

The end of humanitarian aid (as we know it)?

Irene Morlino



The Author



Dr Irene Morlino is Visiting Fellow in the Department of International Relations at LSE and Visiting Professor in International Conflict Management at ESADE Business and Law School in Barcelona. Her research focuses on humanitarian aid effectiveness, EU foreign and security policy, and conflict management. Her book *Humanitarian Aid and the European Union. An Analysis of its Effectiveness in the Field* has just been published. She has worked with organisations including the World Bank, IFAD, and International IDEA, and has been Visiting Scholar at Harvard University. She holds a PhD in International Relations from LSE.

September 2026

Editor: **Stuart Austin**

Design, Typeset and Layout: **Indira Endaya**

Cover image: Created with ChatGPT by the author, May 2026.

<https://doi.org/10.21953/researchonline.lse.ac.uk.00141245>.

Contents

4	Abstract
5	Introduction
6	From Principled Humanitarianism to Survival Humanitarianism - Stuart Gordon (LSE)
7	"The Mask Has Fallen" – Andrea Koulaïmah (DG ECHO)
9	Humanitarianisms, Plural – Hugo Slim (Las Casas Institute, University of Oxford)
10	A crisis of legitimacy, not of funding – Sara Pantuliano (ODI Global)
11	Challenged, not entirely broken – Marian Yun (WFP London Global Office)
12	The era of national societies – Etienne Berges (British Red Cross)
13	Discussion with the audience: Pluralism, localisation, accountability, and protection of humanitarian workers
14	Conclusion
16	References

The end of humanitarian aid (as we know it)?

Report of a roundtable held in collaboration with LSE IDEAS

Abstract

The report examines whether humanitarian aid is entering a new phase amid declining funding, growing politicisation, weakening respect for international humanitarian law and diversification of actors. Drawing on a roundtable held in collaboration with LSE IDEAS - bringing together academics and practitioners from LSE and the University of Oxford, ODI Global, the World Food Programme, the European Commission, and the British Red Cross - the report discusses the current status of the humanitarian system and its implications. The discussion suggests that humanitarianism is not ending, but that the internationally led, donor-dependent and Global North-centred model that has dominated recent decades is undergoing profound change. Particular attention is given to the emergence of 'survival humanitarianism', the longstanding crisis of legitimacy exposed by current funding cuts, and the increasingly explicit instrumentalisation of aid. The report also examines localisation, highlighting both the growing importance of national and local actors and the risk that localisation becomes a transfer of responsibility and risk under conditions of scarcity. Finally, it considers the expanding roles of private actors and technology. It concludes that the future is likely to be characterised by a more plural humanitarian ecosystem, with multiple actors, sources of legitimacy and understandings of humanitarian responsibility.

Introduction

In a world increasingly dominated by the erosion of international law, geopolitical interests, power politics and the resurgence of wars, the space for effective multilateral action seems to be shrinking. Much attention in academia and policymaking is paid to themes such as defence and security policies. While extremely significant, these debates risk overshadowing the consequences of such policies projected towards wars: the humanitarian cost.

Besides conflicts, climate change and pandemics are among the other consequences of human action that have led more than 240 million people worldwide to need humanitarian assistance and protection, according to OCHA (2026a). The closure of the Strait of Hormuz since spring 2026 has halted shipments of oil, fertilisers, and other critical commodities, leaving countries highly dependent on imports to cope with rising prices for staple goods like rice and wheat flour. The Russian invasion of Ukraine also led to a cut in the global supply of fertilisers and grains, with major humanitarian consequences around the world.

