

CHAPTER 3.3

PARTNERSHIPS FOR PRINCIPLES AND PROTECTION

'Humanitarian work, civilian protection, and local governance are inherently interconnected ... donor mandates keep these sectors isolated.'

– *Local humanitarian actor, Myanmar*

The scale of protection and access challenges in this period highlighted the need for the humanitarian system to build partnerships across its own sectors and with local structures, diplomatic functions, peace actors and the private sector. Some promising approaches gained more traction, such as community-based protection; other relationships, particularly with private security actors, created additional risks that required humanitarians to develop new knowledge and guardrails. Protection actors advocated for the system to focus on protection in the Humanitarian Reset and to work not only on response but on threats – an important strategy in the face of sectoral funding cuts and reduced international presence. Operational agencies and donors heightened their focus on humanitarian diplomacy, with the aim of improving armed actors' respect for protective norms and access, which required stronger collaboration and shared learning for several actors. At the end of the study period, humanitarians contemplated new mechanisms to measure adherence to international humanitarian law (IHL) and hold states accountable for violations to reduce impunity.

Collaborating for protection

[Chapter 2.1](#) highlights some outcomes of protection programming in this period. However, protection is not the role of a single sector. Since 2013, the international humanitarian system has committed to the 'Centrality of Protection'; that is, making protection the 'purpose and intended outcome of humanitarian action'.¹⁴³ Despite progress since the last *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS)¹⁴⁴ and the work of strong advocates, significant progress is still required to achieve that goal.



The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force One on Centrality of Protection and a subsequent Community of Practice progressed several recommendations¹⁴⁵ of the IASC's critical report, *The Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action 2022*.¹⁴⁶ This included communicating the meaning and importance of the Centrality of Protection to country coordination structures, with the aim of ensuring that country-level planning and response implementation better considered protection. Under the leadership of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and InterAction, the group produced an action plan, toolkit, *aide memoire* and benchmarks for Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) Centrality of Protection implementation, including a measurement framework to encourage outcome-oriented strategies at the country level.¹⁴⁷ The Global Protection Cluster also stepped up its focus on analysis capabilities and advocacy to enable HCTs to identify and plan for protection risks.

Available evaluations, which did not capture the effects of those recent efforts, showed continued gaps. A recent Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) synthesis indicated that the Centrality of Protection principle remained 'widely misunderstood',¹⁴⁸ while its evaluation of the collective response in Northern Ethiopia showed that a focus on food security resulted in a failure to address high levels of gender-based violence (GBV).¹⁴⁹ There were also challenges translating analysis into practice. In Somalia, biannual Centrality of Protection strategies and formal intersectoral risk analysis failed to translate into people affected by crisis reporting improved protection outcomes.¹⁵⁰ Evaluations also indicated that the lack of country-level leadership on protection highlighted in the last SOHS study period continued.¹⁵¹ Indeed, multiple protection experts told us that Humanitarian Coordinators prioritised other issues or shied away from tackling protection due to either lack of understanding or a sense that there were too many components to address.

Some experts were hopeful that the tools created in this period might make planning and tracking less daunting, but they were unsure whether Humanitarian Reset plans for more empowered Humanitarian Coordinators would help or hinder a focus on the Centrality of Protection. One interviewee suggested that more pressure from the Emergency Relief Coordinator and donors could be required to ensure Humanitarian Coordinators are held accountable for prioritising the Centrality of Protection.

Protection actors continued to stress that other sectors needed to take responsibility for protection. This became more pressing in this period due to large-scale funding cuts – which, in a traditionally poorly funded sector, could reduce humanitarian agencies' operating footprint and funding for protection-specific activities.¹⁵² In late 2025, the United States announced cuts to UN protection architecture, including (among others) UN Women and the Special Representative



on Children and Armed Conflict.¹⁵³ Aid practitioners and people affected by crisis in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Palestine, Sudan and Ukraine all reported the effects of cuts to protection programming.

This was disappointing in comparison to some progress that had been made. Aid practitioners in DRC and Sudan, for example, told us that protection programming had become more central to the humanitarian response in recent years and that a growing number of organisations were working on psychosocial support, GBV case identification and child-friendly spaces, or on integrated protection and livelihoods programming. Several of these programmes had been linked to community structures or, in the case of Sudan, to government services.

