Back to the future: rethinking INGO roles in a changing humanitarian landscape

The Future of Aid 2040: Lenses on the Future

Abstract

The role of INGOs in a localised humanitarian system was explored through scenario-thinking and back-casting from various plausible futures. Kaira Zoe Alburo-Cañete (The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre) shared insights from the Future of Aid 2040 report. It reached 900 participants worldwide and deliberately centred local NGOs, community groups, and people with lived experience of crises. JoJanneke Spoor of CARE Netherlands explained how CARE, as a leading organisation fighting global poverty, is reassessing its future role. She posed the provocative question of whether INGOs would still have a place at all in a truly localised humanitarian system.

In lively conversations participants agreed that the system is shifting, also by external forces. The challenge is to cut through the vested interests and find the courage to imagine new ways of working that connect local, national, and global action. Glimpses of a different future were offered: trust-based funding models, new donors from the Global South, and digital tools that could finally give donors the confidence to support local leadership. In such a system, INGOs will still have a role, but a different one. They would support, not lead, local responses; do fundraising and resource mobilisation; and connecting lessons across countries and contexts.

Kaira Zoe Alburo-Cañete of the Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre opened the session with insights from the Future of Aid 2040 project of the Inter-Agency Research and Analysis Network. The global foresight exercise brought together more than 900 contributors, the vast majority from Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia. By bringing the Global South perspective centre-stage, the project shifts the focus toward local NGOs, community groups, and people with lived experience.

The research maps out several big shifts already reshaping humanitarian action: the accelerating climate and environmental crises, increasing geopolitical fragmentation and the rise of regional blocs, the spread of disinformation, and the growing regionalisation of aid. Based on these trends, the research team developed four sharply contrasting scenarios, from cooperative regional systems and informal aid networks to aid deployed as a geopolitical instrument or, in the most extreme case, the breakdown of formal institutions altogether.

Alburo-Cañete emphasised that these scenarios are not predictions. Rather, they are strategic tools designed to help organisations stress-test their strategies and plans against radically different futures.

"Providing a spectrum of plausible and possible scenarios," she explained, "

allows organisations to 'backcast': to work backwards from a future world and identify what actions today could move us towards - or away - from that outcome." The aim is not only to imagine the future but to shape it, using the field's collective imagination as a strategic resource for building more adaptive, resilient and locally anchored humanitarian systems.

She underscored that envisioning future aid systems helps organisations pinpoint what must change now. Scenario thinking clarifies where they want to be in 2040 and what barriers, policy shifts and practical steps stand between the present and that destination. In the context of rethinking INGOs' roles in a localised humanitarian system, she underscored that the project's broad representative participation marks a long-overdue move away from Global North-centric analysis and toward genuine co-creation.

CARE: Rethinking the INGO Role From the Inside Out

The analytical framing offered by Alburo-Cañete was followed by a more operational perspective from CARE Netherlands' humanitarian director, Jojanneke Spoor, who spoke frankly about how her organisation is wrestling with its future role. As an INGO, CARE is currently developing a new strategy and has even confronted the provocative question of whether INGOs should disappear altogether. The organisation's conclusion: INGOs still have a place, but not the one they have traditionally occupied.

Spoor acknowledged that, despite CARE's formal commitments to co-ownership, shared risk and accountability, the organisation continues to carry the weight of its original one-directional aid model and the neo-colonial assumptions embedded within it. She illustrated this with an experience from Angola, where she arrived as an HIV advisor only to

discover that local staff were fully capable of leading the work. Yet those same colleagues assumed that, as a Western aid worker, she should take charge. These entrenched patterns, she noted, remain stubbornly difficult to dismantle. The shift from ‘we bring aid’ to ‘we co-create solutions’ is still very much a work in progress - on both sides.

In response to a question about how CARE involves local partners in shaping its future strategy, Spoor explained that engagement happens at multiple levels. CARE’s confederation model relies heavily on its country offices, which maintain direct relationships with national NGOs, civil society organisations and community groups. These country teams organise consultations, gather priorities from local actors and feed those insights into CARE Netherlands’ strategic discussions. The organisation then cross-checks these inputs against its own scenario work to determine which strategic directions align with partner perspectives.

She added that CARE is experimenting with new partnership models, where local advisory groups play a formal role in decision-making. Some donors are even pushing to remove the country-office layer altogether, creating direct links between donors, CARE Netherlands and local organisations. CARE is testing an approach that effectively reverses the traditional hierarchy in Yemen, where a national NGO initiated a project and invited CARE to join. Spoor described this as an exciting experiment that could reshape how CARE collaborates in the future.

CARE recognises that local actors are always the first responders in crises, and the organisation is exploring how INGOs can contribute without overshadowing them. With civic space shrinking, militarisation rising and international humanitarian law under strain, local organisations often struggle to have their voices heard in debates at the global level. INGOs, Spoor argued, can help bridge that divide.

Spoor was quick to admit the gap between localisation commitments and day-to-day practice.

“Change is slow,” she said, “because it is scary.”

