



Humanitarian renewal in the era of consequences

From discretionary aid to shared responsibility – grounded in humanity and dignity, stewardship of planetary systems, solidarity with crisis vulnerable and affected people, justice and equity.

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Executive Summary

The Western-led humanitarian system is facing a moment of contraction in ambition and commitment. This should not be accepted as inevitable. In a world of unprecedented wealth and capability, the persistence of large-scale suffering reflects political choices rather than unavoidable constraints. The central challenge is therefore not whether suffering can be reduced, but whether there is sufficient collective will to do so.

This think piece argues that the current moment presents an opportunity for re-foundation rather than retrenchment. Instead of focusing narrowly on sustaining and reforming a shrinking humanitarian system, there is a need to articulate a broader ethical and political project – one capable of mobilising governments, institutions, corporations, and citizens. It should centre around the leadership, needs and rights of crisis-affected communities and align with wider calls for global systems reform, accountability and justice. The question shifts from how to fund humanitarian action to how to organise responsibility, resources, and collective action across a wider and more diverse ecosystem.

At the core of this discussion is the proposal for a new unifying ethical foundation for global cooperation in an era defined by overlapping and systemic crises. This framework moves beyond the traditional humanitarian model and is grounded in four key principles:

- Shared humanity and dignity
- Stewardship of planetary systems
- Solidarity with affected populations
- Commitment to justice and equality

However, achieving this shift requires parallel transformation in how crisis response is governed, financed, and delivered. The current model – characterised by discretionary funding, centralised decision-making, and implementation by a limited set of actors – is not adequate to the scale, complexity, or predictability of current and future overlapping crises. The authors therefore propose segmenting categories of risk into four groups: global systemic risks, manageable risks, forced displacement, and conflict-related humanitarian needs.

Achieving the transformation needed depends on a willingness to reassess entrenched roles, incentives and power structures, and cannot be left to humanitarian actors alone. It requires a process of co-creation across disciplines and geographies drawing on the on-going initiatives for structural reform outside of the sector, as well as the collective strength of an inclusive humanitarian ecosystem.

This think piece is an invitation to broader collaboration and co-creation aimed at developing more legitimate, effective, and equitable approaches to managing shared global risks and responsibilities.

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Introduction

We live in an era of consequences, where the human and environmental impacts of destructive economic and political models generate compounding layers of human suffering and destruction of earth systems that are critical to our collective survival. Despite unprecedented global wealth, the number of people living in food insecurity has doubled in the last 10 years, while the number of people forcibly displaced, has almost tripled.¹

In contrast with this steady worsening trend in humanitarian needs, international humanitarian funding in 2025 fell to the lowest in a decade. The Western-led humanitarian system² is unravelling and rapidly abandoning tens of millions of the world's most vulnerable, forgotten and persecuted people.³

Recent shifts within the Western-led humanitarian system signal a quiet but profound recalibration. In practice, the commitment to “humanity” – the idea that all suffering is intolerable – is being operationally narrowed. The UN's Global Humanitarian Overview assessment of people in need is now increasingly shaped by what donors are willing to fund, rather than solely reflecting the reality of human suffering and need. Funding meanwhile, is becoming more conditional, more politicised, and more transactional. In accepting these compromises, the system is drifting further from a needs-based model toward one that is selective, negotiated, and instrumental. This degrades the overarching “humanitarian principle” of “humanity”.

The humanitarian principles have long functioned as the internal operating code of a Western-led system. They guide practice, but they do not, on their own, provide a compelling ethical or political basis for mobilising broader public or global support. They speak to practitioners more than to societies.

The legitimacy, funding model, and narrow scope of this system were always contingent and fragile. Today, that fragility is exposed. The crisis is not

only financial; it is also one of authority, consent, and purpose, with many, including crisis-affected people, questioning the legitimacy of the current system to act.⁴

If humanitarian actors dilute the principles that once underpinned their legitimacy, they risk becoming indistinguishable from for-profit service providers – or being replaced by them. In such a landscape, the distinctive ethical claim of humanitarianism erodes.

The version of humanitarianism forged in the twentieth century is anthropocentric and crisis-focused, and while claiming universality, is tied to specific Western institutional traditions, geopolitical conditions, and values. The characteristics of Western humanitarianism have shifted over time. It cycled through an ‘imperial’ phase from the early nineteenth century through to World War II in which the International Committee of the Red Cross, and ‘Laws of War’ (notably the Geneva and Hague Conventions) were established. This was followed by a ‘neo-humanitarian’ phase alongside the expansion of the multilateral system, decolonisation, and bi-polar geopolitical competition up to the end of the Cold War. More recently, it arrived at a ‘liberal humanitarianism’, from the end of the Cold War, which saw a dramatic expansion of funding, operational footprint, and complexity.⁵ In each phase, humanitarian action has been understood primarily as a welfare response, determined on the basis of ‘needs’, rather than rights, and has not sought to address the power structures that generate crises. This liberal humanitarian era is now ending as we enter a new geopolitical era. The scope and magnitude of shared global challenges we face requires a far broader, more political, more inclusive and accountable, and more systemic concept and operating model.

This moment of contraction in our ambitions and commitments to humanitarianism should not be quietly accepted as inevitable. Instead, this could be a moment of re-foundation. In a world of unprecedented wealth and capability,

the persistence of large-scale suffering is not inevitable; it is the result of political choices. The question is not whether we can prevent suffering, but whether we choose to.

Rather than shrinking ambition, this is a moment to expand it – to articulate a broader and more compelling ethical and political project that can mobilise governments, institutions, corporations, and citizens alike. The question is no longer how to fund a shrinking humanitarian system, but how to organise responsibility, resources, and action across a wider ecosystem capable of managing the full spectrum of risks we now face.

Vision

This paper argues for a new unifying ethical foundation: a framework for global cooperation, responsibility, and care for people and the planet in an era defined by overlapping crises.

This is not a call to restore the existing humanitarian system,⁶ but to move beyond it towards a broader paradigm grounded in: shared humanity and dignity, stewardship of planetary systems, solidarity with affected populations, and a commitment to justice, rights and equality.

Such a paradigm would retain the legal foundations of international humanitarian law and human rights but extend beyond them offering a more compelling basis for collective action and broader societal support.

Motivation and responsibilities

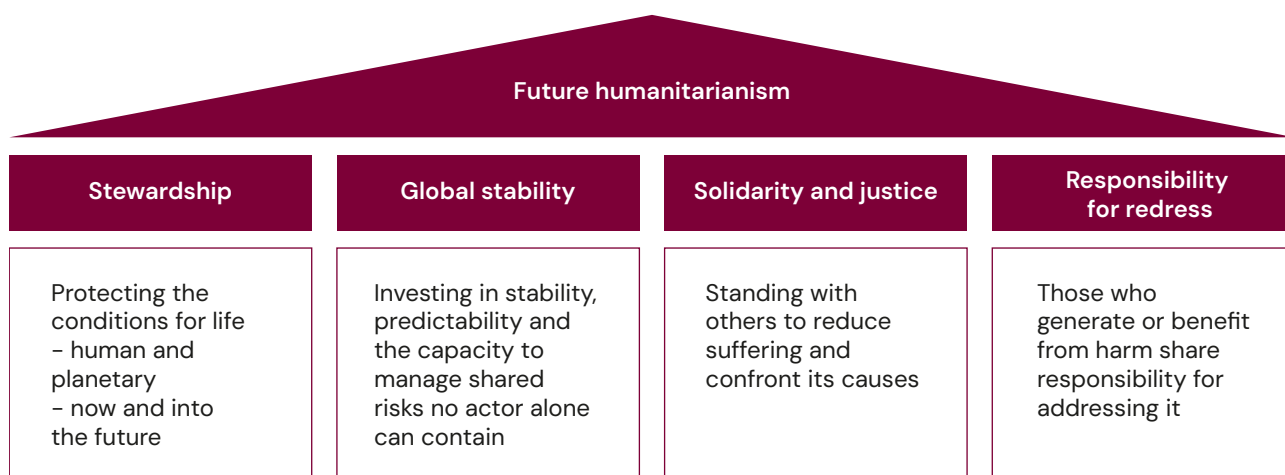
The current humanitarian system rests on a narrow and unstable foundation: discretionary funding from a small group of primarily Western donor governments, driven by a shifting mix of ethical concern and political and economic self-interest. That balance has now tilted decisively toward short-term, transactional priorities.

