

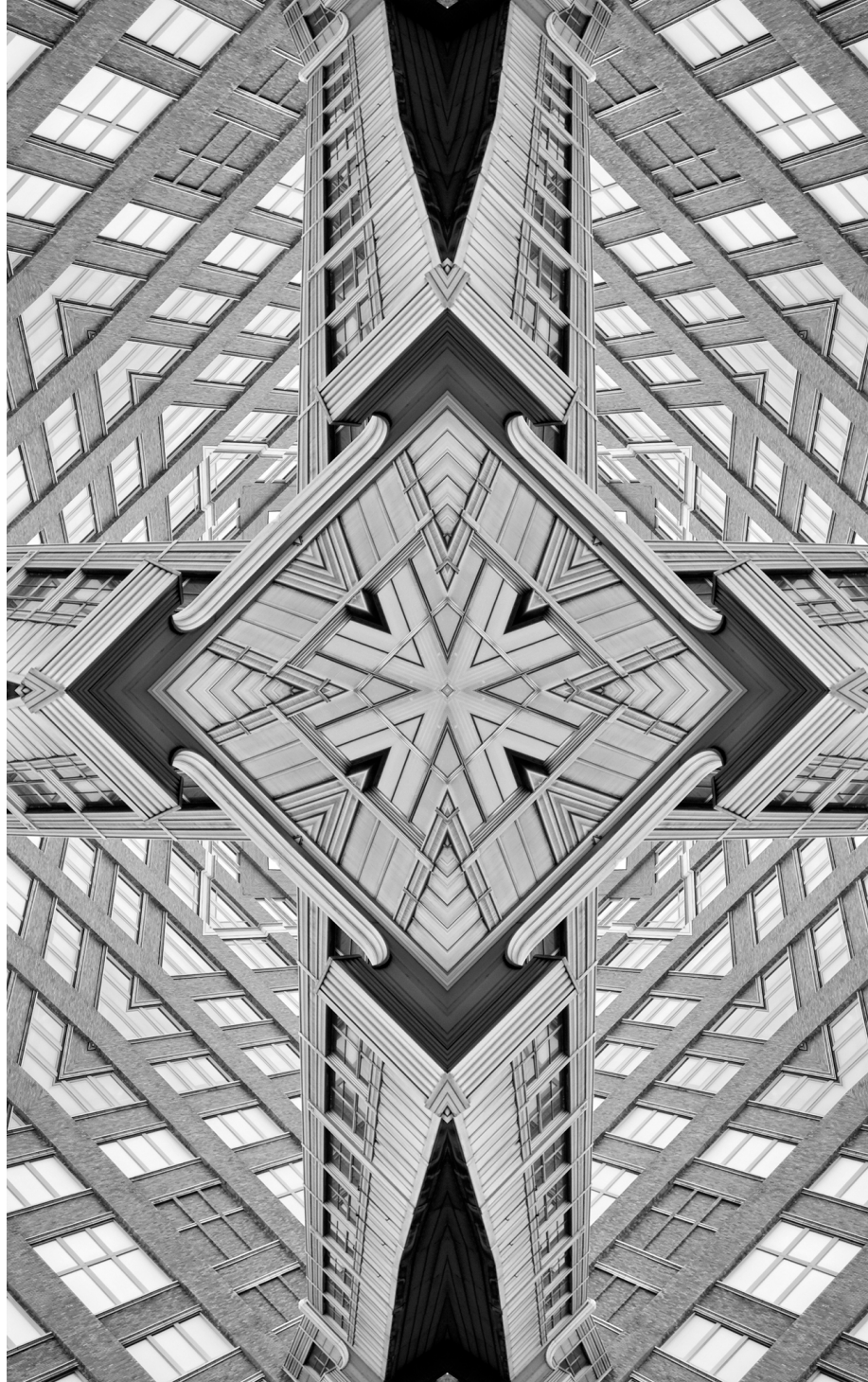
# Issue

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# Brief

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# The Growing Gaps in Global Humanitarian Challenges

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## Abstract

Emergency humanitarian aid, which aims to save lives and reduce people's suffering in times of crises, has grown considerably over the last century to become a central feature of international relations and of the multilateral system. It is estimated that over 400 million people depend on such aid today. The future of these people and of the humanitarian aid they depend on are fraught with risks, in light of five palpable trends: exponentially growing humanitarian needs; shrinking and reshaped funding; the implications of technological advances; the localisation of aid; and the worrying questioning of a principled approach to humanitarian aid based on respect for international humanitarian law.

