



Conference report

The Changing World Order and its Impact on Humanitarian Action

*Conference | Monday 16 June 2025
Huys Clingendael, The Hague*

Organised by:

KUNO, The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre, and Clingendael Institute

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Introduction

About this report

The conference 'The Changing World Order and its Impact on Humanitarian Action' was held on 16 June 2025, with around 80 participants from across the Humanitarian sector, including representatives from Dutch and International NGOs (including the DRA Localisation Working Group partners), the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, academia, and civil society. Organised jointly by KUNO, The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre of the International Institute of Social Studies (Erasmus University Rotterdam), and the Clingendael Institute.

This report summarises the main discussions held at the conference, which was held according to The Chatham House Rule. Accordingly, the only names used are from keynote speakers.

The report first presents key takeaways from the key-note contributions in the opening sessions. Accordingly, the main conclusions from the four thematic streams are presented: i. Logics of prioritisation, ii. Localisation, iii. International Humanitarian Law, iv. Scenario-building. The report concludes with highlights from the closing session.

Opening Statement

Monika Sie Dhian Ho, *General Director of Clingendael*

We are globally transitioning from an era of hyper-globalisation to a more multipolar and geopoliticised world. At the same time, within Western societies, we are witnessing a shift from a permissive consensus on foreign policy and development aid toward a more contested and politicised landscape, marked by societal pessimism and polarisation. These 'two Zeitenwenden' start to interact and oscillate, fundamentally reshaping both the international order and Western societies.

Various changes are becoming visible in the geopolitical context: a move from multilateral cooperation to multi-polar power politics, accompanied with a decline in adherence to the international legal system. The American hegemon is relatively declining in power and there is a growth in aggressive behaviour by various countries. Meanwhile, humanitarian aid is increasingly weaponised and politicised. At the same time there is a surge of suffering and conflict in the world with a significant gap in available aid.

Other logics of a geopoliticizing world are increasing territorial politics and collective identity politics. Communities are resurrecting borders, economic dependencies are being reassessed and instrumentalised, with foreign policy increasingly shaped by geo-economic concerns and self-interest. At the same time, the force of collective identity politics is gaining strength. People are longing for answers to the question where we come from, what we stand for and where we are heading.

Opening Statement (Cont.)

Within Western societies cultural divisions are deepening; between Globalists, who place less importance on shared identity and borders, and Nationalists, who place more importance on shared identity and values. Nationalists can either be exclusive, based on racial identity, or inclusive, based on shared values and virtues. At the same time, a power-driven logic of working with political extremes is becoming more pronounced; for example, traditional centrists working with far-right actors.

