

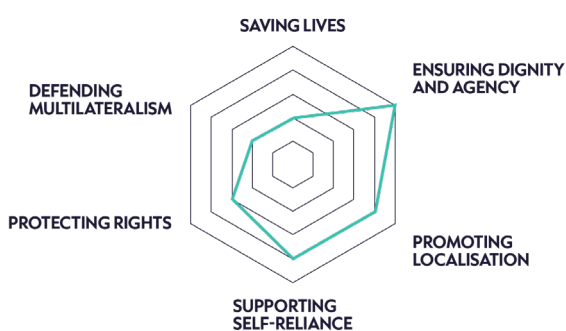
3. ADDRESSING PURPOSE-RELATED TRADE-OFFS AND TENSIONS

FACING THE TENSIONS

Contrary to aspirational rhetoric, it is not possible to simultaneously and equally prioritise all six humanitarian purposes illustrated in [Figure 3](#). Even in a less constrained funding environment, these objectives cannot exist in equilibrium. The current acute resource constraints throw the trade-offs into stark relief. We highlight three of these.

ENSURING DIGNITY AND AGENCY VERSUS LIFE SAVING

'People first' or 'people-centred aid' is often positioned as a 'chapeau' principle in proposals for the future of humanitarian action – including in the Emergency Relief Coordinator's (ERC) Humanitarian Reset (Fletcher, 2025) and the UN 80 Initiative's Humanitarian Compact (UN, 2025) – in line with the purpose of 'ensuring dignity and agency'. Yet this principle often sits in tension with other pre-set priorities, even within the same strategic document.¹³



This diagram illustrates the concept of potential trade-offs. It does not assign fixed values and recognises that the actual shape will vary by context.

If this principle is to be fully realised as a priority, it has implications for the prioritisation of a menu of 'life-saving' interventions based on internationally agreed metrics of need severity – as we discuss in our accompanying paper (Obrecht and Swithern, 2025a). While people suffering acute crisis might identify similar priorities to humanitarian 'life-saving' support, surveys of people affected by protracted crises also often reveal a preference for support for self-

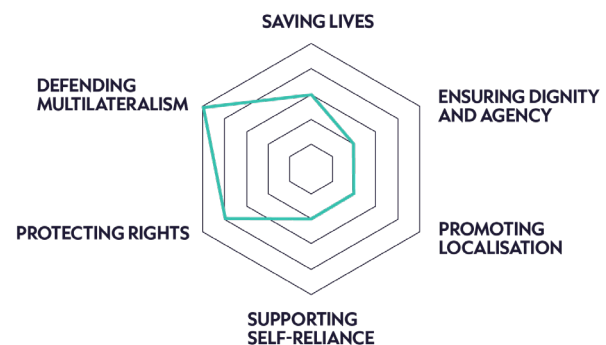
reliance over emergency basics (Ground Truth Solutions, 2025; ALNAP, 2022). Ensuring that people have agency in deciding and directing the aid they receive involves investing resources in a very different operating model – potentially one that prioritises a locally led over a multilaterally led model.

¹³ For example, strategic documents published by some organisations offer localisation and community empowerment as a framing principle, but they go on to describe a pre-set sectoral menu.

DEFENDING MULTILATERALISM VERSUS PROMOTING LOCALISATION

The tensions between multilateralism and localisation are also well rehearsed. Most international humanitarian actors have signed up to some form of localisation commitment as a priority, yet they also retain a belief in the importance of a multilateral system. This is not necessarily a tension, but it can become so in decisions about resource prioritisation at the organisational and system levels.

Donors are highly motivated to support the work of UN agencies, both for pragmatic and ideological reasons. Ideologically, the UN system represents a collective approach to humanitarianism and a central part of the post-1945 rules-based international order – at a time when its shared norms are under threat (IARAN, 2025). Pragmatically, UN agencies are highly effective at absorbing risk, providing an easy win for donors needing to get large grants out the door. But these virtues are traded off against the rigid, top-down hierarchical systems employed by UN agencies in their ‘partnerships’ with local organisations, and in collective decision-making bodies that historically have featured very little power-sharing.