A new humanitarian paradigm requires both an expanded scope of responsibility, and a clearer articulation of why action is in the interests of different actors. This means recognising multiple, overlapping motivations that can mobilise action at scale. A new paradigm should also decentre money and the supply of commodities as the organising and motivating principles, and the mechanism through which power is reproduced. Instead, it recognises the value of mutual aid, care, politically negotiated agreements to

share responsibilities for crisis-affected people, re-centres rights and justice, and makes explicit and centres stewardship of planetary systems on which all life depends.

This think piece argues four key motivations and responsibilities that would underpin a unifying ethical foundation for future humanitarianism. Taken together, these four foundations – stewardship of people and planet, global stability, solidarity and justice, and redress for harm – move beyond a narrow conception of humanitarianism as discretionary aid. They establish a broader and more durable basis for collective action, grounded in ethical responsibility, systemic necessity, and political engagement, capable of mobilising a wider range of actors in response to the complex crises of the present era.

Figure 1. Motivations and responsibilities underpinning future humanitarianism



1. Stewardship of people and planet

The first pillar of a renewed model is the principle of stewardship: a shared responsibility to protect human life and dignity and to safeguard the ecological systems upon which all life depends. This expands the ethical scope of humanitarianism beyond an exclusively human focus, recognising that the wellbeing of people and the health of planetary systems are inseparable – ideas that are deeply rooted across faith traditions and justice frameworks.⁷ Calls from within the humanitarian community however, to ‘expand our gaze’, ethics, operations and systems beyond human crises to an ‘all-life emergency’,⁸ have had little influence on the entrenched culture and systems.

Reframing humanitarianism through stewardship requires acting not as owners or short-term managers of resources, but as custodians accountable to both present and future generations. It introduces a longer temporal horizon into decision-making, where immediate responses to suffering must be balanced against their long-term consequences for environmental stability and social resilience. This framing challenges extractive and short-term approaches to wellbeing that may alleviate immediate need while generating deeper vulnerabilities over time. Instead, it provides a unifying ethical foundation capable of mobilising beyond conventional aid actors, which supports greater resilience of people and ecosystems over time.

Recent efforts to bring unifying moral clarity into climate negotiations (see Box 1), illustrate the potential for new models of ethics and responsibility to be jointly forged to help us navigate emerging global challenges.

Box 1: The Global Ethical Stocktake

The Global Ethical Stocktake was initiated by Brazil during their COP Presidency. It includes civil society-led dialogues designed to complement the Paris Agreement’s Global Stocktake, which assesses technical progress, with an assessment of the ethical dimensions of climate action, including responsibility, equity, planetary stewardship, and the protection of vulnerable people. It is intended to broaden civic engagement in accelerating climate action, including recognising the value of indigenous knowledge and wisdom, and inviting voices typically kept at the margins, in co-creation.

Dialogue host, the Centre for Earth Ethics, explains: “The GES is a necessary moral intervention that assesses not only what we are doing to the Earth, but also who we have allowed ourselves to become in the process and how we can summon the collective will to change course. By integrating ethics into climate negotiations, the GES aims to support the implementation of the Paris Agreement by rooting action in values, justice and conscience.”

Source: Adapted from COP30 (2025) and Centre for Earth Ethics (2025)

2. Responsibility for a stable and governable world

“We are living in the season of superlatives on a scorched Earth. To have any chance of reversing this trajectory, we must build a more responsive, fairer and more inclusive global financial system to fight inequalities, finance the climate transition, and accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.”

H.E. Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados

The second pillar is our shared interest in maintaining a stable, predictable, and governable international system. In an increasingly interconnected world, crises can rapidly cascade and impact across borders, undermining security, prosperity, and sovereignty. Effective crisis response is therefore a core component of sustaining and building a resilient national and international order. It requires investment in collective institutions, norms, and capabilities that enable risks to be anticipated, managed, and contained. At present, responsibilities for such action remain weakly defined in multilateral frameworks and are largely discretionary, limiting both participation and effectiveness. A reimagined system would make more explicit the expectation that states and other actors contribute to the maintenance of global stability, recognising that the costs of inaction are ultimately borne by all.

The motivation to invest in global governance is primarily enlightened self-interest – the belief that acting in ways that benefit others can also be the best way to serve your own long-term interests, often leading to mutual benefits. A renewed framework must recognise the role of enlightened self-interest as a powerful driver of collective action.

Many contemporary risks – notably, infectious diseases, and systemic risks transmitted along shared networks and infrastructure, such as shocks to financial systems, energy and food production and prices – are inherently trans-boundary and cannot be contained within national borders. Failure to manage risk in one context can generate consequences far beyond it. Acting to detect, prevent, mitigate, and respond to such risks is therefore in the direct interest of states, institutions, and private actors alike.

This framing of enlightened self-interest does not diminish responsibility; rather, it complements it by grounding cooperation in pragmatic necessity. By making visible the mutual benefits of investment in shared risk management – reduced volatility, increased resilience, and protection against systemic shocks – it provides a compelling rationale for broader and more sustained engagement. In doing so, it helps shift crisis response from a discretionary and reactive model to one based on foresight, prevention, and collective human security.

In this framing, engagement in crisis response becomes integral to protecting national interests, economic continuity, and the functioning of shared systems, elevating crisis management to the geopolitical domain, rather than an optional or peripheral activity.⁹

A shift will be required to make explicit responsibilities and shift the distribution of power and benefits so that participation in systems of global finance and governance is broadened. Many Global Majority countries¹⁰ argue they have been disproportionately negatively affected by unmanaged ‘global public bads’ – such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and epidemic diseases – and also by the rules-based economic order established and reproduced through multilateral institutions (see Box 2).¹¹ Governance of shared systems and risks would also require a re-balancing of decision-making power to include the interests of people and planet,¹² and not only states, who are often captured by and represent the interests of powerful interest groups and not ‘the peoples’ referred to in the UN Charter¹³.

Box 2: Global Majority-led demands for reform of the multilateral system

Since the 2007–2008 Global Financial crisis, when the G7 was superseded by the Group of 20 (G20) as the world’s premier forum for international economic coordination¹⁴, Global Majority countries have proposed reforms to governance, decision-making and operating models of multilateral institutions to reflect shifts in global power and economic realities, and to better meet their needs and priorities.

The G20 reform agenda, the Bridgetown Initiative (see Box 7), the V20 Accra-Marrakech Agenda¹⁵, and the Accra Reset¹⁶ represent a coordinated push by Global Majority countries to:

- rebalance power within global institutions,
- expand the scale of development and climate finance,
- move beyond traditional donor-recipient aid frameworks,
- embed global risk management and climate resilience in international economic governance.

Rather than rejecting multilateralism, these initiatives seek to reconfigure it for a multipolar world, where emerging economies and climate-vulnerable countries play a more central role in shaping global rules and institutions.

3. Solidarity and justice

Solidarity and justice represent commitments to stand with affected people and rights holders, not only to alleviate suffering and address protection failures, but to address its causes. It expands the ambition of humanitarianism beyond service delivery towards the achievement of rights, equity, dignity and agency and makes explicit the relational and political dimension of a renewed humanitarian ambition.

Solidarity operates across a spectrum – from expressions of empathy and shared humanity to more explicitly political forms of alignment that seek to address the structural drivers of crisis, including inequality, exclusion, and injustice. It challenges a purely technocratic or service-delivery model of response by emphasising relationships, accountability, and the distribution of power. In this framing, legitimacy is not derived solely from adherence to principles or effectiveness of delivery, but from the extent to which actions are aligned with the priorities, perspectives, and structural pressures as identified by those affected.

Solidarity also plays a crucial role in mobilising public support, as it speaks to shared identities and ethical commitments that transcend borders. As such, it complements more institutional and interest-based motivations, drawing on a broader social and political constituency. Notably, solidarity motivated action is often the domain of civil society, faith actors, diasporas and social movements (see Box 3). It expands responsibility beyond states and generates creative tension between civil society, duty bearers, and the private sector, including advancing demands for accountability and action.