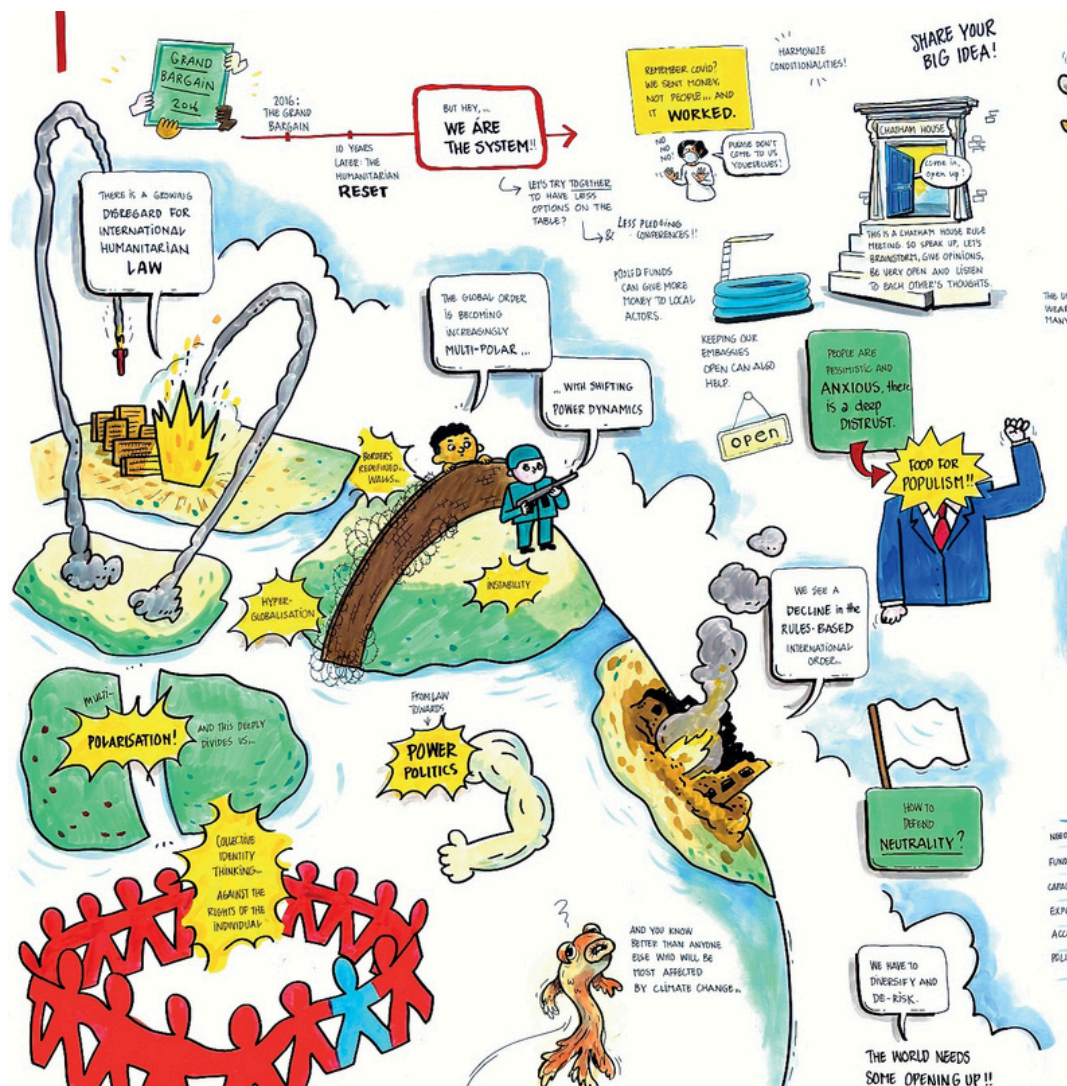
Development aid has come under increasing scrutiny in this polarised environment, while humanitarian aid, though less divisive, is increasingly pressured by foreign-policy influence. In this shifting context, the humanitarian sector faces a dual challenge: to defend the principles of international law while also adapting its narrative to demonstrate its continued relevance.

Some clear challenges for the Humanitarian Sector:

Defending the neutrality of humanitarian work through narratives of solidarity, as a bulwark against power politics and instrumentalization

Diversifying funding streams, and finding ways to de-risk humanitarian work from political machinations and currents

Localisation as a necessity, to maintain service levels



Keynote Conversation

Hibak Kalfan: *Executive Director at the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR)*

Dorothea Hilhorst: *Professor of Humanitarian Studies at ISS and Director of the HSC*

Michael Köhler: *Ambassador and Co-Lead of the Grand Bargain*

Decentralisation and Localisation

The humanitarian system is heading towards a more decentralised model with increasing diversity of actors and donors. The discussion on localisation should not be based around numbers: localisation is more than providing 25% of direct funding to local actors. For example, try not to refer to 'capacity building', rather 'enabling'. The humanitarian sector should also look at the growing role of regional powers in, among other things, fundraising. The 'Humanitarian Reset', too, seems to be mainly aimed at and used by big donors and Global North organisations.

- Large international humanitarian organisations should aim to be more facilitative
- The Grand Bargain requires stakeholders to self-examine their own systems. Most stakeholders have their place within a transformed system – but it may be different from their current position!

Funding

There are three possible futures (10–15 years) of the humanitarian system around funding:

- 1)** An unchanged system with the same actors but less funding: Humanitarian action will become much smaller in scale as a result
- 2)** Full localisation: Western actors will withdraw from the system, and local actors find their own funding structures and become the 'real' responders
- 3)** A new system with more and more diverse donors, that acknowledges the 'values vs. interests' debate, and insists on the core principles. Since the 1980s, aside from some Gulf countries, no new major donors in humanitarian aid have emerged except for South Korea. To engage possible emerging donors, such as Indonesia, Malaysia or other ASEAN and G20 countries, the system must evolve to reflect diverse interests.

