



“We Can Adapt to Anything, But Not to War”

Delivering for People in Conflict Settings:
Reflections on an Evolving Humanitarian Landscape

Cover image caption: Mukera, South Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 19 May 2026. An ICRC protection team holds a focus group for people to talk about their concerns, news from the area and the effects of conflict on their village.

Cover photo credit: H.K. Cunningham/ICRC

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About this report

Communities continue to suffer the catastrophic effects of unbridled conflict and violence. Accelerating conflict, systemic risks, rising humanitarian needs and dwindling resources are constraining the ability of humanitarians to meet even the most basic needs.

This report is based on research conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Ukraine, plus interviews with local, national and international actors. It highlights the perspectives of communities, National Societies (NS) working in conflict and other humanitarian actors on the challenges they face and how humanitarian action can evolve to meet them.

It urgently calls on states, humanitarians and development actors to work together and to intensify their efforts to meet the needs and aspirations of people enduring conflict.

The project was led by Avigail Shai and Arjun Claire, senior policy advisers in the ICRC's Policy and Research Unit, and carried out with the Red Cross Societies of the DRC, South Sudan and Ukraine, which helped design and conduct the case study research. In particular, we wish to thank Gloria Lombo Kihinga (Secretary-General, Red Cross Society of the Democratic Republic of the Congo), John Lobor (Secretary-General, South Sudan Red Cross) and Irina Boicheva (Head of Strategic Partnerships and International Relations, Ukrainian Red Cross Society) for their invaluable support. We also wish to thank the National Society branches and the dedicated and tireless National Society volunteers in the DRC, South Sudan and Ukraine who supported the work. We wish to thank Menty Kebede, Policy Adviser, ICRC, who provided valuable research support in the initial stages of the research, and Amaru Ríos Martínez, intern, ICRC, who provided valuable research support in the later phases.

This research could not have taken place without the support of ICRC delegations in the DRC, South Sudan and Ukraine. We are deeply indebted to the communities we met during the case study research for their trust and for sharing their experiences with us. We are grateful to the other National Societies, local authorities, service providers, national and international NGOs, UN agencies, development and climate actors, faith-based organizations and think tanks that offered their perspectives and insights. We thank the many ICRC colleagues who shared their insights and provided valuable feedback on the report.

We also wish to acknowledge the strategic advice and guidance provided by the advisory group for the project: Gloria Lombo Kihinga, John Lobor and Irina Boicheva, mentioned above; Safia Verjee, Executive Director of the International Centre of Humanitarian Affairs at the Kenya Red Cross Society; Anders Pedersen, Head of International, Swedish Red Cross; Eva Svoboda, former Director, International Law, Movement and Partnerships, ICRC; Francois Moreillon, Head of Delegation, DRC; Wendy Fleury, Operations Strategy and Engagement Lead, ICRC; and Claire de Feu, Head of Programmes and Prevention, Jerusalem, ICRC.

Executive summary

Conflicts without end, egregious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and a diminished humanitarian response are having a catastrophic impact on millions of people affected by armed conflict and violence.

From the DRC to South Sudan to Ukraine, communities share stories of living through crisis: losing loved ones, fleeing to find refuge, suffering under daily bombardments, surviving without even the most basic services and struggling to rebuild in the face of the combined impacts of climate and conflict. They also tell stories of mutual solidarity, demand respect for their right to live in safety and dignity, and clearly say how they want humanitarians to support them.

Today, however, humanitarian action faces deep uncertainty. It has always had to navigate complex local and global politics, but the combination of deliberate and mounting obstacles to assisting and protecting people and precipitous drops in funding makes this moment different. Humanitarian responses are being reconfigured to this new reality. Any refashioning of humanitarian action that does not fully take into account the perspectives of conflict-affected communities and humanitarian early responders will, however, remain incomplete.

This report is one attempt to hear these perspectives. It draws on the views shared by communities, a range of National Societies working in conflict, local authorities, service providers, national and international NGOs, UN agencies, development and climate actors, faith-based organizations and think tanks.

Understanding how these actors see the key trends shaping needs and the environment for humanitarian action, and the dilemmas they grapple with every day, is essential to understanding how to respond to these challenges. So, too, is understanding the impacts of deep cuts in specific contexts; how these have affected the trust and acceptance of humanitarian actors by communities and local authorities; the impossible choices this is forcing humanitarians to make in how they deliver protection and assistance, and on whom they focus their remaining efforts; and the adaptive approaches and partnerships that are needed to meet this moment of profound change.

The key findings include:

- Rising conflict-related violence, developments in how conflicts are fought and a more constrained operational space make it increasingly difficult for humanitarians to deliver for people. At the same time, the convergence of climate risks with conflict is exacerbating humanitarian needs.
- The impact of cuts is sharpening competition and driving geographic consolidation. Funding for critical programmes has declined dramatically, including for those focused on protection and on strengthening resilience, with severe impacts on key services to people affected by conflict. Cuts to common services make it increasingly difficult to gauge these impacts in certain contexts, with evidence that some people are falling off the radar entirely.
- A singular back to basics focus is informing many spending and programming decisions, which risks putting aside hard-earned lessons about what constitutes a good-quality response, including adopting longer-term planning horizons and listening to communities.
- While funding quantity has declined, importantly so has funding quality, and together this is shaping responses in ways that undermine comprehensive, effective and principled responses.
- There is no simple answer as to whether the pace and scale of cuts have eroded communities' trust in and acceptance of humanitarian action; this depends on the realities in each context and on the actors involved. Humanitarians must constantly nurture trust through sustained engagement, transparent communication and concrete action.

The trajectory these trends take can be shaped. But doing so requires key stakeholders – states, humanitarians, development actors – to take real action on our collective responsibilities to communities affected by conflict.

What does this look like?

States must renew their investments in preventing and resolving conflicts and commit to addressing global challenges that can only be solved collectively. Humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political solutions. States must respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law, and ensure an enabling environment for humanitarian response. They must commit to sustainably resourcing humanitarian action with sufficient funding that facilitates principled aid delivery, for work that addresses short- and longer-term needs. Finally, states must continue to insist that development actors remain engaged in conflict settings and support them in doing so.

Humanitarians must forge new ties and work together to reinforce the case for addressing the needs and aspirations of people affected by humanitarian crises. This includes upholding the centrality of protection in their programming. They must keep striving to find the right balance between emergency and resilience activities; invest in dialogue with conflict parties and engagement with communities; support community and system resilience; maintain the foundational elements of quality programming; and invest in equal and adaptive partnerships.

Development actors must remain engaged in and expand their work in conflict settings, where poverty is increasingly concentrated and the risk of development reversals are constant. This includes entering into adaptive partnerships with humanitarian actors, building on and scaling proven models.

Introduction

Humanitarian action is facing profound challenges. Rising armed conflicts, wider shifts in geopolitics and multilateralism, and funding pressures have created an inflection point. What this means for how humanitarian action may evolve is not set in stone, and we have a responsibility to use the momentum for change wisely. To meaningfully respond to challenges, and to imagine possible futures, requires reflection and deliberation – especially during a time of flux.

The aim of this research is thus to look beyond specific reform initiatives to reflect on the deeper trends that will shape humanitarian action for years to come and to consider how these might be shaped in turn.¹ It is to ground these reflections in the experiences and perspectives of people living in countries where these trends are a reality, and in the operational impacts that continue to require terrible trade-offs. And it is to ask how humanitarianism – and the actors who shape it – might evolve in order to better prevent and alleviate the suffering of people enduring conflict.

The research was designed and carried out in partnership with the National Societies of the DRC, South Sudan and Ukraine. It is comprised of three case studies in the DRC, South Sudan and Ukraine, including discussions with communities facing conflict, a series of interviews with leaders of 11 National Societies working in conflict to capture their diverse views, and consultations with a range of actors working inside and outside the formal humanitarian system. Throughout, key themes on which participants reflected include the impact of key trends on their work; how to balance the scope and focus of principled humanitarian action in an environment of scarce resources and shrinking space (including prioritizing long- and short-term responses; and sustaining protection work); how to better work in partnership to deliver more effectively for people; and how trust in, and the legitimacy of, humanitarian action can be reinforced with affected people and other key actors.

The three contexts were chosen because they represent very different types of conflict – with different impacts on people, different needs and different responses. But all are characterized by an intensity of violence, severe protection challenges, and by the near impossibility of reaching and supporting all those who require protection and assistance.

The **DRC** has endured successive waves of armed conflict, with the current escalation in large parts of North and South Kivu the most recent development, and a deadly Ebola outbreak in 2026. Through it all, one reality has remained constant: unrelenting violence against civilians, including very high rates of sexual violence. The health system, already unable to meet the needs of people, is struggling as a result of reductions in both global health funding and humanitarian assistance.