Pockets of progress were made on cross-sector work at the coordination level in this period. For example, a multi-actor initiative developed a resource pack to support protection risk analysis in food security and livelihoods,¹⁵⁴ the Global Protection Cluster and Global Health Cluster created a Joint Operational Framework linking health and protection outcomes,¹⁵⁵ and the Food Security and Protection Clusters held joint workshops in Sudan and Syria throughout 2025 to explore how to operationalise protection in their work.

There were also organisational attempts to mainstream protection: the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action developed guidance on cash and voucher assistance in child protection,¹⁵⁶ while an evaluation of UNHCR found that it successfully mitigated GBV risks and mainstreamed GBV work in sectors like shelter, water and sanitation – especially when using multifunctional sector teams.¹⁵⁷ However, our evaluation synthesis indicated that, on the whole, successful mainstreaming was uneven and influenced by context, leadership communication, resources and accountability.^{xvi} A review of the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans (HNRPs) also found that protection risks were not sufficiently integrated into priority lifesaving strategic objectives, noting that ‘many key activities to address protection risks are either in the protection-specific [strategic objectives] or fall outside the scope of HNRPs’.¹⁵⁸

Some protection experts noted a particular need to integrate protection concerns into food security, given that it will likely continue to be the best-funded and most present sector in a system increasingly focused on lifesaving. At the end of 2025, the World Food Programme (WFP) began more seriously grappling with how, in places of high needs, providing less assistance to fewer people may pose risks to protection and social cohesion.¹⁵⁹ Ad hoc examples in this period also indicated that, in constrained circumstances, food provision was naturally becoming a site of protection activities; for example, interviewees reported that frontline staff at food-distribution points in Gaza were identifying vulnerabilities and trying to provide support.

xvi ALNAP commissioned evaluation synthesis. See [Methodology](#).



In the face of the 2025 funding cuts, humanitarian operational, research and donor actors conducted strong collective advocacy for protection to be included as a key lifesaving function in the Humanitarian Reset. While protection issues are now included in the 'Defend' pillar, protection advocates remained concerned about practical commitments. A coalition of academic, practitioner and policy actors offered three main recommendations in a policy brief to achieve the best protection outcomes in a reduced sector: 'ensure it is proactively focused on reducing civilian harm; demonstrate the impact of limited resources for preventing abuses on reducing civilian harm and need; focus on the most relevant actions that communities are requesting to improve their safety and security.'¹⁶⁰

These suggestions require protection actors, their partners and their funders to act differently and navigate some potential tensions. As the policy brief put it, focusing on reducing and preventing harm 'requires overcoming barriers within the humanitarian business model, including the obsession with "numbers reached" (regardless of little to no impact), rigid programme design norms, and high levels of risk aversion.'¹⁶¹

Indeed, reviewed evaluations found that the prominent approach was remedial (responding after the protection issue has occurred), apart from limited exceptions in unexploded-ordnance clearance and some child- and refugee-protection programmes.¹⁶² Some promising preventative examples included Start Network's anticipatory-funding mechanisms for conflict and displacement crises, which the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs funded,¹⁶³ and a Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Nonviolent Peaceforce Alliance for Peacebuilding analytical framework, which aimed to proactively reduce risks and interrupt violence through community-based approaches.¹⁶⁴

New approaches also required stronger engagement with how communities perceive protection risks and strategies. It was clear from our in-country research that communities found ways to protect themselves beyond what the humanitarian system could offer. In Myanmar, for example, communities dug bunkers near schools to mitigate against airstrike risks. In Sudan, internally displaced people formed voluntary community-based protection networks within camps to report threats, facilitate confidential referrals and offer round-the-clock psychosocial support.



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Funding cuts illuminated the importance of collaborating with sustainable, locally based structures; indeed, one protection expert suggested that loss of access could make supporting community-based protection the *only* way to maintain



a protection response. Evaluations and literature highlighted several promising community-based protection approaches where international actors (including Islamic Relief, NRC, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and Oxfam) offered support, such as negotiation training or establishing early-warning mechanisms, in contexts like Colombia, DRC, Syria, South Sudan and Yemen.¹⁶⁵ One internally displaced person in Gedaref, Sudan, highlighted the role of camp-based protection networks:



'Everyone in the camp knows that these people are part of the protection network ... they train them on how to report ... some organisation personnel give the [internally displaced people] their own personal phone numbers to contact them in cases of emergency.'

However, a member of an Emergency Response Room explained that working through communities also held risks:



'They have to deal with the critical situation in a very diplomatic and delicate way ... members of the [protection] committees were harassed and sometime arrested by the [Rapid Support Forces].'

