Instituto de Estudios sobre Conflictos y Acción Humanitaria

Médicos Sin Fronteras

MIND THE EMERGENCY GAP: CAN ANOTHER HUMANITARIAN RESET REACH THOSE MOST IN NEED?

PHOTO:
Since April 2023, 600,000 people have fled the war in Sudan to seek refuge in Chad. MSF runs a health centre at the Adré border crossing.

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1
INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the impending – and unfolding – collapse of the humanitarian sector as we know it. Global aid budgets are being slashed, and humanitarian organizations continue to face immense security and access constraints in delivering aid to the growing numbers of people of caught in crisis.

Faced with this bleak outlook and a "profound crisis of legitimacy, morale, and funding"[1], the United Nations (UN) - and many humanitarian organisations – have been forced to regroup and renew. In March 2025, the United Nations announced its intentions for a 'humanitarian reset' in a letter from Tom Fletcher, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the watchdog and regulating body of humanitarian action. The ten-point plan for humanitarian sector reform proposes a return to the ´defining mission´ of humanitarian action- saving lives – pledging to prioritise those most in need with the limited resources available, while defending and reasserting the principles and values underpinning the humanitarian mission. In parallel, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) has led a process of "hyper-prioritisation" of global response efforts, reducing assistance and protection targets to the 114 million people whose lives are most at risk – just 38 % of the 300 million people globally reported to need aid at the start of 2025.[2]

The UN's current 'hyper-prioritisation' of humanitarian response to focus on those most in need presupposes an existing ability of humanitarian organisations to effectively meet the needs of people in conflict

The future is disturbing and uncertain. Yet, some things are clear: the number and intensity of conflicts is rising, and humanitarian needs continue to increase. In 2024, 61 conflicts were recorded across 36 countries.[3] As such, many – if not most - of the people in need of humanitarian assistance are those affected by conflict. The UN's current 'hyper-prioritisation' of humanitarian response to focus on those most in need presupposes an existing ability of humanitarian organisations to effectively meet the needs of people in conflict. But history shows that this is, sadly, far from a given.

10 years ago, MSF launched the Emergency Gap project, in response to widespread concerns that the presence of humanitarian actors and the capacity for emergency response was declining, especially in conflict zones.[4] The research found that, across the board, the first few months of acute conflict-related crises are persistently marked by an 'emergency gap,'" defined as a failure to provide timely lifesaving assistance and protection to those most affected by violence. The findings identified powerful external political and security drivers of this gap, but it also found parallel internal system weaknesses within the humanitarian sector's mindset, structure, and conceptual framing of humanitarian action.

A decade later, crises like Sudan, Yemen, and Gaza, and more neglected ones like the Sahel, DRC, and Myanmar, show that the emergency gap continues. As humanitarian actors contemplate how to restore relevance and legitimacy and return to the ´core business´ of humanitarian work, many of the findings from MSF's Emergency Gap project remain acutely relevant. The external

1 OCHA, *The Humanitarian Reset – ERC Letter to IASC Principals*, 11 March 2025
2 UNOCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025 - The Cruel Math of Aid Cuts (Hyper - Prioritized Report)* (June 2025).
3 Rustad, Siri Aas (2025) *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024*. PRIO Paper. Oslo: PRIO
4 See MSF ARHP (2018), *Emergency Gap final report: Bridging the emergency gap - Centre for Applied Reflection on Humanitarian Practice.*

challenges are arguably more pressing than ever, as is the unprecedented gulf in funding decimating the global aid system, but the same internal drivers in the humanitarian sector also persist, compromising the ability of humanitarian actors to navigate those external challenges and, in some cases, exacerbating them.