Armed conflict is intensifying in **South Sudan** and the conflict in Sudan also has wide-ranging ramifications, with over a million returnees and refugees from Sudan seeking safety in South Sudan.² The majority of people in South Sudan live in chronic poverty, with over two-thirds considered to require some form of humanitarian assistance.³ At the same time, the constant cycle of floods and droughts – made more intense by climate change – is devastating the lives and livelihoods of people who are already struggling to cope with the impacts of poverty, conflict and violence.

¹ There have been many rounds of reform within the sector, and these continue to generate rich reflection and analysis. See the Bibliography for an extensive list of resources on this topic.

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Sudan's Refugees and Returnees: Living in Hope in South Sudan*, OCHA, New York, 2026: <https://www.unocha.org/news/sudans-refugees-and-returnees-living-hope-south-sudan>.

³ OCHA, *South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan*, OCHA, New York, 2026: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026-january-2026>.

Over four years into the escalation of the international armed conflict between Russia and **Ukraine**, people continue to suffer the humanitarian consequences of high-intensity warfare, and sustained attacks have led to large-scale damage to housing and to critical infrastructure supporting essential services. Much of the humanitarian response is shaped by local and national actors, with strong government stewardship.

The report first situates the research in the global trends that are shaping the environment for humanitarian action, and the critical challenges to which humanitarians must respond. It pulls out the specific views shared by communities, including on their key needs and how humanitarians can better meet them. It presents the perspectives of a range of National Societies – who work on both emergency and longer-term programmes, on conflict, displacement, climate change and health, and whose volunteers come from the very communities they are serving. And it explores the views shared by other humanitarian actors, or those who work in partnership with them.

The intention is not to exhaustively catalogue the full range of possible perspectives or impacts. It is rather to listen widely; distil commonalities; identify the main questions, dilemmas and opportunities arising from this current moment, and look ahead at what more must be done.



Ukraine, August 2025. Liudmila and a member of ICRC personnel look at photos of Liudmila's grandson, who is missing in action.

Evolving trends in conflict and humanitarian action

Across discussions with affected communities, as well as representatives of National Societies, and local, national and international organizations, a common set of themes emerged: intensification of armed conflict, with climate as a stressor and new technologies as an accelerant; global solidarity fluctuating between narrow definitions of national interest and promoting international cooperation; and one constant, unidirectional trend – an ever more fraught operating environment for humanitarian action.

Rising and evolving conflicts

Armed conflicts are spreading and becoming harder to end. By the end of 2025, the ICRC had legally classified over 130 armed conflicts, twice as many as it recorded in 2010. Not only are conflicts more numerous, but they also last much longer; many of the top ten ICRC operations are in countries that have been affected by armed conflict for decades.⁴

Countries in the grip of conflict go through phases of peak and chronic violence. The three countries examined in the case studies – the DRC, South Sudan and Ukraine – have seen conflict peak, ebb and flare up again in new forms. Entrenched instability impedes economic development and leaves essential services and critical infrastructure in a state of permanent disrepair.

Victory at all costs, unresolved grievances and tangled political and economic agendas define most conflicts, making comprehensive peace agreements elusive.⁵ Where peace agreements are reached that fail to meaningfully address these issues, they often collapse, sparking a new cycle of conflict. Conflicts are not contained within fixed borders, drawing an ever-larger array of state and non-state actors into their vortex. Whole communities are cast as enemies, with food, water, health care and other essential services often deliberately targeted and destroyed. For the more than 200 million people living in areas controlled or contested by armed groups, the challenges are particularly acute and long-lasting: the absence of public services, the lack of legal recognition for some and the lingering suspicion of having collaborated with one side or the other.⁶

The way conflicts are fought is also evolving, with profound implications for civilians. Lack of compliance with IHL, limited accountability for violations, and increasingly expedient interpretations of the law weaken its protective power.⁷ Attacking or weaponizing key chokepoints spreads the pain of conflict, especially when it disrupts deliveries of food, fuel, fertilizer or medical supplies.⁸ Conflicts are not confined to the physical

4 ICRC, *Humanitarian Outlook 2026: A World Succumbing to War*, ICRC, Geneva, 2026: <https://www.icrc.org/en/article/humanitarian-outlook-2026>.

5 ICRC, *Through Humanity to Peace: Reflections on Humanitarian Action and Peace from the ICRC's Practice*, ICRC, Geneva, 2025: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/through-humanity-peace-reflections-humanitarian-action-and-peace-icrcs-practice>.

6 ICRC, *Navigating Violence: Learning from Civilian Experiences and Strengthening Humanitarian Action in Contested Territories*, ICRC, Geneva, 2025: <https://shop.icrc.org/navigating-violence-learning-from-civilian-experiences-and-strengthening-humanitarian-action-in-contested-territories-pdf-en.html>.

7 ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts: Building a Culture of Compliance for IHL to Protect Humanity in Today's and Future Conflicts*, ICRC, Geneva, 2024: <https://shop.icrc.org/international-humanitarian-law-and-the-challenges-of-contemporary-armed-conflicts-building-a-culture-of-compliance-for-ihl-to-protect-humanity-in-today-s-and-future-conflicts-pdf-en.html>.

8 Mercy Corps, *From Hormuz to the Frontlines of Hunger: The Middle East War's Economic Reach into Six Fragile Contexts*, Mercy Corps, Geneva/Portland, 2026: <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2026-05/from-hormuz-to-the-frontline-of-hunger.pdf>. See also: Ben Ramalingam and Shaun Hazeldine, *Humanitarian Action in a Chokepoint World*, IFRC Solferino Academy, 2026: <https://solferinoacademy.com/humanitarian-action-in-a-chokepoint-world/>.

battlefield, but are extending into the digital realm, where data and digital technologies, including AI and cyber means, are accelerating the pace of warfare, potentially undermining human control and facilitating manipulation to polarize and mobilize. Harmful narratives in the digital space amplify hate, which can explode into real-life violence. Cycles of vilification and dehumanization of the other continue, shattering a shared understanding of humanity.

A transforming risk landscape

The impacts of conflict are rarely felt in isolation.

Climate shocks are interacting with conflict-related risks, creating new vulnerabilities and deepening existing ones. The climate crisis is a global reality from which nobody can escape, but countries experiencing conflict are most at risk because they are the least equipped to respond, with the most vulnerable people in these countries bearing the greatest burden.⁹ Several humanitarian practitioners identified increasing climate stress as a factor driving increased competition for resources, potentially amplifying the risk of intercommunal conflict.

The threat of major infectious disease outbreaks is ever-present, particularly as cuts to health funding in conflict-affected countries are leading to diminished disease surveillance, preparedness and response capacity.¹⁰

Technological change is compounding these risks in new and unpredictable ways. The application of robotics and AI in warfare is reshaping conflict itself, creating new protection challenges.¹¹ These technologies pose escalating risks for respect of IHL and the protection of civilians while simultaneously creating security risks and complex duty-of-care considerations for humanitarian workers operating in increasingly automated conflict environments. From remote villages in the DRC to the towns and cities of Ukraine, changes in military tactics propelled by the use of new technologies, such as cheap drones and the increasing use of armed drones, are blurring the distinctions between civilians and military targets, and stretching front lines far beyond geographically defined boundaries, making daily life unbearable for civilians.



North Kivu Province, DRC, March 2026. Hazard tape surrounds an unexploded munition, warning people not to approach. Explosive remnants of war are a major problem in the east of the DRC. ICRC weapon contamination specialists help reduce the risk by marking hazardous areas.

⁹ ICRC, *When Rain Turns to Dust: Understanding and Responding to the Combined Impact of Armed Conflicts and the Climate and Environment Crisis on People's Lives*, ICRC, Geneva, 2020: https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/rain_turns_to_dust_climate_change_conflict.pdf.

¹⁰ Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, *A World on the Edge: Priorities for a Pandemic-Resilient Future*, Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2026: https://gpmc.org/docs/librariesprovider17/default-document-library/gpmb-2026-report.pdf?sfvrsn=6bbe6e95_1&download=true.

¹¹ ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, op. cit.

A new funding reality

All forms of overseas development assistance (ODA) are declining. Even as conflicts multiply and intensify, humanitarian funding has plummeted.¹² After years of growth, humanitarian funding peaked in 2022 at over \$42 billion – driven largely by COVID-19 and the conflict in Ukraine – and has fallen steadily since. 2025 saw the sharpest slump in a decade: funding dropped by over a quarter compared with the previous year.¹³ The cuts fell unevenly across regions, decoupled from actual needs, with sub-Saharan Africa seeing a 40 per cent plunge – a region where humanitarian assistance represents a much larger share of countries' gross domestic product.¹⁴ The UN's 2026 hyper-prioritized global humanitarian appeal is now requesting a minimum of \$23 billion to provide life-saving assistance to 87 million people, representing a mere 36 per cent of all people in need. Even accounting for humanitarian funds flowing outside formal appeals, the trajectory of steady growth in humanitarian funding appears to have come to an end.

