

CONCLUSION

'Political discourse translated into lack of funding and capacity... There are opportunities now to get it right.'

– Senior humanitarian actor

How did the system perform?

The international humanitarian system faced substantial challenges, both internal and external, over the 2022–25 period. Humanitarian needs rose as a result of increased food insecurity, high levels of forced displacement, more frequent climate shocks, and multiple new and protracted conflicts. Crises became more widespread and more complex. A rise in violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) by state and non-state actors heightened protection risks for civilians and at the same made it harder for humanitarians to provide support.¹ In the 20 years since The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) began, there has never been a more deadly time to be an aid worker. And yet in the face of these growing needs and risks, international humanitarian assistance fell by 30% – from an all-time peak in 2022 to a severe trough in 2025 – as key government donors cut funding.

This report explored how the international humanitarian system performed against five key policy areas in this extremely difficult period. This final chapter parses out what the system managed to achieve despite the challenges, which positive efforts were particularly constrained by those challenges, and where the system did not make progress even though it controlled levers for change.

Achievements despite the challenges

Across the policy areas explored in this report, there were clear examples of progress and movement. The humanitarian system helped to avert climate-driven famine and to save hundreds of thousands of lives in Somalia and improved food security in Afghanistan through large-scale food assistance. It made some gains in effectiveness, efficiency and response times by using pre-positioned supplies, anticipatory action and rapid pooled-fund disbursements. It also made greater



use of digital tools, especially to facilitate the delivery of cash-based assistance and to expand the speed and scale of mapping, early warning and delivery in major responses. Overall, the system made improvements against its own quality standards in this period – although these did not always align with the quality perceptions of people affected by crisis.



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As threats to civilians and humanitarian staff increased, the system made some progress on protecting people affected by crisis and on improving security. Engagement with peace actors, community-led protection and conflict-prevention structures produced promising results. Cross-sector efforts on protection grew and tools were developed to more practically embed and measure the 'Centrality of Protection' in response strategies. The system also developed specialist expertise on the risks of artificial intelligence (AI) in warfare, as well as on responding to misinformation and disinformation campaigns and digital shutdowns – though these capabilities stayed concentrated in only a few organisations. This period also highlighted the importance of principled action; there were key discussions about what this meant and how different groups interpreted specific principles, like neutrality, to achieve humanitarian objectives.

Localisation remained an overall sticking point, but actors in the international system made some concrete progress on supporting locally led pooled funds, on evolving pooled-fund governance to be more equitable, and on working through alternative and more locally led intermediary models. Once treated as niche, mutual aid was more squarely recognised as an important model of humanitarian support to people affected by crisis. As such, international humanitarian actors provided assistance to mutual-aid actors through mechanisms like support to community-led responses (sclr), dedicated philanthropic funding modalities, diaspora support or via exceptions to typical United Nations (UN) pooled-fund procedures.² Important conversations were had about how best to support these structures, without co-opting and displacing them.

External barriers to progress

Operational challenges constrained progress in several key areas, however. Humanitarian staff and volunteers frequently told us they pushed forward despite feeling exhausted by the external pressures that reduced the effects of their efforts.

The large funding cuts in 2025 reversed some gains made in the early years of this SOHS period. Nutrition progress in Yemen, Ethiopia and Bangladesh deteriorated rapidly as cuts disrupted services. The system made improvements



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in needs assessments with the creation of the Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) 2.0 and greater use of multisectoral needs assessment in the early part of the period. But cuts led to reductions in the number and scale of assessments, thereby reducing the system's ability to identify populations most in need. System-wide monitoring functions and platforms, such as the Famine Early Warning Systems Network

(FEWS NET), were also hit by cuts that threatened efforts to both track and predict need. In 2025, due to funding cuts and access constraints, the system often failed to reach even the subgroup of people hyper-prioritised as in most severe need of support. Initial progress on inclusion across a range of identity groups was hit in early 2025 by a combination of increasingly restrictive diversity, equity and inclusion policies and the funding cuts; women-led organisations experienced widespread cuts and, in some contexts, tailored services were often the first to be withdrawn.