2
THE EMERGENCY GAP – AID IS NOT REACHING THOSE MOST IN NEED

Long before the severe changes in funding, humanitarian action was already stretched to breaking point, especially in conflicts

Long before the dramatic shifts in the humanitarian funding landscape seen in 2025, humanitarian action was already stretched to breaking point, especially in conflicts. In 2016, MSF launched the two-year Emergency Gap Project in response to persistent concerns that humanitarian organisations were struggling to remain on the ground and deliver effective assistance in conflict settings.[5] Over a two-year period, the research aimed to analyse the enablers and disablers for the provision of effective response in acute conflict settings, based on thematic reports and case studies, and consultations with more than 150 senior-level representatives from 60 organisations across the humanitarian sector.

The research found a consensus that the first few months of acute conflict-related crises are persistently marked by a failure to provide lifesaving assistance and protection to those most affected by violence. In areas of high insecurity, particularly near frontlines of active conflicts, few humanitarian organisations tend to be present on the ground.[6][7] Other research from 2019 found that, in the highest-risk settings, "fewer than a dozen international organisations (including specific UN agencies, a handful of international NGOs, and the ICRC) reliably seek to establish an operational presence – and to do so they often rely on local partner organisations to extend their operational reach".[8] MSF case studies carried out as part of the Emergency Gap project on contexts like Yemen, Mali, Northern Nigeria, and Ethiopia provided clear examples of this trend, also finding that where organisations were present, too often they went for 'low-hanging fruit' by responding where access is more straightforward, rather than moving beyond their areas of regular operations to reach those most affected by crises.

The 2022 State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) report found that in 2021, the system reached an estimated 46 % of the people it identified to be in need and 69 % of those it targeted for assistance under the response plans and appeals where figures on

5 All of the reports and case studies produced as part of the Emergency Gap project can also be found here: https://arhp.msf.es/categories/emergency-gap/

6 Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024). *State of practice: The evolution of security risk management in the humanitarian space*.

7 Stoddard, A., Shoaib Jillani, Caccavale, J. L., Cooke, P., Guillemois, D., and Klimentov, V. A. (2017). 'Out of reach: How insecurity prevents humanitarian aid from accessing the neediest'. In *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 6(1), 1-1. This 2017 study found that, on average, countries with no aid worker attacks had more than four times the number of organisations engaged in the response.

8 Stoddard, A., Czwarno, M. & Hamsik, L. (2019). *NGOs & Risk: Managing uncertainty in local-international partnerships: Global report*.

reach were available.[9] In 2024, these figures dropped to 36 % and 58 % respectively.[10]

Even more concerning is where that aid goes. The 2022 SOHS report found that only 36 % of aid recipients surveyed thought that aid went to those who needed it most. Similarly, data from a survey conducted by Humanitarian Outcomes' CORE project in 9 conflict-affected contexts, looking at the coverage, reach, end effectiveness of humanitarian operations, found in a survey conducted in 9 countries between 2019 and 2023, almost two-thirds (61.4 %) of the respondents felt the aid did not reach where it was most needed and over half reported a decline in response in the past year.[11]

Despite the stark and well documented challenges that humanitarian organisations face in delivering aid in conflict settings, discussion of this is largely missing from the current conversations around the 'hyper-prioritisation' of humanitarian response. Instead, the discourse tends to focus more on what is being cut as organisations are forced to prioritise. This is a valid concern, but it also presupposes the capacity of humanitarian organisations to effectively meet the needs of those most affected by crises, something that data and history shows is not always the case. Furthermore, where challenges are referred to, funding cuts and security continue to be presented as the main drivers of a lack of response on the ground.[12] These are undeniable factors, but alone they do not tell the whole story. Strategic choices made by humanitarian actors, the structural set up of the humanitarian system, and the mindset of actors on the ground also contribute to the gaps in assistance.

The majority of those in urgent need of assistance are in conflict zones

3
EXTERNAL DRIVERS OF THE EMERGENCY GAP

When MSF published the final Emergency Gap findings in 2018, the report identified powerful external factors compromising humanitarian action. Politicisation, instrumentalization, and violence against and obstruction of humanitarian action were key factors in the shrinking of humanitarian space, while funding shortfalls also continued. 10 years on and these external constraints are more acute than ever.

