

CONFERENCE 2026
HUMANITARIAN ACTION
AND (GLOBAL) POLITICS:
FACING TOUGH
DILEMMAS

Summary report

INTRODUCTION

The conference Humanitarian Action and (Global) Politics: Facing Tough Dilemmas – jointly organised by KUNO, Save the Children, and Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences– was held on 8 June 2026. Around 85 participants from the humanitarian field joined, including senior-level representatives from INGOs, local partners of the Dutch Relief Alliance, UN agencies, governmental representatives, researchers and the in-betweens. The key takeaways and conclusions from the various sessions will be presented in this report. The discussions throughout the day were held according to the Chatham House Rule. Therefore, statements are not attributed to people or organisations in this report.



FOCUS

The year 2025 has brought unprecedented challenges to the humanitarian sector. Significant funding reductions, increasing operational constraints, and shrinking humanitarian space have affected humanitarian actors worldwide, with profound consequences for populations affected by conflict, disaster, and crisis. At the same time, humanitarian action is increasingly shaped by geopolitical interests, while attacks on humanitarian workers and violations of International Humanitarian Law continue to rise. These developments raise fundamental questions about the future of principled humanitarian action and the ability of humanitarian actors to operate independently, impartially, and effectively.

Subsequently, KUNO together with Save the Children and Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, convened representatives from the Dutch humanitarian community to reflect on the changing landscape of humanitarian action. The conference provided a platform for critical dialogue, exchange of experiences, and collective reflection on the dilemmas confronting the sector. It also sought to identify opportunities for collaboration and joint action in response to these emerging challenges.

Through a series of facilitated discussions, participants explored the political dimensions of contemporary humanitarian action and examined a range of difficult operational and ethical dilemmas. These discussions took place in plenary sessions as well as in four thematic streams:

- Funding shocks: people at risk of being left behind
- To be silent or not to be silent? The ethics of remaining principled
- Erratic geopolitics: the humanitarian system undermined
- Global militarisation, rising defence investments and the impact on humanitarian action

By bringing together diverse perspectives, the conference aimed to strengthen collective understanding of these challenges and to contribute to a shared agenda for principled and effective humanitarian action in an increasingly complex and politicised world.

OPENING SESSION

The theme of the conference - *"Humanitarian Action and (Global) Politics: Facing Tough Dilemmas"* - highlights the growing intersection between humanitarian action and political dynamics. Shifts in the global political landscape include the rise of nationalist and far-right movements, increasing geopolitical competition, and changing donor priorities. Humanitarian actors are operating in an environment where political interests increasingly influence funding, access, and operational decision-making. These developments raise tough dilemmas about the future of the humanitarian principles, dealing with funding conditionalities and objectives that intersect humanitarian, economic and military interests. The conference zoomed in on those tough dilemmas, to facilitate conversation around, and to increase the understanding of the tensions they hold.

The opening session unpacked the concept of 'politics', which goes beyond what happens in parliaments, capitals and elections. Rather, it is a broad concept closely linked to power, interests and the allocation of responsibility, decision-making and resources. Politics is present at multiple levels of society and is not limited to formal political institutions or top-down arrangements. Politics is inherent in societies. Individuals engage in politics through everyday choices, relationships, and actions, whether in public arenas or within their own communities. Influencing political dynamics does not always require speaking out on a public platform; influence can also be exercised within smaller circles and through informal networks.

A crisis system in crisis

Humanitarian actors are confronted with rather severe funding challenges. Over the past two years, humanitarian funding has declined significantly, with cuts amounting to approximately 30% of the global humanitarian budget. In 2025 alone, funding decreased by an estimated 20%. At the same time, the donor landscape is becoming increasingly diverse.

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Donors other than DAC, including Gulf States such as the United Arab Emirates, are playing a larger role, while traditional donors are reducing contributions. While diversification offers opportunities, it also raises concerns regarding fragmentation, differing priorities, and political influence. Beyond funding constraints, the humanitarian system is facing a broader legitimacy crisis. Humanitarian crises are becoming increasingly protracted – amounting to 95% of crises – forcing organisations to make difficult prioritisation decisions. While prioritisation is unavoidable, it often results in exclusion, leaving many needs unmet. Additional concerns include the selective application of International Humanitarian Law, and the compiled failures to listen to local actors, to address root causes, to meet needs and to shift power.