The quality of funding is also under pressure – more conditions, less flexibility and short-term spending windows – with consequences for prevention, preparedness, protection and other longer-term humanitarian programming.

Trends in development funding are remarkably similar. Funding has declined, with 2025 seeing the sharpest fall in years – almost a quarter – bringing official development assistance to levels last seen over a decade ago.¹⁵ Aid now comes increasingly in the form of concessional loans rather than grants. While development funding for the UN system has declined, contributions to the World Bank and regional development banks have increased.¹⁶ UN peacekeeping budgets have also been cut, with peacekeeping missions reducing their operational presence.¹⁷

It is not clear that governments will be able to cover these gaps – for now. Many governments, particularly those in conflict-affected countries, face mounting pressures with diminishing means: high debts and rising borrowing costs, volatility in international markets and supply chains and technological upheaval. The one silver lining amid this bleak landscape is remittances: global remittance flows reached over \$900 billion in 2024, with increases in most regions.¹⁸

¹² All funding figures are taken from OCHA's Financial Tracking Service: <https://fts.unocha.org/>.

¹³ According to OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, humanitarian funding fell to \$27.80 billion in 2025 from \$37.11 billion in 2024, a drop of 25 per cent.

¹⁴ International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa – Hard-Won Gains Under Pressure*, International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC, 2026: <https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/reo/afr/2026/april/english/text.pdf>.

¹⁵ According to the OECD, development assistance amounted to \$174.3 billion in 2025, down from \$215.1 billion in 2024. However, these figures do not capture all development assistance, as they cover only assistance reported by countries belonging to the Development Assistance Committee. In 2015, ODA amounted to \$174.5 billion.

¹⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *A Historic Decline in Foreign Aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA Data*, OECD Data Explainers, OECD, Paris, 2026: <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/data-explainers/2026/04/a-historic-decline-in-foreign-aid-preliminary-2025-oda-data.html>.

¹⁷ While the overall reduction in the approved UN peacekeeping budget for 2025–2026 is nominal – \$5.38 billion compared to \$5.59 billion the previous year – the real impact has been felt through non-payment of assessed contributions. According to SIPRI, while the number of missions has remained broadly stable, at the end of 2025 the number of deployed personnel had fallen by 49 per cent since 2016, reaching its lowest level in at least 25 years. See: SIPRI 2025.

¹⁸ International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa – Hard-Won Gains Under Pressure*, *op. cit.*

Wavering global solidarity?

Global solidarity – our collective will to respond to human suffering wherever it is found – appears to be under pressure. The current decline in international aid might seem to signal a retreat from it. But the story is more complex.

Polling data in traditional donor countries shows continued support for international aid when it is concrete and connects to issues people care about.¹⁹ Support is closely linked to people’s optimism about their own economic prospects and their trust in institutions and governments.²⁰ Organizations that have a strong constituency – whether faith-based or secular – continue to mobilize support, even reporting increased funding from individual donations. This implies that the steep drops in humanitarian funding do not necessarily reflect a decline in public support for humanitarian action, especially when purpose and impact are communicated with clarity and conviction. Nevertheless, public attention tends to be short, meaning it is often difficult to mobilize support for protracted crises. This is where sustained institutional funding becomes critical.

The one constant – an ever-more fraught humanitarian space

Space for principled humanitarian action has never been guaranteed; it is constantly negotiated. What has changed is the scale and severity of the challenge. States are imposing stricter conditions on where and how humanitarians can operate. This can include prohibitions on working in areas controlled by armed groups and in occupied territories, including through counterterrorism legislation or other emergency decrees; mandatory channelling of money through specific banks; bans on cash programming; and rigid reporting and staffing requirements. Administrative obstacles and bureaucratic processes – from starting operations to negotiating travel authorizations – place enormous demands on time, energy and resources.

Physical insecurity remains an impediment, with the consistently high number of attacks on humanitarian personnel and health facilities a clear indicator.²¹ Bombing and looting of health facilities continue to be a feature of conflict, documented in all three case studies and exacerbating health challenges in countries where such services are already under enormous pressure. Twenty-seven Red Cross and Red Crescent staff members and volunteers were killed on duty in 2025.²²

The growing involvement of for-profit actors in humanitarian action, while not new or widespread, is a trend gaining prominence. This can undermine impartiality and endanger the very people humanitarian action seeks to protect. Many humanitarian actors are also outsourcing assistance delivery to service providers or private contractors, and the resulting loss of proximity can impoverish their understanding of communities and their needs.

Digitalization of assistance is accelerating this loss of proximity. Digital technologies have enabled novel delivery mechanisms, such as digital payments reaching remote populations, telemedicine extending health services and satellite imagery improving the reach of responses.²³ Yet digitalization has simultaneously intro-

19 Institut Public de Sondage d’Opinion Secteur, *Public Opinion on Government Funding for International Humanitarian Aid*, IPSOS Global Advisor, 2025: <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2025-09/ipsos-global-advisor-public-opinion-on-government-funded-humanitarian-aid-september-2025.pdf>.

20 Lily Kennish and Matt Chennells, *Demanding Results: Global Views on International Cooperation*, Rockefeller Foundation, New York, 2025: <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Demanding-Results-Global-Views-on-International-Cooperation-Report-Final.pdf>.

21 According to the Aid Worker Security Database, the year 2025 saw 571 major attacks on humanitarian workers: <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/search?start=2025&detail=1>.

22 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), *In Memoriam*, IFRC, Geneva, 2026: <https://www.ifrc.org/who-we-are/international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement/memoriam>.

23 Pierrick Devidal, “Back to basics with a digital twist: Humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age”, *Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog*, International Committee of the Red Cross, 2 February 2023: <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2023/02/02/back-to-basics-digital-twist-humanitarian-principles/>.



Yei, South Sudan, April 2025. ICRC personnel transfer people with weapon wounds onto a plane that will fly them to Juba for treatment. The ICRC treats hundreds of people with weapon wounds from across the country.

duced risks. Data protection failures can put people's lives in danger, algorithmic systems may encode existing biases, and digital exclusion can leave the most marginalized unreached. Increasing reliance on digital tools and platforms also means that humanitarian operations risk being paralysed during internet shutdowns or disruptions. The fragmentation of digital spaces may require humanitarian actors to navigate multiple digital infrastructures, with implications for their independence and operational continuity.²⁴

These trends are increasingly shaping the humanitarian action of today – and tomorrow. Together, they point to an operational context that will continue to evolve rapidly, forcing humanitarians to adapt. Earlier reforms took place in periods of expansion, adding new structures and processes. Now, reforms are taking place in a period of contraction, potentially undoing some of those very structures and processes. Scarcity can force fundamental and necessary shifts; it can also accelerate the race to the bottom.

²⁴ Pierrick Devidal, “Lost in digital translation? The humanitarian principles in the digital age”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 106, 2024, pp. 120–154, <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/lost-in-digital-translation-the-humanitarian-principles-in-the-digital-age-925>.



Mukera, South Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 19 May 2026. Zawadi Moambi has received ICRC support to start a small trading business after having to flee her home.

Communities, National Societies and other humanitarian actors: Key perspectives

What follows is a consolidation of insights shared by local, national and international actors – including communities affected by conflict, National Societies, local authorities, private service providers, faith-based organizations, national and international NGOs, development and climate actors, think tanks and the UN.

Some discussants come from South Sudan, Ukraine or the DRC; others speak from a specific country or global perspective.

Communities share their experiences and expectations of humanitarian action

We spoke with a range of communities, local leaders and local authorities. In the DRC, we held focus group discussions with people from the Kaziba chiefdom in South Kivu, only a few months after heavy clashes had taken place in the village; in South Sudan, we sat with returnees, refugees and host communities in Aweil East County, many of them recently arrived in South Sudan after having been displaced multiple times inside Sudan; in Ukraine, we spoke with communities in Chernihiv Oblast, many of them elderly, living under the constant thrum of air alerts with limited electricity.

For these communities, humanitarian agencies are one among a broader constellation of actors they look to for assistance. Most people rely on their social networks as a first point of support.

