

Humanitarian Defunding and Emergency Preparedness: A Perspective¹

June 2026

Carlo Scaramella, Frederick Spielberg, Moira Fratta, Christine Mougne, Jean Luc Poncelet,
Angela Raven-Roberts, Everett Ressler, Antony Spalton²

Executive Summary: The sudden cuts in funding affecting humanitarian operations globally are having a clear, profound, structural, and long-lasting impact on the emergency response capacities of the global humanitarian system and therefore, ultimately, on the well-being, the lives and livelihoods of affected and vulnerable people relying on such system. The findings summarized in this short “non-paper” provide initial insights on a general operational and strategic gap – the area of emergency preparedness - requiring an urgent reassessment and refocusing by key stakeholders of the humanitarian system, including the UN, the NGO sector, donors, national governments, local institutions and civil society, and other decision makers.

1. The Dimensions of the Defunding.

The unexpected, unplanned, and drastic reduction in humanitarian funding implemented by most Western donors has dramatically affected a system that relied on stable and incremental flows of such critical resources to ensure the lifeline of millions of vulnerable people. This sudden contraction in aid flows happens at a time when global humanitarian needs are on the rise, further exacerbating the gap between needs and response capacity. Funding for the global humanitarian sector rose steadily from 2015 to 2022, reaching a maximum of \$43 billion in 2022, when response to the COVID19 epidemic combined with a surge in assistance to Ukraine altered “normal” trends. In 2023, however, donor assistance started to decline, falling approximately by 35 per cent in 2025³. The US and Germany were

¹ This document is the result of an initial, exploratory process of consultation conducted by experts of the HDPI NGO Preparedness Working Group, with leaders and practitioners from the UN and INGO sector engaged in the field of emergency preparedness, management, and crisis response. The consultations were held under Chatham House rules and, where possible, the authors have complemented the findings with data from public sources. HDPI engaged in this process with the sole objective of gaining a better, although still preliminary, understanding of the impact of humanitarian defunding on the capacity of the UN-IASC system to execute preparedness and anticipatory work at global level.

² <https://hdpi.org/2026-preparedness/>

³ For most recent trends in humanitarian funding, see OCHA’s financial tracking at <https://fts.unocha.org/global-funding/overview/2025>. Total ODA from DAC member countries amounted to USD 174.3 billion in 2025, a 23.1% decrease over 2024, the largest annual contraction on record and a second consecutive year of decline (<https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/official-development-assistance-oda.html>)

responsible for the largest cuts, accounting for 88% of the total fall in humanitarian funding for the year⁴. During the period, private funding also contracted by 40%⁵.

As of May 2026, actual funding for the entire humanitarian system stands at approximately \$7.4 billion, representing just above 22% of the \$ 33 billion target for the year, and only 17 per cent of what it was at the 2022 peak.

According to all organisations interviewed, evidence from the field is unequivocal. All organisations have cut programs and operations. In some cases, millions of people among the most affected and vulnerable populations have been dropped from on-going programs, in other cases programs are simply being shut down. Humanitarian action has been massively affected with enormous human costs and global implications. Because of impromptu, unplanned and untransparent decisions to cut financial flows, millions of people living in extremely vulnerable conditions are being left without any predictable assistance from the international system.

2. The System Response

The downsizing of the humanitarian aid budget initiated in 2023 by Western actors has become more apparent with the cuts implemented by the US administration in 2025. The funding cliff poses an existential threat to most actors, challenging their ability to deliver on their mandate and generating shockwaves across the global humanitarian system. As a reaction, organisations entered “emergency management and survival mode”, adopting immediate response measures aimed at reducing costs.

Key measures included:

- **Hyper-prioritization of response.** This is a central tenet of the “reset” strategy laid out by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) since 2025, to address the dramatic funding shortfalls affecting the system. In essence, hyper-prioritization means focusing action on only the most severely affected population in about 20 particularly critical countries (down from nearly 50 countries in the past), through narrowly-defined life-saving activities only, jettisoning long-term, proactive planning.
- **Massive workforce reductions:** UN humanitarian agencies executed sweeping personnel cuts. The World Food Programme (WFP) reduced its workforce by about 6,000 positions, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) by 5,000, the World Health Organisation (WHO) by over 2,000. Similar cuts affected other agencies, like IOM and UNICEF. Massive cuts likewise affected key international NGOs, while small local NGOs with limited resources saw their main resource pipelines dry up. Only the National Red Crescent/Red Cross societies may have been partly

⁴ US cut its aid by 55%, from US \$13.5 billion to US \$6.1 billion, while Germany reduced it by 36%, from US \$2.3 billion to US \$1.5 billion. Only few donors saw their aid increase during 2025, including Canada, Italy, Switzerland and Ireland, with very significant increases by Qatar (+189%), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (+54%) - see <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-gha-report-2026/>.