Shifting the Power is possible, but not under the current system. In any case, there is a need for a new narrative to underpin a wider variety of countries and organisations.

Keynote Conversation

Responsibility

Localisation does not simply emerge when international actors leave. They still need to support local communities, especially in response to climate change. So much of local work is still dependent on foreign (financial) support, and when foreign funding is pulled, it does not lead to localisation, instead it leads to a shrinking civic space. Resilience, too, does not just spring up: it needs building.

There is a need for more solidarity, as a countermeasure to power politics, including around climate change (which remains critically underfunded). Accountability is an underpinning value that is often neglected and can help to inspire new initiatives.

Humanitarian Principles

The Principles, whilst still the centre of humanitarian work, can sometimes feel like the 'property' of humanitarian organisations, and are used to gatekeep humanitarian action. International humanitarian law should also be a cornerstone of humanitarian work.



Stream

The Logics of Prioritisation

Dr. Rodrigo Mena (HSC-ISS)

Marieke Pot (Clingendael Institute)

This interactive session on the Logics of Prioritisation brought together humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and other experts, to critically examine how prioritisation decisions are made within and across organisations. Facilitated by Rodrigo Mena (HSC) and supported by Marieke Pot (Clingendael), the session challenged the common framing of prioritisation as a purely needs-driven process, highlighting the influence of structural and strategic factors such as funding, access, capacity, expertise, and politics.

The morning began with an engaging Mentimeter poll that surfaced participants' assumptions and lived realities around decision-making. It quickly became apparent that while the humanitarian sector values needs-based approaches, organisational decisions are often shaped by more pragmatic and political constraints.

Through a **participatory matrix mapping exercise**, participants visualised how different drivers—needs, funding, capacities, expertise, access, and politics—operate at macro, meso, and micro levels. This exercise revealed notable variation between organisations, with politics and funding consistently emerging as major determinants—especially within the Dutch context.

Although a structured continuation of the matrix exercise had been planned for the afternoon, the rich discussion from the morning carried over organically. Rather than proceeding with the activity, the group opted to continue the conversation in an open and reflective format.

This shift allowed participants to delve deeper into how current shifts—**such as significant political changes and the resulting realignments in funding**—are affecting prioritisation logics across the sector. The discussion moved beyond organisational frameworks to consider broader sectoral implications, such as the risk of misalignment between humanitarian principles and emerging political agendas.

A clear insight that emerged during the session, was the degree to which prioritisation is influenced by political dynamics: not only is aid delivery shaped by what can be done logistically or financially, but increasingly by shifts in the political climate. Several participants noted that the sector is navigating a more politicized environment, with donor priorities and geopolitical interests directly impacting both funding streams and operational strategies.

Thus, despite a formal emphasis on needs-based frameworks, political agendas and institutional capacities frequently determine where and how aid is delivered. There was a recognition that prioritisation is inherently multilevel and shaped both by supply and feasibility and by demand and urgency.

Stream

Localisation

Tom Ansell (HSC-ISS)

Marjon Botha (KUNO)

The localisation stream featured two roundtables, each anchored by a contribution from a member of the DRA's localisation working group, as well as by a researcher/theorist.

Key themes from the discussion:

- What is the role of the INGO in facilitating a shift towards a localised system?
- Can the current UN-led system ensure the shifting of power as well as funding?
- How can iNGOs be persuaded to take on greater risk, and thus work with more local partners?
- Can iNGOs and global North funders shift their mindset to trust the capacities of national organisations?

'Once television was invented, the radio was not replaced; instead, radio programmes evolved'
[Referring to the role of iNGOs in a new system]

It is important to include national and local governments in humanitarian action programmes. They should gain a better understanding of the objectives of humanitarian action and modes of operating.

The aim of localisation is not to exclude international actors from the humanitarian system. Local and international actors can complement each other well since they each have specific strengths. Mutual respect and solidarity are essential.

Private funding allows for a higher risk-appetite for organisations and more funding to local organisations. It is important to be transparent to donors that conflict settings are complex and that funding can be lost to corruption or a programme can miss its objectives.

It is in the best interest of international organisations to implement 'true' localisation programmes. Gulf Cooperation Council states are not simply funding international actors anymore if they are not well-regarded by local partners.