While supporting community structures is important, protection experts warned that a lack of international presence had already undermined some protection strategies and points of leverage that communities did not have at their disposal. Reduced funding and increased conflict in this period also undermined state referral systems for GBV and child protection that had been important for integrated and sustained support in some of our case-study contexts, like Sudan. These changes underscored the need for humanitarians to work better with not only communities but also across the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus.

Donors continue to have an important role in upholding protection in a constrained environment, including by encouraging partners to consider protection and risk reduction in all aspects of programming. The Protection Donor Group has already been important in driving forward more cohesive messaging on protection among a subset of donors, and it could also be important in maintaining pressure to practically integrate protection into the Humanitarian Reset – both at the programming and IHL advocacy levels.¹⁶⁶ For example, some donors we spoke to were considering how best to support newly empowered Humanitarian Coordinators to overcome identified gaps on protection leadership at the response level.



Diplomacy and political engagement

At its core, humanitarian diplomacy aims to influence key decision-makers to act in the interests of people in (or vulnerable to) crisis and to respect humanitarian principles.¹⁶⁷ Driven by the scale of IHL violations and access restrictions in this period, humanitarian diplomacy gained prominence as a topic in conferences, panel discussions and strategy documents;¹⁶⁸ yet there were varied interpretations of what the term meant, its objectives and the actors and methods involved.

At the operational level, [Chapter 3.2](#) outlines multiple instances of frontline staff, civil society groups, non-governmental organisation (NGO) leadership and HCTs practising humanitarian diplomacy by engaging with governments, de facto authorities and armed groups, with the aim of influencing access and human rights outcomes. System support organisations like the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva Call, the Centre on Armed Groups and the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (among others) provided advice, guidance and convening opportunities to support humanitarian diplomacy efforts in this period. One leader of a support organisation reported an uptick in requests for their support, from both operational agencies and donors, in response to growing access restrictions and IHL violations.

NGOs were also active in advocacy in IHL violations in contexts like Gaza, Myanmar and Sudan and provided contextual information to political actors. For example, a group of NGO and human rights actors monitored movements around Al Fasher, Sudan, and acted as an early-warning advocacy system for international governments, including to the US during President Biden's administration, to bring greater pressure on abuses through engagement with the United Arab Emirates. Meanwhile, ICRC's negotiations supported the release of people detained (by state and non-state actors) in multiple contexts, such as Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Thailand and Yemen.¹⁶⁹

Despite attacks on their power and legitimacy in this period, the UN was also active in humanitarian diplomacy. For example, the 2022 UN-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative brought humanitarian and commercial interests together to enable the export of grain from Ukraine,¹⁷⁰ although diplomacy was unable to prevent Russia from withdrawing from the agreement in 2023.¹⁷¹ Other collective wins for humanitarian access included the adoption of UN Security Council Resolutions 2664 on sanctions^{xvii} and 2730 on protecting humanitarians in May

xvii This Resolution emphasised that sanctions measures are not intended to have adverse humanitarian consequences for civilian populations or humanitarian activities, nor for those carrying out the latter (see UN (2022) <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/sres2664-2022>).



2024.^{xviii} The two Emergency Relief Coordinators in this period were vocal and negotiated on multiple issues, including with the Taliban to lift bans on female humanitarian staff in Afghanistan, with Israel to maintain access by international NGOs (INGOs) and with UN member states on preventing genocide in Gaza.¹⁷² The Humanitarian Reset included respect for IHL under its 'Defend' pillar and the UN80 reforms created the Collaborative Humanitarian Diplomacy Initiative. However, at the time of writing, questions remain over how these initiatives will implement commitments and contribute to greater accountability for upholding IHL and to enabling humanitarian action.



**This was a period
of humanitarian
diplomacy failures**

Overall, this was a period of humanitarian diplomacy failures: parties to conflict remained unwilling to concede to humanitarian access, including in the face of famine in Gaza and in Al Fasher, and they continued to perpetrate IHL violations against civilians and aid workers.

The outcomes of humanitarian diplomacy ultimately rely on the actions of political decision-makers and the willingness of parties to conflict to adhere to IHL, enable access or pause hostilities. While not directly responsible for the retrenchment of norms, the legitimacy of the humanitarian system and its ability to operate were dented, requiring humanitarians to more effectively engage in advocacy and political influence to create stronger levers of accountability.¹⁷³

Many operational actors looked to humanitarian donors to influence their countries' political apparatus to better support IHL and access – and many donors did make efforts to engage. For example, while donors like Ireland and Spain already had a strong humanitarian diplomacy focus, Belgium and Sweden introduced humanitarian diplomacy as a priority in their new humanitarian strategies launched in 2025.¹⁷⁴ Several donors told us about their renewed commitments to funding system-support actors who specialise in building the humanitarian diplomacy capacity of operational partners. Others more directly supported their operational partners. For example, the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) produced a practitioner guide on food security and IHL,¹⁷⁵ and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) began funding a hub with the Swiss Red Cross that supported the Red Cross movement on mis-, dis- and false information.