# Exponentially Growing Humanitarian Needs

The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has more than doubled over the last five years, and in 2022 alone, it grew by a third to an estimated 406.6 million people.<sup>1</sup> All the indicators point to exponentially growing humanitarian needs in the coming years.

They are driven globally by a cascade of new, continuing, recurring and often overlapping crises and shockwaves. Humanitarian emergencies are usually classified in two broad categories: those resulting from armed conflicts and other situations of political, terrorist or criminal violence, and those caused by disasters, encompassing events related to extreme weather, food or health crises.

Concerning the first category, while it is difficult to judge whether there will be an increase or decrease in the number of conflicts in the coming decades, there are serious risks of both inter-state conflicts, in several regions of the world, as well as of internal armed conflicts, involving for instance terrorists, separatists, rebellions or organised criminal groups (notably in Latin and Central America). The years 2022 and 2023 have been identified as the most conflictual years in the world since the end of the Cold War, according to ‘The Uppsala Conflict Data Program’, which has been tracking conflicts globally since 1945.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of conflicts on civilian populations is multifaceted, with children often paying a particularly heavy price. A recent UNICEF report noted: “Globally, children account for two thirds of all of the civilians killed and maimed by explosive remnants of war—with the lasting consequences including physical disabilities and mental health issues. Urban conflict also destroys the infrastructure necessary for children’s well-being and, often, their survival. Homes, schools and play spaces are destroyed or damaged, as are water and energy supplies, markets, health care facilities and other vital infrastructure. Indeed, far more children are victims of indirect harm caused by conflict than of conflict itself.”<sup>3</sup>

Compounding the current challenges is the massive investment in, and rapid development of, new weapons and forms of warfare—for instance the intensification of the use of drones and complex automated weapons, cyber warfare, combined with the likely proliferation of small arms and light weapons due to the increased use of 3D printing and craft manufacturing. Once

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geographically contained battlefields are increasingly giving way to a limitless ‘battlespace’, as demonstrated by the broad impact of cyberattacks across multiple countries, and the increasing likelihood of conflicts being also waged, directly and indirectly, in outer space.<sup>4</sup> The humanitarian impact of future conflicts could cause even more harm to more civilians. Yet, not all is doom and gloom: Some of these technological developments, if properly controlled, and regulated, could possibly lead to greater adherence with international humanitarian law, which sets limits to protect, in particular, civilians by facilitating more precise identification of military targets and lessen collateral casualties. One can also hope that international law may be swiftly developed to regulate the use of new types of weapons, as well as the extension of conflicts in new domains.<sup>5</sup>

Other humanitarian emergencies encompass disasters, including health emergencies, food crises, and, increasingly, climate change-induced events, as well as other environment-related disasters. All of these, including droughts, floods, and wildfires, are projected to occur more frequently in the coming years and threatening to cause graver consequences. The growing concerns stem notably from the climate crisis and stresses resulting from a degraded environment, for instance in terms of water scarcity and undermined biodiversity, negatively impacting food systems, in turn causing soaring rates of malnutrition particularly for infants and children. As extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and intense, they are also multiplying the humanitarian needs of an increasingly large number of people and communities, some newly affected and others who have had prior humanitarian needs—for example, those who live in a conflict zone.

The costs of so-called ‘natural disasters’ are rising at a frightening speed, causing US\$313 billion in economic losses globally in 2022 alone.<sup>6</sup> The year 2023 was labelled the hottest year on record, with people experiencing overlapping environmental disasters and protracted crises around the world.

Scholars and practitioners have been arguing for almost 30 years that lifesaving emergency humanitarian assistance can, and should, complement and support longer-term development efforts, and vice-versa. The term ‘double humanitarian-development nexus’ has been coined to qualify this interaction between emergency humanitarian, and development aid. It was promptly supplemented by the so-called ‘triple nexus’, characterising an approach that combines the expertise of the sustainable development, peacebuilding and

# Exponentially Growing Humanitarian Needs

conflict mitigation, and humanitarian aid sectors in overcoming collective challenges and ensuring the protection and well-being of affected populations. The humanitarian-development-peace nexus, meanwhile, is about providing immediate life-saving assistance while also strengthening infrastructure, such as water and sanitation, and social security systems, including healthcare and education, to ultimately support longer-term development and consolidate peace.