3.1. Growing needs as new crises accumulate on top of protracted crisis

Since the release of MSF Emergency Gap report, the number and intensity of conflicts has continued to increase and, with them, humanitarian needs. Displacement has doubled in the last decade;

9 ALNAP (2022) *The State of the Humanitarian System 2022*. London: ALNAP/ODI.
10 Humanitarian Outcomes (2024) Global Humanitarian Overview 2025: 2024 in review – Humanitarians Delivering Under Attack, 2024.
11 Humanitarian Outcomes (2023) *Score Info: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (CORE).*
12 OCHA (2025) 'Cuts and attacks have consequences: what happens when humanitarians cannot respond'. In *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025 (op. cit).*

the past five years alone have seen the number of people forcibly displaced around the world rise from 79.5 million in 2018 to 123 million in 2024.[13] Of these, 84.3 million people – almost 70 % - are internally displaced within their own countries as the result of violence and conflict.[14] As such, many – if not most - of the people in need of humanitarian assistance are those affected by conflict.

It is also estimated that 44 % of the global population has been affected by a climate-related disaster during the last 20 years and climate change and environmental degradation are also contributing to the genesis and worsening of humanitarian crises.[15] Likewise, the number of global non-communicable disease consultations has continued to increase. In this context, according to a study published in the Lancet, funding cuts to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) which has had a crucial role in improving global health, could result in a shock "similar in scale to a global pandemic or a major armed conflict" for many low- and middle-income countries.[16] The study also underlines that over 14 million preventable deaths could occur by 2030, a third of which could be among children aged under five.

In 2024, international humanitarian aid fell by almost $5 billion -the most severe drop in its history

Protracted crises, by their very nature, continue to fail to evolve into effective and lasting solutions. Meanwhile new crises rooted in armed conflict and social, economic and climatic deterioration are added to the list, constantly expanding the number of people in need of assistance.

3.2. Political agendas dictate and obstruct humanitarian action

The political landscape has become increasingly dynamic and unstable, characterised by a move away from bipolar models of power towards a multipolarity that favours the influence of regional powers in the global agenda. The fabric of alliances and agreements is based more on opportunistic approaches than on ideological substrata, with the middle powers aware of the room for manoeuvre to promote their own agendas. As part of this, conflict trends are changing. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) documented 59 state-based conflicts in 2023, the highest number since 1946. Of these, 57 were intrastate conflicts (civil wars). At the same time, however, these internal conflicts have become increasingly internationalized, with UCDP data indicating that 23 of the 59 civil conflicts documented in 2023 also involved international actors, such as in Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and DRC.[17]

Amidst this web of alliances and interests, Official Development Assistance (ODA), historically a stable source of external financing for developing countries, is experiencing a significant downturn. In 2024, international humanitarian assistance fell by nearly US 5

13 UNHCR (2024) *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2024*. Geneva. (Accessed: 12 September 2025).
14 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (2025) *GRID 2025: Global Report on Internal Displacement*, Geneva: IDMC. (Accessed: 14 September 2025).
15 Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) & United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) (2020) *The human cost of disasters: An overview of the last 20 years (2000 - 2019)*.
16 Cavalcanti, Daniella Medeiros et al. 'Evaluating the impact of two decades of USAID interventions and projecting the effects of defunding on mortality up to 2030: a retrospective impact evaluation and forecasting analysis', *The Lancet*, Volume 406, Issue 10500, 283 – 294.
17 Rustad, S.A. (2024) *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2023*. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

billion dollars, the largest cut ever recorded.[18] Major donors like the US, Germany, the UK and the EU are planning or have already implemented substantial cuts to future ODA budgets, driven by fiscal pressures, shifting domestic priorities, and political recalibrations. The impact of these political decisions on affected populations is disregarded.