To strengthen support for humanitarian diplomacy initiatives, research highlighted the value of convening multiple government actors in a coalition of diplomatic colleagues, the military and relevant thematic ministries – such as agriculture to tackle hunger as a weapon of war.¹⁷⁶ Some actors focused their

^{xviii} This Resolution concerned the protection of humanitarian, UN and associated personnel, as well as their premises and assets (see Security Council Report (2025) <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-04/protection-of-humanitarian-and-un-personnel-2.php>).



efforts on training and providing context updates to diplomatic counterparts. For example, the British Red Cross worked with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to update an IHL handbook for parliamentarians,¹⁷⁷ and FCDO trained diplomats on humanitarian principles. The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) told us they found that creating a cross-stakeholder working group – including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the UN directorate, the Ministry of Defence, NGOs and Red Cross members – helped to operationalise Spain's 2023–26 humanitarian diplomacy strategy,¹⁷⁸ and they have since shared lessons learned with donors who are newer to humanitarian diplomacy.

We found significant gaps in collective learning because several humanitarian donors and operational agencies we spoke to were grappling with strategic humanitarian diplomacy for the first time. Research provided few clear indications of which methods worked best – partly because strategies can encompass a wide range of approaches at different levels, but also because diplomatic efforts often happened behind closed doors.¹⁷⁹ A study by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation found that common enablers of effective diplomacy included compromise, flexibility, trust-building and creating networks of diverse actors,¹⁸⁰ while an NRC review found that barriers included gaps in Humanitarian Coordinator leadership and a lack of understanding of humanitarian principles among humanitarian staff.¹⁸¹ Given that implementing the Humanitarian Reset will empower Humanitarian Coordinators as leaders, it will be important to support them to better engage with diplomacy and protection.

Interviewees and commentary also highlighted a need for humanitarians to better adapt to the shifting geopolitical landscape and players, raising the question of how more explicitly transactional approaches to ending conflict may affect humanitarian diplomacy.¹⁸² Humanitarians seeking greater influence over outcomes may also need to consider that those who exert the most influence over parties to conflict or who engage directly in peace negotiations may not be the 'Western' states they most commonly interact with; research highlighted the negotiating roles played by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Türkiye and Qatar in this period.¹⁸³ Research also underscored a growing role for non-state actors – including civil society, transnational advocacy networks and diaspora groups



There were missed opportunities for making humanitarian diplomacy efforts and objectives more grounded in the voices, experiences and capacities of communities affected by conflict





– in putting pressure on parties to conflict.¹⁸⁴ But at both country and global levels, there were missed opportunities for making humanitarian diplomacy efforts and objectives more grounded in the voices, experiences and capacities of communities affected by conflict.¹⁸⁵

One of the biggest missing levers in this period (and discussed in [Chapters 3.1](#) and [3.2](#)) was the lack of political accountability for perpetrators of IHL violations and atrocities. The *Lancet Commission* report, analysis by Researching the Impact of Attacks on Healthcare (RIAH) and several senior humanitarians we spoke to all underscored the need for stronger measurement and reporting structures to increase states' accountability and ensure consequences for perpetrators.¹⁸⁶ While some states already publish voluntary reports on IHL compliance, the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, launched in 2024, has sought to introduce more concrete commitments and transparency. At the time of writing, it had 111 state participants, engaged over 130 states in discussions and had created a set of working groups to develop concrete and practical recommendations to strengthen respect for IHL.¹⁸⁷ Beyond self-reporting, state action is needed to take political action against perpetrators. As an Oxfam report warned, 'Unless there are consequences for violations, humanitarian diplomacy risks reinforcing cycles of impunity rather than halting them'.¹⁸⁸

Engagement with peace and security actors

Humanitarians are not the only actors involved in diplomatic efforts to protect people affected by conflict. Over this period, continued deteriorations in the Global Peace Index and growth in new and protracted conflicts highlighted the need for humanitarians and peace actors to work more collaboratively and effectively.¹⁸⁹ In the words of one senior adviser: 'The solution to a protracted humanitarian crisis in an unresolved conflict is not just more aid. It has to also include more peace.'¹⁹⁰