In eastern DRC, communities have lived through four decades of violence and have strong intercommunal solidarity. An overwhelming majority of displaced people live with host families rather than in IDP camps. In Aweil East County, some host communities have swiftly mobilized to assist returnees and refugees, offering them land to build makeshift shelters and providing food and clothing. Most returnees, many of whom had lived in Sudan for many years, still share communal ties with the host communities. A few also noted receiving remittances from abroad. People in Chernihiv Oblast are also receiving support from neighbours, community organizations and church groups, although they underscored that this remains insufficient.

“When we first arrived, women from the host community would often provide meals. The village chief provided space for small huts. But the host families themselves are in a difficult situation and their capacity to provide sustainable support is limited. The land and housing we have now is temporary, and sometimes ten people share one small hut.”

Focus group participant, Wanyjok, Aweil East County, South Sudan²⁵

Communities describe a range of ways they support each other. Village savings and loan associations are common in the DRC and, to some extent, in South Sudan. In Kaziba, there are several associations, each of approximately 50 members, through which people pool money and extend credit to one another to fund small enterprises or meet emergency needs. Communities regret that humanitarian actors do not consistently recognize or support these mechanisms, and underscore the importance of reinforcing and building on existing community resilience. In Kaziba, a few of the village savings and loan associations have collapsed, as people are unable to repay their loans owing to renewed fighting; focus group participants suggest humanitarian actors could support them in reviving these, through grants.

In Aweil East, some returnees say they have land in more remote areas but are hesitant to go there as they would have access to neither casual labour opportunities nor assistance from humanitarian agencies. They suggest that if humanitarian actors equipped them with farming equipment and provided shelter materials, they could cultivate their lands and become self-reliant.

Communities and local authorities in all three contexts are unequivocal in their desire for sustainable assistance, to support their self-reliance. Many emphasize the need for sustainable livelihood support in the form of vocational training opportunities and skills development. This includes training for skills as diverse as carpentry, masonry and construction work, grants for income-generating activities, as well as complementing seed distributions with knowledge of new planting techniques. An underlying refrain from several discussions is that humanitarian assistance must leave something behind – either in the form of specific skills or structures – that communities can build upon to sustain themselves.

“We need to invest in education and schools and human capital. We need to build human beings, not only distribute materials.”

County government official, Aweil East County, South Sudan²⁶

Communities voice recurring concerns with humanitarian responses: assistance often arrives late, is poorly matched to actual needs and is not always seen to be fairly distributed. These challenges are not new, but recent funding cuts have exacerbated them. As humanitarian actors narrow vulnerability criteria further, assistance is reaching fewer people.

In Kaziba, people emphasize the importance of adapted support – farmers, animal breeders and traders all have different needs – and consistently express a preference for cash rather than distributions of food and household items.

²⁵ Focus group discussion, Aweil East, Northern Bahr Ghazal, South Sudan, 4 March 2026.

²⁶ Key informant interview, Aweil East, Northern Bahr Ghazal, South Sudan, 4 March 2026.

In Aweil East, newly arrived returnees and refugees are in urgent need of assistance – including food, water and health care – but few organizations can respond immediately and at scale because of funding cuts. The limited response targets only returnees and refugees, effectively excluding the host community. Some returnees who have received cash would prefer farming materials and food instead, as this would be more useful given rising prices.

In Chernihiv, people underscore the need for sustainable housing support rather than quick fixes, pointing out that they need a solution for more than one season. Some know of people who have returned to their homes in insecure front-line areas or who refuse to evacuate, waiting until conditions become untenable, for fear of losing eligibility for assistance.

“Not all people were registered; there was bias in registrations. Some villages were not covered. This creates tension in the community, as people don’t speak to each other.”

Focus group participant, Kaziba, South Kivu, DRC²⁷

Humanitarian approaches to deciding who receives assistance also contrast with community values; while humanitarians narrowly target based on specific vulnerability criteria, many communities recognize that conflict affects everyone, and favour assistance that benefits all in some way. From the perspective of communities, this is vital to maintaining social cohesion, as exclusion from assistance can become a source of enduring grievance. Humanitarian notions of vulnerability also tend to be narrower and more rigid than communities’ own understandings of it, which are grounded in individual lived realities.

Communities also ask that humanitarian actors be more responsive to their needs and less reliant on standard response templates. This means engaging communities in a two-way conversation – not just sharing information, but also ensuring communities feel heard and more closely involved in the aid response. Communities want not only to be consulted, but to participate in shaping how assistance and protection are conceived and delivered. Without community participation, many responses will continue to be poorly targeted and designed.

For communities, participation cuts to something deeper – it is a reaffirmation of their agency and dignity. One local service provider in Chernihiv, for instance, recalled the effort to convince a humanitarian agency to focus on heating – a critical priority with the winter season approaching – instead of water in their initial response. In Kaziba, local authorities said they welcome food distributions, but their priority is the clearing of explosive remnants of war, which prevent farmers from accessing their land.

Local authorities underline the importance of predictability in assistance, emphasizing that humanitarian actors should define, as much as possible, clear timetables for their work, and deliver on what they promise. They note that this allows them to coordinate assistance more effectively and avoid trust issues with communities; when humanitarian actors leave without clearly communicating their reasons, communities may direct their frustration at local authorities.

Community trust and acceptance are critical to humanitarian actors’ ability to protect and assist people, but they are hard to measure. Communities trust humanitarian organizations when they respect their cultural norms, do what they promise and communicate transparently about targeting decisions. Trust is also strengthened when humanitarians are close to communities and engage with them over time. Rapid withdrawal from specific locations, needs assessments not followed by action or a marked reduction in assistance without proper explanation all undermine trust. Reduced aid can also strain relations between communities and their leaders, as some participants confide that community representatives will sometimes leave people out. This also has implications for humanitarian actors. When communities see agencies engaging exclusively through such leaders, they may view those agencies with suspicion.

²⁷ Focus group discussion, Kaziba, South Kivu, DRC, 17 February 2026.

Above all – and far beyond the challenges of humanitarian assistance – communities want the conflict that blights their lives and futures to end, and peace to return.

“We can adapt to anything, but not to war.”

Focus group participant, Dihtiarivka, Chernihiv Oblast, Ukraine²⁸

The perspectives of National Societies working in conflict

The 191 National Societies in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are rooted in their communities, relying on staff and millions of dedicated volunteers to respond to humanitarian emergencies and other crises, and provide support to vulnerable people. They are also auxiliaries to their authorities in the humanitarian field²⁹ and are a key partner for the ICRC and the IFRC, and in some cases for other humanitarian organizations.

After communities themselves, National Societies are often the earliest responders in humanitarian settings. Present in virtually all contexts, National Societies offer a range of perspectives on the evolving humanitarian landscape. Yet they share a common DNA and a commitment to the same Fundamental Principles;³⁰ in a series of interviews with senior leaders of NS working in conflict settings, a clear set of trends and reflections on how humanitarian action must adapt come into sharp relief.

There is a pervasive sense that as attention moves to new conflicts, many complex, protracted crises – where conflict intersects with climate shocks, chronic water and food insecurity, displacement, deep poverty and weak health systems – are being forgotten. Among these overlapping crises, the impacts of climate change are repeatedly singled out as a risk multiplier, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.

“People run from bullets to a place with no water.”

National Society representative³¹

A lack of respect for both IHL and international human rights law is also highlighted as contributing to an environment in which the protection of civilians is undermined and progress on inclusion is at risk.

The operational environment for NS has become more challenging because of a combination of factors. These include rising violence, including against humanitarian personnel; the increasing burden of bureaucratic and other administrative burdens restricting the space for principled action; politicization and the questioning of humanitarian neutrality by parties to conflict, especially in contexts where governments and multiple armed groups vie for control (along with a reaffirmation by many NS of both the challenge and the imperative of maintaining neutrality in their context in order to reach all populations); and security and duty-of-care issues arising not just from the known risks of working in conflict settings, but also from increasing misinformation and the use of new technologies, such as drones.

²⁸ Focus group discussion, Dihtiarivka, Chernihiv Oblast, Ukraine, 7 April 2026.

²⁹ National Societies are neither government institutions nor wholly separate non-government organizations. They are meant to supplement or substitute for public humanitarian services, acting in conformity with the Fundamental Principles of the Movement, remaining independent and able to act impartially and neutrally based solely on needs: <https://www.ifrc.org/who-we-are/international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement/about-national-societies/auxiliary>.

³⁰ The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: <https://www.icrc.org/en/our-fundamental-principles>.

³¹ Key informant interview, National Society representative, 16 December 2025.

At the same time, NS identify a withdrawal or significant reduction in presence of other humanitarian actors following funding cuts in 2025, but in some cases reflecting a longer-term decline in donor interest in protracted conflict settings. Some NS are directly affected by cuts themselves, having received funding from key donors or from other humanitarian actors, especially UN agencies. As the impact of cuts works its way through the system (and with costs going up while common services are reduced), NS are clearly facing more pressure to deliver, from governments and from communities. They see protection, food security and health as the sectors with major gaps.