Humanitarian assistance risks becoming even more conditional, politicized, and securitized, with bilateral aid flows directed toward strategic interests and partners rather than populations most in need. This risk is not only distorting needs-based and impartial response frameworks but further eroding the credibility and operational space of humanitarian actors, particularly in conflict and fragile settings.

3.3. Insecurity and safety concerns for humanitarians

It is worrying that disregard for IHL is now spreading throughout much of the international community

Humanitarian workers are also having to navigate increasingly hostile and dangerous conditions. In the four years between 2017 and 2020, there was a 54 % rise in the number of aid workers attacked and 2024 was the deadliest year on record for humanitarian workers.[19] The increase in armed conflicts involving national militaries, such as those in OPT, Sudan and Ukraine, has also seen state actors play a growing role in violence against aid workers. In 2023, for example, 57 % of recorded aid worker fatalities occurred as a result of aerial bombardment, a means of violence almost exclusively used by States.[20]

The accelerated erosion of respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in recent years adds a significant threat to humanitarian action in conflict situations. This is not only due to widespread noncompliance, but, as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has warned, is also the result of increasingly expansive interpretations of IHL that 'assert states' leeway to kill and detain… and undermine its protective force.[21] Worryingly, disregard for IHL, long common among Non-State Armed Actors and authoritarian states, now extends to much of the international community that traditionally claims to defend and protect global coexistence based on binding norms.

Many states that previously had a broad humanitarian space with few administrative requirements have now developed policies aimed at strengthening the exercise of their sovereignty, resulting in the implementation of regulatory frameworks to coordinate humanitarian aid. However, many of these frameworks are riddled with bureaucratic impediments that are rarely compatible with emergency responses based on independent humanitarian action. This regulation of humanitarian space, coupled with the tendency of States to implement costly responses through regional and international coordination mechanisms, results in restrictive agendas outside of which it is increasingly difficult to operate. The impact of these restrictions is often particularly acute in internal conflicts where the State is a party to the ongoing conflict.

18 ALNAP (2025) *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2025*.
19 ALNAP (2022) 'Does humanitarian support reach the right people?' In *The State of the Humanitarian System 2022*.
20 Breckenridge, M. J., Fairbanks, A., Czwarno, M., Harvey, P., Duque-Díez, M. & Stoddard, A. (2024) *Aid Worker Security Report 2024: Balancing advocacy and security in humanitarian action: Summary of key findings*. Humanitarian Outcomes.
21 International Committee of the Red Cross (2025), 'International humanitarian law and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts'. In *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 927.

The widespread implementation of security agendas and policies that stigmatize segments of the population has also led to the criminalisation of those who try to assist them. Providing assistance to undocumented migrants or to people living in areas under the control of declared terrorist groups, for example, can expose humanitarian organisations to suspicion, surveillance, harassment, or even criminal prosecution under domestic legislation that has been eroded to the point of diluting the protection of international human rights law and refugee law. Social and political polarisation is also a fertile ground for filling that fragmented spectrum with waves of disinformation, much of it harmful for vulnerable populations and for humanitarian workers.

Furthermore, the humanitarian landscape has also experienced the arrival of new actors from the development and from the private sectors. These actors also bring a different understanding of ways of operating, which can further reduce room for manoeuvre for humanitarian principles with assertive authorities. The few humanitarian actors that continue to pursue an approach to working in conflicts underpinned by humanitarian principles find themselves more alone than ever, with fewer resources and support. They are exposed to greater uncertainty in terms of security and targeted by those seeking to discredit impartiality as a principle to be upheld in humanitarian action.

Strategic decisions made by the humanitarian sector itself have contributed to the erosion of the space in which it operates

4
INTERNAL DRIVERS OF THE EMERGENCY GAP

While external challenges to aid delivery continue to grow, there are also key internal drivers of the emergency gap within the humanitarian sector that are comprising the ability of humanitarian actors to navigate those external challenges and, in some cases, exacerbating them. Back in 2018, MSF identified three main barriers – conceptual, mindset, and structural. These remain relevant today.