It is even more urgent to reflect on the current status of humanitarian aid and what radical changes we are witnessing. The changes facing the humanitarian aid sector do not seem cyclical but rather structural. And there are several reasons for it:

1. Despite overlapping crises, the deep funding cuts across key donor states, alongside the dismantling of USAID, have disrupted the framework that historically sustained United Nations agencies and NGOs (Stepansky, 2026). In general, international aid from OECD member countries and associates of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) fell in 2025 by 23.1% in real terms compared to 2024, and Humanitarian Official development assistance from DAC countries fell 35.8% (OECD, 2026). We are already seeing the costs of these cuts: major NGOs have decreased their capacities on the ground and closed field programmes. Local actors are also experiencing the consequences of these cuts, being expected to take more responsibility, nonetheless.
2. The politicisation of humanitarian aid is also increasing significantly. The humanitarian sector is increasingly caught between state security and political priorities. At the end of last year, the US pledged \$2bn for humanitarian aid, but told the UN to 'adapt or die' (Foulkes, 2025); funding increasingly comes with strings attached. In this case, for instance, funding could not go into Yemen and Afghanistan due to US political and security priorities. The constrained operational space is also another issue that comes with the increasing politicisation.
3. Finally, the humanitarian system is undergoing a gradual but significant diversification of actors. Private-sector actors are playing an increasingly prominent role – alongside states, international organisations, and NGOs – as donors and as providers of logistics, finance, and technological solutions; this raises critical questions about accountability and neutrality.

Against this background, a roundtable, held in collaboration with LSE IDEAS, brought together academics and practitioners to explore whether humanitarian aid is entering a new phase. The speakers were chosen to ensure a breadth of institutional perspectives. Two came from academia: Prof Stuart Gordon (LSE) and Dr Hugo Slim (University of Oxford). The others represented four distinct parts of the humanitarian system: a think tank, in Dr Sara Pantuliano, Chief Executive (Overseas Development Institute [ODI] Global); a UN agency, in Marianne Yun, Head of Partnerships (World Food Programme London Global Office); the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in Etienne Berges, Senior Humanitarian Adviser (British Red Cross); and a major donor, in Andrea Koulaïmah, Director for Sub-Saharan Africa, LAC, South, East and South-East Asia and the Pacific (Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations [DG ECHO], European Commission).

Speakers centred their speeches around one or more of the five questions posed, which focus on politicisation, technology, effectiveness, and legitimacy. In particular:

- How is the increasing politicisation of aid reshaping humanitarian principles and operations?
- What role should private actors play, and under what frameworks of accountability?
- Will technology in humanitarian action exacerbate divisions or enable more effective and accountable responses?
- To what extent is the growing integration of humanitarian and development aid driven by political and strategic interests rather than needs?
- And ultimately, what are the implications for the effectiveness and legitimacy of humanitarian action in a rapidly changing global order?

This report critically examines the five interventions and, in the conclusion, draws out the key themes and broader implications emerging from the discussion. Quotes are attributed to the panel speaker identified in the subheading of the relevant section unless cited otherwise.

From Principled Humanitarianism to Survival Humanitarianism¹ - Stuart Gordon (LSE)

Humanitarian action has never existed outside politics. It has always depended on states, negotiated with armed groups, reflected donor priorities and operated within unequal global structures; the idea of a pure humanitarian space was always ‘more aspiration than description’. What is distinctive now is the convergence of three pressures: the weakening of international humanitarian law, the contraction and conditionalisation of humanitarian financing, and the geopolitical shift towards a more openly transactional, sovereignty-based, and anti-multilateral form of politics. Gordon’s central claim is that this convergence is producing what he terms ‘survival humanitarianism’: a system organised increasingly around triage, residual access and the transfer of risk to those least able to carry it.

The first pressure is legal. International humanitarian law remains binding, but its constraining authority is eroding: the rules that civilians must not be targeted, that starvation must not be used as a method of warfare, that medical facilities and aid workers must be respected, that relief access is not a discretionary favour of armed power, are challenged conflict after conflict. The problem is not that needs have increased but that the grammar through which humanitarian claims are made is losing force. This matters operationally, not only ethically: neutrality, impartiality and independence

¹ See also Gordon (2026).

are the tools that allow access to be negotiated, and assistance distinguished from military or political projects. Where they are disbelieved or manipulated, 'access becomes a concession, civilians become bargaining chips, and aid workers become suspect rather than protected'.