All these point to the overlapping and interrelated layers of needs which are mutually reinforcing. These demand more complex, nuanced, multifaceted and intersectoral humanitarian responses. Multiple challenges are sometimes deemed to form a ‘polycrisis’, when disparate crises occur simultaneously and interact, with their overall impact exceeding the sum of their parts; or a ‘permacrisis’, referring to a prolonged relentless period marked by several overlapping crises. In such complex contexts, emphasis has been placed on building resilience to equip individuals, communities, peoples and countries to cope with crises, especially when they recur frequently or overlap, for example because a flood occurs in an area where there is a conflict.

Indeed, as the expectation is that increasingly frequent and grave climate and environment-related disasters will occur, there will be little time and opportunity for people and communities to recover between one shock and the next. This poses the fundamental question of how to ensure that the humanitarian response to one crisis does not only respond to that particular crisis but also provides durable solutions and builds necessary resilience to cope with the next or overlapping crisis. Faster and more effective responses lessen the recovery time and can help build resilience for future events. Delivering such responses which build resilience and durable solutions will remain a key challenge for the foreseeable future.

Is it realistic, however, to expect humanitarians to do more, while political and geostrategic challenges are already frustrating their efforts to effectively respond to the most immediate needs of people facing death, starvation or disease? *The New Humanitarian* has questioned the assumption that humanitarians should and indeed could pivot to do more to build resilience and support frontline communities to adapt: “Maybe, but to do climate adaptation well would mean a complete transformation of humanitarian organisations—different skills, different staff, different partnerships. And if that transformation were to take place in time to avert the worst climate disasters, it would need to be under way

# Exponentially Growing Humanitarian Needs

already, and it isn't. In a world on fire, with humanitarian responders focused on delivering on core mandate mega-crises in places like Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, is it really realistic to expect them to also be developing advanced resilience-building capacities?"<sup>7</sup>

The United Nations (UN) and other humanitarian actors have for years been underscoring that the international humanitarian system faces an exponential rise in humanitarian needs, with the countries and people with limited coping capacities suffering the most, especially children, women, marginalised groups and communities and those affected by humanitarian emergencies such as armed conflicts. The World Bank has estimated that by 2030, two-thirds of the extremely poor people in the world will live in countries affected by fragility, conflicts, and violence.<sup>8</sup> We can expect humanitarian needs to continue growing at an alarming rate in the coming decade, while the governance and operational systems currently in place will probably be increasingly questioned.

“Overlapping and interrelated layers of needs that are mutually reinforcing demand more complex, nuanced, and intersectoral humanitarian responses.”

# Shrinking or Reshaped Funding?

Will there be sufficient funding to match these growing humanitarian needs?

Even now, the humanitarian funding gap is dramatic. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated in November 2023 that the gap between the financial requirements for its ‘Global Humanitarian Overview’ and resources stood at US\$41 billion.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, current resources for some of the key areas highlighted at the SDG Summit for transitioning towards transformative results also remain too limited. It is critical to shore up investments in the six areas highlighted during the SDG Summit as transformative entry points for creating systematic impact across the SDGs and generate renewed momentum on the 2030 Agenda. These include food systems, energy access and affordability, digital connectivity, education, jobs and social protection, and climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

Traditional institutional donors, including the largest ones, have been reconsidering their budgetary priorities and allocations. The States and international or regional organisations which have traditionally funded emergency humanitarian aid do not seem prepared to dramatically increase international aid budgets, especially as they are also asked to allocate more funds for other crucial global initiatives, for instance related to climate change. The ‘Loss and Damage Fund’ established by the COP28, lauded as a significant advance, led to pledges of some US\$700 million.<sup>10</sup> While this is impressive, it was estimated to cover less than 0.2 percent of the needs, with an estimated US\$400 billion in losses in developing countries each year.<sup>11</sup> While some States that were not among the traditional humanitarian donors, for instance the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have in recent years boosted their contributions to humanitarian aid, it is unclear whether they will expand such funding. In any case, it is unlikely that they would do so to the point where resources are able to fill the needs.