4.1. Conceptual Drivers of the Emergency Gap

As outlined above, external factors make hard for humanitarians to stay or surge and deliver. But it is not just the external environment that is making it hard for humanitarians to respond and practice principles. Strategic choices made within the sector itself – by both donors and humanitarian organisations – have actively contributed to the erosion of humanitarian space seen today.

Over the last two decades, humanitarian assistance has been progressively stretched to breaking point. Conceptually, the humanitarian imperative —the moral obligation to alleviate suffering— has been integrated into an ever-widening agenda spanning chronic poverty, climate vulnerability, political insecurity, peace building, and counter-terrorism. As a result, there has been a long-standing pressure to align humanitarian action with developmental and political goals. The stretching of the notion of humanitarian action has also been coupled with an ideological push towards coherence, which results in a dilution of the inherent

importance of humanitarian action and undermines the principle of independence from political agendas as a foundational concept of the humanitarian mission.

The aid sector has a long history of trying to operationalise an idea of coherence of policies and integration of humanitarian action with broader political or economic objectives. This has materialized through various and still evolving concepts of ´Linking Relief, Recovery, and Development (LRRD), the Humanitarian Development (and now peace) Nexus (HDN) and "integrated approaches" that not only aim to tackle the root causes of crises at the same time as addressing immediate needs, but have also sought to shift the concept of humanitarian action as something that should support that goal. By definition, the traditional idea of principled humanitarianism sits awkwardly alongside peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, economic development and climate change mitigation. This is not because of 'humanitarian exceptionalism' but because humanitarian action —as an endeavour intended solely to support human beings— cannot be so easily aligned with policies that are designed to correct political, social and economic injustices.

Political agendas tend to overlook the fact that humanitarian aid struggles to distribute vital assistance

In 2016, the first ever World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) offered an opportunity to address some of the system's dysfunctions at a time of particularly intense frustration with the performance of the humanitarian system at large. Instead, the WHS showed no ambition to improve emergency response and the sector's ability to reach those most in need in conflict settings; rather, the issue was largely skirted in favour of discussion on how to do better and more in prevention and recovery. HDN, its evolvement into triple nexus involving peace building agendas, the 2016 Grand Bargain, and the New Ways of Working (NWOW) as a paradigm for making these ideals operational, have all dominated the humanitarian policy space over the past decades. In the focus on achieving coherence between different objectives in crises, all these policy agendas share a tendency to overlook the fact that humanitarian aid is already struggling to deliver life-saving aid, let alone longer-term change, in many contexts.

These conceptual shifts and framings have had real time consequences. As the final report of MSF's Emergency Gap project pointed out, '[b]y subordinating humanitarian action to political, development, and security agendas, humanitarian actors have – often unconsciously - relinquished vital space for humanitarian action´´.[22] Whether "integrated" into a UN mission with state-building and/or military objectives or "partnered" with a government with a development agenda, in too many contexts humanitarian action has lost voice and ability to not only stand up for the victims in a time of crisis, but also to push for access to certain affected populations, especially in conflicts.

In 2024, an independent evaluation into the response to the conflict in Northern Ethiopia presented a striking example of the risks of the coherence agenda in situations of armed conflict.[23] The evaluation found that when the war broke out in northern Ethiopia, humanitarian organisations were not prepared to provide a response in a situation of armed conflict and struggled to implement an effective response underpinned by humanitarian principles. The evaluation found that this was due, in a large part,

22 Op. cit. MSF ARHP (2018).
23 Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group (3 June 2024) *Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation: Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Northern Ethiopia*.