As conflict increased, international peace funding decreased. Even before the 2025 cuts, data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recorded a reduction of peace spending to countries included in the *Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) 2025*: from US\$16.9 billion in 2023 to US\$14.7 billion in 2024.^{xix} Funding for countries in the *GHO 2025* was highly concentrated in Ukraine, which accounted for 63.5% of all peace finance to those countries.^{xx} Most peace funding supported the public sector, governance and civic

xix ALNAP commissioned thematic analysis on humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus and climate financing. See [Methodology](#). Calculated using OECD Common Reporting Standard data in 2023 constant prices.

xx After Ukraine, the largest recipients were Bangladesh, DRC, Colombia, Nigeria and Somalia. Together, with Ukraine, these six countries accounted for 75.9% of all peace finance captured here.



participation; just 14.5% was spent on 'core' peace activities like peace-building, conflict and security-related interventions.^{xxi} Peace funding also remained largely siloed from humanitarian streams,¹⁹¹ as a local humanitarian actor in Myanmar explained:



'Humanitarian work, civilian protection, and local governance are inherently interconnected ... donor mandates keep these sectors isolated.'

These separations can limit the transformative potential of HDP nexus approaches by reducing flexibility, joint planning and strategic multiphase approaches (see [Chapter 5.1](#) for a broader discussion of the HDP nexus).¹⁹²



There was a disconnect between how international structures coordinated peace and humanitarian work versus more organic community-based programming

Other barriers to joint peace and humanitarian work stubbornly persisted in this period, with peace remaining the least-integrated pillar of the HDP nexus.¹⁹³ There was a continued disconnect between how international structures coordinated peace and humanitarian work versus the more organic programming of local community-based actors.¹⁹⁴ In an IASC mapping of HDP nexus good practice, HCT actors cited few examples of practical peace programming, while local and national actors frequently cited peace and governance programmes they were implementing

as connecting with humanitarian aims.¹⁹⁵ Practical examples included early-warning systems for disasters and conflict in Burundi, social cohesion in displacement programming in Pakistan, and mental-health and psychosocial support programmes in Ukraine.¹⁹⁶ A national NGO in Goma, DRC, described one programme:



'Children from different tribes who were maybe fighting, they find themselves in the same peace club, where they sensitised and they become actors, now they hold the same message of peace in the families, meaning behind humanitarian assistance, behind development programm[ing], peace sections are also included in the community.'

Several international NGOs also reported engaging in community-focused joint humanitarian–peace programming in this period.¹⁹⁷ For example, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue supported collaborations between community

xxi ALNAP commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing. Calculated using OECD Common Reporting Standard data.



leaders and faith-based organisations in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to reduce intercommunal tensions.¹⁹⁸ To build acceptance and sustainability, the Nonviolent Peaceforce designed programmes built on approaches that communities already used to protect themselves: their Myanmar staff worked with local civilian networks to negotiate ceasefires and support the evacuation of over 6,200 people, while their Unarmed Civilian Protection programming achieved successes in Ukraine, the Philippines and South Sudan by addressing conflict as it emerged, rather than trying to build peace after a period of instability. These approaches were in line with the proactive and community-based engagement that humanitarian protection actors have promoted.^{xxii} Some new initiatives also emerged to strengthen humanitarian–peace connections; for example, NORCAP, the Humanitarian Policy Group and the Network on Humanitarian Action launched a Belgian-funded Consortium for Civilian Safety and Security to improve how humanitarian, peace-building and community actors work together on protection.¹⁹⁹

Conflict sensitivity, however, remained a challenge for many humanitarian responses. While 2024 IASC mapping found increased use of conflict sensitivity and ‘do no harm’ analysis in planning across a sample of 11 HCTs, its adoption was not systematic; the IAHE of the Yemen response, for example, found no evidence that conflict-sensitive approaches informed programming.²⁰⁰ Some

initiatives tried to bridge gaps; for example, International Alert created guidance to help humanitarian actors better integrate conflict sensitivity and peace into their work,²⁰¹ and Saferworld’s research and information facilities in South Sudan and Sudan provided conflict-sensitivity support for humanitarian actors.²⁰²