In several countries where the humanitarian sector makes up a significant part of the economic mix, cuts have had a ripple effect beyond direct programming. NS can see what is happening in their communities, but fewer data are available, which makes needs less visible. As a result, the true impact of both humanitarian and development cuts is still to be seen.

Recognizing that declining interest and, in some cases, exposure to the fluctuations of international funding prevent them from achieving organizational and programming sustainability, many NS are responding with a range of domestic resource-mobilization measures including cost-recovery, private fundraising and income-generation initiatives. These are bearing fruit in some cases – but particularly in contexts with a weak economy and high needs, these alone cannot meet funding needs. This is where direct funding from Movement partners, donors or country-based pool funds remains essential – though still limited for most NS.

NS have disparate views on the commitment of the wider international humanitarian sector to equal partnerships and to localization. In several contexts, they have joined consortia on an equal footing, lead initiatives on localization or cash and participate in the formal humanitarian architecture at various levels. Here, they often feel their contributions are valued and shape decision-making. Yet more commonly, NS feel that commitments by international humanitarian actors to localization are more rhetorical than practical, and that – with the exception of some partnership approaches within the Movement – there can be a transactional and extractive approach to partnering, with National Societies treated as implementers rather than co-designers of programmes, and occasionally as competitors for funding.

Three consistent suggestions are made to counteract this trend: directing resources towards building local capacity (including for domestic resource mobilization) to ensure long-term impact and sustainability; valuing and leveraging local knowledge; and shifting decision-making more to national and local actors.

“We’ve been here and we’re going to be here.”

National Society representative³²

Several NS highlight the need to reckon with the fundamental shifts in support for humanitarianism. They see this moment as an opportunity to reshape the system rather than maintain the same response architecture at a smaller scale, and to revisit how it can better complement existing community initiatives and strengthen government systems where possible. This connects to an issue raised across the board: NS, as front-line actors doing both emergency and longer-term work, passionately believe in the absolute imperative to deliver life-saving assistance. However, they see prioritizing a “back to basics” emergency approach, whether in contexts facing the combined impacts of conflict and climate shocks, or in urban middle-income settings, as untenable. For NS, basic emergency interventions must be designed from the outset to either combine elements of resilience-building or be able to plug into existing systems, including to facilitate longer-term exits. These views also reflect the unique perspectives National Societies bring as auxiliaries to their public authorities in the humanitarian field.

³² Key informant interview, National Society representative, 8 April 2026.

Trust and acceptance by communities, local authorities and governments depend on contextual factors. Across NS, humanitarian failure to deliver operationally is seen as a critical factor undermining trust, along with fatigue around assessments that don't lead to support, poor engagement with communities on targeting decisions and the impacts of funding cuts, an over-reliance on community leaders to identify people in need, and rising disinformation.

On the whole, NS feel that their proximity to communities, their sustained presence – especially of volunteers – their institutional permanence and their direct delivery model anchors their work in a more transparent and accountable dynamic that strengthens the confidence of communities.

Perception surveys confirm these views in several contexts. National Societies also identify complementarity within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as essential to accessing communities in the hardest-to-reach areas, with several pointing to the ICRC's ability to access contested areas as an example.

Other humanitarian actors reflect on shifts in the system

Local, national and international humanitarian actors working in the DRC, South Sudan and Ukraine, in other contexts or globally, hold a range of views on how the humanitarian sector is responding to unprecedented pressures, and how it might evolve.

Yet there is convergence around key challenges and dilemmas: how the impact of cuts is playing out; the difficulty of balancing the scope and focus of humanitarian action; how partnerships can adapt – and if this will happen; and whether these dynamics are affecting the legitimacy of humanitarian action in the eyes of affected communities and other stakeholders.

The impact of cuts

The impact of the changed funding landscape differs in the three countries where case studies were conducted. In the DRC, cuts have led the formal humanitarian system to geographical rescoping and consolidation of coordination structures. While the full impact of cuts continues to work its way through the system, one area where the effects are clearly visible is health care; ICRC surveys showed that nearly 85 per cent of health facilities in North and South Kivu were experiencing shortages of medicines.³³

In South Sudan, where, even before 2025, agencies were closing or curtailing operations, discussants shared concerns that standards on shelter, food and non-food items are being lowered; and sectors such as health are completely unable to keep up with basic needs, because of funding cuts and attacks on health care.³⁴

“We are giving to three families what would previously have been given to one.”³⁵

International humanitarian actor, Juba, South Sudan

Concretely, local government representatives in Aweil East describe a lack of food and water, and the closure of health facilities, with only 16 of 34 health facilities in Aweil East still functioning. Coupled with climate shocks, economic decline and rising violence, the impacts of the cuts are described as creating a perfect storm of converging vulnerabilities in South Sudan.

³³ ICRC, *Democratic Republic of the Congo: Health care increasingly difficult to access in North and South Kivu*, ICRC, 7 October 2025: <https://www.icrc.org/en/news-release/democratic-republic-congo-health-care-difficult-access>.

³⁴ Médecins Sans Frontières, *MSF South Sudan: “No Medication”: Gaps in Healthcare Threaten Lives as Violence Escalates in South Sudan*, MSF, London, 2025: <https://prezly.msf.org.uk/msf-south-sudan-no-medication-gaps-in-healthcare-threaten-lives-as-violence-escalates-in-south-sudan>.

³⁵ Key informant interview, Juba, South Sudan, 11 March 2026.

In Ukraine, while funding has also declined, funding quantity is considered by some to be less an issue than funding volatility, though specific actors, particularly women-led and women's rights organizations,³⁶ are highly exposed to cuts; and there remain ongoing challenges in securing support for programming in areas controlled by the Russian authorities. Reductions in support beyond the humanitarian sector are also affecting basic service delivery and critical infrastructure; one local service provider described the impact of cuts on their operations as “catastrophic ... it was a miracle we survived this heating season”.³⁷



Central City Hospital, Kharkiv Oblast, Ukraine, March 2026. The ICRC is helping restore buildings at the hospital, to enhance conditions for patients and staff and improve infection control. This is particularly important, as the hospital receives large numbers of casualties, and conditions have a direct impact on their recovery.

Yet there are commonalities across these contexts, and these are confirmed by humanitarian actors working in other contexts.

There is a recognition that the impact of cuts is not solely down to funding reductions by one donor, and that it also reflects the interdependence of donor funding, for example in the case of co-financed projects. The entire funding landscape has become more challenging, and in many cases appears to be driving increased competition and a focus on institutional survival rather than collaboration. The net result is a system pursuing the same approaches at a significantly reduced scale.

The suddenness of cuts has prompted uncoordinated withdrawals and consolidation, with response increasingly concentrated in specific areas within conflict-affected countries (sometimes in areas that are relatively easier to reach and deliver in, and sometimes at the expense of other, less mediatized conflicts). Common services, such as data collection and flights have been cut, affecting the ability to understand needs and reach people. The unpredictability of funding is also incentivizing humanitarian actors to favour quick delivery modalities – such as food or cash distribution – even though this may be out of step with what communities identify as their priorities. Organizations whose funding model relies on individual donations (many

³⁶ Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group in Ukraine (GiHA WG in Ukraine), A Year of Funding Reductions: Consequences for Women's Rights and Women-Led Civil Society in Ukraine, GiHA WG in Ukraine, February 2026: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2026/02/the-impact-of-foreign-assistance-cuts-on-womens-rights-and-women-led-organizations-in-ukraine>.

³⁷ Key informant interview, local service provider, Chernihiv, Chernihiv Oblast, Ukraine, 6 April 2026.

faith-based) are not all facing the same challenges as those organizations that are heavily reliant on institutional donors – however, for them, the withdrawal of other actors makes meeting needs more challenging.

Cuts are having an acute impact on activities that are costly, were already underfunded and take time, such as physical rehabilitation and the clearing of landmines and explosive remnants of war. Protection responses are highlighted as being highly affected, with a tightening focus on reactive rather than preventive activities, and more limited engagement with communities.³⁸ Respondents consistently cite the disappearance of referral pathways – for example in cases of sexual violence – as a particular concern in South Sudan and the DRC.

Yet given the withdrawal of humanitarian actors from certain areas, the cuts to access-focused and front-line positions affect more than just the quality of response. In combination with cuts to common data services, these cuts make it extremely difficult to gauge the full scope of the impacts on affected people – with evidence that some people are falling off the humanitarian radar completely. In South Sudan, for instance, refugees and returnees from Sudan reported that they had not been registered when crossing the border. A lack of quality data will inevitably affect the quality of programming. If needs become apparent only in the wake of atrocities, large-scale displacement or disease outbreaks, this delays response in the critical emergency phase, meaning that when assistance does arrive, it is often too late and poorly adapted. A question many ask is whether the severity of these impacts – both immediate costs to life and dignity, and to human development in the longer-term – is being communicated with sufficient coherence and urgency.