While strong ambitions were committed to in the Grand Bargain, the trends in localisation are in fact reversing. The agreed share of funding that should be directed to local organisations has never been close. In fact, numbers in the last two years are in fact decreasing. These challenges raise fundamental questions about the sustainability of the current humanitarian model and the ethical pathways for reform.



The politics of humanitarian action

The times are dark; the needs are enormous and assistance is too little. 240 Million people are in need but only 87 million people can be helped. Populations are starving and are under siege for political gain at this very moment. Politics are increasingly shaping humanitarian action in ways that challenge its core principles. Humanitarians are operating in environments where aid can be manipulated for military, political, or economic purposes. It is not possible to separate politics from aid; far right movements are using social factors like migration, security and nationalism in narratives against aid. The first responsibility of states is indeed primary protection of its civilians, but that should exist next to taking into account the needs of communities in other countries.

The laws that were established by and for humanitarian action are not upheld, but only applied when convenient. This is dangerous not just in specific locations: what happens elsewhere will inevitably come to you as well. Aid workers are continuously the victims of violence. The principles are there to safeguard the humanitarian space, yet they are constantly under pressure. The desire is to reach populations because of humanity, but it also means taking sides sometimes. A dilemma is whether INGOs should speak out publicly, which many are doing, whilst aiming to striking a balance with what can be done behind the scenes.

Budget cuts at present seem to foster more recentralisation than devolution. Funding cuts are reshaping the system; there is a gap emerging between what is being said and what is being done. Funds to UN agencies are significantly increasing; for example, the US has pledged USD 1.8 billion to UN OCHA. The recentralisation leads to immediate uncertainty, while staff positions are being protected. It also leads to reduced risk appetite. And it leads to capacity erosion at local partners: when budgets are cut, they are hit harder. International actors are becoming default actors, going against the localisation agenda.

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Another issue is aid manipulation: aid is diverted, criminalised and used as a tool which puts aid workers at risk. For example: in Yemen are humanitarian actors systematically targeted. In the Sahel is a powerful form of political interference happening; Russia is convincing people through online campaigns not to trust humanitarians. The political impact was

immediate. Humanitarian action is increasingly becoming part of political strategies in warfare. It is key that governmental actors speak out that

protection of civilians and aid workers is a legal obligation. International organisations have their own politics around how to ensure jobs continue to exist. The Humanitarian Reset is about devolving power to local actors. 70% of Country-Based Pooled Funds should go to national and local actors, however, INGOs take a substantial share. From 900 million USD, only 400 million was going to national and local actors. Save the Children decided to withdraw from CBPFs, it is committed to pursuing this in a timespan of two years, contrary to recent publications stating the opposite. Other INGOs have not yet followed suit, while this was the hope of Save the Children; their move can be considered meaningless if others do not follow.

INGOs are not transparent with each other, resulting in localisation not going forward. Each donor is going through their own process of localisation and allocating funds to local partners. Politisation also affects local partners not just about funding, but also about conditionality. They wish to uphold the principles and not to be associated with politics. For local organisations the cuts mean that staff is being lost; they do not have decision-making power while communities depend on them, resulting to trust and operations being lost. At the same time, there is another picture: the people affected by aid cuts are still providing aid and assisting people, also when there is no 'humanitarian system'. Solidarity is still present, which is key as it brings humanity and is the core of humanitarian action.

STREAMS

Stream 1

Funding shocks: people at risk of being left behind

This interactive session explored two central dilemmas that the humanitarian sector is currently facing during the funding decline:

1. Prioritising fewer locations more intensively over covering as many locations as possible?
2. Prioritising reaching the people most in need or as many people as possible?