Social-cohesion programming grew in this period, but yielded mixed results



Social-cohesion programming grew in this period, with the aim of addressing some of the negative effects of humanitarian action on conflict (discussed in the 2022 SOHS), but it yielded mixed results. Some randomised controlled trials found that humanitarian action had positive social-cohesion effects. For example, in Uganda, Young African Refugees for Integral Development provided a cash grant that – coupled with education messages about how aid-sharing meant that funding refugees helped to fund local services – reportedly led to improvements on a range of indicators (including an 11–18% increase in supporting refugees’ right to work) which lasted for over two years.²⁰³ In contrast, a two-year ODI Global research project advised that ‘aid actors avoid addressing social cohesion as a primary objective unless their interventions meet four requirements’, namely

xxii Nonviolent Peaceforce has collaborated with Safer Space to launch the Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) Academy to share learning on this practice (see Nonviolent Peaceforce (2025) <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/UCP-x-Peacebuilding.pdf> and <https://www.ucpacademy.org/post/nonviolent-peaceforce-and-creating-safer-space-launch-ucpacademy-a-global-hub-for-learning-in-unarm>).



clarity of thought and purpose, pragmatism about the limitations and risks, equity and transparency, and political coherence. The research warned that, if social-cohesion programming is not done well, humanitarians could do more harm than good.²⁰⁴

One of the persistent challenges to sustained social cohesion in displacement contexts was ineffective connections with state and development actors that play strong roles in durable solutions (discussed further in [Chapter 5.1](#)). While guidance like the Shelter Cluster's *Housing, Land and Property Rights Toolkit* usefully set out due-diligence requirements for shelter actors to identify and avoid land-rights violations, challenges remained in practice. For example, people affected by crisis in Goma told us of conflicts between internally displaced people and host communities over land and environmental resources. Solutions offered by communities went beyond what humanitarians could deliver. One local chief said:



'I think they should be providing or buying land to receive [internally displaced people] in our regions. Because this has led to so many problems like fight[ing], houses' destruction, and so on between landowners and [internally displaced people].'

Some collaborations were important for protecting staff and civilians, but humanitarian principles and institutional cultures remained barriers to humanitarians engaging effectively with security actors. The 2024 IASC mapping found that most humanitarians did not think integrating peace objectives compromised their principles, but several found the pursuit of security and stabilisation policies alongside humanitarian objectives concerning for neutrality.²⁰⁵

An Oxfam study in the Central African Republic, DRC, Mali and South Sudan revealed limited trust among communities for UN peacekeeping operations, despite the range of broader humanitarian activities the latter may engage in (including water provision, constructing health centres and GBV sensitisation).²⁰⁶ Such activities could further blur the line between armed actors and humanitarians, raising questions for principles and safety; yet the protective function of peacekeeping forces, including providing infrastructure (such as medical facilities and situational analysis), as well as physical protection for civilians, also benefited humanitarians.²⁰⁷ Peacekeeping spending fell from US\$5.80 billion in 2022 to US\$4.82 billion in 2024 (a drop of approximately 16.8%), which was a concern for several protection experts.^{xxiii} And the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported that, by the end of 2025, the number of personnel in peace operations had fallen to a 25-year low.²⁰⁸

xxiii ALNAP commissioned thematic analysis on HDP nexus and climate financing. See [Methodology](#). Calculated using Peace Security Data Hub available at <https://psdata.un.org/dataset/DPO-PKOAppropriation>, accessed 22 April 2026.



Increased conflict meant humanitarians needed to engage more directly with the military for deconfliction, including coordinating on parallel interventions with humanitarian aims in crises, or on security and logistics.²⁰⁹ Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination units sometimes helped to navigate mandates and uphold humanitarian principles in those interactions, but evaluations indicated gaps in their effectiveness. In the Somalia response, for example, a lack of civilian contacts in the army and limited engagement with armed groups hindered civil–military coordination.²¹⁰

Some efforts to strengthen cross-institutional understanding and collaboration included multifunction training and exercise sessions at the Regional Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific;²¹¹ a 2023 update to the Australian Civil Military Centre guide to support collective understanding of civil, military and police stakeholders engaged in international disaster response;²¹² and a new Humanitarian Advisory Group guide for civil–military coordination in the Pacific.²¹³ Despite some improved connections, however, Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination actors noted continued gaps in dialogue and engagement with new actors – including organisations led by former military personnel who had less experience with humanitarian accountability and principles, but who offered skills in logistics, new technologies and volatile contexts.²¹⁴

Principles in private security and technology partnerships

Humanitarians increased their partnerships with companies that provided logistical or technological support in insecure contexts, but they had trouble negotiating their principles with them. A 2024 mapping found that at least 220 private technology companies engaged in over 50 major humanitarian partnerships.²¹⁵ They often provided digital infrastructure and services to humanitarians and militaries – simultaneously – in conflict though,²¹⁶ raising ethical dilemmas about their use of experimental emerging technologies with both sectors²¹⁷ and the risk of satellite or personal data being shared or humanitarian funding indirectly contributing to building military capabilities.