Box 3: The role of civil society and social movements in shaping discourse, norms and policy outcomes

Alongside institutional reform efforts within multi-lateral systems, a long tradition of liberation-oriented thought and civil society mobilisation offers important insights into how global cooperation and accountability can emerge from below and provide a powerful check on states, institutions and corporations.

Latin American liberation theologies and critical pedagogy that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, provides a framework for understanding injustice not simply as individual suffering but as the result of structural inequalities embedded in political, economic and social systems. Central to this tradition is the idea that those affected by injustice must play a central role in analysing and transforming the structures that produce it.

Liberation theory has been particularly influential in shaping global civic movements that challenge concentrations of power and demand greater justice in international governance. Faith actors have a long tradition of supporting resistance and liberation movements, including notably support from Catholic organisations during the 1970s and 1980s to communities and liberation movements in Central and South America. The martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, an outspoken critic of injustice and advocate for practical solidarity with the poor, is one notable example.¹⁷

One important example is the global campaign for debt relief in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Jubilee 2000 movement, rooted partly in faith-based traditions of economic justice, mobilised civil society organisations, churches and social movements across multiple continents to challenge the legitimacy of sovereign debt burdens imposed on low-income countries. Through sustained advocacy and public mobilisation, the campaign contributed to major debt relief initiatives for heavily indebted poor countries and reshaped global discourse around economic justice and responsibility in international finance.

Similarly, contemporary climate justice movements draw heavily on liberation-oriented thinking by framing climate change as a product of historical inequalities and power imbalances rather than merely a technical environmental problem. Networks of civil society and faith-based actors, youth and women's organisations, indigenous communities and vulnerable countries have worked to hold governments and corporations accountable for emissions and climate harms. These movements

have played a central role in advancing concepts such as loss and damage, climate reparations and just transitions, and helped drive the creation of a Loss and Damage financing mechanism under the UN climate negotiations in 2022.

Workers' rights and ethical supply chain justice campaigns provide another example of how global civic mobilisation can generate new accountability mechanisms.

Liberation-oriented approaches highlight the importance of recognising humanitarian action not only as a technical or institutional endeavour but also as an expression of global civic solidarity. While formal institutions remain essential for coordinating large-scale responses and financing public goods, civic movements can play a vital role in articulating moral claims, representing affected communities, and ensuring that institutions remain accountable to the people they are intended to serve.

Together, these traditions suggest that a more legitimate and resilient system of global cooperation will likely depend on a combination of institutional reform and strengthened global civic engagement capable of challenging power imbalances and sustaining collective action in the face of shared global risks.

A current notable example of liberation-oriented civic solidarity can be found in the mutual aid networks that have emerged in Sudan since the outbreak of large-scale conflict in 2023. Community-led initiatives, most notably the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), mobilised rapidly to provide food, healthcare, evacuation support and protection in the absence of an effective international humanitarian response. These mutual aid initiatives are deeply embedded in Sudan's longer-standing civil society, drawing organisational capacity, trust and legitimacy from resistance committees, neighbourhood associations and professional bodies such as doctors' and engineers' unions that were central to Sudan's pre-war social movement mobilisation. Organised through neighbourhood-based volunteer networks and sustained largely through diaspora funding and local solidarity, these mutual aid structures reached millions of people and, in many cases, outperformed formal aid mechanisms constrained by bureaucratic impediments and underfunding.¹⁸ The Sudan case illustrates how humanitarian action can function as a form of civic mobilisation from below, rooted in collective agency, moral obligation and local leadership, while simultaneously exposing the limitations of the UN-led humanitarian system and reinforcing calls for more accountable, locally-led global responses.

4. Responsibility to redress harm

The fourth pillar is the principle of responsibility to redress harm, which addresses a central weakness of the current system: the disconnection between those who generate risks and harm and those who bear the consequences. Humanitarian action has often functioned as a downstream response to crises without systematically engaging the actors – states, corporations, or other entities – whose actions or omissions have, and continue to, cause human rights abuses, genocide, ecocide and other ecological harms. This creates a profound legitimacy deficit, and incentives that favour those who generate harm, by allowing harm to be externalised and responsibility to remain diffuse.

A renewed framework would seek to align responsibility more closely with causation, establishing clearer expectations that those who contribute to or benefit from actions and systems that generate harm should also be held responsible for prevention, mitigation, and repair. This may take the form of financial contributions, regulatory obligations, or participation in collective mechanisms designed to address shared risks. Making responsibilities for harms explicit and assigning a cost to those responsible, not only expands the resource base for crisis response, but also strengthens incentives for more responsible behaviour. This has long been proposed within the framework of climate negotiations on the principle of ‘polluter pays’ with taxes and levies proposed as mechanisms through which costs could be recovered (see Box 4).

Currently, humanitarian actors often receive funds from state actors engaged in acts of war, earmarked to be spent meeting the needs of the victims of the conflict they hold at least part of the responsibility for prosecuting. Accepting these funds represents a moral dilemma for humanitarians, undermining their credibility as neutral actors, while providing reputational benefits for states involved in inflicting harms on civilian populations.

The same concept, of formalising responsibility for redress for harms generated by polluters, could be extended to those responsible for harms generated by war. It would entail agreement on norms, as well as mechanisms created to assign a cost and collect funds to provide compensation for harms to people and the environment, including meeting the costs of reconstruction and repairing ecocide. For example, though agreement on their use has not yet been reached beyond use of financial returns, the EU has developed proposals to leverage frozen Russian sovereign assets to generate loans to finance Ukraine’s reconstruction.¹⁹ Any future mechanisms should not absolve those violating international law from accountability, and the use of funds should be determined taking into account the priorities of those affected.

This domain draws in states, private sector corporations and state-owned enterprises whose political and profit incentives are at odds with human and planetary wellbeing. Holding these actors to account will also disincentivise the generation of future harms by placing checks on opportunities to accumulate resources and power, which enable capture of political actors.²⁰ Assigning a cost to those responsible can also create extrinsic pressures to encourage pro-social behaviours and would generate substantial new revenue streams.

Box 4: 'Polluter pays' proposals for generating climate finance

Arguments that polluters should pay for the harms they generate have a long history in environmental justice. The Stockholm Declaration, issued by the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, the first global conference on the environment, for example, called for further development of the law to include environmental liability and compensation.

Such calls for polluters to pay have grown in prominence in the context of climate justice and climate finance negotiations, particularly in relation to growing acceptance of the need for remediation and meeting the costs of losses and damages incurred as a consequence of climate change. Proposals include a fossil fuel extraction levy, air passenger ticket levies, a global carbon levy on international shipping, and windfall taxes on fossil fuel profits.

A report by Christian Aid has shown how the UK could meet its fair share contribution to the Loss and Damage Fund, which is assumed to be 12,57 billion GBP (15 billion USD), through different taxation options taking into account principles of fairness and distributional impact. Key options include a net wealth tax (0.5% on wealth above 1 million GBP), which would generate 15 billion GBP; higher fossil fuel profit taxes, which would also generate approximately 15 billion GBP; and/or a longer-term model for Climate damages Taxes, which has the potential to generate significant financing for Loss and Damage Fund contributions as well as for other financing needs. Alternatively, the UK government could choose to combine smaller targeted taxes and revenue streams, such as the existing air passenger levy, an emissions trading scheme, a financial transactions tax, and an energy profit levy, that in combination could raise significant finance to be used to cover the UK's fair share of the Loss and Damage Fund.

Sources: Chowdhury and Pearce (2023); Handl (2012); Wemaëre, et al (2023).

Governance, financing and delivery

A unifying ethical foundation requires a corresponding transformation in how crisis response is governed, financed and delivered. The current model – characterised by discretionary funding, centralised decision-making, and a narrow set of actors – is no longer adequate to the scale, diversity, and extent to which a range of predictability of contemporary risks can be modelled and anticipated.