The second is financial. This constitutes a political economy shock rather than a funding gap. Cutting and reprioritising appeals changes the moral architecture of aid; the organising question shifts from what people are entitled to by virtue of need to who can still be reached with the resources available, a move from humanitarianism as a universal claim to humanitarianism as rationing. Managerial vocabulary conceals this retreat. Efficiency, focus and prioritisation may be necessary, but they soften the fact that people are being moved outside the circle of assistance. "Triage is unavoidable in emergency medicine; as a permanent organising logic for global humanitarianism, it is far more troubling."

The third is geopolitical. As donors present humanitarian funding openly as an instrument of national interest, conflict parties treat humanitarian actors more readily as extensions of political agendas. The dismantling of USAID exemplifies the shift and encourages other donors to align aid with strategic priorities.

Two consequences follow. Localisation, properly understood, should transfer resources, authority and recognition. However, with poor and unpredictable funding conditions, localisation risks becoming the transfer of responsibility under conditions of scarcity. Gordon argued that risk is being decentralised, leaving local actors to deliver the last mile and absorb insecurity as underfunded subcontractors. Also, technical systems are never neutral simply because they are technical: they determine who is visible, verified, excluded, and who can appeal. Where technology shapes access to aid, affected populations require rights in relation to transparency, explanation, contestation and remedy.

The result is a humanitarianism 'thinner, more local but less resourced, more targeted but less universal, more efficient but less protected, more technologically capable but less accountable, more integrated with development and stabilisation agendas but less independent'. The challenge is therefore not simply to make humanitarian aid more efficient, but to defend the conditions under which humanitarian action can remain humanitarian: grounded in law, allocated by need, protected from instrumentalisation, and accountable to affected populations rather than only to donors. The danger is not that humanitarianism disappears, but that it survives in diminished form.

"The Mask Has Fallen" – Andrea Koulaïmah (DG ECHO)

A breaking point was reached in 2025. Needs have risen steadily for two decades; the consolidated appeal stood at around \$5 billion in 2006, displacement has tripled, and the number of conflicts has doubled. Funding, however, has not collapsed in the way commonly assumed: international public funding for humanitarian aid has risen since 2006 in real terms, despite the US cuts. What has widened is the gap between needs and resources channelled, and between the scale of response and overall global wealth.

If scarcity was not the novelty, the shock of 2025 lay in its intentionality. Commitments already made were broken, and the cuts were taken as a deliberate decision to cut rather than because of diminished means. This marks a rupture in consensus, and two observations follow.

The first concerns development and humanitarian aid spending. On the surface, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC)'s figures suggest donors are protecting development while cutting humanitarian aid; in fact, humanitarian aid is the 'canary in the mine' (OECD, 2026b). Humanitarian cuts register within the year, whereas development is programmed over several years. Hence, what is currently reported reflects disbursement decisions taken two or three years ago. The impact of development cuts will prove larger and will become visible later. The crisis in development, particularly human and social development, is already evident in the policy positions being taken.

“

Taboos are no longer taboos, and the false pretence that assistance is principled when it is not has become unsustainable.

”

The second concerns the consensus itself: how true was it, and how good was the past? Aid was always politicised. The 2007 European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid insisted so heavily on international humanitarian law, civil–military coordination and the principles precisely because they were not being respected. Otherwise, there would have been no point in stating them so emphatically. Drawing on her own work on Darfur between 2003 and 2005, Koulaïmah noted that the loss of International Humanitarian Law (IHL)'s protective function, the instrumentalisation of aid, and the denial of access were all present then, and also being contested. “What has really changed is that the mask has fallen down and, to some extent, it is good that it has.”

