

Commentary: What next for humanitarian reform?

Facing the conflict, displacement and climate polycrisis of 2026, slashes in official development assistance (ODA) and a reprioritised approach, humanitarian actors across the system are asking if the reform process and priorities remain fit for purpose. Furthermore, humanitarian responses are also increasingly facing a multipolar donor environment – as discussed in [Chapters 1 and 2](#) – with non-traditional donors taking on increased prominence. Gulf donors in particular are increasingly influential in terms of both their financial and operational presence in some humanitarian contexts such as Gaza and Syria. Given that they are less present in coordination spaces, provide less predictable funding and are less embedded in reform processes such as the Grand Bargain, the consensus on the reform agenda may no longer be taken for granted.

So what is next for humanitarian reform in a changed funding landscape? The Grand Bargain is coming to the end of its strategic cycle – having already been through two restructuring processes – and is in the process of defining its future to be agreed at the next annual meeting in October. There is broad consensus that the Grand Bargain should evolve and continue beyond 2026,³⁴ as many actors note that it is the only multi-actor space at a time of increasing fragmentation.³⁵ But in today's vastly changed funding landscape, questions remain on how the platform can remain truly relevant.

After a decade of failing to meet commitments and shift power, proposals are being put forward not only for a redesigned Grand Bargain platform but also towards a new vision of humanitarianism. The Advisory Panel on the Future of Humanitarian Action identified the crisis of legitimacy as the primary threat to the humanitarian system. It proposes centring justice and equity in humanitarian responses, countering emergency mindsets and international monopolies, and updating humanitarian norms.³⁶ These findings overlap with the recent recommendations from the *Lancet* Commission on health, conflict and forced displacement,³⁷ which calls for strengthened accountability mechanisms, a renewed look at humanity and a global – non-UN-led – pooled fund.

The fundamental barrier to progress remains the lack of political will. The high-level political intervention seen at the World Humanitarian Summit was the driving force for reform momentum but is now nowhere to be seen. Major donors cutting funding – such as the UK – are doubling down on a partnership-based model that encourages the private sector and international finance institutions to take on a bigger role in development goals (as seen at the recent UK Global Partnerships Conference³⁸), but this approach fails to deliver in many humanitarian settings.³⁹ Without the political will and collaboration to strengthen the quality, delivery and impact of humanitarian financing, the reform process appears to be at an impasse.