Structurally different risks, ranging from predictable climate shocks to acute conflict emergencies, compete annually for limited discretionary funds. Moreover, these funds have contracted sharply, leaving more than an estimated hundred million people in need largely cut off from internationally supported humanitarian assistance.²¹

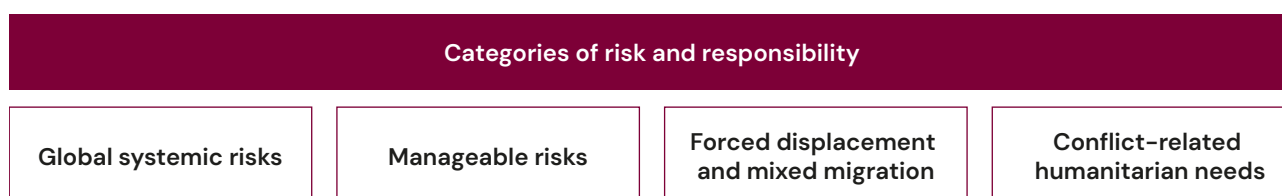
This results in chronic underfunding, reactive responses, and the exclusion of large populations from assistance and protection. A more effective system requires segmentation by risk type, with tailored governance, financing, and delivery models. This would make responsibility and ownership of risks and categories of humanitarian needs more explicit, with the potential to overcome the failure of humanitarian-development ‘nexus’ approaches, which effectively make risk management the responsibility of no-one in particular. This would in turn require longer-term commitments to managing risks and supporting the realisation of people’s rights.

A reimagined system must therefore:

- Differentiate between types of risk and categories of humanitarian needs rather than treating all crises as equivalent claims on a single, shrinking pool of “humanitarian” funding;
- Assign responsibility for risks and categories of humanitarian needs to the actors and duty bearers (or identified risk ‘owners’) best positioned to prevent, manage, or respond to them;
- Diversify financing sources, moving beyond a narrow donor base toward shared, predictable, and rules-based contributions; and
- Adopt inclusive governance arrangements, including reform of multilateral institutions and agreements to enable equal representation and terms for Global Majority countries. In addition, governance mechanisms should also make provisions for participation of a wider ecosystem of sub-national governments, citizenries, civic, and private actors, who all have a stake in risk management and crises response.

We propose segmenting categories of risk into four groups:²²

Figure 2: Categories of crisis risks and responsibility



1. Global systemic risks

“We have no effective global response to emerging, complex and even existential threats.”

UN Secretary General, Summit for the Future, 2024.

The global governance of systemic risk is a background condition for a stable and liveable world system, analogous to public health or disaster response within a state.

Global systemic risks are qualitatively distinct in that they are transboundary, interdependent, and capable of cascading across systems at speed and scale. Financial contagion, infectious diseases, energy and food price shocks, and emerging technological risks, such as those associated with AI do not respect borders and cannot be contained by national responses alone. These risks often interact and compound and require new surveillance systems, rules, decision-making mechanisms and financial resources for managing and responding to risks as they materialise.

In a technologically hyper-connected and interdependent global economy, systemic risks are increasingly likely. The underlying conditions of stability, namely a stable climate and healthy ecosystems are collapsing.²³ Relatedly, rising inequality, polarised politics, and geopolitical competition are also accelerating, and conflicts, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Israeli and US attacks on Iran, which quickly resulted in sharp food, fuel and fertiliser supply disruptions and price inflation, illustrate that even geographically contained conflicts may now have far reaching cascading impacts.

Certain elements of crisis preparedness and response – particularly those linked to systemic risks, such as pandemics, climate instability, and global food shocks – exhibit the characteristics of global public goods. Their benefits are diffuse, cross-border, and under-provided if left to voluntary contributions. These components require predictable financing and shared governance.

Elements of the global governance of risk exist (see Box 5), but they do not function in a coherent way and have historically been ‘confounded’ with the wider morass of development assistance.²⁴ The multilateral system’s approach to the governance of risks is siloed and does not conduct foresight, surveillance or decision-making across interacting and compounding risks. Development frameworks and funding models, particularly among the multilateral development banks (MDBs) operate on a country-model basis which is poorly designed for transboundary risks. MDB financing terms and instruments, for example, do not provide incentives for governments to invest in the prevention and management of global public goods which, unmanaged, can become systemic risks. The collapse in support for multilateral institutions among traditional donors currently point towards the emergence of a multilateral system which is “more fragmented, with diminished legitimacy and weakened ability to respond to global and local challenges”.²⁵

Box 5 : Risk surveillance and management functions of the IMF and WHO

A key part of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) mandate to oversee the international monetary system on behalf of its 188 members, is its surveillance and crisis management functions. The IMF undertakes regular surveillance – known as Article IV consultations – of member policies, identifying potential risks to stability, including systemic risks, and providing technical advice. The IMF's surveillance failed to provide clear warnings on the build-up of risks and vulnerabilities in the lead up to the 2007/8 global financial crisis. It has taken steps to adapt its methods and approach to a rapidly changing risk landscape, albeit slowly and to a limited extent incorporating climate and other shocks into their analytical frameworks. The IMF has also added financial mechanisms to its toolkit – notably the Resilience Sustainability Trust created in 2022 – to manage realised risks. Critics argue meanwhile that policy advice continues to recommend fiscal consolidation, austerity, regressive taxation policies and deregulation.²⁶ The IMF's surveillance of risks to the international monetary system, however, remains a rare example of routine surveillance and management of a key source of global system risk.

The IMF performs a global surveillance function, in which states have a range of incentives to participate, including access to finance, technical assis-

tance, and the reputational benefits that include potentially cheaper lending on global markets (and conversely adverse market responses to poor assessments and compliance with policy recommendations).²⁷ In contrast, the World Health Organisation (WHO) supports governments to undertake routine surveillance of diseases and to assess the capacity and preparedness of health systems. There are fewer incentives for states to comply with WHO's surveillance and recommendations. The limitations of this system and the tendency towards self-interested and competitive behaviour was laid bare during the Covid-19 pandemic, with governments under-reporting risks, and engaging in hoarding of medical supplies and 'vaccine nationalism' that left the poorest countries highly exposed to the virus.

The WHO Pandemic Agreement, a legally binding international agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response was agreed at the World Health Assembly on 20 May 2025. The Pandemic Agreement will create a Conference of the Parties governance structure but does not appear to include agreements or structures to enable decision-making in crises situations. It also includes provision for a new global financing facility; however, this will be funded on a voluntary basis.

Sources: Breen & Doak (2023); Poole et al 2020.

As systemic risks grow in frequency and complexity, there is a strong justification for treating them not as episodic crises, but as shared global liabilities requiring standing governance, mandatory participation, and collective financing mechanisms. Managing these risks is a necessary requirement for maintaining the basic stability of interconnected global systems upon which all states and economies depend.

The traditional Western-dominated aid funding model, which has financed existing efforts to manage the fallout of global public bads has generated institutions and models where the interests and priorities of major funders have taken precedence.²⁸ And the behaviours of these donors has "obstructed meaningful delivery by earmarking, encouraging mission creep, fostering global governance complexity by creating new funds and entities, not strategically managing the

totality of their multilateral spending and failing to build the right domestic political constellation for investing in multilateralism."²⁹

This model is now contested from many directions. The donor-recipient model is increasingly rejected by Global Majority countries. In its place, new narratives are emerging, notably targeting domestic political audiences. These include:³⁰

1. An 'aid in the national interest' narrative, which foregrounds economic and geopolitical interests of the donor nation, is increasingly dominant in the US and among UK and many other European donors.
2. A solidarity-based narrative that focusses on global inequality and justice.
3. A supra-national narrative which emphasises the need to invest in 'global public goods'.

The Global Public Investment model has been proposed as a potential model for financing and governing the management and response to global public goods (see Box 6). The logic of ‘all contribute according to their means, all decide together, all benefit from the outcomes’ could provide the basis for new models of cooperative decision-making where power is shared equitably within multilateral institutions.

At the same time, even this new proposed model would need to contend with new regionally focussed institutions emerging from the Global Majority – notably new regional development banks and monetary institutions – which rival, and in some cases already exceed the capabilities of existing multilateral institutions.³¹

Box 6: Global Public Investment

Global Public Investment (GPI) has the potential to reform international public finance to better address shared global challenges, such as climate change, pandemics, and humanitarian crises. It seeks to move beyond the traditional donor-recipient relationship in which a small group of wealthy countries provide discretionary aid to poorer countries. Advocates of GPI argue that this model rests on outdated assumptions: that global problems are located primarily in poorer countries, that only the Global North should finance responses, and that decision-making should be organised based on who contributes the most funding.