What is difficult for those working in the sector to absorb is the intentionality behind the change. Taboos are no longer taboos, and the false pretence that assistance is principled when it is not has become unsustainable. The same metaphor extends beyond humanitarian aid to the post-1945 international order, now deeply challenged. The system has moved from being overstretched to being simply overwhelmed.

There is opportunity in this. The flagrancy with which the largest humanitarian donor has framed assistance as an instrument of national interest, together with reactions to IHL violations in the Gaza context, has triggered a response among actors who had previously regarded IHL and humanitarianism as Western constructs. In the Middle East, Asia and Brazil a movement to defend IHL is emerging, on the grounds that its defence is in everyone's interest; the ICRC's summit at the end of the year will test where this leads.

Above all, contraction is a choice. Aid cannot be delivered without funding, but needs can still be quantified as they are, and the shortfall stated loud and clear. Political statements matter in this context. The EU's Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid (European Commission & EEAS, 2026), adopted in May 2026, reflects that choice: continuity in the principles, with no questioning of them, and a greater willingness to defend them openly than was previously thought necessary. Its three pillars are protect, perform and partner. *Prioritise* is deliberately not among them. 'Protect' covers alliances with the political side of the system on humanitarian diplomacy (which has rarely been conducted by humanitarians themselves beyond operational access, the difference now being that humanitarians state clearly what they need so diplomats can carry it), the protection of aid workers, and gender-based violence, itself a political statement in the current context. The second pillar, 'perform', looks more at aid effectiveness. The system has become heavy, responding to needs rather than resolving situations, when populations ask for solutions rather than continued assistance. The source of this is a contradiction within the sector itself: keeping distance from development – on the grounds that development sits too close to politics, in order to preserve the purity of the principles –

means throwing money and aid at needs indefinitely. Here comes in the third pillar: 'partner'. Genuine accountability to affected populations requires bringing development in, which is what partners provide: an integrated strategy on fragility, another name for the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, and before that for linking relief, rehabilitation and development. An old concept under new names, but not one worth abandoning simply because it has been implemented poorly for thirty years.

What is ultimately at stake is identity. As Commissioner Lahbib framed it (European Commission, 2026), the European choice is one of fairness, cooperation and human compassion, principles that should never need defending, that are not naive, and that are tried and tested throughout European history. This is a question of identity for Europe and potentially for other parts of the world, because what is questioned alongside the humanitarian principles is the proposition that the world cannot simply be a jungle in which the strongest defines the rules.

Humanitarianisms, Plural – Hugo Slim (Las Casas Institute, University of Oxford)

Humanitarian action is entering a new phase. Another phase, one of many, and there is no cause for moral panic. Humanitarianism itself is a human constant and is not going away. Nor is the sector's sense of crisis new: the complaints heard at a humanitarian meeting in 1985 were identical to today's, that the laws were not being respected and the money was not there. The phrase 'more than ever' warrants suspicion.

The central point is that there is no such thing as humanitarianism in the singular. There are humanitarianisms. Many, across the world and across history, varying by culture, religion, context, ideology and politics. What the sector treats as humanitarianism is a narrow Western version, serviceable for the last twenty or thirty years but due to be replaced by something more expansive and imaginative. Among the plural traditions, some hold neutrality as paramount; others regard it as irrelevant and will risk their own lives, spy, and deceive to get people to safety. Neither is correct: "We need both in the world, and we're going to have both in the world."

“

What the sector treats as humanitarianism is a narrow Western version, serviceable for the last twenty or thirty years but due to be replaced by something more expansive and imaginative.

”

Humanitarianism is therefore always invented and reinvented for new times. Formal Red Cross humanitarianism was invented at Solferino, with Dunant best understood as a humanitarian entrepreneur who, in formalising the category of the wounded, left out millions suffering in other ways. Herbert Hoover, among the greatest humanitarians of the twentieth century, invented international food relief and modern humanitarian diplomacy through his shuttling between Berlin, London, Brussels, Paris, Moscow and Washington. The third invention came in the 1990s, when agencies turned to Geneva, modelled themselves on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), adopted its principles and changed the plates on their doors from Relief Director to Humanitarian Director. Principles most of the sector had never previously encountered, and which had to be actively introduced to the fifteen DEC agencies by someone who had himself never been given a copy of the Geneva Conventions or told whether he was expected to be neutral or impartial.