Closing humanitarian space also threatened access and protection. The system's efforts could not adequately address need in conflict-driven famines in Sudan, Gaza and Haiti, where access obstruction, political paralysis and funding shortfalls were decisive. Nonetheless, frontline staff and volunteers worked hard to maintain their support for people affected by crisis, which often included their own communities. Access challenges affected even networks of community solidarity in contexts like Gaza and Sudan, whose resources dwindled dangerously under blockades, conflict and bombardment. While UN Resolution 2730 on protecting humanitarian staff and infrastructure was passed, investments in collective security infrastructure and efforts to better protect local staff and volunteers were undermined by a combination of funding cuts and continued IHL violations. As parties to conflict failed to uphold IHL, and as UN member states failed to hold perpetrators to account, the security efforts of humanitarian actors and the maintenance of protection as a lifesaving function within the Humanitarian Reset paled in comparison to the threats.

Areas of underperformance

In our interviews with aid practitioners and recipients we also heard a good deal of disappointment at the lack of progress in some areas that were more clearly within the



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humanitarian system's control. Much of this related to willingness to alter power structures, which caused growing frustration, particularly among local actors but also many international ones. Partnerships remained largely transactional, with little meaningful decision-making power shifting to local actors across coordination, resource allocation and strategic priorities. Frustration was also expressed at the lack of momentum on interrogating colonial structures and power dynamics within individual organisations and the system. The scarcity of quality funding flowing to local actors was revealed as a core vulnerability after the sudden funding cuts in 2025 – a significant number of local organisations closed because they lacked the flexibility or reserves to maintain staff or infrastructure. While there was growing recognition of the role of mutual-aid structures and local disaster-governance mechanisms, the more centralised and rigid structures of the international system often struggled to engage with these horizontal, fluid and dispersed forms of assistance.

The scarcity of quality funding flowing to local actors was revealed as a core vulnerability

Despite some high-level attention paid to accountability to affected populations (including in the Flagship Initiative of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), for example), engagement with communities affected by crisis often remained tokenistic and was characterised by poor responsiveness to people's input. Upholding accountability and dignity was undermined by a lack of investment: not in frameworks, tools and strategies, but in the processes, structures and incentives that would shift the system's business model and make people affected by crisis the primary point of accountability rather than donor contracts. The system-level reforms and political will required to enable engagement with independent mechanisms – which communities sometimes trusted more than organisations directly providing assistance – were also absent. Lack of independent mechanisms was a particular challenge when responding to sensitive complaints about sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, and about corruption; these continued to be largely internally managed by the organisations being accused. While people affected by crisis

Engagement with communities affected by crisis often remained tokenistic

often prioritised food as a an immediate need need, they also consistently requested more focus on resilience to future crises and livelihoods for recovery. A decision to explicitly narrow the humanitarian remit to 'lifesaving' needs caused some people affected by crisis to question the relevance of humanitarian assistance to their broader priorities.

In the immediate term, the reduction of development funding – combined with a lack of progress on connecting humanitarian action with the development, peace and climate systems – means the people and programmes who are no longer prioritised by the humanitarian system risk going unserved. As funding reduced in this period, each system narrowed its priorities, largely in isolation. Because of the different structures and purposes of the humanitarian, peace, development and climate systems – and the ways states pursued their interests across all – decisions were made that did not reflect the intersectional realities of people affected by crisis, whose needs were not neatly divided into sectors. In the longer term, the humanitarian caseload could ultimately increase due to a lack of investment in tackling root causes and protecting against future harm in these systems.

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Cuts to donor spending and the politicisation of assistance in this period could be seen as external forces, driven by politics and public perception. However, international humanitarian actors also play a role in preserving the legitimacy and value of the system to influence funding choices. While this requires the system to make an effective case for its own value, it also means making promised changes, upholding ethical principles and investing in the most effective and efficient models of assistance, as well as in the evidence base that enables those assessments (including outcome data and community perceptions of performance). The system could have gone further to adopt and scale some of the most effective and efficient approaches – where significant evidence already shows that they work – such as investing further in multiyear flexible funding, cash, anticipatory action and funding for local (rather than international) intermediaries.

In the next few years, we will see the legacies of this period, including the full implications of funding cuts, a narrowed humanitarian remit, the loss of structures and staff, and the impacts of IHL violations and of genocide. Some choices made were a pragmatic reaction to the shocks experienced. However, there are opportunities to make strategic choices – and to leverage the passion and experience of committed individuals – to make the international humanitarian system better able to serve people affected by crisis in an uncertain future.

The system could have gone further to adopt and scale some of the most effective and efficient approaches



Is the system fit for the future?

Predicting the future is not easy: the 2018 SOHS could not have anticipated the widespread effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, nor the 2022 SOHS the size and scale of this period's funding cuts. As such, this report does not attempt any precise forecast. Recent research, however, has looked at some of the likely challenges and drivers of change for the system.