Under a GPI approach, global challenges are reframed as shared risks requiring collective investment. All countries would contribute to financing global priorities according to their means, all would participate in decisions about how funds are allocated, and all would benefit from the outcomes. This model aims to replace episodic and politically contingent aid flows with predictable, ongoing contributions to global public goods, such as climate stability, pandemic preparedness, and humanitarian response capacity.

GPI is not conceived as a single new fund but as a set of principles guiding international public finance across existing regional and global institutions, including the multilateral development banks and other multilateral agencies and funds. These principles include:

- **Universal contributions**, where all countries participate financially based on their capacity;
- **Ongoing commitments**, replacing short-term replenishment cycles with stable and long-term financing;

- **Co-responsibility**, ensuring more inclusive and representative governance in decision-making that is based on constituency, not on financial contribution or single country voting; and
- **Co-creation**, enabling countries and communities to shape investments according to shared priorities and local contexts.

In the medium term, proponents envision ODA continuing to play a role, particularly in supporting the least developed and most fragile states, but within a broader financing architecture that also addresses global public goods. Over time, the concept of aid as a temporary transfer from donors to recipients could gradually be replaced by a system of permanent collective investment in the global commons, a shift in focus towards addressing structural causes of inequality, and the emergence of an altered international system where the Global Majority is no longer at the bottom of the global economic system.

Proponents of GPI do not propose replacing the existing multilateral system, rather the GPI governance model would help to drive governance reforms and changes in financing terms within existing institutions that Global Majority countries are increasingly calling for, as well as guide the design of new global and regional institutions. By creating incentives for broader participation in financing, particularly from middle-income countries, there is an expectation that the GPI model could increase financing above what can be achieved under the current constrained ODA model.

Sources: Adapted from Reid Henry and Benn (2023); Aly et al (2024); Kaul (2022) and KIIIs.

2. Manageable risks

A large and growing share of what is currently labelled “humanitarian need” in international appeals arises from climate-related shocks that are both increasingly frequent and severe, but also with improvements in availability of data and modelling, increasingly predictable, modellable, and recurrent. Droughts, floods, storms, extreme heat, and slow-onset environmental degradation are no longer exceptional events but structural features of the global risk landscape. Treating these shocks as humanitarian emergencies to be funded through ad hoc appeals is inefficient, avoidably costly and unjust, as it systematically delays response, increases losses, and places the burden on discretionary funding streams.

The tools to anticipate and prepare for many of these risks already exist yet financing and governance arrangements have not kept pace. There is therefore a compelling case to systematically shift the financing and response of these risks out of the humanitarian domain and into planned, rules-based systems of risk reduction, adaptation, and financial preparedness, supported by reformed international financial institutions and scaled climate finance.

Addressing modellable climate risks through anticipatory risk management is more cost-efficient, effective in reducing impacts, and more consistent with the goals of resilience-building and ‘nexus’ approaches. Such a shift also reflects principles of equity and differentiated responsibility, given that those most affected by climate risks are often least responsible for generating them. Mobilising funding beyond ODA will be required to address a wider scope of locked-in climate losses and damages. This should include levying taxes on those responsible for generating harms.

The governance of these funds will require new principles and institutional arrangements. The Bridgetown Agenda provides an illustration, with proposed reforms to the international financial institutions (IFIs) that would re-engineer IFI support to climate vulnerable governments. It proposes the allocation of funding on terms that take into account structural vulnerabilities that result from harms caused by others and introduces new terms and financing mechanisms to “shock proof” their economies (see Box 7).

Box 7: The Bridgetown Initiative

The Bridgetown Initiative is a reform agenda for the global financial architecture launched in 2022 by Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley. It emerged from frustration among small island states and other developing countries that the international financial system – particularly the IMF, World Bank, and multilateral development banks (MDBs) – was failing to mobilise sufficient, affordable capital for climate action and sustainable development. The initiative reframes the challenge not as a lack of resources but as a failure of the global financial system to channel capital toward global public goods, such as climate resilience, sustainable development, and disaster preparedness.

The original Bridgetown Initiative 1.0 focused on three core priorities: expanding liquidity and crisis financing, reforming the lending capacity of MDBs, and mobilising large-scale private investment for climate mitigation and development.

Bridgetown 2.0, released in 2023, broadened the agenda beyond liquidity measures. It incorporated proposals related to tax cooperation, trade, governance reform of international financial institutions, and access to concessional finance, and aligned closely with the UN’s SDG Stimulus proposals.

Bridgetown 3.0, launched in 2024, builds on earlier proposals while again elevating ambitions. It calls for an additional USD300 billion per year in MDB lending, mobilisation of USD500 billion annually in private capital, and stronger investment in global public goods, such as climate adaptation, food security, and biodiversity protection. It also introduces new proposals, including reforms to credit rating agency methodologies, expanded carbon pricing frameworks, a new USD650 billion Special Drawing Rights (SDR) allocation, and a Global Compact for Global Public Goods financed by philanthropy. The initiative also calls for progressive international taxation, including levies on fossil fuel windfall profits, financial transactions, and emissions from shipping and aviation.

Since its launch, the initiative has helped shift global debate on development and climate finance. Tangible progress includes the creation of the IMF’s Resilience and Sustainability Trust, the G20 commitment to re-channel over \$100 billion in SDRs, the establishment of a Loss and Damage Fund at COP28, reforms to MDB capital adequacy frameworks unlocking additional lending, and the growing use of natural disaster clauses in sovereign debt agreements.

Sources: Bridgetown Initiative (2024); Ellmers (2024).

3. Forced displacement and mixed migration

Regional crises, particularly those involving large-scale displacement, occupy an ambiguous space between humanitarian response and political responsibility. Forced displacement and mixed migration are highly predictable in contexts of conflict, state fragility, socio-economic vulnerability and climate stress, yet current approaches treat them as temporary humanitarian problems rather than structural features of the global system. This has led to policies of containment, deterrence, and encampment that may be politically expedient but socially and economically unsustainable.

Forced displacement in response to conflict often has regional and sometimes longer-range impacts. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol define legal responsibilities of signatory states including the principle of non-refoulement and a range of basic minimum standards in the treatment of refugees to enable them to lead a dignified and independent life.³² The Refugee Convention also asserts the necessity of international cooperation including burden sharing among states.

In practice, in recent decades, most refugees have remained in their regions of origin in low and middle-income countries with high-income countries providing voluntary aid funding to UNHCR and other refugee supporting international organisations. This also generated a practice of treating refugees as residual and semi-permanent humanitarian caseloads where their rights and freedoms are severely curtailed within highly restrictive refugee camps.

The liberal consensus that underpinned voluntary funding to support refugee hosting countries has collapsed and donor governments have in many cases adopted overtly hostile domestic and international policies towards migrants and refugees. Notably, in the context of increased global population movements, particularly since 2015 when large numbers of migrants arrived in Europe, and in contravention of the principle of non-refoulement, European states engaged in expulsions and pushbacks from Europe's land and sea borders.³³ These dynamics have contributed to the erosion of multilateral cooperation,

including calls to revise or withdraw from the Refugee Convention,³⁴ and the politicisation of aid budgets, with large volumes of aid funding directed toward deterrence and the costs of hosting refugees in donor countries.

There are key gaps in the international law in terms of clarifying responsibilities for forcibly displaced people. Within the Refugee Convention, there are a number of omissions, including obligations and modalities to respond to situations of mass displacement, and responsibility-sharing for the costs of hosting displaced people.³⁵ In addition to those forced to flee by conflict and rights abuses, growing numbers of people are expected to be forced to move as climate change and environmental degradation renders parts of the planet uninhabitable. There is currently no international legal framework for the protection of people displaced across international borders due to climate change.³⁶ Despite the obvious political difficulties in the current climate, defining our collective responsibilities for forcibly displaced people is critical. The alternative is likely to be a further slide into violent deterrence of migrants and fuelling of political polarisation and authoritarianism in refugee hosting and donor countries, and the entrenchment of norms of cruelty and intolerance.

At an operational level, there are already examples of how political settlements and funding packages could be brokered to achieve greater rights, mobility, and inclusion within host societies for displaced people. With substantial and predictable investment, they can enable displaced populations to live dignified and productive lives as rights holders, while also supporting host communities.