While funding *quantity* has obviously decreased, funding *quality* is also seen as declining. Tightly earmarked funding from different donors is reshaping which types of actor get funded and is shifting operational response priorities. As the overall quantity of funding decreases and competition increases, there is a sense that the pressure to meet donor expectations will rise, contributing to fragmentation and coverage gaps.

At the same time, along with cuts to humanitarian programmes focused on supporting longer-term resilience, deep cuts have occurred in development and peace funding. These, together with the retreat of development actors from some conflict settings, can limit people’s access to essential services and place additional expectations on humanitarian response. This calls into question the idea that development actors will step into or remain engaged in certain settings as humanitarians transition out. More practically, there is a perception of limited coordination and coherence, in terms of policy and programming, between humanitarian and development funding streams.

Some stakeholders do point to the possibility of funding cuts leading to efficiency gains and a stronger focus on effectiveness. But while many acknowledge the efficiency gains to be made and the need for new ways of working, it is clear that in many settings, the scale of the cuts and rising needs mean increased efficiency alone will never make up for the gaps.

“A sick person does not have a coping mechanism ...
a child who needs food and money for school fees can’t
find ways to cope.”

International humanitarian actor, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan³⁹

Others highlight the strength of community resilience mechanisms, from village savings and loan associations to the support host communities provide to displaced people. However, repeated shocks and the absence of conflict resolution are eroding these mechanisms, underlining the need for humanitarian responses that support them.

³⁸ Global Protection Cluster (GPC), *Protection Capacities under Pressure: Evidence from Consultations with Protection Partners across 22 Operations*, GPC, Geneva, 2026: <https://globalprotectioncluster.org/latest/publications/protection-capacities-under-pressure-evidence-consultations-protection-partners>.

³⁹ Key informant interview, international humanitarian actor, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan, 4 March 2026.

Prioritization

If there is one word that captures the shifts prompted by funding cuts, it is “prioritization”. Having fewer resources inevitably means making tough choices – what to continue doing and what to suspend or abandon, which geographic areas to focus on and from which to exit, who to include and who to exclude.

Nothing crystallizes these trade-offs more sharply than the tension between using limited resources for life-saving action or for long-term resilience. This has become a central focus of discussions with humanitarian practitioners and policymakers alike.⁴⁰ That tension has long run through humanitarian action. The differences in views are not so much about the value of long-term resilience programming, but about whether humanitarian actors should be the ones doing it, and if so under what conditions and how.

The understanding that much of what humanitarian actors do is life-saving is itself contested by interviewees. Some hold that, with the exception of specific activities in major health crises or famine-like situations, most humanitarian action is *life-preserving* – sustaining the conditions that make life possible – and that prioritization should not therefore be reduced to a focus on *life-saving* activities alone. Many interviewees also challenge the rhetoric of “going back to basics”, noting that “basics” differ from one context to another. This is most evident in Ukraine, where one interviewee noted that in a middle-income country with a strong state, a purely emergency focus would see humanitarians add limited value.⁴¹ The focus on *life-saving* action is also seen as failing to account for the compounding challenges that people face, such as conflict, climate and outbreaks of disease, which short-term interventions cannot address.

Other interviewees question whether the distinction between life-saving and resilience is binary. In most protracted conflicts, humanitarian activities can have both immediate and longer-term impacts. This makes it essential for humanitarians to adopt a long-term perspective from the outset of the emergency phase. Many discussants emphasize the need for humanitarian response to complement emergency activities with support for livelihoods and resilience, including by assessing what possibilities exist to connect with – and strengthen – existing community and public systems, rather than setting up parallel structures or ways of working.

Others express a different concern: that distinguishing between life-saving and resilience activities may be counterproductive. Attempts to overcome the emergency gap – the gap between emergency needs and humanitarian response capacity – risk creating a protection and resilience gap. Examples include the pressure on protection actors to justify their activities as life-saving, even though protection is not just about safety from violence but also about prevention and about restoring respect for people’s rights. Further, the growing reliance on short-term emergency spending windows is not conducive to protection responses, which require long-term engagement with armed actors and communities, nor to the search for durable solutions.

Geographical prioritization – with the intention of refocusing humanitarian responses on those places with the most severe needs – is another area where trade-offs are more difficult than they may initially appear. At the global level, geographical prioritization will mean closing down formal humanitarian coordination structures across several countries. At the country level, this has entailed prioritizing areas with acute violence or food insecurity instead of chronic vulnerabilities. In countries where formal coordination structures are expected to close, discussants suggest this is not often accompanied by meaningful transition planning.

More critically, interviewees mention severe limitations on responding in areas of high-intensity conflict, owing to increasing restrictions imposed by states and armed groups, worsening security conditions and humanitarian actors’ own duty-of-care obligations to their staff and partners. The trade-off is framed as: accept severe limitations and unpredictability in programming in areas with high-intensity conflict, or develop more comprehensive responses in relatively stable areas. What is clear, most emphasize, is that this should not be an either/or choice.

⁴⁰ “Going back to basics” means focusing on short-term, life-saving activities rather than longer-term activities that also build resilience.

⁴¹ Key informant interview, Kyiv, Ukraine, 3 April 2026.



Fizi, South Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 20 May 2026. The staff of Fizi General Hospital arrive for work.

There are also divergent views about prioritization based on area-based and needs-based approaches. Area-based approaches prioritize a specific geography based on the area's exposure to conflict and other risks, and aim to provide a comprehensive, multi-sector response that benefits all – displaced people, host families and other marginalized groups. In the context of shrinking resources, some informants question whether this is still the right approach, arguing for targeting solely on the basis of vulnerability induced by specific shocks.

Others underline the arbitrariness of measuring and categorizing vulnerability in narrow ways, especially in places where people face compounding risks. Targeting only the most acute needs can be counterproductive – those just below the threshold see their situation deteriorate without support until they too become acutely vulnerable. An approach that exclusively prioritizes individual vulnerability also severs people from their broader social context, a point communities themselves underscore.

Partnerships

Interviewees reflect deeply on how partnerships are evolving (or not) in the face of the challenges faced by the sector – and views are mixed. Many of those interviewed have the sense that despite the enormous changes facing the sector, cooperating in new ways and partnering with diverse actors on equal terms is still not where it should be.

In the DRC and South Sudan, many see that competition for reduced funds is undermining prospects for closer cooperation. Along with the positives – mixed international/national NGO (I/NNGO) platforms, formal coordination structures that include local and national actors – interviewees point to a top-heavy international presence, the disproportionate share of limited funds flowing to international humanitarian actors, and local actors being treated as implementers rather than true partners.

In Ukraine, progress on localization is widely agreed to be more advanced than in other humanitarian settings, with strong leadership by local actors and coalitions, more equal partnerships, and significant direct and indirect funding to local actors. Donors expect international humanitarians to work with local civil society and trial new ways of working. This is not to say there are no challenges: some point to a replication of the power dynamics more commonly associated with international actors, including on issues such as short programme cycles and the passing on of overheads.

“Localization is not just how international actors work with local actors but also how local actors work with each other.”

National humanitarian actor, Kyiv, Ukraine⁴²

Others feel that by treating civil society actors as implementers, grant redistributors or service deliverers, the formal humanitarian response architecture erodes the strengths of civil society in advocacy and constituency-building, and limits their ability to carry out truly community-based responses that build resilience.

Beyond this, discussants emphasize the need for adaptive partnership approaches that are tailored to different contexts. For example, in South Sudan, interlocutors raise the imperative to review whether, while respecting independence, there might be more flexibility for humanitarian organizations to partner with each other where catastrophic needs and low funding make closer cooperation an ethical imperative.

“Partnerships have to be contextual and we need to open our minds to this.”

International humanitarian actor, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan⁴³

In Ukraine, some ask whether a narrative that primarily defines successful localization as support to civil society should expand to ask how humanitarians can better support government systems strengthening to build a sustainable response and a path to recovery. Local actors themselves describe their efforts to build closer models of cooperation with government ministries on specific issues.

“Localization should mean ‘support to local systems’... When starting a humanitarian response ..., the first question should not be ‘How do we do cash?’ but ‘Can we go to government first?’”

International humanitarian actor, Kyiv, Ukraine⁴⁴

Respondents see adaptive partnerships – especially with development actors or service providers – as particularly relevant in settings where violence fluctuates, there is relative stability in some areas and not in others, or where there are specific challenges associated with working in areas outside government control. They see such partnerships as helping sustain systems during periods of intense conflict while keeping the door open to transitioning to recovery and development.