The localisation agenda is not moving forward. Local actors are tired of being introduced to new ideas and frameworks, while the same issues are being discussed year after year.

Key Challenges going forward:

- Increasing the appetite for risk amongst INGOs and funders
- Moving from frameworks and planning to integrating
- Better coordination between LNGOs / INGOs, and local/national governments
- Continuing to focus on knowledge sharing (particularly technical)

Stream

International Humanitarian Law

Corinne Lemain (KUNO)

Julia Golterman (KUNO)

The aim of the session was to learn and reflect on initiatives for strengthening International Humanitarian Law (IHL). It was moderated by **Jeff Handmaker (Associate Professor of Legal Sociology at the International Institute of Social Studies)**. 2024 was the deadliest year for aid workers, with a big uprise in critical incidents. There is an ongoing erosion of norms in IHL, that needs to be tackled. Targeting of aid workers is becoming a military strategy, raising significant ethical and legal challenges. Compounding this, there is an increasing use of explosive weapons. Seven initiatives to strengthen IHL were presented. Participants also engaged in a moral council, exploring moral or ethical questions that drive choices on which initiatives to pursue. They focused on the values that drive their choices, as well as those of other actors, and they weighed potential reputational risk(s).

INSO	Protection of Aid Workers	Advocacy for accountability; supporting local NGOs and INGOs with information to mitigate safety risks, and support organisations in protecting themselves better during crisis response.
MSF	Legal Protection	A campaign that calls for a Dutch international championing role to protect IHL, including enhanced legal possibilities in the Netherlands to ensure accountability for violations.
MoFA	(Silent) Diplomacy	Prioritizes addressing the safety of (local) aid workers, leads in applying risk-sharing mechanisms throughout the humanitarian implementation chain, emphasizes that humanitarian worker safety includes MHPSS, and promotes humanitarian exemptions in sanction regimes. NL contribute to several workstreams of ICRC's Global IHL Initiative and partners with INSO and Clingendael to provide security training for aid workers. NL MoD has incorporated humanitarian worker protection into its Military Manual.
ICRC	Political Commitment	<u>Global Initiative</u> three aims: 1) make IHL a political priority, at global, regional and domestic levels, 2) set higher expectation for compliance to IHL 3) discuss challenges on specific IHL topics across seven work streams1 on prevention and protection.
CIVIC	Protection of Civilians	Community led protection, demand-driven with frontline communities, creating coping mechanism, awareness of rights. Engagement with governments, armed actors and local authorities to prioritize and improve POC. Civilian Harm Mitigation training to armed actors.
SV	Improving Access	Hold own governments accountable and uphold their legal obligations under IHL. Speak out about atrocities publically.
OXFAM	Accountability	Court case: summary proceedings against the Dutch state, demanding to stop the export of parts for F-35 fighter jets to Israel

Key points raised for moving forward:

- Public awareness and understanding of IHL, NGOs and civil actors should actively promote IHL education. Increasing public literacy to sustain support for humanitarian principles.
- Political agendas: advocating for inclusion of IHL in political programmes for the upcoming (NL) elections.
- Role of the media in shaping public understanding of humanitarian issues. Media has the potential to raise awareness but sees inconsistent engagement.
- A national IHL Expertise Centre was proposed, bringing together military, legal, and civil society actors, serving as a hub for training, research and dialogue. This should be integrated in the increasing defence spending.







Stream

Scenario-Building

Leela Koenig (Clingendael Institute)

Anticipating effective humanitarian policy and operational choices such as prioritisation and localisation as well as adherence and accountability to international humanitarian law is complicated. It is even more complicated during times of profound geopolitical shifts.

How can states and organisations develop strategies to provide humanitarian assistance and civilian protection in such a volatile context with many uncertainties about the future? By engaging in strategic foresight analysis, we engaged in a sense-making exercise and developed potentially possible scenarios for the future with support strategic decision-making now.