Refugee compacts, such as those negotiated in Ethiopia and Jordan (see Box 8) represent some of the best examples available for political compacts. Backed with substantial funds, they compensated host governments and communities with development investments, in return for permitting certain rights and freedoms for refugees that enabled them greater opportunities for income generation, education, freedom of movement and a dignified life. Regional and national compacts with serious investment capital and political commitment will be needed and must include a clear commitment to ending the long-term warehousing of people in camps.

Box 8: Refugee compacts

Refugees no longer have the protection of their state of origin and are therefore protected under the Refugee Convention. States that grant them asylum assume responsibility for providing them with legal protection and assistance. Where host states are unable to provide adequate protection or support, the UNHCR has a mandate to assist them. Refugee protection is therefore both a responsibility of host states and a broader responsibility of the international community.

Large-scale displacement from Syria into neighbouring countries, and further into Europe, prompted a major political rethink of how the international community meets its obligations towards refugees. This led to a series of international convenings and compacts, including The Global Compact on Refugees, affirmed by the UN General Assembly in 2018. Compacts are an attempt to move beyond ad hoc discretionary international support, towards more transparent and concrete commitments that benefit refugees, host communities, and host states. This in turn should provide states with incentives to provide more generous rights and entitlements for refugees, providing them with greater opportunities for a dignified life.

Jordan and the EU entered into a 10-year ‘compact’ in 2016, shortly followed by a ‘jobs compact’ between the EU, multilateral development partners and the Government of Ethiopia in 2017. In both

cases, investments that would support trade and generate jobs for refugees and host communities were negotiated in return for legislative and policy changes allowing refugees certain freedoms of movement and employment. Motivations included a desire on European donors’ part to discourage onward migration into Europe, and to reduce reliance on the long-term ‘warehousing’ refugee encampment model.

In 2018, the World Bank approved a financing package of USD 202 million to support Ethiopia’s industrialisation, including job creation for 100,000 refugees and Ethiopians. Bilateral donors provided additional financing. In 2019, Ethiopia adopted a new Refugee Proclamation (Proclamation No. 1110/2019), with three supporting directives on conditions of movement, rights to work, grievances and appeals handling, which together granted substantial additional rights to refugees.

In their implementation, problems emerged in project design and execution, including low uptake of the jobs created in garment industries due to low wages, poor worker protections and distances from where target employees live. Nevertheless, these compacts delivered important new rights for refugees and provide a template for future negotiations on burden-sharing and dignified futures for forcibly displaced people.

Sources: Adapted from Poole et al. (2020); Almasri and Nigusie (2026); World Bank 2018; Gordon (2019).

4. Conflict-related humanitarian needs

Human security and the protection of the rights of the most vulnerable are shared interests that underpin a stable global order. States and the international community have duties, grounded in human rights and international humanitarian law, to ensure minimum rights (to life, health, subsistence) are not violated. In situations of active conflict, where a state cannot or will not protect those rights, subsidiary duties fall to others, such as other states, international institutions, and capable actors. Humanitarian response is a mechanism for safeguarding rights when normal duty-bearers fail.

The legitimacy of humanitarian action in these settings depends on maintaining a clear norma-

tive and operational distinction from political, military, and economic agendas, even as the wider ecosystem of actors becomes more diverse. In a reconstituted system, where the management, financing and response to systemic risks, climate shocks, and forced displacement and relocation removes these categories of crises from the humanitarian caseload, principled humanitarian action would retain a vital but more bounded role as a last-resort guarantee of minimum conditions for survival and dignity.

The current contingent and discretionary humanitarian funding model has failed and must be replaced. So too the development aid model, which has undergone a shift away from fragile and conflict-affected settings, and towards countries and programmes of greater economic and strategic interest to government donors in

the Global North. Notably, in 2025 for example, ODA contracted by 23.1%, the largest fall on record. But it fell faster – by 25.8% – in least developed countries, and fastest in sub-Saharan Africa: 26.3%.³⁷

Contrary to current donor trends, increased political engagement and financial investments across the humanitarian, development and peace-building nexus is urgently needed in order to attain long-term and sustainable outcomes for crises affected communities. The global public investment model could provide an alternative decision-making model that avoids donor self-interest in funding allocation and could include a global mechanism that commits to ensure a minimum standard of care for people in crises and that makes explicit specific financial responsibilities that states must meet.

At the same time, the ecosystem of actors responding to crises is increasingly diverse, and international actors are often marginal compared to mutual aid groups (see Box 9), international networks and relationships of solidarity³⁸, including religious networks and diasporas. The governance and operating models of the internationally-led humanitarian system will need to let go of its centralising normative tendencies,³⁹ including its restrictive view of who counts as legitimate humanitarians, and learn to work with a more diverse range of actors and coordination models who are mobilising substantial funds and capabilities, and who may adopt approaches far more inclusive of human rights, climate and economic justice.⁴⁰

Box 9: Mutual aid in crisis response

Mutual aid refers to self-organised, voluntary actions of individuals, families and communities to support each other during crises. This phenomenon characterises any crisis, but it has become a central modality of assistance in recent acute conflicts including in Myanmar, Sudan, and Gaza and has itself evolved into new semi-formal organisational forms.

As the international humanitarian system has retreated from the world's most difficult and dangerous places, local communities have taken on an increasingly prominent role in crisis response, obliging the international system to adapt to working with them if they want to retain access and relevance.

Some international organisations, including Act CoS, have developed and adopted the Supporting community-led response (sclr) approach that links international humanitarian and nexus funding to locally organised mutual aid efforts.

sclr is a method for enabling and strengthening community-driven responses. It emphasises principles such as local ownership, protection, responsiveness, power sharing, social cohesion, flexibility and complementarity with traditional humanitarian assistance, with the aim of supporting both immediate crisis response and longer-term resilience.

In practice, sclr typically involves an international donor providing funding for a project that is facilitated by a local or national NGO, which works with communities to co-design the approach and align it with local realities. Through participatory processes such as appreciative inquiry, existing mutual aid initiatives are identified and supported, with community representatives forming committees to decide which projects are selected. Community groups can then apply for simple, flexible support packages, often including unearmarked micro-grants, demand-led capacity sharing, coordination assistance and connections to wider networks.

Groups do not need to be formally registered and generally operate with collective, community-focused objectives. By strengthening initiatives that communities already lead and encouraging external actors to move away from top-down approaches, sclr aims to reinforce local resilience while avoiding long-term dependence on external aid. Debate remains, however, about how consistently the approach is defined and implemented in practice, and many traditional aid actors express reservations about the potential of such approaches to deliver at scale.

Sources: Posada and Ahimbisibwe (2025)

Operationalising a new vision

This paper rejects an acceptance that humanitarianism should shrink and retreat. On the contrary, in an era defined by both unprecedented wealth, and escalating, overlapping crises we collectively face a decision, whether we choose to accept avoidable human suffering. We believe this is the moment to elevate and expand our ambitions for humanity; to build a broader and more compelling ethical and political project that can mobilise governments, institutions, corporations, and citizens alike, rooted in principles of shared humanity and dignity, stewardship of planetary systems, solidarity with affected populations, and a commitment to justice, rights and equality.

This paper outlines elements of a framework for global cooperation, responsibility, and care for people and the planet that would be needed to operationalise this vision. The framework set out here is not a finished model, but an invitation. It is intended to open space for debate, to surface tensions, and to test assumptions about how responsibility for managing risk, preventing harm, and responding to crisis should be organised in a rapidly changing world.

The authors recognise that many elements are incomplete, contested, or politically challenging, and welcome critical scrutiny from those working across humanitarian, development, climate, financial, civic and faith-based domains, as well as from those most directly affected by crises.

Refining and mobilising support for such a transformation of humanitarianism cannot be left to humanitarians alone and must draw in a far broader coalition of actors, with crisis-affected people and earth systems as the central focus. Advancing this agenda will require collective effort: co-creation across disciplines and geographies, engagement with new constituencies, and a willingness to rethink entrenched roles, incentives, and power structures. This paper is offered as a starting point for a broader process of collaboration and co-creation, that brings together diverse perspectives to shape more legitimate, effective, and just approaches to managing shared risks and responsibilities.