to the general mindset of the humanitarian community, which was not orientated towards humanitarian response, but on resilience and development. Instead of allowing organisations to demonstrate comparative advantages, humanitarian leadership was fundamentally disunited, which led to «confusion as to which mandate or set of priorities should come first at times of crisis». Furthermore, many organisations were not equipped with the right staff and resources to launch an effective response in conflict areas. The findings of the evaluation revealed many parallels with an MSF Emergency Gap case study on the humanitarian response in North East Nigeria between 2015 and 2017.[24]

It is unclear if and how the Humanitarian Reset agenda will approach these concerns. While OCHA has committed to defending the principles that underpin the humanitarian mission, very little has been said about how this process will relate to wider UN reforms that still push an agenda of coherence and integration, with no reflection on if and how this affects the ability of humanitarian organisations to deliver principled operations. For example, while the increasing politicisation of aid is commonly referenced as an external threat – usually with examples of donor policies being aligned with national interests over needs of affected population – there is little discussion of how the UN system's quest for coherence and political solutions might have facilitated that creep in some contexts.

Research shows that the sector often intervenes in areas where access is easier

4.2. Mindset drivers of the Emergency Gap

Back in 2018, MSF argued that the humanitarian mindset had "become conservative, risk-averse and cost-obsessed." Highly insecure environments pose inherent physical, organisational, and financial risks for humanitarians. But too often these are perceived as unsurmountable obstacles, rather than operational challenges that must be overcome in line with the humanitarian imperative. Saving lives risks becoming an operational choice, not a moral imperative at the core of humanitarian action, and, as such, it has become a choice that can be – and often is – swapped for more strategic gains or easier programming.

UNOCHA's hyper prioritised response plan commits to directing severely cut resources to those who need them most. But research shows that organisations often respond in areas where needs are evident and access is more straightforward, rather than moving beyond their areas of regular operations. The 2022 SOHS report, for example, found that humanitarian organisations still tend to "cluster together near 'well-tarmacked roads', creating geographic coverage gaps… [only] identifying needs in the places where they are already active and donors funding programmes in places with established response capacity", rather than moving to places depending on need.[25]

Access and security constraints are key factors limiting humanitarian presence, but managing risk is also an inherent part of humanitarian action. This does not mean that humanitarian organisations should operate at any cost. Instead, balancing risks and the humanitarian imperative means analysing risks in relation to the level of need and impact of operations to determine how far to go and at which point the risks become so great that limiting or withholding urgent lifesaving assistance may be justified. This is

24 Edwards, J. (2017) *North-East Nigeria Case Study*. Barcelona: MSF ARHP.
25 Op. cit. ALNAP (2022).

one of the defining ethical challenges of humanitarian action, and the higher the need and the risks, the tougher that call becomes.[26]

MSF's Emergency Gap research found approaches to risk management can be part of the problem. As part of the wider professionalization of the humanitarian sectors, as well as in response to increasing levels of risk in many contexts, donors and humanitarian actors – particularly international organisations – have invested heavily in risk management policies, systems, and practices. While investments in security management are much needed, risk management processes can both facilitate and restrict operations, depending on how they are conceived and applied. A 2022 study of how NGOs approach risk management found that the objective is frequently framed as "ensuring compliance" rather than managing risk to ensure humanitarian programs can reach people in need, conversely limiting the ability of INGOs to meet humanitarian needs in many contexts, rather than supporting safer delivery.[27] This mindset is also driven by donors' stringent monitoring and reporting policies and by their unwillingness to accept uncertainty or deviation of assets, or fund potential failure. As result, many humanitarian organisations have become increasingly intent on risk devolution where each actor pushes risk as far away from itself as it can.