What that generation built was an elaborate and neoliberal humanitarianism of the 1990s: the humanitarianism of the moment when the West was triumphant. It saved millions of lives, established that people bombed in schools or subjected to sexual violence deserve protection, and extended the language of rights; much of it will survive in new forms. But creating what was essentially a war humanitarianism carried costs elsewhere. Disaster relief and disaster risk reduction, prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, fell into the shadows. The greater loss was national and local humanitarians: the system became 'too big, too bossy, too imperial', driven partly by a post-imperial consciousness among a cohort formed when many states had been independent barely fifteen years.

Three propositions follow. First, younger humanitarians should go out and fight for and invent new manifestations of humanitarianism in the human spirit, focused on the national and the local, including domestic preparedness. On risk, this breaks with a common protective instinct in the sector: it is patronising to suppose that local humanitarians should be shielded from the risk of saving their own people. If that is their decision, they should bear it, and responsibility rests with states and with citizens who must compel their governments to accept it. Second, an international system of systems should be preserved: a forum where the whole world compares how it does humanitarianism, without one Western tradition attempting to dominate. Third, humanitarianism must become ecological. There is no human life without other life, and no sense in fetishising the saving of humans alone; in East Africa people speak not only of their bodies but of their cattle, their grass, their water and their pasture.

A crisis of legitimacy, not of funding – Sara Pantuliano (ODI Global)

The sector treats its own vocation with an almost religious quality, as a matter of faith rather than of analysis, when the proper objects of scrutiny are the structures and constructs of the humanitarian system itself. There is the habit of describing every year as unprecedented. A little historical awareness goes a long way in recalling what the 1980s and the 1990s were, and what the challenges have been at every juncture.

The system's legitimacy was declared in deep crisis ten years ago, in Humanitarian Policy Group's pre-World Humanitarian Summit report *Time to Let Go* (Bennett *et al.*, 2016), which invited the northern-dominated system to relinquish power and control, questioning whether it had ever really held legitimacy at all. Very little has changed since. The Grand Bargain (OCHA, 2016) was another procedurally heavy exercise driven by dominant actors, generating cynicism and delivering nothing; the Transformative Agenda (IASC, no date) preceded it, and every five to ten years another such process appears.

The legitimacy crisis identified a decade ago has deepened, and the funding crisis has now made it impossible to ignore. Equally, the funding crisis occurred because the legitimacy crisis was never addressed. The evidence is the absence of resistance to the cuts. Governments could cut because 'no one in the public is actually screaming about it', and civil society in recipient countries did not experience the cuts as devastating either. Many were the first to say the system had to go, and if chaos and the challenge of reorganising is the price, so be it, because what existed was not fit for purpose.

This reframes the direction of reform. Against the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit's mantra of 'as local as possible, as international as necessary', where the 'as necessary' served to obfuscate and keep internationals in place, there should be a 'locally led, internationally supported'. However,

the vocabulary of localisation is itself the problem: a transitive construction presuming that internationals hold the power to transfer authority and legitimacy to something already inherently local. Response to crisis comes first, and always will, from those closest to it. Crises are not isolated spikes; they recur and are built into the day-to-day functioning of societies that existed before them and will exist after. The same objection applies to the language of saving lives, since far more lives are saved by the continuous reciprocal support of communities than by external intervention: an effort incommensurate with the money, resources and attention it consumes in the North.