Table 1: Proposed logic, responsibilities and functions of a segmented and differentiated approach to humanitarianism

	Global systemic risks	Manageable climate and other risks	Forced displacement and mixed migration	Conflict-related humanitarian needs
Category of risk / caseload	Transboundary pandemics/ infectious disease, financial contagion, food/energy shocks, AI related risks. Potentially catastrophic risks including famine collectively determined to be intolerable and which require a large-scale mobilisation.	Droughts, floods, storms, extreme heat, slow onset climate impacts, humanitarian outcomes of seismic shocks	People forced to cross international borders in response to threats to their safety and/or deterioration in their economic ability to meet basic needs	Acute humanitarian and protection needs in active conflict zones
Core principle	Systemic risk management is a condition of global stability and human security	Predictable risks should be planned for – not funded through emergency appeals	Forced displacement and mixed migration are not temporary humanitarian anomalies. Securing rights and protections for people on the move requires political solutions and a burden-sharing approach.	Where political solutions and duty bearers fail, humanitarian action must still guarantee minimum conditions for survival and dignity.
Governance	Global systemic risks require standing multi-lateral governance with binding participation and shared oversight. Expand models like the IMF surveillance into a “Global Risk Governance Council”. Mandatory risk surveillance, reporting, and peer review. Decision-making combining states, technical bodies, independent scientific expertise. Stronger integration across currently fragmented systems (health, finance, climate, technology).	Shift from humanitarian response to planned risk management and resilience systems led by national governments, supported by reformed multilateral institutions including IFIs and climate finance architecture. Pre-arranged financing (contingency financing, appropriate financially sustainable risk transfer mechanisms).	Shift from humanitarian programming and indefinite encampment to political compacts backed with substantial financing and provision of rights. Regional and bilateral agreements including burden-sharing frameworks and mobility governance, preferential trade agreements, and rights-based agreements for displaced populations and inclusion in national systems.	Retain and reformulate a distinct humanitarian function grounded in IHL Governance must be operationally independent and protected from political instrumentalisation. Power must be distributed to reflect importance of local actors and mutual aid.

	Global systemic risks	Manageable climate and other risks	Forced displacement and mixed migration	Conflict-related humanitarian needs
Financing	<p>Assessed contributions.</p> <p>Contingency financing /global risk pooling instruments.</p> <p>Financing for prevention and preparedness mobilised on GPI logic “everyone contributes, everyone decides, everyone benefits”.</p>	<p>Beyond ODA to include governmental contribution determined based on differentiated responsibilities and taxes levied on harm generating industries.</p>	<p>ODA-funded multi-year compact-based financing packages mobilising significant up-front investments to incentivise host government participation. Trade agreements.</p>	<p>GPI funding against a principle of a global minimum guarantee mechanism to ensure baseline assistance in conflicts, protracted and forgotten crises, funded through predictable contributions.</p> <p>Funds generated through redress for acts of war.</p> <p>Private financing mobilised by solidarity networks, including faith networks, diaspora, communities.</p>
Responsibilities	<p>Primary responsibility: All states.</p>	<p>Primary responsibility: Climate-vulnerable states for delivery; high emitting states and industries for financing.</p>	<p>Primary responsibility: States of origin, transit and destination.</p> <p>Shared responsibility: regional blocs, major economies.</p>	<p>Primary responsibility: Parties to conflict.</p> <p>Secondary responsibility: International community.</p>
Key constituencies	<p>Multilateral institutions; national governments (risk management obligations, decision-making, financial contributions); private sector (compliance with regulation and risk surveillance especially in tech, energy, agribusiness, extractive industries, and finance).</p>	<p>National governments, IFIs and climate funds; regional bodies, private sector (provision of insurance, infrastructure, energy transition), civil society, mutual aid, citizen representatives, faith and solidarity networks and activists.</p>	<p>Host governments, intragovernmental organisations, IFIs, local and international civil society, UN agencies, faith and solidarity networks and activists.</p>	<p>Mutual aid, local civil society, affected governments, international NGOs and UN, faith and solidarity networks and activists.</p>

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Endnotes

- 1 In 2016, there were 105 million forcibly displaced people, by 2024 this had grown to 295 million; in 2016 there were 59 million people facing high levels of food insecurity, by 2025 this had grown to 112 million (AL-NAP 2025).
- 2 The study uses the term 'Western-led' to refer to the overall international humanitarian assistance paradigm and model, and 'UN-led' to refer to the system of institutions and actors involved in the financing and delivery of humanitarian assistance. The Western-led humanitarian paradigm and model has its origins in European responses to war and disasters, including the formation of non-governmental organisations and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement (Davey et al 2013), which generated and reproduce the principles, norms and practices that characterise a connected set of institutions and organisations that are collectively recognisable as a system (Poole and Parker, 2026).
- 3 The Johns Hopkins Centre for Humanitarian Health – Lancet Commission on health, conflict and forced displacement (Spiegel et al 2026) state that "Both health and human rights are being dismantled globally in plain sight and with escalating impunity, driven by geopolitical fragmentation, erosion of the rule of law, and transactional approaches to aid and security that undermine protection and accountability. Conflict-related deaths nearly doubled between 2021 and 2024, and an estimated 239 million people require humanitarian assistance in 2026. The health systems and humanitarian ecosystem meant to protect health and life are buckling under the scale, duration, and political complexity of contemporary crises."
- 4 Consultations by Ground Truth Solutions (2026) with 14,000 crisis affected people in 2025 found that "communities in most contexts report little real influence over aid decisions, with engagement often reduced to consultation that validates pre-existing plans. Aid cuts are further weakening frontline capacity for meaningful dialogue, reinforcing perceptions that the system remains structurally unaccountable to the people it exists to serve."
- 5 Based on Barnett (2011) in Davey et al. (2013).
- 6 Critiques of the existing system abound. For example, Sida et al (2025) argue: "The current system has become remote, bureaucratic and out of touch with the people it serves. Turf wars, stagnation and cookie-cutter aid have undermined confidence in the international humanitarian system. A community and people-centred approach would start to rebuild that trust."
- 7 For example, Islamic teachings of Khalifa, or stewardship, and Jewish notions of Tikkun Olam, or 'world repair' frame humans as custodians with ethical obligations to restore the world. The 2018 Islamic Declaration on Climate Change for example states that 'Disruption of the global climate is a consequence of our corruption in the earth. We are but one of the multitude of living beings with whom we share the earth, and a miniscule part of the divine order, yet we have exceptional power, and bear the responsibility to establish good and avert evil in every way we can.' The Catholic 'Laudato Si' puts forward a concept of integral ecology, arguing social and environmental crises are interconnected and require unified moral responses (Pope Francis, 2015). In Liberation Theology, thinkers such as Leonardo Boff (1977) link the 'cry of earth' with the 'cry of the poor'.
- 8 Slim (2024) for example argues "First, we need a new doctrine of humanity that recognises humans as part of a wider Earth community. In this all-life emergency, it will not do to work with humanitarian principles devised in 1965, largely for war, and just bolt on extra environmental principles as subsidiary policies."
- 9 The 2024 UN Pact for the Future for example presents its commitments on humanitarian action as separate from the political and economic causes described elsewhere in the document and calls only for material assistance in Action 15 "We will ensure that people affected by humanitarian emergencies receive the support they need" before describing in vague and technocratic terms 'addressing root causes' (UN 2024).

In sharp contrast, the representative of Venezuela speaking on behalf of the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations, commenting on the annual UN omnibus text "Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations" (document A/80/L.25), which for the first time in 33 years was not passed due to objections from the United States, noted that "The recent rise in extreme natural disasters has been driven, among others, by an unsustainable model of environmental exploitation and wealth concentration. Further, humanitarian crises have also been fuelled by "politically driven actions linked to hegemonic ambitions"" (UN 2025).
- 10 "Global Majority countries" refers to states primarily in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Oceania whose populations collectively constitute the majority of the world's people (around 80–85%), and which are often linked by shared historical experiences of colonialism, structural inequality, and marginalisation within global economic and governance systems (Campbell-Stephens 2020).