After more than two years of crisis in Sudan, the humanitarian response is still far from meeting needs

This mindset often undermines the humanitarian commitment to stay and deliver a response to acute needs, with long term consequences for affected populations. In Sudan, for example, a 2023 Humanitarian Outcomes survey on coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness (SCORE) of humanitarian aid concluded that when the conflict escalated in April 2023, the 'stay and deliver' philosophy was largely absent. Most UN and international NGOs – including MSF - suspended their programmes and evacuated their international staff. While the security situation might have warranted this early action, it had a major impact on the capacity of organisations to regroup and respond to needs in the longer term, leaving local responders to bear most of the burden of response. In the following weeks and months, government restrictions on granting visas and the movement of supplies effectively prevented many agencies from re-establishing the necessary surge response, leaving gaps that have persisted over two years into the conflict. MSF also evacuated staff in the early months of the conflict and, while different MSF sections did manage to launch emergency interventions, teams faced multiple challenges in doing this. The SCORE survey found that at the end of 2023, eight months into the conflict, the aid response remained primarily focused in the more accessible east of the country and SAF- controlled areas, with most agencies struggling to operate in much of the country, where needs are highest, and in RSF-controlled areas.[28] Over two years into the crisis, and these gaps have become deeply entrenched, with a humanitarian response that still falls woefully short of meetings needs across large parts of the country, especially those outside of SAF control.

26 See MSF's 2017 report, which offered a reflection on the subject of risk acceptance and some of the underlying factors that –apart from the actual security threat– influence security decision-making in the humanitarian sector, see: MSF ARHP (2017) *Emergency gap: Insecurity – always an insurmountable obstacle? (Emergency gap series 05)*. Barcelona: ARHP.
27 Hamsik, L., Reader, S., Allen-Rhoads, R., Cechvala, S., Robillard, S., and Edema, H. (2022) *Making the Most of Uncertainty: Common risk management traps and how to escape them. Risk III: Global Findings Report*. InterAction & CDA Collaborative Learning.
28 Humanitarian Outcomes (2023) *Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Sudan Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid*.

Ten years after MSF launched its research project, the humanitarian mindset matters more than ever as humanitarian organisations face an even more tightly squeezed financial context and increasingly hostile security risks. Reaching people in need in conflict requires risk management guided by humanitarian principles and requires presence on the ground, including in difficult areas. It also requires more – and often costly - investment in security management and negotiation capacity.

4.3. Structural drivers of the Emergency Gap

The traditional humanitarian sector has failed to capitalise upon the diversity of its actors, approaches and operational models. Instead, coordination, planning and funding streams have been increasingly articulated around UN-led architecture and processes, which often favour coherence of action over flexibility and timeliness.

Growing centralization has also contributed to policy thinking that sees the humanitarian community more as a system of tightly fitting elements that all contribute to one purpose, rather than an ecosystem where independent and often diverging missions, goals, ambitions, and operational and organisational models can interact with and complement each other through their added values and strengths.

Increasingly, local entities are taking on the bulk of the response in the most complex contexts

Effective emergency response in conflict relies on the ability to react in a timely and meaningful way. This depends on heavy structural investments in security management, robust logistics and specialised stand-by technical expertise. In practice, operational independence —the ability to make and execute decisions— is also greatly facilitated by unearmarked or softly earmarked funding that gives agencies vital flexibility in programming choices and risk management. Cuts to humanitarian funding is also threatening the continuation of some crucial common services and supply chains, such as the United Nations Humanitarian Air Services, which could impact access to patients and affected populations in certain contexts.

There is also a mismatch between the core recipients of funding —UN agencies— and the frontline deliverers of aid not only a major technical challenge for the rapid and cost-efficient transfer of money, but also a fundamental design flaw that hampers support for the necessary structural and operational investments required for the ability to stay and deliver in acute crises. Local responders increasingly carry most of the burden of responding to needs in the most difficult places but receive almost none of the funding. In 2023 only 4.5% of all trackable humanitarian funding went to local or national orgnisations.[29] The 'localisation' agenda has also tended towards devolution of risk and pressure to these local actors, rather than genuine partnerships based on comparative skills and advantages a 2024 study of security risk management in the humanitarian space conducted by GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes found that while the last decade has seen substantial advances in building security risk management systems and capacities in the sector, this progress is mainly benefiting international actors. The study found that local/national organisations are about 20 years behind their international