	1. Question-setting
	2. Mapping Drivers
	3. Identifying Uncertainties
	4. Determining the Scenario Matrix
	5. Scenario-development
	6. Recommendations for Policy/actions

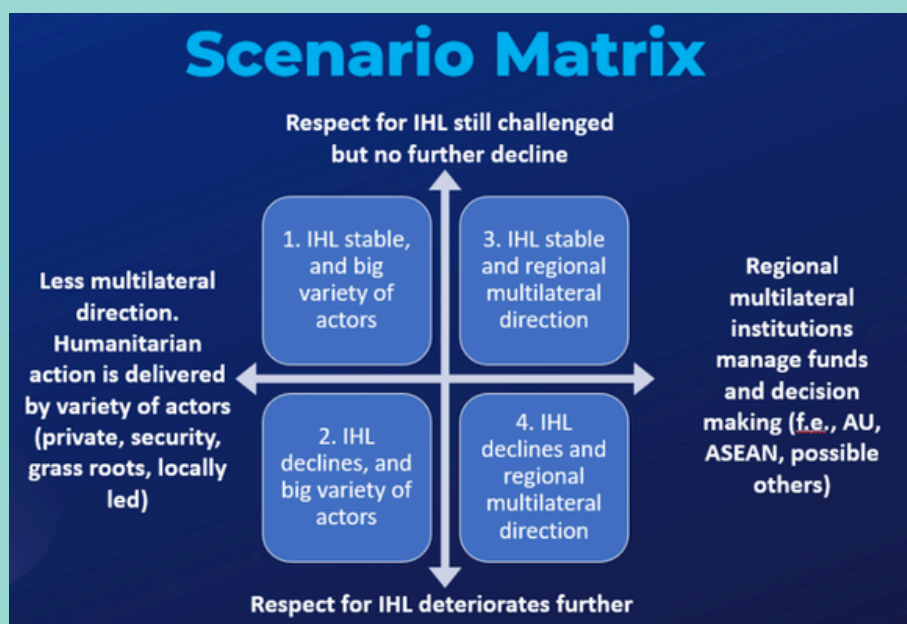
A diverse group of humanitarian policymakers, academics and practitioners set out to develop a set of scenarios in which influential international trends were analysed to uncover their underlying uncertainties.

Our main question was “**what could the geopolitical context for humanitarian action look like in 2028?**”. After identifying drivers and uncertainties, we developed a scenario matrix with four possible futures of geopolitical context around humanitarian action.

The possible futures matrix

X-axis: ‘actor landscape’: Who will be delivering humanitarian assistance in 2028. On right side, there is a possible future with regionalised multilateral direction of humanitarian action. On the left side, an actor landscape with no multilateral direction, and with a diversity of actors in humanitarian action.





Y-axis: ‘normative landscape’. On the top side, there is possible future in 2028 with stabilised respect for international humanitarian law. On the bottom, a context with even further deterioration of and lack of accountability to international humanitarian law.