Literature highlighted Ukraine as a microcosm of interacting interests between humanitarians, private companies and the military. For example, digital infrastructure served both civilian medical centres and military cyber defence,²¹⁸ and a partnership between the Ukraine Government and Palantir reportedly included support for both military intelligence and the ability to evidence war crimes, clear land mines and resettle displaced refugees.²¹⁹ Local logistics companies also blurred those lines; the biggest Ukrainian mail and delivery service, Nova Poshta, provided free deliveries and cargo support for displaced people and medical facilities, *and* frontline deliveries to the military.



If private companies are not sensitive to boundaries and contribute too directly to military objectives, they could lose their own legal protections as civilian entities



If private companies are not sensitive to boundaries and contribute too directly to military objectives, they could lose their own legal protections as civilian entities, potentially putting people affected by crisis, their own staff and humanitarian partners at risk.²²⁰ In an effort to address this, ICRC has presented its legal views on some of the current challenges in applying IHL rules and principles to new technologies of warfare.²²¹ Innovation funding at ICRC also supported feasibility testing for creating a 'digital emblem' that could be used online to help

demarcate and, hopefully, protect humanitarian digital infrastructure from cyber operations during armed conflict. The aim was to extend the protective function of the physical Red Cross/Red Crescent and Red Crystal emblems used by staff and volunteers on uniforms, cars and infrastructure into cyberspace.²²²

In this period, there were also some nuanced conversations about what type of digital dual-use capabilities humanitarian agencies can use while protecting staff and civilians. For example, FCDO agreed to support Nonviolent Peaceforce work in Ukraine, which used frequency analysers for drones to help civilian volunteers decide whether it was safe to move with humanitarian assistance. In Ukraine, local NGOs' advocacy prompted a review into whether humanitarian use of drone-jamming equipment was permissible to protect staff; the review found this incompatible with neutrality because diverting the course of drones interfered with military objectives.²²³

Beyond technology companies, humanitarians increasingly partnered with security companies or private vendors to enable access in insecure contexts. A UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP) survey found that the use of armed actors was common – and, indeed, a security requirement in some contexts – despite it often being termed a 'last resort'.²²⁴ Several non-UN entities we spoke to were engaging in these partnerships for the first time in response to increased access restrictions and insecurity. While collective reflection and research on use of armed escorts remained limited,²²⁵ policy debates questioned whether armed escorts brought greater safety or risk, whether they undermined the perceived neutrality of humanitarian actors and whether humanitarians understood the conditions in which their escorts would use force.²²⁶

Our in-country research in DRC, Gaza and Sudan highlighted some of these dilemmas regarding the use of armed escorts or private contractors. In Gaza, the practice grew as theft of assistance increased due to scarcity, driven by



the Government of Israel's blockades and attacks on Gaza's police force that undermined the rule of law.²²⁷ One private-sector actor explained their contribution:



'An institution ... asked me every day to bring in 10 cars without anyone knowing ... because if [people affected by crisis] knew that it was aid, they would steal it, because they would consider it to be theirs.'

Similar challenges were noted in Sudan. One UN representative explained:



'If we were to go out with large quantities of aid, people in desperate need might overwhelm us, putting both staff and supplies at risk ... We cannot take the risk of moving independently, as we are unarmed and unable to defend ourselves.'

In Gaza, humanitarian actors and private logistics companies made some efforts to train employees on how to manage crowds; however, humanitarian actors noted there was no real control over how these companies delivered assistance and stressed the need for more regulations and protection training. A private company told us individual staff were often left to their own judgement, which led to some incidents of people using sticks to control crowds of people left desperate by extreme need.