An alternative ecosystem already exists. Diaspora remittances have consistently outstripped official aid, and in crises the first money to arrive comes from relatives abroad; philanthropic funding increasingly flows to community and local response. This also explains why the reaction to the closure of USAID has not been as expected; the urgency has been generated in the North, because the cuts mean less money for the intermediaries. International actors can choose to join the existing ecosystem, or continue as though they were the 'be-all and end-all' and become progressively irrelevant.

The imposition of the sector's own vocabulary is part of the same story. Humanitarian Policy Group's Global History of Humanitarian Action (ODI Global, no date) documented traditions of giving in China, the Arab world and Latin America, and showed how far the term humanitarian was imposed rather than found; in the Arab world, *Insāniyya* (humanity) arrived comparatively late, displacing words such as *Sadaqa* (voluntary charity) that were rooted in solidarity, under pressure to conform with the international system.

What follows is a rethinking of roles. The UN retains a valuable normative function and should facilitate work on principles and international humanitarian law in-country. The legitimate role for international NGOs is holding their own governments accountable, since many crises are political failures: "Gaza doesn't need money. Gaza needs accountability." Beyond that, the task is to support the creativity already there. For instance, Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms simplified reporting procedures and the procedures for receiving donor money, setting their own terms; they will not play by the existing rules or produce endless log frames, and this is the system on offer to anyone who wishes to fund them. The choice for northern donors is between continuing to admire a 'well-documented, polite, peer-reviewed decline' and recognising that the change has already happened, and supporting it.

Challenged, not entirely broken – Marian Yun (WFP London Global Office)

This is a period of profound systemic fragility, and more than a funding crisis; the question is not whether humanitarian aid is ending but whether its independence, coherence and legitimacy can be sustained. On the contested word, however, unprecedented remains accurate: not only of humanitarian action but of the speed and scale of change itself. Two famines were declared simultaneously in 2025, the first time this century, and that cannot be masked.

Against the picture of a system in retreat stands the scale of what still happens. In 2025, WFP assisted over 120 million people (79 million of them through life-saving support), delivered by staff who were themselves under attack at a moment when it does not feel very safe to be a humanitarian. Rapid response remains possible: in Lebanon, cash and food reached 400,000 people in shelters within 24 hours of the conflict. That depends on preparedness, established supply chains, local

partnerships through which delivery mostly runs, and, above all, flexible, multi-year funding that permits prepositioning and advance financing. The same conditions underpin principled access: in Burkina Faso, largely unreported, food access was maintained to over eighty besieged areas. In protracted crises, sustaining assistance at scale is an investment in people's stability and protection: "It's not a stopgap, and it's certainly not a failure of reform."

The outlook is bleak. The crisis concerning the Strait of Hormuz is likely to add another 45 million to the numbers; there are strong indications of El Niño conditions landing between May and July 2026, compounding the fertiliser problem and striking during the most important agricultural season across a belt running from the Sahel to the Horn, and into Latin America and Asia. Over 300 million people now need some form of humanitarian assistance: "We are taking from the hungry and giving to the starving."

The system's traditional foundations are being tested, and perhaps rightly so. There are four possible responses. First, holding focus on the urgent needs of the most vulnerable, where WFP's scale and speed constitute irreplaceable life support, almost always delivered through local partners. Second, proactive handover: the new strategic plan states for the first time what the organisation will not do, stepping back where others are better placed and transitioning out of small-scale projects, since scale is the comparative advantage. Third, accelerating national and local ownership: a dual humanitarian and development mandate, work in 77 countries to strengthen national systems, over half of partner funding going to local actors, 80% of food purchased in countries of operation with a large share from smallholder farmers, and a new localisation policy adopted in explicit recognition that WFP is not getting everything right. Half of Sudan's wheat in 2025 came from a project supported by WFP with international financial institutions; in Syria, the National Bread Subsidy Programme supplies flour to bakeries in hunger hotspots while the government covers fuel and labour costs, though funding cuts have halted it again – "stop-go, stop-go." Fourth, using the UN-80 reform, particularly the Integrated Supply Chain initiative, to consolidate services already provided separately, now actively rolling out in Afghanistan, Gaza, Haiti, Somalia and Sudan.

