state of Israel, already denounced by the Red Cross in 2007,¹² has only reinforced the idea of an asymmetrical application of IHL and permanently weakened the authority of the humanitarian narrative towards all other Member States. Similarly, the abusive use of the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine in Libya further fueled the suspicion of a humanitarian doctrine that would in fact be serving the interest of the Global North.

These trends strongly question the relevance of the UN-led system on several counts. With several permanent members refusing to enforce or comply with international mechanisms and laws,¹³ the UNSC continues to reflect the geopolitical interests and struggles of its members. By doing so, it accelerates an already well-established undermining of the international normative framework – including IHL.

On the technical side of things, **the UN internal power dynamics and lack of clear leadership** have been hindering attempts to envision transformative change and in-depth reforms. This institutional inertia added to the above-mentioned competing interests among influential nations neutralized any opportunity to move away from an unacceptable status quo.

These sub-optimal conditions have largely eroded the faith of many civil societies in international institutions and organizations, which are seen as complicit of a system that has failed to uphold human rights. International humanitarian agencies, while still benefiting from their “saving lives” aura, are in parallel considered one of the parties at fault in this global issue.

NEW NARRATIVE OPTIONS

The recent adoption of UNSC Resolution 2664 demonstrated renewed commitment to humanitarian values. The difficulty to promote its roll-out in Europe and ensure its extension to autonomous sanctions regimes are however sour reminders of their limited weight when specific political interests are at play. Restoring the authority of humanitarian action on a large scale will require more than aligning financial flows with needs, outputs, and technical solutions. Whether legitimate or not, there is an undeniable rise of doubt in the system by many opinion leaders around the world. A bolder stance will be needed to maintain its legitimacy and the weight of its core operating principles. Aid actors may then want to answer a central question: **“what would it take to safeguard – if not restore - the notion of humanitarian aid as a global public good?”**

Principles are not dogmas, and all options should be considered to ensure humanitarian space is preserved. If we confine ourselves strictly to basic humanitarian action and try to grasp the fault lines running through the sector’s political environment, three main narrative models may come into play.

(i) Asserting the universality of humanitarian values has served as a mantra for the sector throughout many decades and is still dominant in the sector’s narrative though the principles of independence and neutrality have been increasingly challenged lately. Increasing calls for a de-Westernization and decolonization of aid have pointed to the need of a truly independent aid sector. Recent reports on neglected crises have also pointed at the tendency from major donors to deprioritize crises benefiting from poor media

coverage and political attention, questioning the very notion of impartiality.

Neutralizing the geopolitical origin of humanitarian funds would imply the creation of a “one-stop-shop” mechanism as main repository of aid funding, exclusively needs-based. The technical modalities, constraints and governance of such a system were already explored in our previous paper,¹⁴ in the unlikely scenario where key donor States would agree to abandon this important soft power instrument of their external action arsenal.

The alternative idea of an independent governance body co-led by NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and the UN¹⁵ is also challenged by the assumption that these increasingly powerful institutions have a vested interest in the *status quo*, and are part of the cultural bias problem. Re-centering aid around the priorities of affected populations would require the launch of a genuine equal partnership with Global South representatives and civil societies sharing the governance; though opening the door to other stakeholders is quite different than making sure that everyone can substantially contribute. It would take decades for such prospects to materialize. Moreover, it would require a deep overhaul or even replacement of leading humanitarian institutions, starting with the United Nations.

(ii) Accepting a partial re-politicization of aid as a response to the detractors of the principle of neutrality when the latter paves the way for complicity in acts of cruelty. According to this model, Dunantist principles underpinning the concept of humanity would not be the only universal moral compass and may come into conflict with often more pressing values. The concept of solidarity – in the sense of supporting a just cause – made a great comeback as a global narrative item during the war in Ukraine. It may be seen as a way for Western countries to legitimize the outpouring of humanitarian aid in a context where they are anything but neutral. Some observers prefer the term of humanitarian resistance¹⁶ against an established order perceived as inhumane.

On the longer run, it is hard to see how States can adopt this narrative as a cornerstone of their humanitarian policy: likely, they will, at some point, find themselves in the role of the oppressor. By anticipation, the muffled tones induced by the principles of impartiality and neutrality are far more comforting and better suited to future compromises and closed-door diplomacy.

With civil societies increasingly frustrated by a humanitarian system unable – by design – to take sides effectively and openly with the oppressed, the next decade is likely to see new humanitarian aid actors with a more explicit activist agenda emerging in conflict situations – and not just in the ranks of local operators.

(iii) Acknowledging that humanitarian aid in its current form is largely a Western construct and a natural extension of the Western powers’ external action. As such, the authority of humanitarian principles has started to lose ground, and their universal nature has been increasingly challenged. While this situation has been documented, denounced, and discussed extensively in global fora, most aspirations for system reforms have remained constrained to technical improvements and funding commitments limited to the same traditional payers’ club.

Acknowledging this situation would be one of the first necessary step towards challenging the “global” nature of the current international humanitarian model. We need to move away from the idea that the current system is capturing the bulk of the humanitarian response and start considering all response mechanisms. Such a holistic approach would imply considering the current international system as only part of the response, and the need to articulate it with other relief mechanisms: local, regional, or faith-based.¹⁷



CONCLUSION

So far, most of the humanitarian reform efforts have focused on addressing specific challenges of the current aid system and finding ways to adjust its most outdated aspects with a strong emphasis on the search for cost efficiency and aid effectiveness. To adapt to ever growing needs, the system has developed important biases, widening the gaps between the official global response measured by humanitarian response plans (HRPs) and a much more diverse and complex reality of response models. As a result, the percentage of the HRPs covered by the main donors only partially and imperfectly reflect the reality of the response, though it remains the main indicator to support global fundraising efforts and to assess the success of a response. The growing disconnection between an official global narrative, stubbornly focused on its support to the traditional internationally led response has been fueling an increased mistrust in the model: outside the sector, and within. Ensuring the relevance of tomorrow's response will require in-depth reforms and a genuine appetite to understand how the global aid model articulates with other ways of working and thinking.

The narrative models briefly presented above may not be as incompatible as they seem at first glance and deserve to be explored further to identify concrete alternatives to the traditional humanitarian paradigm that needs to be profoundly revisited to remain relevant.

Innovative approaches and paradigm shifts also need a fertile institutional ground to generate concrete propositions and lead to large-scale reforms. The EU has a unique capacity to offer a powerful and stable environment where humanitarian values would be protected while new solutions could be tested and operationalized. As a first step, it needs to continue affirming its humanitarian leadership by offering the space for true innovative and potentially disruptive thinking.

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Endnotes

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