Participatory forecasting by the Inter-Agency Research and Analysis Network (IARAN),³ exploring the future of aid up to 2040, outlines key drivers of change in the system. Externally, this includes continued pressures of the climate crisis, conflict, displacement, geopolitical shifts and power realignments. Internal drivers include shifting patterns of funding and donor influence, continued pressures towards greater local leadership, changes in aid governance and stronger agency for people affected by crisis. Taken together, these drivers are likely to create greater humanitarian needs, more complex crises and multifaceted power dynamics to navigate. They suggest a continued need for the international system to more meaningfully – and with greater political will – grapple with longstanding power dynamics and deliver assistance more effectively, efficiently and ethically. A lack of certainty about the future also points to a need to be adaptive in the face of change.

Despite the funding shocks of this period, the drop in funding in 2025 was not as big as several pessimistic predictions. At the time of writing, there are indications that the decline is slowing in 2026 and that the system may level out, with the United States still playing a strong funding role. While in 2025 the system shrank back to 2017 levels, that system of 2017 was still vital in the humanitarian landscape that supported millions of people affected by crisis around the world.⁴

How the international humanitarian system chooses to move forward in the next few years matters immensely – and reduced funding means the system must think carefully about how it invests in strengthening performance. The analysis in this report suggests some considerations for decisions made over the next four-year SOHS period, with associated tensions and challenges.

Reduced funding means the system must think carefully about how it invests in strengthening performance

Consideration 1: Complementing broader ecosystems of support

Broader ecosystems of support are essential in contexts affected by crisis. The international humanitarian system can build on some of the lessons of this period to make stronger, more appropriate connections with these actors. It can take



steps to better understand what patterns of support exist, what is likely to be directed to supporting humanitarian needs and which people affected by crisis might be left out of those structures due to resource gaps or political dynamics. By taking these ecosystems as a starting point, the international system can centre existing local structures, knowledge and leadership – from the point of planning a response – to establish what it can most usefully offer. This can help a reduced humanitarian system use its resources most effectively to play a supportive, gap-filling or enabling role.



The international humanitarian system needs to think beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement, focus on existing capacities and be sensitive to political barriers to assisting and protecting people



The ability of state structures to support all people affected by crisis varied across contexts in this period. States were not only the main drivers of disaster management, but also parties to conflict or oppression. Evidence also suggested that states are reacting to the international funding cuts with different policy responses, some of which seek to diminish reliance on foreign assistance. These variations suggest that the international humanitarian system needs to think beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement, focus on existing capacities and be sensitive to political barriers to assisting and protecting people. Newly empowered Humanitarian Coordinators may need support to lead effectively on appropriate

engagement with governments and de facto authorities in contexts with complex politics and varied levels of disaster-management infrastructure.

To better interact with informal support systems, the international system can build on its progress in engaging with mutual aid and sclr approaches in this period. Evidence demonstrated that the system could work with – and more directly fund – mutual-aid networks in contexts like Myanmar, Ukraine and Sudan. There is potential to replicate positive progress in other contexts. However, it is also important to be sensitive to the dynamics of these organic approaches and consider the risks of changing their value if the humanitarian system scales up this support. The international system tends to be more rigid, divided by sector and accustomed to funding at scale; mutual-aid networks are more horizontal, fluid and dispersed, and they derive their legitimacy and accountability from the communities they serve. As such, the international system may need to work differently with these networks than its standard operating model. Mutual-aid structures, civil society and local/national non-governmental organisations (L/NNGOs) often design their support to address their communities' holistic needs and preferences, rather than dividing their activities into humanitarian, development, peace and climate 'buckets'. Given the international system has struggled to overcome those silos in



contexts affected by crisis, it will need to ensure that increasing its engagement with informal networks does not replicate or impose these international silos so networks lose their ability to address communities' requirements holistically.

Indeed, progress may also be required to strengthen the humanitarian system's engagement across the development, peace and climate systems – but the evidence suggests this will be difficult to achieve. These systems also contracted significantly over 2022–25, and they often favour contexts with capable state counterparts and manageable political risks because they channel funds through national governments and international financial institutions. Their prioritisation followed state and donor interests that did not always align with the crisis-affected and politically volatile contexts where humanitarian assistance focuses.