Participants used the tool Option One-and-a-Half created by Bob Dick. This tool is used to identify advantages and disadvantages of competing approaches, before seeking a balanced solution that integrates the advantages of both sides, creating an Option One-and-a-Half.

Where prioritisation happens

The participants who worked on where prioritisation happens, identified the importance of joint programming in-country with transparent and accountable collaborations between humanitarian actors, especially during protracted crises. They realised that by choosing fewer locations to target, the risk of harming social cohesion could rise, and there would be limited room to scale up.





On the other hand, covering many locations would lead to spreading too thin, and would risk the needs of the most vulnerable not being met. While on differing sides, the groups created solutions that would benefit both sides. Both identified the need for stronger localised collaborations between organisations and sectors. One group visualised their Option One-and-a-Half with a puzzle, in which actors are aware of the impact of their sector and complement other locations and sectors where needed. This way, prioritisation due to funding shocks would be solely based on collective abilities, rather than individual donor contracts and decisions made by policymakers.

Who is prioritised

During the discussions on who is prioritised, the importance of inclusion was addressed. A focus was on how to ensure that conflict between communities

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does not arise, and how to ensure that inequalities are not increased. There was broad agreement that funding decisions should be guided by humanitarian needs and principles (such as impartiality) rather than political considerations. Participants also emphasised the importance of investing in local capacities and supporting

locally led initiatives. Both groups reached the agreement that building on existing structures and capacities is crucial. One group visualised their Option One-and-a-Half by drawing a broken-down car (symbolising the current humanitarian system), which was being repaired by community members. They stated that vulnerability criteria can only be identified and managed by those most in need.

Stream 2

To be silent or not to be silent? The ethics of remaining principled

This stream focused on the ethical dilemmas arising from the increasing politicisation of humanitarian action. Humanitarian organisations are facing growing operational restrictions, conditional funding arrangements, and pressures that challenge their ability to uphold humanitarian principles. Using the No Easy Choice Tool developed by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub, participants analysed four ethical dilemmas:

1. Speaking out or remaining silent regarding violations of International Humanitarian Law
2. Accepting donor funding with restrictive conditions
3. Accepting operational restrictions in exchange for access to affected populations
4. Accepting funding from actors whose actions may conflict with humanitarian or do-no-harm principles

Key reflections

One discussion group focused on the dilemma of accepting operational restrictions imposed by authorities. Participants considered a scenario in which humanitarian organisations were required to follow a government-approved list of beneficiaries. Compliance would enable access but risk excluding those most in need, while refusal could result in the suspension of humanitarian activities altogether. Another group discussed whether to accept funding from a donor with conditions attached which are not in line with an organisation's values.

The discussion highlighted that there are rarely perfect ethical options in humanitarian action. Every option involves trade-offs and consequences. Accepting restrictions may compromise organisational independence, while rejecting them may prevent life-saving assistance from reaching affected populations. Participants also noted the potential risks for humanitarian staff operating in politically sensitive environments.



Plenary reflections identified several key lessons, and the No Easy Choice Tool was very much appreciated. First, humanitarian actors must recognise that ethical perfection is rarely achievable; difficult compromises are often unavoidable. Second, organisations should critically assess whether previously established “red lines” have already been crossed through gradual adaptation to external pressures. Third, maintaining a degree of financial autonomy is essential for safeguarding organisational values and principles. Finally, participants suggested replacing the concept of fixed “red lines” with “red dots”: identifying and reducing ethical concerns wherever possible, while acknowledging that complex operational realities often require nuanced decision-making.

The session demonstrated that principled humanitarian action increasingly requires organisations to navigate complex ethical terrain, balancing different stakeholders' perspectives, access, accountability, operational effectiveness, and adherence to humanitarian values.