Underlying all four is one observation that the international system does not answer; in places where WFP had to contract, withdraw or reduce, other actors did not step up at the level or scale required. For instance, in Jalalabad, Tawila and Gaza, assistance was cut or reduced overnight, and no one has come in to fill the space. The UN, as a forum for sharing priorities and mobilising collective action, is close to unique. The architecture is being challenged, but 'it's not entirely broken'; "the task is to fix what needs fixing, strengthen what needs strengthening, and keep doing what works."

The era of national societies – Etienne Berges (British Red Cross)

There are roughly 192 national societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, from North Korea to Syria. National actors generally, and national societies specifically, offer an interesting model for navigating the conditions the other speakers had described – e.g., Gordon's survival humanitarianism and Koulaïmah's fallen mask laying bare state-to-state transactionalism. Within the movement's own microcosm, this may be the era of national societies; the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of the Red Cross remain important, but in parts of the world the centre of gravity in funding and policy is shifting towards the national societies themselves. Whether this is anecdotal coincidence or mirrors the wider collapse of multilateralism is an open question.

Ukraine offers the clearest case. What has emerged there is a nationally-led humanitarianism (a ‘patriotic humanitarianism’, as Slim says), developed under conditions of intense politicisation driven by both Ukraine’s allies and its government, and represented a clear response to the humanitarian consequences of a war understood as existential. Here, it mattered that local and national actors hold and apply their own conceptions of the principles very differently and navigate them accordingly. Within a single national society, in a city occupied for nine months, the Kherson branch continued providing cross-line services into the Russian-held territory, and neutrality in the classic sense was critical to making that possible; that branch was harmed by the more solidarity-driven, patriotic messaging coming from headquarters in Kyiv. Yet that messaging had its own cause: a branch in the Kyiv suburbs had been threatened, with staff held at gunpoint, because they were seen as too neutral. On the other side of the front, the Russian Red Cross has also responded to the war’s humanitarian consequences, navigating very difficult political terrain in doing so.

The mechanism through which nationalisation can be negotiated is the auxiliary role recognised in the Geneva Conventions, under which national societies act as auxiliaries to their public authorities in the humanitarian field. For all 192 national societies, this establishes a hypothetically legally grounded basis for dialogue with the state. In Europe, where aid cuts are freeing fiscal space for defence at home, that channel is being used to ask what rising defence budgets imply for humanitarian budgets and domestic preparedness; a conference in June 2026 will bring 35 national societies together with their governments in London to discuss preparedness for major crises.

However, the same mechanism is a burden and a vulnerability. In Myanmar, the Red Cross’s auxiliary role and proximity to the current authorities place it under great strain, and what has re-emerged is ‘multiple-track humanitarianism’: the national society operating largely in military-controlled areas, with some grey-zone work in borderline areas, alongside the resistance humanitarianism of small aid groups and ethnic organisations, with which there is complementarity.

Discussion with the audience: Pluralism, localisation, accountability, and protection of humanitarian workers

The Q&A extended the discussion beyond the formal humanitarian system, raising questions about the growing plurality of actors involved in humanitarian action and the implications for principles, responsibility and accountability.

1. A first discussion concerned different traditions of humanitarianism and the applicability of humanitarian principles to local actors. Drawing on research in south-eastern Turkey, one participant described Marxist, Muslim and other locally rooted forms of humanitarian action whose understandings of humanity, neutrality and impartiality differed from those of international organisations. Stuart Gordon situated such ‘patriotic humanitarianism’ within a much longer history of politically embedded relief organisations, questioning whether these actors are becoming more numerous or simply more visible as the dominance of the Geneva-centred humanitarian system weakens. Andrea Koulaïmah cautioned against automatically defining local civil-society organisations as humanitarian organisations and expecting them to adopt neutrality, particularly where they are embedded in struggles over rights and political oppression. Sara Pantuliano similarly distinguished humanity and impartiality from neutrality and independence, which she characterised primarily as operational means rather than principles that can realistically be demanded of all humanitarian actors. Hugo Slim defended pluralism while stressing a minimum normative

threshold: different ideological traditions can engage in humanitarian action, but not where assistance excludes particular groups or violates humanity and impartiality.