29 Development Initiatives (2024) *Falling short? Humanitarian funding and reform*.

counterparts, thanks to the 'pervasive and stubborn funding model' that prioritises international actors and prevents them from building core organisational capacities.[30]

5
REFORM BEYOND RHETORIC: CAN THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR BRIDGE THE EMERGENCY GAP?

The 'humanitarian reset' comes out of a long history of reform agendas, all of which have tended to expose the broader sector's resistance to any transformational change.[31] However, as some commentators have pointed out, while previous resets have occurred at times when humanitarian financing and operational capacity was expanding, this one is a response to massive cuts in both.[32]

Improving the response to crises requires major structural and conceptual changes, as well as substantial investment

Humanitarian needs are increasing, and rising conflict is the main driver of acute humanitarian needs. As such, if the reset is to achieve its aims of ensuring 'the best crisis response' for those most affected by crises with the limited resources available, humanitarian organisations must be able to navigate the complexities of working conflict zones. Over several decades, many humanitarian organisations appear to have lost the reflexes or appetite for emergency response in acute or chronic conflict settings. At the same time, those contexts are becoming more costly, difficult and dangerous to work in, creating even more barriers to effective response for an over stretched and increasingly risk-averse humanitarian sector that is also coming under attack. The result of this is that in many contexts around the world, humanitarian organisations are not reaching populations most affected by conflict – especially those near front lines or in hard-to-reach areas.

This reality needs to be at the core of the humanitarian reform agenda. A recommitment to bridging the pervasive emergency gap needs to start from an acknowledgement of the full extent of the problem – recognising not only the huge and very real external threats to humanitarian action, but also the internal shortcomings within the humanitarian sector that are impeding organisations' attempts to navigate these pressures and, in some cases, are exacerbating them.

Improving crisis response requires significant structural and conceptual change and investments, not just tweaks to international systems. It requires significant shifts in mindset, concept, and structural investment across the sector. Delivering more effectively requires policies and conceptual frameworks that promote and enable principled and agile humanitarian action, rather than diluting its importance. It requires a shift in thinking and structural investment in operational capacity, strong security management, and skills in negotiated access, as well as

30 Op. cit. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) and Humanitarian Outcomes (2024).
31 Pantuliano, S. and Bennett, C. (2016) *Humanitarian aid system must undergo radical change to respond to modern-day crises*. Overseas Development Institute.
32 Slim, H. (2025) 'Humanitarian Resets Past and Present – where have we come from and where shall we go?'. In *Activism, Influence and Change*.

For the reset to bring about meaningful change, the humanitarian imperative must be reinstated as a driving force

independent logistics and transport. The UN also needs to champion and put into practice its own 'stay and deliver' principle with the same determination as the protection of its staff and assets.[33]

10 years ago, the Emergency Gap findings queried whether the humanitarian imperative had faded as the driving force in operational and security decision-making. At that time, the research concluded that the answer was probably yes and no. It was fading as the driving force in the decision-making of many humanitarian organisations on the ground but was stronger than ever in activating collective processes. The current reset has once again committed to restoring the humanitarian imperative at the core of humanitarian mission. If this is going to result in meaningful change, then it must become the driving force on the ground too. There is increasingly limited room or resources to reinvent the wheel, but humanitarian organisations need to think outside the pervasive parameters constraining the sector and find ways to operate that prioritise the delivery of effective and principled action in those places where humanity seems to have vanished.

33 As outlined in the 2011 report, Egeland, J., Harmer, A. and Stoddard, A. (2011) To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments. Geneva: OCHA. Available at: https://www.humanitarianlibrary.org/resource/stay-and-deliver-good-practice-humanitarians-complex-security-environments

PHOTO:
This baby girl is only three days old. She was born in the MSF maternity ward in Mocha. She had tachypnea and had to be admitted to the neonatal care unit.

YEMEN © JULIE DAVID DE LOSSY / MSF


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