



Expert meeting: State-led crisis response

Tuesday 24 February 2026 | 15.00 – 17.00 CET | Location: CARE NL

Summary Report

Introduction

As humanitarian actors step in to assist crisis-affected populations, they frequently find themselves substituting the role of the state. This raises critical questions about the social contract between a state and its people. With over 90 per cent of crises now classified as protracted, how can humanitarian actors better facilitate transitions to state-led response? What does it mean for aid workers, civil society, and other stakeholders, especially when the state itself is contested or even a perpetrator of violence?

These questions formed the backdrop for a discussion that was co-organised with the **Humanitarian System Transformation through Local Humanitarian Leadership (HST-LHL) program**. Researchers in the program have spent the past two years examining the complexities of state-led crisis response. This includes a multitude of short-form and in-depth analyses, focusing on Southeast Asia and East Africa, but addressing global issues related to governance, civil society, and humanitarianism. **Stella Naw**, an academic and activist specialising in decolonial peacebuilding and governance, and **Dustin Barter**, a senior research fellow at **ODI Global's Humanitarian Policy Group**, presented key findings, followed by a discussion on the challenges and opportunities for a sector navigating increasingly fraught times.

Research findings: state-led responses in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Kenya

Two central themes guided the research: accountability (to whom are humanitarian actors accountable?) and solidarity (with whom should they stand in solidarity?). The published and upcoming studies focused on Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Kenya, and Somalia – all countries at different stages of stabilisation, each with varying capacities and willingness to lead humanitarian response efforts.

In Indonesia and the Philippines, the state has increasingly asserted control over humanitarian response, partly to avoid foreign dominance. For example, the Philippines' frequent typhoons have drawn limited international attention, yet the state has increasingly managed crisis response effectively, including with its own resources. Similarly, Indonesia's domestic funding is far higher than aid. This shift highlights the importance of understanding how states can take the lead in crisis response, even as they confront internal challenges and external pressures.

The research showed that crisis response is often not led by central governments, but by sub-national authorities. This decentralisation demonstrates the importance of a whole-of-society approach, where state and civil society actors, including faith-based organisations and informal networks, complement each other's efforts. Such collaboration is essential for fostering inclusion

and accountability, though it is increasingly difficult in contexts where civic space is shrinking. For instance, [“red tagging” of activist groups in the Philippines](#) has undermined civil society engagement.

States frequently do not adequately address the root causes of crises, such as through the neglect of certain regions or by allowing illicit financial flows to undermine public resources. In Somalia, for example, the federal government’s budget is often less than a third of that of individual agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP). With 70 per cent of the state budget allocated to security, little remains for crisis response. The World Bank is one of the few actors investing significantly in state capacity, but Somalia remains trapped in a cycle of perpetual crisis. Meanwhile, in Kenya, ongoing crises are a governance challenge, exacerbated by deep, structural inequalities that exacerbate vulnerability.

Myanmar: revolutionary state-building and civil society actors

Since the military coup in 2021, [over 6.000 people have been killed in Myanmar, more than 20.000 have been arbitrarily detained, and 3.5 million have been internally displaced](#). The coup was not an isolated event but the latest escalation after seven decades of systemic marginalisation of indigenous peoples like the Rakhine, whose demands for self-determination have been repeatedly suppressed by central authorities. In 2008, Cyclone Nargis devastated the country, yet the military blocked aid while pushing forward a controversial referendum. After the 2025 earthquake, the junta restricted aid and conducted airstrikes in resistance-held areas. During the recent sham elections, as the country remains at war, indiscriminate attacks in non-military-controlled zones escalated. “When I call home, I hear bombs,” Stella Naw said. “I wonder, ‘Will this be the last time I speak to my family?’”

Most INGOs in Myanmar are concentrated in junta-controlled areas, often adopting risk-averse strategies. In contrast, cross-border INGOs work better understand resistance actors, practising a solidarity-based approach. INGOs should shift toward adaptive, locally responsive mechanisms rather than maintaining risk-averse, junta-centric models. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and ethnic resistance organisations (EROs) are often the sole service providers in resistance-controlled areas, where international and UN agencies lack access. INGOs should recognise local actors' role as creators of community justice, laying the groundwork for future political and social structures. CSOs and EROs' legitimacy is rooted in decades of trust-building with indigenous and minority groups, ensuring accountability to the people they serve. CSOs do not operate in isolation; they effectively navigate contested governance and state building to deliver services and support locally led governance. Their work is not contingent on external support, as people will continue to fight for their rights, with or without international backing.

A key insight Stella highlighted is that humanitarian efforts cannot be separated from protection and development. Contested governance is not an excuse for inaction. Humanitarian organisations must adopt an ecosystem approach, which is more open, flexible, and inclusive of different models of humanitarianism. This means developing and implementing plans that support local and national actors that work towards state building, underpinned by a focus on justice and emancipation, including through both macro- and micro-level negotiations. The challenge lies in shifting power and responsibility from expansionist international aid organisations to local and state actors, with donors playing a supportive role.

Finding collaboration with states through an ecosystem approach

A question was posed on how INGOs should engage with governments without taking sides. In Myanmar, engaging with central military authorities can mean marginalising the voices of marginalised communities. For many minorities, the central military state is not their government. Resistance groups, not the central state, provide services in these areas. They act as de facto governance structures, responding to community needs while the military state punishes civil society and civilians. International actors based in military-controlled areas often struggle to work effectively with local and national actors. It's critical to centre local organisations in decision-making from the start, providing them with the resources and access to operate effectively.

The military's presence further complicates access. Areas are not inherently "hard to reach"; they are made inaccessible by military control. Even in stable times, international organisations receive vastly more resources, including for safety and security, while local organisations struggle for basic resources, while taking the most acute risks. This is not just about resource-sharing; it's about strategic decision-making on resource allocations and what is equitable.

Dustin Barter emphasises that resistance actors are not merely service providers; they are integral to a broader state-building framework. They deliver education, healthcare, land management, and crisis response, often filling gaps left by the military state. The aid system must find constructive ways to support these efforts. Yet, he observes a reluctance to engage with resistance actors. State collaboration should not support authoritarian states; it should be with those state structures that do not reinforce oppressive systems. In Myanmar, resistance actors have de facto taken up state functions, and humanitarian actors could engage with those actors, not with the junta. Meanwhile, in many other contexts, such as Kenya, humanitarian aid is deeply connected to inequality and state neglect. The challenge is to encourage states to act responsibly, reducing reliance on external aid to fill gaps.

About the Oxfam Novib HST-LHL programme

The Humanitarian System Transformation through Local Humanitarian Leadership (HST-LHL) programme is implemented in partnership with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NLMFA).

The multi-country programme runs from April 2024 to December 2027 and aims to contribute to a humanitarian system that is truly locally-led. Through learning, coordination and innovation in 7 programme countries (Colombia, DRC, Kenya, South Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar and Indonesia), research and recommendations will be shared widely through the programme to inform and influence concrete policy and practice changes by all relevant stakeholders across the humanitarian delivery chain, including donors, UN agencies and local and international NGOs. Knowledge will be shared globally, through research and (learning and influencing) events, with the support of ODI Global, as well as with KUNO for a specific focus on the Netherlands and Dutch-based humanitarian actors.