Apart from institutional donors, other sources of funding for humanitarian aid have always included rich individual benefactors, companies, and foundations. Some of these are becoming increasingly influential in the humanitarian sector, considering their funding capacity. For instance, the Gates Foundation alone spent over US\$7 billion in 2022.<sup>12</sup> This trend could accentuate in the coming years, although it is difficult to foresee in a more exact manner.

# Shrinking or Reshaped Funding?

The sustainable funding of the humanitarian sector in the coming decade seems uncertain and, with increased demand, it is likely to be affected by major upheavals. Unless a seismic shift happens: “Needs are on track to outpace resources, leaving an inundated humanitarian system struggling to meet a fraction of needs,” according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.<sup>13</sup> Could technological developments trigger such seismic shift?

“The States and international organisations which have traditionally funded humanitarian aid do not seem prepared to dramatically increase their aid budgets.”



# Tech-improved Humanitarian Aid

**R**estrained funding is already driving efforts to reduce humanitarian costs by improving its efficiency and maximising its reach. Technological developments are undoubtedly playing an important part in these efforts and can be expected to do so in the foreseeable future.

Like any other sectors, the humanitarian one is being reshaped by relevant technologies. There are many current examples, for instance involving the use of drones to deliver critical food or medical supplies to remote areas that would otherwise be impossible or far more costly to reach.<sup>14</sup> A technology already largely adopted by most humanitarian actors is the distribution of cash, notably through mobile phones, allowing people in need to receive aid swiftly and in a dignified way, without having to queue for hours to receive a package that may not be suited to their individual needs. These two examples illustrate cases where the humanitarian sector adopted and adjusted technologies that have been developed for other uses.

In other cases, efforts are made to invent new technological solutions to distinctive humanitarian problems, for instance as a way of tracking real-time monitoring of evacuation status in cases of catastrophes. In Japan, for example, humanitarian actors have developed an app to monitor the flow of people evacuated in cases such as tsunamis, through anonymised data on their successive locations, collected from the use of their smartphones, with their consent obtained through a specific application.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, the possibilities related to AI are promising for the humanitarian sector. While AI is expected to disrupt 40 percent of all jobs, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the opportunities will also impact the humanitarian sector. But while AI has much lifesaving potential, it is not a silver bullet and also contains risks. Indeed, even if it could facilitate the prompt and effective delivery of aid, this must be done in a responsible manner, guaranteeing at all times the rights and interests of those receiving this aid. Critical potential opportunities lie in harnessing faster and improved data quality and analyses to enhance predictive capacities and also the quality and rapidity of the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Promising opportunities include real-time damage assessment. When a disaster occurs, planning and delivering an effective humanitarian operation requires knowing as soon as possible how many people are affected, where they

# Tech-improved Humanitarian Aid

are and where they are going, how they are affected, and what their needs are. Automating such assessments improve them dramatically. Efforts are being made to develop automated damage assessment tools as deep-learning models which identify, for instance, damaged buildings in satellite images after a disaster has happened. Decreasing the time needed to assess the needs, from a few days to hours, allows for a quick delivery of the information on the ground, and may make a huge difference in terms of the speed of response, thereby saving many more lives.

There are glimmers of hope that tech developments, including AI, may improve our collective capacity to better forecast, including extreme weather events, and therefore drastically improve early warning. In an idealised future, everyone will be forewarned of floods, droughts, or tsunamis. However, technological solutions have limits and will need to be accompanied by other humanitarian and political solutions, to ensure that people can effectively use that knowledge to protect themselves, because they will effectively have the means to reach a safe place.

Improved forecasting may also generate alternative funding for humanitarian efforts, notably through so-called ‘forecast-based financing’: enabling funding for humanitarian aid for early action based on in-depth forecast information and risk analysis. The Red Cross Movement, which has been exploring such opportunities, reveals: “A key element of forecast-based financing is that the allocation of financial resources is agreed in advance, together with the specific forecast threshold that triggers the release of those resources for the implementation of early actions. The roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in implementing these actions are defined in the Early Action Protocol (EAP). This ensures the full commitment of implementation among the involved stakeholders.”<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, the promises of this new form of humanitarian funding would be to anticipate disasters, prevent their impact as much as possible, and reduce human suffering and losses.

In all these areas, innovation and developments are largely driven by companies and individuals, again underlining the role that the private sector can play, and is increasingly playing, in supporting the humanitarian sector.

To be sure, however, these potential improvements are not a given. The threats are many, as the trends described above of increasing frequency and gravity of catastrophes, compounded by other risks such as those of wars, which could themselves be fueled by and conducted with support of AI systems.