⁴² Key informant interview, Kyiv, Ukraine, 6 April 2026.

⁴³ Key informant interview, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan, 5 March 2026.

⁴⁴ Key informant interview, Kyiv, Ukraine, 3 April 2026.

The ICRC’s water project in Bukavu offers a concrete example. Originally designed to expand water supply capacity with Agence française de développement – channelled through the government – with the ICRC in a primarily advisory role, the project had to be restructured as conflict dynamics changed, with the ICRC prepared to take on a direct implementation role to prevent the water system from collapsing. This reorientation – from a development project expanding water capacity for a growing population, to a humanitarian one focused on replacing damaged pipes – was possible because of pre-existing trust between the partners, built through sustained exchanges over several years at multiple levels. The commitment of all parties will be essential in allowing the ICRC to play this role.

When they bring the right actors together, such partnerships can also help avoid the fragmentation, gaps or duplication that local authorities, service providers and development partners see as a common problem with humanitarian response – and consistently ask humanitarians to address. For instance, in South Sudan, the partnership between the ICRC and the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare on physical rehabilitation, and that with the Ministry of Defence on the ICRC’s support to Juba Military Hospital had helped improve referral pathways, capacity and access to specialized health care for the war-wounded in particular – although needs still far exceeded resources.



Juba, South Sudan, 16 September 2025. ICRC physiotherapist helps a 12-year-old boy who was badly injured in a bomb blast at the start of the conflict in Sudan. Specialists at the ICRC-supported Physical Rehabilitation Centre in Juba are fabricating an artificial leg so he can walk again.

Overall, while recognizing the gap between rhetoric and reality, interviewees see not just the imperative but the enormous potential in finding new ways to work together, both within the formal humanitarian sector and with actors outside of it. And they consistently identify the success factors for such partnerships: built on a pragmatic understanding of the different incentives at play; recognizing and addressing the real friction between different goals and mindsets; underpinned by genuine efforts to address and shift power differentials; and supported by adequate and equitable resourcing.

Trust and acceptance

Interviewees had varied perspectives on trust. To work safely and effectively, humanitarian actors must negotiate the distinct yet sometimes conflicting trust dynamics of communities, authorities, armed groups and donors. This is essential for gaining acceptance.

Trust with communities is not always a direct relationship; it is often filtered through community leaders and local authorities. Where communities mistrust local and state authorities because of what often amounts to a ruptured social contract, this can also influence how they view humanitarian actors. When communities perceive humanitarian actors as independent of local power structures and therefore impartial, this builds trust. At the same time, proximity with communities is a key enabler of trust, especially where organizations can build sustained relationships over time – faith-based organizations and National Society volunteers with community roots were examples that came up often. This proximity, however, also creates expectations, which, if not met, can weaken trust.

Proximity to communities can also generate resentment. In places where humanitarian aid constitutes a significant part of the local economy, the visible infrastructure of the response – offices and housing in elite locations, large vehicle fleets, fortified compounds – contrasts uncomfortably with what humanitarians are actually able to deliver. That disparity breeds mistrust.

Sudden withdrawals – not only in the wake of funding cuts, but during COVID-19 and when staff evacuate in periods of conflict escalation – are seen to undermine the trust of communities and local authorities. Trust is also inseparable from accountability to communities, an area where humanitarian actors have consistently struggled. Interviewees agreed that there is no substitute for active listening and effective delivery. Yet new ways of working that rely on remote or digital technologies, such as mobile payments, can reduce proximity to communities, making it difficult to sustain trust.

Donor trust in humanitarian actors is equally critical. Interviewees are divided on whether the current funding cuts represent a gradual erosion of trust by donors, are a consequence of wider geopolitical shifts, or both. At a time of significant funding pressures, how the various humanitarian actors – across international, national and community levels – build and sustain trust among themselves will be decisive for meeting the challenges ahead, including where they may abide by different principles but share the common goal of alleviating suffering.



Busuma, eastern Burundi, March 2026. Children carry the water they have collected back to a camp for refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Implications: Shaping the road ahead

The evidence and insights shared paint a sobering picture. But it is possible to change this trajectory. Acknowledging and taking action on our collective responsibilities is essential to this – and all stakeholders have a role to play.

States

Take action to ensure political solutions and international solidarity are prioritized, and to find pathways out of spiraling cycles of conflict and violence: While humanitarian action can alleviate suffering, it cannot substitute for political solutions. States must renew their commitment to peace by reinvesting in conflict prevention and resolution.⁴⁵ They must also reckon with rapidly evolving risks, and commit to addressing global challenges that can only be solved collectively, and that have significant humanitarian implications. This includes pushing back on polarizing narratives that dehumanize people and groups, normalize violence and make the path back to peace more challenging.

Respect and ensure respect for IHL: States, through both words and actions, must uphold their commitments to international humanitarian law, in their own conduct and of those they support. They must also uphold other bodies of law and fundamental rules protecting people in armed conflicts and other situations of violence, and provide the long-term support required for protection programming by humanitarian actors. The *Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law* is one attempt to strengthen political commitment to and respect for IHL, in order to provide more effective and meaningful protection for people affected by armed conflict.⁴⁶

Ensure an enabling environment for aid delivery by all humanitarian actors: While investing in peace and development is critical, humanitarian action continues to play an essential role in addressing the needs of people affected by conflict. States bear the primary responsibility to meet the needs of their people. They must also refrain from politicizing or instrumentalizing humanitarian aid, remove barriers restricting humanitarian action, commit to better support principled humanitarian action and facilitate its delivery.

Commit to sustainably resourcing humanitarian action: Political support for humanitarian action must be accompanied by sufficient, quality and needs-based resourcing, including for locally led response, long-term protection work and community engagement. While there are efficiency gains to be made and new ways of working can contribute to these, the scale of cuts, coupled with rising needs and growing risks, means no amount of efficiency, or new partnerships, can make up for the resourcing gap in humanitarian settings. Innovative and private funding have a clear role here. But public finance should remain the basis for funding at the scale, quality and predictability required to meet humanitarian needs. This understanding must inform discussions about how to finance humanitarian action, along with the recognition that the responsibility of financing must be borne by more actors.

⁴⁵ ICRC, *Through Humanity to Peace: Reflections on Humanitarian Action and Peace from the ICRC's Practice*, ICRC, Geneva, 2025: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/through-humanity-peace-reflections-humanitarian-action-and-peace-icrcs-practice>; ICRC, *The ICRC appeals for 1.8 billion Swiss francs for its operations in 2026*, ICRC, 17 February 2026: <https://www.icrc.org/en/article/icrc-appeals-operations-2026>.

⁴⁶ ICRC, *Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law*, ICRC, Geneva, 2024: <https://www.icrc.org/en/global-initiative-international-humanitarian-law>.

Support complementarity and partnerships with development actors: States can work to ensure greater complementarity between their development and humanitarian funding, and leverage their roles as shareholders in development banks and international financial institutions to shape policy and insist that these actors remain engaged in conflict settings. They can also support innovative partnerships between humanitarian and development actors that deliver real gains – including for people living under the control of non-state armed groups or in other highly complex settings.

Humanitarians

Broaden the humanitarian coalition: There are many ways of doing humanitarian action, with ecosystems of aid that encompass states delivering assistance directly, faith-based organizations, mutual solidarity networks, civil society organizations and private philanthropy. Each has its own values and principles, its strengths and its limitations. These ecosystems of aid can be complementary and more resilient than any of their components. The collective humanitarian voice carries real power to shape public narratives when they are anchored in the stories, struggles and aspirations of the people we seek to protect and assist. When we bear witness to people’s suffering and amplify their stories, this can matter as much to communities as the assistance we deliver. In the face of global headwinds, new ties must be forged, including with actors outside humanitarian systems, to reinforce the case for humanitarian action and respect for the law.

Uphold the centrality of protection: People caught up in conflict are above all facing a crisis of protection as a result of disregard by states and parties to conflict for IHL and human rights with long-lasting consequences. While it is the primary obligation of states and parties to conflict to respect IHL – and of those who support them to ensure respect for IHL – working to prevent violations and mitigating their consequences demands long-term engagement by humanitarians with armed actors and communities. This is a commitment that cannot be sustained through short-term programming alone.

Navigate hard choices with purpose: As humanitarians navigate tough choices, humanity must continue to be our compass. These choices begin with the question of scope. The message is clear: humanitarian action must focus on both emergency and resilience activities, with responses shaped by community priorities and by the specifics of each context. This will require each organization to assess objectively where it can add most value, where it can work with others and where it should step back while continuing to actively support existing local responses. Whatever the balance, adopting a long-term view right from the outset of programming – and recognizing the trade-offs – will be critical.