Stream 3

Erratic geopolitics: the humanitarian system undermined

This stream explored how growing geopolitical instability is affecting humanitarian decision-making and challenging the foundations of the humanitarian system. The objectives were to increase understanding of the implications of geopolitical shifts, identify organisational “red lines” that guide decision-making, and introduce scenario-based thinking as a tool for navigating complex ethical dilemmas. The discussion centred on three key dilemmas of humanitarians today:

1. Should humanitarian actors cooperate with new aid modalities and structures, such as the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation?
2. Should organisations accept OCHA Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) funding when donor-imposed conditions may influence humanitarian action?
3. Should ambitions regarding localisation be adjusted in response to changing geopolitical realities?

Conversations on the dilemmas were held in relation to scenarios from IARAN’s The future of Aid report to explore how different contexts affect decision-making.



Participants emphasised that continuing the push towards locally led humanitarian action remains essential for effective, relevant, and sustainable responses. Concerns were raised about the increasing influence of donor priorities and conditions, and the implications for independence and neutrality. The role of OCHA and other UN entities in accepting funding arrangements that carry risks of political influence were criticised. More direct funding mechanisms are needed for local organisations and a fairer distribution of risks, responsibilities, and decision-making power. Localisation should not be reduced to funding targets alone but should focus on improving the quality of humanitarian action and ensuring meaningful participation of affected communities.

While recognising that humanitarian principles cannot always be applied without compromise, they should continue to serve as an essential guide for decision-making. Transparency and accountability were considered particularly important when organisations face difficult trade-offs. One proposal was to strengthen bottom-up monitoring and evaluation approaches, allowing organisations and communities to assess funding arrangements more critically and ensure greater accountability. There is a strong need for structured dialogue among humanitarian actors and affected communities, which should go beyond funding concerns and create space for open reflection on humanitarian principles, operational realities, and differing perspectives.

Organisations differ in their willingness to define red lines to maintain principled humanitarian action in increasingly politicised environments. A red line across the entire sector was engagement with the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation. This was, however, not the unique aberration it has sometimes been defined to be; similar cases have been encountered in the past, for example in Afghanistan. Some organisations decide to adopt a more pragmatic approach to maintain access to affected populations. A key observation was that many of the dilemmas currently confronting the sector are not new. There is no sufficient awareness of decision-making in previous crises and whether organisations effectively capture and apply lessons from past experiences. The sector often faces recurring challenges without systematically recording why and how certain decisions were made, or consulting those that were part of it. During this session, a proposal was made to strengthen independent oversight and accountability through an independent “watchdog” or ombudsman.

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Stream 4

Global militarisation, rising defence investments and the impact on humanitarian action

This stream examined the implications of increasing global militarisation and rising defence spending for humanitarian action. This stream explores key dilemmas humanitarian actors are confronted with in response to growing militarisation and rising defence investments. It aimed at knowledge sharing on trends concerning this topic, what the urgent concerns at the humanitarian organisations and institutes are, and what their considerations are in responding to those trends.

The discussion highlighted that humanitarian actors are working in increasingly constrained environments. Reduced respect for International Humanitarian Law, the politicisation of aid, and the changing nature of conflicts are making it more difficult to secure access to affected populations, provide protection, and maintain neutrality. Participants noted that modern warfare technologies, including drones and other remote weapon systems, have devastating consequences for civilians – the physical harm is compounded by a continuous mental health strain. Remote warfare also creates operational challenges for humanitarian organisations.



At the same time, engagement with military actors is becoming increasingly common and, in some contexts, unavoidable. On the ground, humanitarian organisations are often required to interact with defence and security actors to negotiate access, coordinate operations, and address protection concerns. Participants stressed that such engagement must remain firmly grounded in humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law. Clear boundaries, roles, and objectives are essential to prevent humanitarian action from becoming associated with political or military agendas.

Discussions using the World Café approach revealed uncertainty among humanitarian organisations, policymakers, and academic institutions about the future implications of increased militarisation and defence spending. Participants also emphasised the need to distinguish between increased defence investment in the Netherlands and broader global militarisation trends, as these affect humanitarian actors in different ways.

Effective interaction between humanitarian and military actors was seen to require clear frameworks, mutual understanding, and well-defined responsibilities. Trust was identified as essential but fragile. Several participants added that limited knowledge of humanitarian principles among military actors can create operational risks and misunderstandings. Strengthening awareness of humanitarian mandates and principles within defence institutions was therefore considered an important priority.