**I**n such increasingly demanding humanitarian context, a trend likely to continue and even further increase is the so-called ‘localisation’ of aid. Localisation could contribute to transforming humanitarian aid, making it possibly more efficient and less costly, and as such help transform it to confront increased demands.

Humanitarian aid is too often conflated with foreign or international assistance when, clearly, in response to any crisis, the first responders are usually local actors and organisations, already present on the field and helping their own people and neighbours. Not only are local humanitarians able to respond faster, especially in the initial hours that are always crucial in emergency operations—they are also able to communicate in the local languages and have greater sensitivity to cultural contexts. They are intimately familiar with the situation on the ground and the genuine needs of the population. These all make them particularly effective, and eliminate numerous costs like international travel and translation services, thus allowing more resources to be allocated to providing assistance and saving lives.

The Istanbul World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 helped highlight the importance of local humanitarian actors and of the localisation of aid, as underlined by the UN Secretary-General who declared that aid is to be “as local as possible, as international as necessary.”<sup>17</sup>

This trend can be expected to continue, as the often-lower financial cost of local humanitarian organisations, compared to their ‘international’ counterparts, gives them a comparative advantage that is likely to persist. Moreover, it matches the general push towards asserting national sovereignty and the recognition that States have the primary responsibility in protecting their people and providing them with at least basic services at all times, including and especially in crises.

Ultimately, given the increasingly fragile and fragmented international systems, global and regional, humanitarian and other actors will have to gradually become more willing to contemplate not only reforms but also collaborations. Suggestions for improvements or transformations should not be perceived as threats, but this is challenging in an environment where there is fear of opening a Pandora’s box, undermining status quo, or questioning established practices.

The aim should be to not allow the humanitarian space to become a zero-sum game, especially when assessed in light of its ultimate objectives: to save lives and restore people's dignity. As observed by a commentary from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore: "Rather than seeing the humanitarian space as a by-product of another time, it should be viewed as an avenue for cooperation and change. It is in the area of disaster response that countries and sectors come together to provide humanitarian assistance to those most in need. It is therefore an avenue where bold changes should be made to meet the challenges of today and to demonstrate possibilities of cooperation in action."<sup>18</sup>

“Humanitarian aid is often conflated with foreign assistance but, in response to any crisis, the first responders are usually local actors.”

## A Principled Humanitarian Approach and Respect for International Humanitarian Law?

**P**erhaps the most crucial global humanitarian challenge expected to persist beyond 2030 is to secure access to all those in need in conflict situations. The capacity of humanitarian actors to reach all is underpinned by their neutrality, impartiality, and independence.<sup>19</sup> These principles must be recognised and accepted by all, especially by all parties in contexts of conflicts. Yet, whether in Ukraine or Gaza, Sudan or Yemen, they are fundamentally challenged. This is related to the risks of further erosion of international humanitarian law—the body of laws that limit the conduct of warfare and require that civilians and objects such as hospitals, schools and services crucial for people’s lives be protected at all times in conflicts.

This bedrock of humanitarian aid has been shaken to the core by what the world is witnessing in recent conflicts. The targeting of civilians and their properties, displacement of civilians, even attacks on schools, healthcare personnel and facilities, have become all too common. Endless images of human suffering risk numbing public opinion to their own humanitarian needs and the rules that protect all of us. While the world is rapidly changing, some deep concerns and ethical considerations have to remain the same. International humanitarian law encapsulates key concepts common to most, if not all cultures and religions, and ultimately to the whole of humanity. We must promptly return to full respect for international humanitarian law.

“While the world is changing,  
ethical considerations have to  
remain the same.”

While predictions are methodologically fraught, it can be safely assumed that global humanitarian challenges will become increasingly complex in the coming years and decades and thereby necessitate critical adjustments on the part of all humanitarian actors, whether international or regional organisations, governments, or civil society actors.

As the humanitarian sector adjusts to an environment that requires more nimble solutions, it will increasingly be able to rely on digital and other emerging technical tools, while confronting the massive challenge of delivering far more to meet growing demands with far less predictable financial resources. Yet, saving lives and restoring people's dignity in times of crises remains a basic legal and moral obligation, and is arguably the very purpose of political governance, nationally, regionally, and internationally. [ORF](#)

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