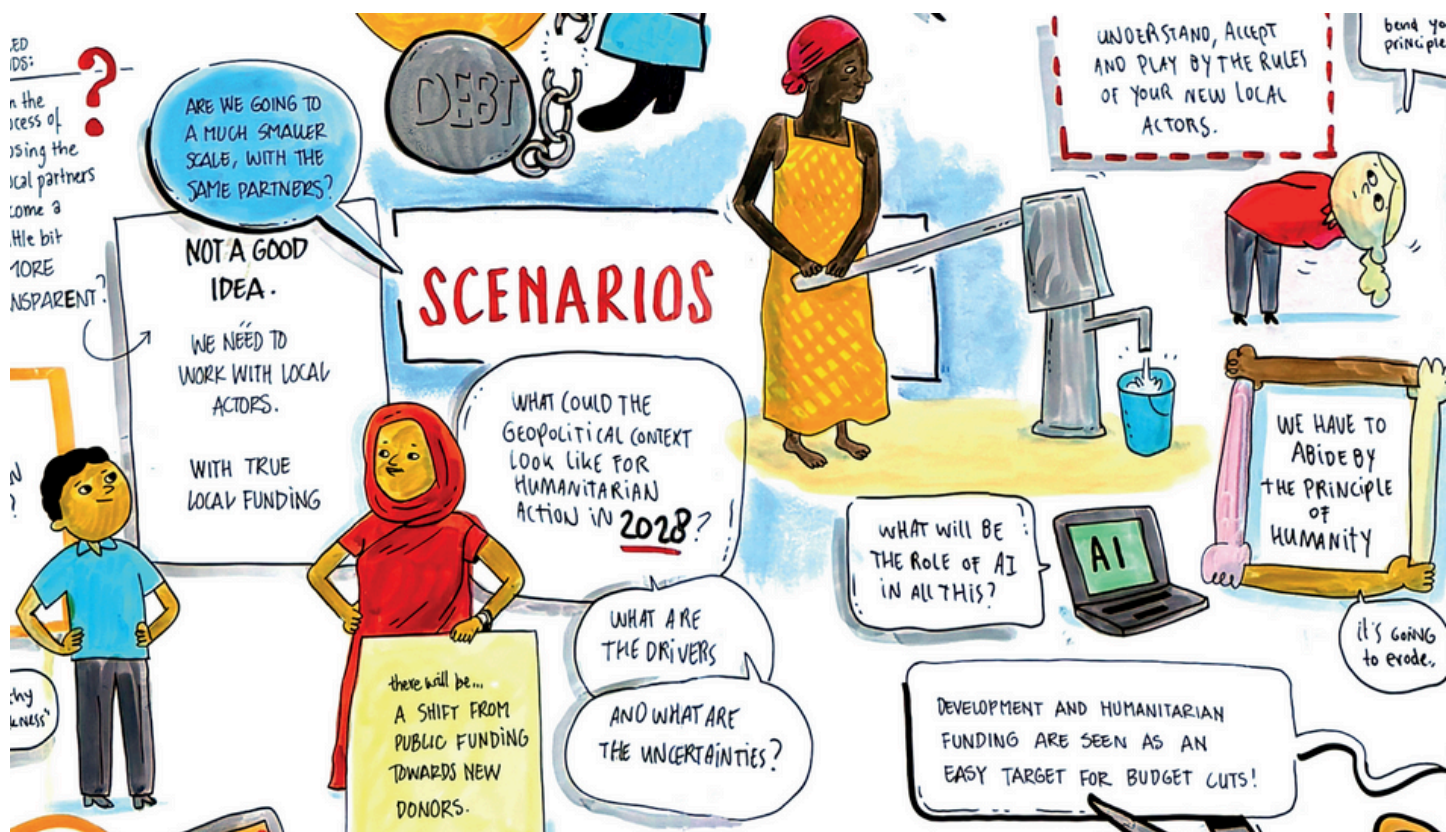


Stream

Scenario-Building

The recommendations that proved to be robust for all stakeholders at all levels (local, national, humanitarian and diplomatic) in the humanitarian space are:

	Partnerships	Develop a vision on working with private actors and include strategic relationships with private sector actors for humanitarian action
	Policy	Assess your position on the moral discourse around humanitarian principles and align yours with a broader moral framework such as around justice, equity and solidarity
	Military/Civil Coordination	Invest more in civil military coordination structures to enable safe implementation and protect aid workers
	Localisation/ Funding	Increase support on strengthening truly localised coordination structures



Closing

Reflections by **Nathalie Olijslager-Jaarsma**

Director Stabilisation and Humanitarian Assistance, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Challenges

- Compliments to KUNO, HSC, and Clingendael for initiating this timely conference.
- For we are indeed witnessing major international changes that not only challenge the world order as we know it, but also have fundamental impact on the present humanitarian system.
- The recent and sudden demise of USAID is a stunning and most visible case in point. But other worrisome developments also force us to face harsh realities: other key donor countries have also decided to cut their development and humanitarian budgets; there is a trend to politicize and weaponize aid (also humanitarian assistance); undermining of IHL is on the rise: see Gaza, Sudan Ukraine. And there are more things to worry about.

Self-reflection

- So – if ever – it is time to act and regroup to turn this tide. And to do this boldly, because – as the Dutch saying goes – fear is a poor counsellor.
- And to be frank, it is also time for serious self-reflectionand self-criticism I would add.
- For we know a number of these challenges have been around for some time. So let's not point to others, nor 'blame the system': we are the system, our actions make or brake it.
- Of course, the World Humanitarian Summit (2016 !) and the ensuing Grand Bargain were important efforts to address shortcomings in the system. The main focus being on more quality funding from donors and effective cooperation and transparency by humanitarian organisations. Due to an overly 'technical' and a-political follow-up approach the process however lost momentum.
- But looking at the changing (geo)political context and the challenges this brings for humanitarian action, we can agree political action and political courage is what we really need.
- This also goes for the dialogue with other – especially local and national – actors calling for transformation, claiming a seat at the table, and demanding direct funding.