⁵ <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-gha-report-2026/>.

shielded from the worst effects of defunding, due to their organisational model largely based on voluntary work.

- **Reduction of geographical presence:** Cost containment measures also impacted geographical coverage, physical infrastructure and field-based logistical capacities. Regional and country presence have been drastically reduced, with the closure of hundreds of decentralized offices and entire country offices and forcing the consolidation of regional hubs.
- **Dropping programmatic links and synergies:** One of the implicit outcomes of the hyper-prioritization process, focusing exclusively on life saving activities, has been a return to the vertical segmentation of competences and functions that characterized the humanitarian-development divide decades ago. Hyper-prioritization risks creating an emergency, life-saving only function that operates in isolation of--and disconnected from--livelihoods, resilience, peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. And it is the burial ground of the “triple nexus.”

The consultations highlighted how some NGOs/CSOs and volunteer groups have managed to keep moving forward at a time when the international system is in disarray, but in general, the smaller the organization, the harder it has been impacted by funding cuts. Some larger faith-based NGOs, many of which have a committed base of individual donors, seem to be resisting hyper-prioritisation, and continue to work in the ample space between emergency and development (i.e., preparedness, resilience, and livelihoods). Those NGOs with the capacity to do so have sought out new donor sources, including private philanthropists, foundations, and specialised niches (e.g., feminist funding for women’s health care, reproductive rights), however these new sources are insufficient to compensate for the large funding cuts, and they might not be able to sustain the system in the medium and long term. Likewise, UN agencies have accelerated their exploration of partnerships with the private sector, potentially providing enormous financial and technical resources and expertise, albeit posing serious challenges in terms of risks of corporatization and commercialization.

While virtually all humanitarian actors have been shaken by the de facto strategic de-prioritization, the more important reality is the impact that such cuts are having and will have in the years to come on the lives and livelihoods of millions of vulnerable people around the world, and especially on women and children. Although it may be too early to assess the full middle- and-long term implications of abrupt defunding by key Western donors, initial estimates by research institutes anticipate the reality of millions of preventable deaths occurring.⁶

3. The Impacts of Defunding of Preparedness.

The value of investing in preparedness has been well documented over the years. Recent evidence demonstrates that emergency preparedness in humanitarian operations typically generates an average Return on Investment (ROI) where every \$1 invested saves up to \$3.40 in future response costs⁷, while

⁶ According to *The Lancet* global health aid cuts could lead to between 9.4 million and 22.6 million avoidable deaths worldwide by 2030, particularly among children and pregnant women in low- and middle-income countries [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(26\)00008-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(26)00008-2/fulltext)

⁷ A 2017 IASC study conducted with different UN agencies, highlights median savings-to investment ratio US\$ 1.5 per US\$ 1 invested, and mean gain in response time of 14 days

also empowering local communities and institutions, and significantly shortening emergency response time. Furthermore, preparedness and anticipatory actions and interventions—such as local capacity development and staff training, supply prepositioning, infrastructure development, local standby agreements and partnerships, among others— yield significant financial and operational efficiencies.

Despite this evidence, with a system shifting to a reactive mode, the area of preparedness - already historically underfunded - has been slashed, often suffering disproportionate cuts compared to other programmatic and technical areas. Interviews conducted by HDPI experts confirmed that virtually all frontline UN and INGO humanitarian organisations implemented radical cuts, of as much as 50% to 60%, in preparedness activities and capacities at headquarters level and in the countries where they are present. Such cuts meant significantly reducing the specialized capacities necessary to monitor, prepare for, design and activate emergency response protocols; reducing interaction with local actors and institutions; shutting down altogether crucial early warning and preparedness initiatives; and putting innovation on hold. All this, taken together, undermines the sector's ability to anticipate, mitigate, and respond rapidly to crises.