Reflecting on future roles triggers uncertainty and emotional resistance as genuine localisation may require downsizing staff and budgets in donor countries. This often means organisations are torn between protecting themselves and pushing for wider transformation.

“*This is a dilemma*,” says Spoor, “*that the sector must address*.”

Her core message was clear: INGOs must evolve by redefining their value in a system where local actors lead. She envisions a future in which organisations like CARE focus far less on implementation and far more on influence: global political advocacy, defending humanitarian principles, sustaining public support for humanitarian action in donor countries, and fundraising. Bringing local experiences together across countries and helping

to build digital and AI tools for local organisations will also become a key focus of the INGO support role.

> "*Above all*," Spoor stressed, "*local partners must shape INGO strategy. Localisation cannot be reduced to implementing programmes imposed through a top-down process; it requires genuine co-design. Only then*, she argued*, can INGOs contribute meaningfully to a humanitarian system that is truly led from the ground up*."

Breakout groups

What the Future of Humanitarian Action Might Look Like

Various elements of humanitarian transformation were further explored in breakout groups. The diversity of backgrounds set the stage for a rich conversation on the transformations needed for INGOs to remain relevant. Discussions focused on practical dimensions of future humanitarian action, including the role of the private sector, the ethical implications of AI, and the challenge of gathering local knowledge under crisis conditions. Several cross-cutting insights emerged. Across groups, participants emphasised the need for flexible funding, stronger foresight capabilities, and more equitable partnerships.

The gap between localisation ambitions and action

Throughout the debates, a shared frustration kept surfacing: despite years of debate, localisation still feels more like talk than action. The numbers speak for themselves: 98% of OECD humanitarian funding to civil society still goes to international NGOs, with only 2% reaching local actors directly. This is leading to localisation fatigue: people are tired of hearing about power-shifting when they do not see it happening. The sector urgently needs to address the politics behind this stalemate. Yet it struggles to do so. The sector is divided over how political it should be in a context where humanitarian values continue to receive lip service, but increasingly fail to guide state behaviour. And as national interests are becoming more dominant in aid policy, this tends to leave INGOs to navigate sensitive issues such as migration and geopolitics without a shared approach. To avoid losing influence, the sector needs a new narrative that speaks to both humanitarian values and donor country interests.

INGOs must also address uncomfortable questions about their own relevance and role. It is not an option to treat localisation as a technical fix. The required powershifting frequently come up against a lack of real commitment among INGOs, whose instinct for self-preservation tends to get in the way. The inconvenient truth is that political will is not just faltering on the side of donors. INGOs must ask themselves whether they are genuinely prepared to shift funding to local organisations if this means shrinking their own organisational capacity at home.

Aid is delivered in highly political contexts. The system is being reshaped by external forces, such as geopolitics, funding shocks and public sentiment. Avoiding politics only makes it harder to tackle the structural barriers that keep power dynamics in place.

Risk adversity impedes direct funding

This led to a bigger question: what will humanitarian resources look like in 10, 20, or even 30 years, and what has to change for the system to keep functioning? The first reality check was blunt: donors are still extremely risk-averse. It is one of the reasons the Grand Bargain hasn't shifted funding patterns as much as hoped. Governments may talk about localisation, but very few are willing to transfer large sums directly to local organisations without rock-solid monitoring. A government representative put it bluntly:

> *"Politicians are accountable to taxpayers. No politician wants to take the risk of transferring 40 million euros directly to a local NGO in the Central African Republic."*

Local organisations struggle to access donors directly, and INGOs continue to act as gatekeepers for resource mobilisation.

That led to a practical question: how do local organisations get ready for direct funding when most compliance systems were built for large Global North institutions? Some pointed to new tools that could help. One example was an AI platform that turns local documents into donor-compliant proposals. It sparked interest as well as a fair bit of caution.

Drawing on Kaira Alburo-Cañete's scenario-building examples, the discussion sketched a future in which the Global South has a stronger economic base and becomes less dependent on traditional donors. Participants also imagined the rise of non-traditional funders - particularly from majority-Muslim countries where demographic and economic growth is accelerating. These shifts could further reshape the role of INGOs.

Technology as a catalyst for localisation

AI came up a lot. People could see how it might help level the playing field: simplifying proposal writing, monitoring, reporting, data analysis, and admin work. But the risks are real too: bias, privacy issues, and the danger of 'cognitive surrender', where people stop thinking for themselves and let AI decide. The group's take was simple: AI has huge potential, but only if used ethically, transparently, and with strong safeguards.

Even so, technology might end up being a turning point. If digital tools can provide reliable, real-time oversight, donors may finally feel comfortable sending more money directly to the ground. In that sense, tech could become a prerequisite for shifting power dynamics.

Flexible Funding, light reporting, strong support

In terms of humanitarian financing, participants agreed that flexible funding is essential for localisation. The INGO Cultural Emergency Response (CER) offered a real-world example of how this can work in practice. CER supports cultural heritage in crises, and its approach looks very different from the rigid, paperwork-heavy systems most INGOs deal with. Instead of funding one project at a time, CER raises money through portfolio-level funding. Donors back a broad plan, for example, 'emergency heritage response in Palestine', and CER allocates money according to need and what local partners judge most urgent. This gives

local organisations the flexibility and resources to act quickly in places like Ukraine or Palestine, without waiting for budget changes or new approvals.