Reset

- Against this backdrop the 'Humanitarian Reset' initiative of the ERC Tom Fletcher provides an opportunity for real change and for a much needed thorough reimagining and rebuilding of humanitarian action.
- This needs thinking boldly and thinking outside of the box by all of us. So no technical discussions that make us end up in a cul-de-sac. And at the same time not forgetting that during this overhaul we need to do our utmost to keep helping people who are in need now.
- While reimagining however, let us not throw away the baby with the bathwater. For as we witnessed during the global COVID-crisis, the humanitarian system was able to adapt quickly, to deliver, and to involve national and local actors effectively.

Closing (Cont.)

Reflections by **Nathalie Olijslager-Jaarsma**

Director Stabilisation and Humanitarian Assistance, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Quality & pooled funding

- Present challenges also demonstrate the persistent relevance of quality funding: unearmarked, predictable, and flexible funding that enables humanitarian organizations to act quickly where needs are highest.
- The underlying principle of quality funding however does by itself win in the (political) debate around control and risk. Most donors have Ministers and/or parliaments – and sometimes civil servants as well – wanting to control humanitarian budgets as to which crises and issues should be prioritized.
- That is why I am a strong supporter of OCHA's country-based pooled funds – or as I would prefer to call them CRISIS-based pooled funds. These funds are flexible enough to enable locally led responses where money is needed the most, while politicians can see for which crises funds are used.
- Donors should pool their money much more and coordinate amounts per fund. This reduces the unfortunate phenomenon of overfinancing responses to some crises while forgetting and underfunding others. This would also mean that donors and organisations should sit together and discuss trust and risk in a way that strengthens the system and action and diminishes the cost of administration. In addition harmonizing conditionalities by donors would save a lot of costs because the administrative burden of organisations will go down.

Information, engagement, language

- Information is another domain where pooling should be enhanced. This will improve effectiveness and transparency. The power to decide how money is spent should be based on data that is not owned, but transparently collected and pooled. Information-owners and budget owners should therefore not be the same.
- Reimagining humanitarian action also needs engagement with 'non-usual suspects'. The Netherlands for instance is presently reaching out to member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. To see where we can team up and explore interest of these states to join the system. And if they are interested room needs to be made for them.
- And last, but definitely not least (and probably first and foremost); let's bring back the human in the story we tell. We should not just talk about systems and organisations, donors and effectiveness, Grand Bargain and IHL. We really need to take into account the people we serve, the people in need. This helps to speak to hearts and minds and to politicians and broader audiences to better understand what is at stake.
- It also provides an opportunity that humanitarian action is not only about suffering, but also about resilience, survival and resistance. People in need support each other, set up local kitchens, provide mental support to traumatized children. They deserve our respect and full attention.

Reflections

From Key Listeners

Four key listeners were appointed to attentively observe and follow the day's discussions. At the end of the event, they shared their reflections with the audience. The key listeners came from a diverse range of backgrounds, including the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a local organization, an international NGO, and an academic institution. They all attended different streams.

Aid prioritisation **goes beyond targeting**, such as influence by politics, funding, experience, and more. While **needs-based approaches exist, realistic expectations and honest dialogue are essential.**

Localisation is often misunderstood as removing international actors, but it's about **shifting power and trust** to local actors—something still **hindered by capacity doubts and limited funding access**; building trust, enabling direct or intermediary funding, and following through on commitments like the Grand Bargain are key to real progress.

Initiatives to strengthen respect for IHL range from **media engagement to political advocacy and legal action**, including ideas like a Centre of Excellence tied to NATO funding; moral dilemmas show that perspectives vary by stakeholder, and **humanitarians must confront whether they're willing to walk away from certain choices.**

Amid pessimistic scenarios of a future humanitarian system, proposed responses include **strengthening local coordination, improving public perception and advocacy**, forming coalitions of willing states, and most importantly, **recentring humanitarian action on people**—not just principles—by reframing around **humanity, equality, and solidarity.**



In full





For more information, please reach out to the organisers:

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