The strategies adopted by most UN and INGO actors in response to the funding crisis have led to a significant reduction - if not overall critical erosion - of system-wide capacities in humanitarian preparedness:

- **Loss of Organisational and Operational Capacity:** Humanitarian actors have lost specialized personnel, coordination infrastructure, and learning capabilities. Operational links, services, and interoperability with host governments and local communities are being weakened.
- **Fragilization of humanitarian mechanisms:** Lack of predictable and flexible funding have limited the capacity to maintain standby logistics and procurement services, early warning and data analysis capability, staff surge mechanisms and other tools. Systems created over decades of humanitarian practice still exist, but the massive reduction in personnel, resources and assets has weakened them and stripped their capacity to scale up; they will disappear if not sustained to a minimum critical level.
- **Erosion of Localized Resilience:** Resources for local community-based institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have dried up. This limits the transfer of tools, capacities, training, systems, and services required for enhanced localized and self-sustaining crisis management/disaster response.
- **Weakened Protection Systems:** Foundational community health services and safety nets have been gutted—for example in the areas of emergency sexual and reproductive health, gender--based violence (GBV), and child protection, among others--leaving teams unprepared to manage new emergencies including both disasters and conflict situations.

(https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2019-01/return_on_investment_in_emergency_preparedness_phase_2.pdf). A 2026 WFP study suggests that every US\$1 invested yields US\$3.40 in response cost savings, while reducing emergency response lead times by 25 days (See WFP. 2026. Updated Return on Investment for Preparedness to Respond Study, Rome, <https://doi.org/10.71958/wfp132029>

- **Debilitated Early Warning Systems:** Severe budget reductions have impaired the ability of key monitoring, data collection and analysis tools which inform ex-ante decision making and operational prioritization. Cuts to essential programs like the Famine Early Warning System (FEWSNet) or information and mapping services in the context of the mixed migrations in Latin and Central America, directly affect organisations' ability to anticipate, coordinate, and deliver.⁸
- **Data and Analysis Shortfalls:** Funding cuts have weakened the capability of key actors to systematically produce and share forecast, observational and impact data about hazards and shocks. In the case of global food security monitoring, recent reports highlight critical gaps in metrics in priority crisis situations (e.g., Global Report on Food Security, jointly led by the FAO and WFP alongside other partners).
- **Constrained Anticipatory Action:** The lack of funding has limited the ability to launch proactive, anticipatory interventions —such as distributing cash to communities ahead of a forecasted hazard, although there are also some reports of increases in investments⁹.

In short, the effect of abrupt cuts in humanitarian resources coupled with hyper-prioritisation has pushed the system into significantly downsizing preparedness. The entire humanitarian system has shifted the focus away from anticipation and back to a more reactive, funding-driven, life-saving mode. The closing of the “preparedness window” is amplifying the potential impact of current and future crises, reversing hard won gains in prevention and risk management at the local, national, and global levels. Tragically, the funding cliff comes precisely when international experts warn about the potential for a global humanitarian hyper-crisis, involving food security, health, energy, conflict and climate. In this context, cutting funds and programmatic focus on preparedness seems counter-intuitive, making it more difficult and slower to respond, and undermining the very 'life-saving' effort it is meant to achieve.

4. Ethical Considerations

Managers and decision makers have been asked to handle the financial crunch with realism and concreteness, which is consistent with the context and the current organisational challenges. However, little space has been left for other considerations, despite the need to reframe our shared vision also in consideration of the extraordinary ethical dilemmas that the current situation poses.

Humanitarian actors can collectively reclaim the moral high ground, by insisting on respect for human rights, international humanitarian law, and the humanitarian imperative. This includes, *inter alia*, maintaining a critical stance on “hyper-prioritization” and defending the rights and humanitarian needs of all the vulnerable, not just those classified in the 3rd, 4th, or 5th IPC severity levels. Collectively, the sector must challenge the most onerous of donor-imposed restrictions including a defence of expenditures on preparedness; renewed recognition that protection and education are lifesaving

⁸ The Humanitarian Archive initiative is trying to counter the massive loss
<https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/projects/humanitarian-archive-emergency/>

⁹ <https://www.anticipation-hub.org/news/new-report-from-the-anticipation-hub-shows-that-anticipatory-action-reached-96-million-people-in-2025>; also cf. <https://www.preventionweb.net/quick/102543>

sectors; and full embrace of the need to support women's health care, sexual and reproductive rights, and other temporarily forbidden issues. The public opinion should be made aware of decisions taken by their governments. Governments should be held accountable for their decisions, and the ramifications and consequences of such decisions should be openly scrutinized and addressed.

Global solidarity must not become the casual victim of mere geo-political motivations and temporary strategic advantage or profit. The inability to appropriately address the increasing suffering in countries undergoing humanitarian crises poses enormous ethical challenges today, and risks shaping human relations for years to come. At the same time, humanitarian actors must accelerate internal reforms, including more radical restructuring and rearticulation embracing the philosophy of making ourselves dispensable, through a careful process of consultation, negotiation, and localization with transfer of real resources and capacities.

It is a defining moment for humanitarianism in the 21st century. All organizations must engage in a common effort to overcome current challenges, reshaping, re-committing to and reaffirming the critical principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence, and humanitarianism.