Some might assume development actors will fill gaps as the humanitarian system steps back to focus on populations affected only by recent shocks and to provide 'lifesaving' support. This assumption will require further probing – and contingency planning – to avoid people who are experiencing vulnerability going unassisted, and to avoid resilience to future crises being ignored. Further testing of some existing mechanisms could enable progress on the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, including area-based coordination, stronger emphasis on transition planning in Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans, or donors combining humanitarian and development functions. However, the humanitarian system will likely need to go beyond coordination and planning functions to better understand the complexity of international systems with very different operational functions and incentives. It must also consider how to work with local ecosystems that are less hierarchical than many international structures.

Consideration 2: Strengthening trust

Funding cuts, pressurised decisions, disinformation and a lack of movement on key Grand Bargain commitments have all dented trust; the international humanitarian system needs to strengthen several relationships over the next few years. While this will take time rather than quick fixes, the system can build on some pockets of progress from this SOHS period.

Some progress was made to better engage with people affected by crisis, but trust diminished because these people were not centred in decision-making and because the system failed



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to meaningfully respond to their inputs and communicate with them effectively over project closures. However, evidence showed the power of investing in accountability to affected populations: communication, consultation and feedback were all linked to positive outcomes on feelings of dignity and the effectiveness of assistance. The broad benefits of strengthened accountability could be key considerations for donors and operational agencies in prioritisation decisions within the coming period.



The Humanitarian Reset stated that people affected by crisis will be at its centre; the coming period presents an opportunity to clearly articulate how to make that promise a reality



To increase trust, the system will also need to invest in reducing harm. Accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian staff were reported on a large scale in this period, and scarcity of humanitarian assistance may further drive vulnerability to abuse.⁵ Increased use of digital technology also created data-protection risks, while people affected by crisis were often unsure of how their data was being used. The system could usefully build on existing safeguards, apply more caution in building biometric-based platforms, be clear-sighted about the risks of cyberattacks, invest in AI governance and offer meaningful data consent to

people affected by crisis. Following rapid retreats in 2025, the system could build on nascent efforts by some international actors to plan for more ethical exits with local actors and communities. At a system level, the Humanitarian Reset stated that people affected by crisis will be at its centre; the coming period presents an opportunity to clearly articulate how to make that promise a reality.

Local actors told us of their significant frustration with the formal system due to a lack of progress on Grand Bargain commitments. The consequences of unfulfilled promises were felt as sudden funding cuts saw the closure of local organisations and loss of local staff. OCHA-managed pooled funds were positioned as a localisation mechanism in the Humanitarian Reset, but the system could strengthen localisation by applying political will to areas of progress. For example, adjusting the governance structures of existing international pooled funds to make decision-making more equitable, and scaling up support to locally led pooled funds to overcome the challenge (reported by donors) of funding many local organisations versus a few international intermediaries. These intermediaries could also learn from some evolved intermediary models emerging in this period that better tailored their support to what local actors asked for. As funding cuts play out still, international intermediary organisations can decide where to work, and what to work on – choosing to complement existing local efforts over competition and operational maintenance.



Widespread IHL violations hindered the international system's ability to protect civilians, staff and volunteers in this period. While humanitarian actors can try to apply humanitarian principles in contextually appropriate ways to achieve humanitarian ends, large-scale structural barriers require UN member states to uphold IHL and hold perpetrators of violations accountable. As such, humanitarian actors need the leverage of political decision-makers. In an effort to better inform and influence these decision-makers around IHL and access, some operational and donor organisations took steps – and explicitly invested in strategies – to strengthen humanitarian diplomacy. The practical evolution of IHL workstreams within the Humanitarian Reset and UN80, and implementation of the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law, could all be important vehicles for sustaining momentum over the next few years. Actors can also capitalise on opportunities to share their learning from these efforts to further strengthen this protective function.

Humanitarian actors need the leverage of political decision-makers

Attacks on aid budgets, widespread misinformation and disinformation, and poor articulation of impact have also damaged relationships with donor publics and politicians. This 2026 SOHS indicates several areas where the system could build on progress to repair and strengthen those relationships. This progress includes efforts by some to better understand and tackle disinformation – from community to international levels – and to track and analyse cost data so the system can



The system could benefit from greater investment in evaluating outcomes, rather than outputs



measure and articulate cost effectiveness. While some sectors were able to measure their impact in this period, the system could benefit from greater investment in evaluating outcomes, rather than outputs, and from consciously investing in programming and modalities that are shown to work effectively and efficiently.