- 11 Eisentrout (2025) argues “negative externalities of global challenges have disproportionately affected Global South countries, while the benefits have disproportionately accrued to the West. For some people across Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East, the peace dividend never materialized, the open, rules-based economic order was exploitative, and global challenges, from climate change to health crises, usually hit them harder than they hit the developed world.” Gallagher and Ocampo (2025) argue more pointedly, that “For more than half a century, economic development in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia has been constrained by austerity conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, by punitive debt collection policies pursued by commercial banks and hedge funds backed by U.S. law, and by trade deals that stunt their ability to develop economically.” The G20 (2025) independent expert report on inequality argues that “In virtually every area there needs to be a rethinking of the effects of international agreements, with more attention paid to the distributive effects, both within and between countries. In particular, the G20 should ask how much any provision within any agreement addresses some externality, helps resolve some global coordination problem of mutual interest, or assists in the provision of some global good; versus to what extent its specific provisions are designed to enhance the wellbeing (or income) of certain powerful actors (whether countries or companies) on the global scene.”
- 12 The “We the Peoples” campaign for example calls for (1) a UN World Citizens’ Initiative to enable people to propose global issues for UN action; (2) a UN Parliamentary Assembly to enable elected representatives a voice in global decision-making; (3) a UN Civil Society Envoy. <https://www.wethepeoples.org/>
- 13 The preamble to the UN Charter begins “We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.” (UN 1945).
- 14 The Group of Twenty (G20) comprises 19 countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Türkiye, United Kingdom and United States) and two regional bodies: the European Union and the African Union (as of 2023). The G20 members represent around 85% of the global GDP, over 75% of the global trade, and about two-thirds of the world population.
- 15 The Accra–Marrakech Agenda is a strategic roadmap adopted in October 2023 by the Vulnerable Twenty (V20) Group of Finance Ministers. It demands fundamental structural reforms to the global financial architecture to ensure the world economy is fit for climate resilience and supportive of climate-vulnerable nations. <https://www.v-20.org/accra-marrakech-agenda/> <https://cvfv20.org/>
- 16 The Accra Reset is a political and policy initiative launched in 2025 that seeks to transform global development by moving away from aid dependency toward sovereignty, domestic investment, and more equitable partnerships. Starting with the health sector, it aims to reshape global development systems, financing, and governance, so that countries, particularly in the Global Majority, have greater control over their own development priorities and outcomes. <https://accrareset.org/>
- 17 Slim (2022)
- 18 Ahmed (2026).
- 19 Rankin (2025).
- 20 Rising inequality is a major threat to peace, stability, trust in democracy and international cooperation, and planetary sustainability. The G20 (2025) assessed that “Across all major regions, private wealth has grown in the past two decades, sometimes quite sharply, while public wealth has stagnated or declined. Of particular concern has been the global increase in incomes and wealth at the upper end of the scale, with those at the top getting an increasing share of national income and wealth.”
- 21 Spiegel P, Martinez E, Abraham O et al. (2026)
- 22 This builds on the framing developed by the lead author published in Poole et al. (2020).
- 23 Eisentrout (2025) “each new day begins with further news of the dire consequences of unmanaged GPG-related challenges. These include “the highest number of state-based armed conflicts” in more than 70 years and their manifold spillover effects, unprecedented climate disasters that show the destructive global ripple effects of unmitigated climate change, and a global erosion of political rights and civil liberties, facilitated by a rise in impunity. If we add the potential spillover effects of economic and financial crises or the risks posed by unchecked viral outbreaks, it is clear that our highly interconnected world is confronted with a growing number of GPGs – or, more precisely, their “alter egos – global public ‘bads’ or challenges.” Their effects transcend national borders, “potentially affecting anyone anywhere.”
- 24 Kaul (2022).

- 25 MOPAN (2025). MOPAN's survey of 31 multilateral agencies in 2025 identified budget shortfalls of 30–60% with humanitarian and health programming particularly affected, and assessed that “Structural reforms are reactive, occurring by default, rather than design, driven by financial pressures rather than strategic vision. Efficiency measures, while necessary, are insufficient to absorb the scale of current reductions, and without co-ordinated, mandate-aligned restructuring, the system faces de facto mandate narrowing by attrition.”
- 26 The Bretton Woods Project (2025) analysed 998 Article IV reports covering a period from 2011–2025, found that consistent with much criticized structural adjustment policies of the 1980s, 100% recommended some form of fiscal austerity, with 80% recommending public sector reforms including ‘rationalizing, freezing or cutting the wage bill of public sector workers’, meanwhile, 90% recommended deregulation to attract private sector investment.
- 27 Breen and Doak (2021) find for example that in analysis of 428 surveillance exercises between 1997 and 2013, Article IV consultations had “large impacts” on sovereign debt prices in the days around their public disclosure.
- 28 Reid-Henry (2023) argues “The narrow base of finance that is being made available via traditional means is not just wholly inadequate but also skews decision-making and priorities, as a small number of wealthy countries that contribute to global commons also demand a dominating influence over how this money is invested.”
- 29 Aly et al (2025).
- 30 Aly et al (2024).
- 31 Gallagher and Ocampo (2025) note for example that the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF), of which the US is not a member, already provides more infrastructure financing in the region than the US-led Inter-American Development Bank or World Bank. Similarly, the Chinese created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) now has 110 member countries and provides similar levels of financing to the US-led Asian Development Bank and has ambitious growth targets. Rivals to the IMF are also emerging, including the Chaing Mai Initiative, and the proposed African Financing Stability Mechanism. Negotiations are also underway among climate vulnerable countries to create their own IMF-like mechanism to provide protection against climate shocks.
- 32 149 States are parties to the 1951 Convention and/ or its 1967 Protocol. Rights defined under the 1951 convention include: the right not to be expelled, except under certain, strictly defined conditions (Article 32); the right not to be punished for irregular entry into the territory of a contracting State (Article 31); the right to non-discrimination (Articles 3 and 5); the right to decent work (Articles 17 to 19 and 24); the right to housing, land and property, including intellectual property (Articles 13, 14 and 21); the right to education (Article 22); the right to freedom of religion (Article 4); the right to access to justice (Article 16); the right to freedom of movement within the territory (Article 26 and Article 31 (2)); the right to be issued civil, identity and travel documents (Articles 12, 27 and 28); the right to social protection (Articles 23 and 24 (2–4)).
- 33 <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/news-releases/unhcr-warns-asylum-under-attack-europes-borders-urges-end-pushbacks-and-violence>
- 34 Fratzke and Benton (2025) note “Pandora’s box has been opened with the public suggestion by the United States and more quiet comments by some other governments that they are contemplating revising or withdrawing from the 1951 Refugee Convention and/ or its 1967 Protocol.”
- 35 Fratzke and Bendon *ibid*. Ground Truth Solutions (2026) also argue that as funding shrinks, “UN actors and international NGOs will need to proactively shrink their operational and delivery role in many contexts, focusing on supporting other parts of the ecosystem, and on advocating and upholding norms and principles. They will need to get more comfortable with support which straddles disaster relief, human rights, climate and economic justice, as more community-driven action dissolves artificial silos.”
- 36 Amnesty International (2025).
- 37 OECD: <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/oda-trends-and-statistics.html>
- 38 Slim (2022) argues that in Ukraine, where ‘resistance humanitarianism’ – that is, response that is openly politically aligned with and supportive of the Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion – has been far more successful in reaching and providing relevant assistance, internationals have sought to ‘colonise it rather than enable it’.
- 39 IARAN (2025) “By focusing localisation initiatives on integrating local actors into existing decision-making structures while preserving the dominant, Western-centric humanitarian paradigm, not truly appreciating the skills, capacities and cultures of local actors and failing to accept that local leadership will mean they have to work differently, intermediary actors and enablers have rendered themselves incapable of moving forward. Relinquishing control and embracing a pluralistic future demands more than structural shifts: it calls for an emotional readiness for change.”
- 40 Sida et al (2025) reflect that “Demands for people-centred and locally-led humanitarian action have never been higher. The need for reform is urgent, driven not just by the funding crisis but also by the failure to deliver aid that is responsive to people’s needs and capacities. The current system has become remote, bureaucratic and out of touch with the people it serves. Turf wars, stagnation and cookie-cutter aid have undermined confidence in the international humanitarian system. A community and people-centred approach would start to rebuild that trust.”

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