5. Seeking a coordinated, forward-looking, system-wide response?

One of the underlying considerations emerging from the HDPI experts' exploratory consultation on emergency preparedness is that the humanitarian system has thus far failed to deliver a vision of how to address the challenge beyond the immediate framework of a *funding-driven and reactive hyper-prioritization*. The crisis has highlighted the extreme dependency of the global humanitarian system on a financial model that is mainly Western, vertical, donor-driven, politically oriented, fragile and volatile, and in many cases lacking accountabilities. Changing this would require courageous reforms, new visions, new actors and partners, and new commitments.

On the other hand, it has not been possible to fully appreciate the level of strategic and policy coordination among UN and NGO emergency managers and decision makers. Is the system asking the right questions? Or are key players still in a responsive, inward-looking mode? Are we lacking a more shared, coordinated, forward-looking analysis, informing a more sustainable systemic response?

Historically, in different contexts and situations, emergency preparedness initiatives and workstreams have greatly contributed to the humanitarian mission, by saving lives, preserving livelihoods, stabilizing local markets, and reinforcing community resilience. Important headway has been achieved fostering "nexus" approaches to ensure funding and operational linkages between humanitarian preparedness and response, peace building and development. Drastically reducing investments in humanitarian preparedness, and severing programmatic linkages with related peace, resilience and development areas, will inevitably cause dramatic, long-lasting impacts on the most vulnerable.

On one hand, the system risks losing the ability to anticipate and mitigate potential losses (human, socio-economic, environmental) through long-established actions, protocols, initiatives, partnerships and programs working at various levels, from local to global. On the other hand, a narrow focus on "saving-lives" risks pushing the system back several decades in terms of the sustainability of its approaches, making vulnerable people more – not less – dependent on external aid.

The key challenge today is to find ways to retain capacities, skills, and organisational cultures, while moving ahead in visioning and transforming the global and local architecture of preparedness. Obviously, there is an urgent need to revisit the “business model,” working towards a more consistent engagement and leadership by national and local institutions, diversifying funding sources, exploring innovative public-private partnerships, scaling up innovative insurance schemes, among others.

Critical opportunities exist in terms of promoting the expansion and consolidation of national capacities, including through universal social protection schemes and community-based interventions. In many cases – particularly in middle income countries – governments have developed effective and replicable protection and social integration models, for example in response to mixed migration crises in Latin America, or hurricane preparedness in the Caribbean. However, the challenge remains for countries with more limited capacities, socio-political stability and fiscal space, where humanitarian conditions are extremely challenging.

Some UN agencies and NGOs have taken to heart the call to implement “localization”, even in very complex circumstances. New models for locally based action are being scrutinized, with an eye toward replicating the most effective methods of listening to and supporting communities at risk. Among other examples, BRAC in Bangladesh, the Sudanese Emergency Response Rooms, and The Women's Voice and Leadership in Humanitarian Settings initiative in contexts as varied as Afghanistan, Colombia, and Nepal, have demonstrated that the leadership of local NGOs in reducing risk is both effective and desirable. Emergency preparedness efforts in the Philippines have been led for over a decade by local authorities under their own “cluster system.”

However, a more strategic and systemic, holistic, and people-centred vision is missing. Preparedness capacities and action should not be lacking where they are most needed. Finding solutions to this critical gap is urgently required.

6. Next Steps.

The defunding of preparedness poses systemic challenges in that it reduces the capacity of the global humanitarian community to operate more effectively and efficiently in an anticipatory manner in the interest and in support of populations in need.

There seems to be a strategic and policy gap concerning this situation, which may require urgent coordinated follow up. As a way of defining an initial agenda for follow-up action, the following actions should be considered:

- Technical and strategic consultations engaging key UN/IASC/INGO actors, donor community, national governments and civil society to discuss the status of emergency preparedness systems and capacities and priority actions to take by the international community (HDPI is hosting an initial Round Table on 30 June 2026);
- Identification of critical situations requiring immediate coordinated preparedness and anticipatory action, also considering El Niño and the risk of a global food, fertilizers, health and protection crisis escalated by the war on Iran and the consequences of the Hormuz blockade;

- Analysis of the potential cost of the lack of humanitarian preparedness in specific contexts and scenarios; estimation of funding requirements to ensure maintenance of critical preparedness systems and services;
- Rethinking strategies of engagement with donors, recipient governments and regional/local humanitarian actors;
- Changing narratives - development of a global advocacy campaign to preserve capacity and reposition emergency preparedness as a critical life-saving investment in support of the most vulnerable.