Work towards sustainable outcomes: Sustainability at both community and systems levels must guide humanitarian responses. People affected by conflict have a clear idea of what they need to build and sustain their own resilience. Humanitarians must continue to invest in understanding communities’ realities and how they are coping and adapting – and work to strengthen existing resilience mechanisms as well as local systems of exchange and resource pooling, while mitigating the consequences of harmful adaptation. At a systems level, humanitarian action must connect with and reinforce public systems wherever possible. This means engaging with state institutions, development actors and service providers to avoid creating parallel structures or processes. Exit strategies cannot be an afterthought; they must be built into programme design from the start.

Invest in operational relationships: The soft infrastructure of response – forging connections, sustaining relationships, communicating transparently and conducting negotiations – is as important as the hard infrastructure, and is critical to gaining the acceptance of communities, local authorities and armed actors, and to understanding community needs. The depth of engagement this requires is only possible through long-term proximity to communities and continued dialogue with armed actors. Cuts that disproportionately impact front-line or negotiation staff erode the networks, relationships and understanding that make effective response possible.

Strengthen equal partnerships: Addressing complex challenges – finding durable solutions and supporting recovery – demands closer cooperation between local, national and international humanitarian actors, local authorities, development actors and service providers. Partnerships must be as much about sharing capacities and complementing strengths as about implementation. In addition to the joint delivery of programmes, partnerships can take the form of advisory support to help partners seek funding or implement projects, technical mentoring between organizations or support for building the sustainable systems, logistics and administrative capacity that local and national organizations need to respond to crises. They can also have a mutually beneficial learning effect – building everybody’s capacity along the way. Adaptive partnerships – where partners shift roles according to their comparative advantages and in line with their respective mandates – are better suited to fluid conflict environments. Partnerships should not be pursued for their own sake, but to enhance the collective impact and sustainability of responses.

Sustain the foundations of quality response: Decades of accumulated learning and practice about what makes humanitarian responses effective must not be sidelined. The knowledge exists and must be built upon. It is equally important to preserve common humanitarian services: coordination, data collection, monitoring, analysis, knowledge creation and logistics. These might appear to be obvious targets for cuts when quick decisions about what to preserve and what to cut must be made. Yet their value is greater than the sum of their parts. They are what enable humanitarian response to be comprehensive, timely, well-targeted and grounded in people’s needs and expectations – and they are also what ensures that when hard choices must be made, these are informed by operational realities, with full visibility of needs.

For its part, the ICRC will continue to be guided by humanity, promote respect for IHL, and work to deliver principled humanitarian action. Protection will remain at the heart of our work. We will also reflect critically on how we can improve our responses, and invest in better understanding and integrating systemic risks into our analyses. We will continue to pursue complementarity of action by sustaining resilience work and emergency response. We will reinforce existing partnerships and seek new ones that enhance our operational impact and amplify our ability to influence on issues of humanitarian concern. We will work to strengthen complementarity across the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, to enhance preparedness, improve operational delivery and leverage the collective Movement voice to shape decisions that affect communities in crisis. To do this, we will reinforce our work with National Societies, with the goal of supporting their resilience and learning from them. Above all, we will strive to ensure that the needs and aspirations of communities remain central to guiding our response, and that we continue to advocate for their dignity, humanity and for the peace they desire.

Development actors

Stay engaged in conflict settings: Development actors must continue to reinforce and invest in their work in conflict-affected contexts. Disengagement carries high, avoidable costs: the most vulnerable populations are often the first to lose access to essential services, accelerating reversals in development gains and sharply increasing humanitarian needs and long-term costs. In many of today’s protracted conflicts, where periods of relative stability give way to peaks of violence, partnerships must be designed from the outset for flexibility, and risks must be shared and managed, rather than borne by humanitarians alone. Building on complementary mandates, strengths and ways of working means that humanitarian and development actors can work in parallel to achieve mutually reinforcing outcomes, scale proven models and support sustainable transitions. Where feasible, formalized multi-year arrangements can allow humanitarian actors to lead delivery during periods of acute instability, phasing back as conditions stabilize while development actors take a greater role. This can help preserve operational space in contested settings, enabling development actors to remain engaged or re-engage when conditions allow. Looking ahead in this way is more cost-effective than reactive interventions, better addresses individual vulnerabilities and strengthens the systems on which communities depend.



South Sudan, January 2026. People connect with their families via internet connectivity provided by the ICRC in partnership with the South Sudan Red Cross.

Conclusion

Without a change of course, the impacts of increasing conflict, violations of IHL and declining support for principled humanitarian action will see millions of people in need of protection and assistance and only a fraction receiving it. In the short term, the consequences will continue to be dire: lives cut short, forced displacement, rising food insecurity, livelihoods lost and declining access to health and education. Humanitarian organizations already find themselves forced to choose which lives to save. The longer-term repercussions can be predicted – a world where more people suffer, one that is less stable, with our shared humanity under strain.

Yet this future is not a given.

While important, technical fixes or structural adaptations alone will not be sufficient. Collectively, we cannot abandon communities facing the terrible harms caused by conflict.

Concretely, states must invest in conflict prevention and resolution, while also providing sustained political support and resourcing for principled humanitarian action. Humanitarians must keep striving to improve and deliver the best possible response for people, and to nurture diverse ecosystems of aid. We have a shared responsibility to stand in solidarity with communities affected by conflict – and we must not retreat from it.



A school in Romny, Sumy Oblast, Ukraine, 24 January 2024. Ukrainian Red Cross Society volunteers lead an activity called "My closest people". The aim of the workshop is to reduce the children's psychological stress.

Methodology

The objective of this research is for the ICRC, in partnership with National Societies, to reflect on how humanitarian action must adapt to an increasingly complex geopolitical, financial and operational environment by: identifying emerging trends shaping humanitarian action; surfacing the perspectives of conflict-affected communities and National Societies; and examining how humanitarian actors can adapt partnerships and approach questions of trust, accountability and inclusion.

The overarching question guiding the research is: “Ideally, what should conflict-affected people expect from a humanitarian system or systems? What does this mean for the ICRC and National Societies and, where relevant, more broadly for the Movement?”

To support these reflections, and following approval by the ICRC Ethics Review Board and literature reviews of academic and practitioner literature on humanitarian reforms, current geopolitical trends and trends in humanitarian action, primary qualitative research was undertaken. This consisted of three in-country case studies in the DRC, South Sudan and Ukraine. These contexts were selected on the basis of the varied nature and phase of the conflict and the different impacts of evolving conflict trends and humanitarian funding in each setting. Along with a preparatory review of the literature looking at the humanitarian and conflict situation in each country, the in-country research consisted of community focus group discussions and key informant interviews with a mix of local authorities, private service providers, Movement actors, local, national and international NGOs and platforms, faith-based organizations, UN agencies, think tanks and ICRC staff.

The case studies were complemented by a series of interviews with senior leaders in eleven National Societies working in conflict, and interviews at the global level with a range of interlocutors speaking from a specific country or global perspectives including national and international NGOs, NGO networks, the IFRC, faith-based organizations, think tanks, development and climate actors and geopolitical analysts. In total, 15 focus group discussions were conducted with communities, some of which the ICRC was assisting and some not, along with 120 key informant interviews. We aimed to ensure a wide diversity of participants, including by age and gender in the focus group discussions.

An advisory group comprised of senior NS representatives (from the DRC, Kenya, South Sudan, Sweden and Ukraine), plus senior ICRC colleagues (operational and HQ) helped to shape the project overall and provide a strategic steer.

The research examines the perspectives of many different stakeholders. But it is by no means exhaustive, given the breadth and diversity of actors delivering humanitarian action and those working with humanitarian actors in conflict settings. Focus group discussions are by definition limited, because of the possibility of bias given the ICRC was providing assistance to some of these communities, as small groups of people who could not represent all community perspectives, and because the decision as to which communities to meet in each context was influenced by the ICRC’s pre-existing contacts and acceptance by these communities. Finally, in a continuously evolving landscape, the research necessarily provides a snapshot of a specific moment in time – although the goal has been to look ahead and ask what these different perspectives mean in the light of long-term conflict and humanitarian trends.

When taking notes, we pseudonymized focus group participants by keeping only standard information, to protect people’s identities. These notes, and those from key informant interviews, are safely stored in an ICRC database in line with ICRC data protection rules. We have taken care not to identify people quoted in the report, to protect their anonymity.

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Mission

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

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ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross

19, avenue de la Paix
1202 Geneva, Switzerland

T +41 22 734 60 01

shop.icrc.org

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