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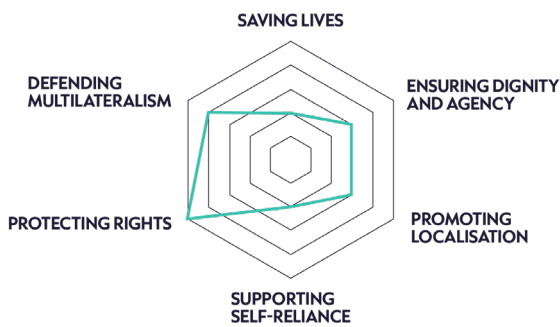
As part of the ERC’s humanitarian reset, there have been some suggestions for uniting multilateralism with localisation, the most notable being calls for increased funding to UN-managed country-based pooled funds with targets for channelling those funds through local actors. While these calls may be posited as a useful reconciliation between two opposing directions, they are ultimately weighted towards prioritising the centrality of multilaterals, due to the nature of their governance and financing terms.

A more localisation-weighted alternative – endorsed by some local actors themselves – may be to explore how the multilateral system can shift from an operational to a more normative and diplomatic role for multilateral agencies, supporting and protecting the space for local actors to operate (Barter et al, 2025).

PROTECTING RIGHTS VERSUS SAVING LIVES

In many conflict settings, advocating for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to be upheld is in line with preserving humanitarian access. In other contexts, pursuing this priority is in tension with maintaining presence to deliver support. This tension is negotiated daily at the operational level in most complex crises,¹⁴

¹⁴ See the [principles chapter](#) in ALNAP (2022).



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and it comes to the fore at a diplomatic level in geopolitically high-profile conflicts. This may appear to be less of a resource prioritisation choice than a principles dilemma, but in fact it has implications for decision-making at the population, programme, organisational and system levels.

At a population level, it drives choices about how far reachability or severity should determine which communities are prioritised. At programmatic level, it shapes choices around investments in protection. At organisational and system levels, it points to a greater emphasis on diplomacy functions – as the UN 80 Humanitarian Compact begins to suggest.¹⁵ But it also plays into the tensions around multilateralism and localisation too. Where the international system prioritises protecting rights – or is nonetheless denied access – it tends to rely on local actors to shoulder the risk of delivery, and so implies greater and more systematic investments in mitigating their risks and protecting their space.

APPROACHES TO DECISION-MAKING

How then, can donors and agencies navigate these tensions and dilemmas inherent in prioritisation, as they attempt to ‘do better with less’ in an era of aid cuts and poly-crises? It is evident that no single solution can fully reconcile them, but we propose high-level guiding points for decision-makers as they navigate choices and challenges over the coming year.

Be clear on purpose. Move beyond the headlines of strategic objectives to an honest articulation of what these entail in practice, the evidence on which both delivery and success will be judged, and which purpose(s) take priority.

Use an appropriate evidence base. Those who wish to prioritise life saving as their most fundamental objective in humanitarian action will still face questions as to which organisations, intervention designs/sectors or crises offer the highest life-saving impact. Consulting evidence across different options is key, as is acknowledging that what is considered an appropriate evidence base will differ depending on what purpose is prioritised. An approach that seeks to balance multilateral-centric life saving with locally centred dignity and agency will value evidence on needs and effectiveness from local organisations and populations affected by crisis in equal complement to international research and data.

¹⁵ The UN 80 Humanitarian Compact does not address the question of organisational configuration and resourcing for diplomacy, but it does emphasise the need to bring agencies together to speak with one voice under a new Collaborative Humanitarian Diplomacy Initiative (UN, 2025).

Make clearer, bigger, purpose-driven 'bets'. Donors and large international agencies alike have broadened their internal and external investments over the past decade to include wide-ranging functions, issues and services. This spreads funding and attention more thinly, potentially reducing impact and making it harder to monitor effectiveness. In this new era of constrained funding, individual actors may see benefit in choosing a lane and going big. For example, leaning fully into localised response through locally managed funding mechanisms and local networks as a majority share of their spending or work; or opting to focus specifically on anticipatory action and prevention designs; or investing in organisations that explicitly support the dignity and voice of people affected by crisis in response.

This then demands and enables **complementary decision-making** to be negotiated – backed up by **transparent cooperation**. The reality that different actors will set their priorities in different places could be a net gain, instead of a net loss at the system and population levels. For this to be realised takes collaboration rather than the insularity and resource competition that has characterised much recent reaction to financial scarcity. It involves finally facing the necessity of inter-donor dialogue, and of meaningfully including local organisations in multilateral decision-making fora.

The practical and political realities of the humanitarian system, in which formal decision-making is fragmented and frequently opaque, are unlikely to change for the better in the coming years. But donors and agencies should challenge one another to do better and help one another make more effective decisions – they should share information more readily and accept that no actor can go it alone in the face of present and unfolding humanitarian demands.