Although difficult operational settings induce some risk of corruption and abuse, the system can build on the practical and collective steps taken in this period in contexts like Somalia to address diversion. After the 2025 funding cuts, the system also made some nascent progress on articulating to donor publics the value of the humanitarian system, presenting a potential opportunity for engagement by international NGOs. However, discussions on decolonialism and dignity in this period highlighted tensions that may arise when trying to accessibly convey the impact of international humanitarian assistance while maintaining an ethical, respectful approach to – and mutual solidarity with – people affected by crisis.



Consideration 3: Pursuing opportunities for structural and functional change

To address immediate challenges in this period, many prioritisation decisions were made quickly at both system and organisational levels. Opportunities were rarely taken to bring about strategic shifts and tackle persistent sticking points. The levelling out of the funding decline may enable the system to address some of the limitations inherent to prioritising when in panic and survival mode. Strategic and transformational choices could be made: moving the model from one driven by international actors' supply decisions to one driven by the demands of people affected by crisis.

Political will would be required to make such practical changes. Otherwise, the system risks doing the same but smaller instead of making meaningful gains on key challenges: localisation, accountability, the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, and investing more in effective modalities of anticipation and resilience to future shocks rather than in reactive response alone. An increased focus on cash in the Humanitarian Reset and 2026 UN-coordinated appeals could incentivise shifts – if the funding follows.

The system risks doing the same but smaller instead of making meaningful gains on key challenges

While the system's funding was more balanced in 2025 than in the past, dependency and concentration remained. The largest four donors still provided almost half of all public funding, and a similar proportion of funds still flowed to three UN agencies. The funding cuts and political challenges to multilateralism revealed the precariousness of a concentrated system. While humanitarians looked to alternative funders – including philanthropies, non-Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors and the private sector – at the time of writing, the size of their contributions means they are unlikely to fill the gaps left by governments. Engagement with these different sources of funding also requires humanitarian agencies to learn

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more about their modalities, potential and limitations (including incentives and risks), as well as their preferred means to build relationships. Diversifying delivery mechanisms could also shore up sustainability if some larger, concentrated delivery mechanisms become blocked. As demonstrated in this period, beyond broader imperatives to localise, there are strong practical benefits of investing in local actors who remain present when international delivery mechanisms lack access.



Consideration 4: Retaining what already works

As well as indicating how the international system could work in more thoughtful and complementary ways, our research underscores improvements that have been made in learning, innovations and quality. Many of our interviewees raised concerns that, in the face of funding cuts, the system would lose this hard-won progress and learning by 'going back to the eighties' or returning to unsuitable models of 'truck and chuck', which could result in low-quality assistance or harm to people affected by crisis.

In the aftermath of the cuts, we identified losses to monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning positions; cuts to evaluation budgets; and reductions in system assessments and data platforms. However, valiant attempts were also made to salvage learning from organisations that had closed (like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Development Initiatives), to fund data enablers, and to create a more sustainable data ecosystem that combined international and local knowledge. Shoring up these functions will be crucial so the system can track and respond to future crises and further improve its performance. With staff losses across the system, there is a need to maintain space for convening and sharing learning (as well as 'unlearning'), while also making system knowledge more equitable so that vital local knowledge can inform the future functioning of the international system.

With staff losses across the system, there is a need to maintain space for convening and sharing learning

Standards of assistance and delivery processes have improved over the past 20 years, although there is more to be done so the system's technical standards match the contextual realities and quality perceptions of people affected by crisis. As well as maintaining quality, the system could do more to avoid backsliding on addressing the harm it may cause and in upholding the dignity of people affected by crisis through mechanisms to prevent sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. While continuing to embrace digital technology for better efficiency and effectiveness, the system also needs to be inclusive and mindful of the serious risk of holding sensitive data from people affected by crisis.

Harnessing the potential for change

Across our interviews with individual humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers, including local and international staff and volunteers, we consistently heard commitment, passion and a sense of solidarity with people affected

by crisis. We also heard significant frustration, both at the lack of progress on longstanding reform areas and at the loss of skilled colleagues across the sector. As the system adjusts to an altered landscape of assistance, efforts will be required to galvanize the potential of the people who work within and alongside it - their knowledge and lessons learned, their commitment, and their frustrations – to shape future international humanitarian action that is more effective, appropriate and ethical for people affected by crisis.

Harnessing the sector's experience and commitment will be critical to future change

ENDNOTES

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