Some private contractors funded by humanitarian donors used highly questionable delivery methods. An article in *The New Humanitarian* criticised the private company Fogbow for its air drops in Nasir, Sudan – which local communities reportedly claimed was largely occupied by government officials and soldiers, meaning people affected by crisis were scared to return to access the food. The company was also criticised for blurring the line with military engagement by using a Ugandan aviation company linked to the military.²²⁸ Several humanitarian actors warned against focusing on air and sea deliveries, instead advocating for action to remove political barriers to land access. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) declared air drops in Gaza to be a 'distraction' and 'smokescreen';²²⁹ other humanitarian actors and activists criticised NGOs and the private sector for constructing the ill-fated 'Joint Logistics Over-The-Shore' port in Gaza instead of focusing on political pressure to move large amounts of blocked assistance on the border.²³⁰

Humanitarian actors and people affected by crisis widely condemned the creation of the private Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) created in February 2026 by Israel and supported by the US.²³¹ Between 27 May and 1 August 2025, the UN reported that at least 1,373 Palestinians were killed 'seeking food', '859 in the



vicinity of the GHF sites and 514 along the routes of food convoys'.²³² The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) indicated that the Israeli military killed most of these people, and that OHCHR had no evidence to indicate that 'these Palestinians were directly participating in hostilities or posed any threat to Israeli security forces or other individuals. Each person killed or injured had been desperately struggling for survival.'²³³ People affected by crisis told us of the threats they faced accessing GHF assistance, which transformed aid from a source of 'relief' to one of 'danger' – even 'a death trap'. They described late-night delivery of assistance – in limited quantities – via disorganised, 'chaotic' and 'violent' processes. One displaced woman explained:



'We do not support [GHF assistance], it's a trap for the Palestinian people, and it has caused many injuries and deaths. It does not represent the Palestinian people. It is a great injustice and humiliation. It is very dangerous, as it spreads thieves and armed men.'

Some humanitarian agencies reportedly met with actors involved in the GHF in the hope that engagement may improve the dangerous systems deployed in the only structures that Israel and the US supported. Some, including Samaritan's Purse, worked in partnership with the GHF.²³⁴ Others refused to engage with the GHF or with actors including the Boston Consulting Group who helped to create it.²³⁵ Over 200 NGOs coordinated to strongly push back against the GHF, which one INGO representative called 'a blatant militarisation of humanitarian assistance'.²³⁶ Another INGO representative spoke of what they saw as the collective rejection of the GHF by the humanitarian community in Gaza:



'Our rejection of them has been one of the deciding factors in why we've maintained community acceptance as long as we have, despite not being able to deliver at the scale that's needed ... if there's anything we can be proud of, it's the fact that we have – if we're going to go out as an industry and this is the last response and khalas [the end] for humanitarianism – at least we went down with a fight.'

Private-sector actors who engaged in humanitarian partnerships or delivered aid in lieu of humanitarian sometimes lacked understanding of humanitarian principles and accountability frameworks. Multiple research papers and people we spoke to emphasised the need for greater training and exchange between humanitarian agencies and the private sector, including training for corporate decision-makers, to uphold principled humanitarian action and protect people affected by crisis from harm.²³⁷ Following the GHF experience in Gaza, one INGO representative also underscored the need for the humanitarian system to adopt clearer boundaries regarding who should even qualify as a legitimate partner to work with – or fund.



These kinds of regulations are needed quickly; in the current funding environment, a greater number of humanitarians are accepting a need to engage more with the private sector (whether for logistics, communications, delivery or financing). As Save the Children explained: 'The scale of need has outgrown the architecture on which it was built ... the role of the private sector is no longer optional but essential'.²³⁸

Conclusion

This period of grave IHL infringements and reduced funding underscored the need for humanitarians to partner with a wide range of actors to improve protection outcomes for people affected by crisis. There was some nascent progress in embedding the 'Centrality of Protection' across responses and sectors, engaging political actors to better defend IHL, collaborating with peace actors, and navigating humanitarian principles with private-sector technology and security firms.

Further work is needed to build on pockets of good practice, to create collective ways of principled working with diverse partners, and, in some cases, to implement strong boundaries for when *not* to engage. As one international actor working on protection and conflict told us, this must be done:



'in a way that is responsible, sustainable and meets needs' – a process that, despite a funding environment that prioritises quick fixes, 'kind of moves at the speed of trust'.



Further work is needed to build on pockets of good practice, to create collective ways of principled working with diverse partners



Donors and operational agencies increasingly looked to humanitarian diplomacy to stem disrespect for IHL and growing impunity for violations, but there remained space for greater shared learning on effective strategies and a need to provide newly empowered Humanitarian Coordinators with the tools and political backing required to support protection at a response level. Gaps in transparent measurement and accountability mechanisms demand concerted attention to incentivise progress on respect for IHL among UN member states and sanction violators.

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