The need for a more balanced approach to the traditional Defence–Diplomacy–Development (3D) framework in the Netherlands was mentioned. Current policy discussions often prioritise defence responses, while investment in diplomacy, conflict prevention, and long-term development receives less attention. Participants warned that this imbalance risks undermining efforts to address the underlying drivers of conflict and civilian harm. Participants also highlighted the need for stronger evidence-based advocacy on the human costs of conflict and the root causes of insecurity.

The discussion highlighted the importance of continued dialogue between humanitarian, security, and policy actors and the need for greater cross-sector learning. Participants agreed that strengthening dialogue, improving mutual understanding, and restoring attention to prevention of conflict, diplomacy and addressing the root causes of conflict are essential.

CLOSING SESSION

Participants reflected on funding shocks, humanitarian principles, localisation, humanitarian reform, and the growing interaction between humanitarian, development, and security agendas.

Learning from funding shocks

The significant reductions in the Dutch development cooperation budget came as a shock. While the Dutch humanitarian budget was relatively protected, substantial reductions in funding for civil society organisations have had indirect consequences for humanitarian and development efforts. A key lesson has been the importance of communicating about international cooperation and its relevance to Dutch society. Understanding and communicating connections between global and local challenges in a nuanced rather than simplistic manner is essential. On identifying red lines: humanitarian organisations can advocate, mitigate risks, and propose alternatives with policymakers.

Dilemmas, ethical choices and red lines

While tools and methodologies to address tough dilemmas in ethical manners are helpful, the humanitarian principles remain the critical reference point. However, difficult situations rarely offer perfect solutions. Transparency, bringing diverse perspectives together and carefully analysing all dimensions of a dilemma were considered essential steps in responsible decision-making. The Dutch policy is to avoid using humanitarian funding as a mechanism for punishment or reward. Nevertheless, circumstances may arise where cooperation in a particular country can no longer continue, requiring difficult political decisions. Ultimately, decisions on government budgets are made by the Minister and the Parliament and are therefore political. Reductions in funding often have the greatest impact on vulnerable populations rather than on political actors.

Localisation and risk sharing

Localisation is about much more than transferring funding; meaningful localisation entails power sharing with local actors and greater

understanding of local realities. However, this remains challenging for donors operating from capitals far removed from implementation contexts.

Participants discussed the importance of sharing risks more equitably, as well as the challenges of working through local systems, particularly in contexts where governance structures may be weak or state actors are part in a conflict. Funding traveling across layers can reduce the resources reaching affected communities. However, intermediary organisations have an important role in trust building towards donors that have limited capacities to maintain oversight of how resources are ultimately used and to ensure due diligence. The challenge is to strike a balance between accountability requirements and locally led action.

Humanitarian reform and geopolitical change

The promise of decentralisation that was made in the Humanitarian Reset vis á vis the actual realities of shifting donor landscapes raises concerns amongst humanitarian actors. In particular with regard to the United States funding to OCHA's Country Based Pooled Funds with its tightened funding conditionalities and fast allocation timelines concerns were expressed about what this means for maintaining principled action. Participants stressed the importance of engaging not only with governments but also with civil society, communities, and other stakeholders. Effective localisation and humanitarian reform requires broad partnerships rather than competition between actors.



Humanitarian action and defence

The relationship between humanitarian action and security is shifting due to rising defence investments. Dialogue with the Ministry of Defence has become increasingly important; positive cooperation is facilitated by growing awareness within defence institutions of humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law. Participants also reflected on the recent engagements with Syrian authorities and international organisations supporting recovery efforts; engagement and dialogue remain essential. The discussions underscored the need for humanitarian organisations to remain adaptive while safeguarding their core values in a rapidly changing world.



We thank Save the Children and Van Hall Larenstein and all participants for the exchanges and learning. For more information, please reach out to the organisers through kuno@kuno-platform.nl.

Pictures: Qawal Ilyas