Administrative demands are kept deliberately light, with simple budgets, two check-ins, and reporting that can be as easy as a phone call or an audio message. As relationships grow, partners choose activities from a menu of actions where partners choose which activities make sense as circumstances and conditions shift. A key part of the model is that the INGO takes on the heavy lifting of turning partner updates into donor-friendly reports. It is labour-intensive for the INGO staff, but it keeps the burden off local teams who are responding to crises in real time.

Another approach pointing in the same direction, came from the Humanitarian Observatories Network in the Philippines, where communities created funding proposals using video and other non-written formats. It worked - until USAID cut its funding. The experiment showed what is possible, but also how fragile locally-led systems remain under current funding structures.

Both cases show what localisation can look like in practice and how it could be expanded.

Competition hinders learning

In addition to flexible funding, programme design emerged as an issue: in the current structures, success tends to still be measured through top-down indicators that rarely reflect what local communities and first responders value as most important. The debate centred on how INGOs can learn from local partners in a way that supports them, without adding to their workload. When partners lead the work and make the key decisions, this also often means organisations struggle to pull local insights together into the bigger picture they need to for strategic decisions and planning.

The problem is becoming more pressing as, in times of shrinking budgets, the sector is forced to talk about hyper-prioritisation. Teams at organisations' headquarters rarely have access to raw data in real time. Local teams collect it, but it often stays within individual projects, thus failing to contribute to broader analysis. And competition only complicates things further: many organisations gather the same information in the same places because they're chasing the same funding. And instead of sharing, they hold onto it, even when sharing would save time and reduce pressure on communities. As one participant said, "It would be so easy to have open databases, but because we're competing, we don't."

Project cycles counterproductive to reflection

Hope came from community-led mutual aid initiatives that are proving highly resilient and often outperform formal systems. INGOs can support them by sharing experiences of these local responders across countries so they can learn from one another's experiences. However, short-term project cycles mitigate against this kind of learning. Local partners are

often only engaged during crises, when they're already pushed to their limits. INGOs need their insights to improve systems and analyse risks, but asking for learning during an emergency can easily become extractive. Short project cycles make it worse: there is rarely space or funding for reflection. People agreed that long-term relationships, not one-off projects, are essential.

The takeaway is straightforward: INGOs need learning and funding systems that reinforce local autonomy, not undermine it. The challenge is building models that respect local leadership while still meeting donor expectations. Some felt multilateral organisations may be better placed to track risks across crises, because they monitor situations continuously. However, it was pointed out, these institutions can be slow to react when things change on the ground. INGOs may be better placed to take on this role.

Conclusion: Walk the talk

One idea ran through the discussion: humanitarian action is always political, whether acknowledged or not. Principles matter, but aid is delivered in environments shaped by power, interests, and inequality. Ignoring that reality only makes it harder to address the structures that keep those dynamics in place. What is missing is a narrative that connects humanitarian values with political realities.

> "*What we need,"* one participant concluded, "*is a better story. One that speaks to both principles and interests.*"

Even with all the pressures on the sector, there were reasons for optimism. Community-led initiatives continue to show that solidarity is alive, and localisation does not have to be a zero-sum game. INGOs still have important roles in advocacy, coordination, constituency-building, and mobilising political will in donor countries. The challenge is moving beyond talking about shifting power while quietly maintaining inflexible and misaligned systems and instead building ways of working that genuinely support local autonomy.

Mutual aid offered a powerful reminder of what that could look like. Community-driven efforts, often informal and improvised, regularly step in where formal systems are proving rigid and slow to respond. They show that hope persists, even when official structures struggle with their own constraints, often reinforcing patterns they know are counter-productive: programme design still predominantly relies on top-down indicators that rarely reflect what communities consider most important, and funding and reporting requirements often prevent organisations from reprioritising or adapting activities to the shifting realities on the ground. Real change means rethinking who sets priorities, who defines success, and how resources, responsibility, decision-making and influence are shared.

The conversation closed with a mix of excitement and unease. AI is advancing faster than it can be regulated. Donor expectations are shifting. Local actors are asking for more influence. And INGOs are being pushed to rethink what they are for. The discussion outlined a future role less focused on frontline implementation and more on a new role as 'connectors': fund managers, risk absorbers, technical support providers and monitors of quality and accountability.

That transition won't be simple, but the discussion made clear it need not be perceived as a threat. Solidarity still needs organisation, especially when navigating governments and global power structures. One participant captured the mood:

"We live in an interesting world - sometimes exciting, sometimes scary. But we can't ignore what's coming."

If the sector is serious about localisation and shifting power, the next step is clear: it's time to walk the talk.

This conversation will continue in the next sessions in the series, which will explore in depth:

- *Session 2 – INGOs and their constituencies in donor countries*
- *Session 3 – Futuring: what roles for INGOs are conceivable in a more localised system*

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