2. This debate fed directly into a second theme: localisation, sovereignty and the allocation of responsibility. Participants questioned approaches that treat civil-society organisations merely as local implementers of internationally determined programmes rather than as actors within their own societies. At the same time, Koulaïmah warned that localisation can produce a problematic transfer of responsibility. Basic services ultimately remain a responsibility of the state; replacing them with NGO provision can redirect accountability from the citizen–state relationship towards a chain running from communities to NGOs and ultimately to donors. The discussion therefore also challenged institutional divisions between humanitarian, development and climate finance. Pantuliano argued that these categories largely reflect international funding structures, whereas communities experience climate pressures, conflict, health, education and other needs simultaneously.
3. A third theme concerned private-sector participation and accountability. A question from the UPS Foundation highlighted that private companies are not simply service providers: they may be longstanding members of affected societies and possess significant logistical, technological and financial capacities. Koulaïmah proposed a dual understanding of accountability: towards the people an intervention is intended to serve and, where public resources are involved, towards those providing those resources. Marian Yun stressed that local companies have long formed part of the operational value chains through which humanitarian organisations work, suggesting that definitions of ‘local actors’ need to become broader. Etienne Berges pointed to the reverse possibility of importing private-sector accountability practices into humanitarian action, particularly mechanisms allowing affected populations to provide direct feedback on the organisations serving them.
4. Finally, the discussion returned to the protection of humanitarian workers and the erosion of respect for international humanitarian law (IHL). Gordon emphasised that humanitarian norms require continuing political and institutional support rather than being self-sustaining. Koulaïmah similarly stressed the importance of upholding IHL and strengthening accountability for attacks on aid workers, while acknowledging the absence of a straightforward collective protection mechanism. Pantuliano placed the emphasis on impunity and on what she regarded as inconsistent application of IHL standards, arguing that perceived double standards undermine both the legitimacy of the humanitarian system and the protection it can offer its workers.

Taken together, the exchange suggested that the future of humanitarian action cannot be understood simply in terms of the survival or reform of established international organisations. It also requires confronting a more plural humanitarian landscape in which local civil society, states, international organisations and private actors operate according to different sources of legitimacy and responsibility. The central question therefore becomes not only ‘who provides humanitarian

assistance, but according to which principles, with what responsibilities, and accountable to whom’?

Conclusion

The roundtable offered an opportunity to reflect on the current state of humanitarian aid with academics and practitioners. What emerged from the discussion is that humanitarian aid, as we know it, is not ending, as the roundtable title provocatively suggested, but rather transforming.

This is a moment that Marian Yun defined as a time of systemic fragility. Stuart Gordon identified three simultaneous pressures on the humanitarian aid system: the weakening of international humanitarian law, the contraction and conditionalisation of humanitarian financing, and the geopolitical shift towards a more openly transactional, sovereignty-based, and anti-multilateral form of politics. Their significance, he argued, lies in their convergence rather than in any one of them alone.

Politicisation is not a novelty. Humanitarian aid never operated outside politics; it always depended on states and donors. What has changed, however, is that ‘the mask has fallen’, as Andrea Koulaïmah put it: political interests and the instrumentalisation of aid are increasingly explicit. Humanity and impartiality are foundational, the conditions of being humanitarians. However, the principles of neutrality and independence are, as Pantuliano observed, ‘means to an end’, and, for Koulaïmah, an operational consideration rather than an absolute principle. In practice, humanitarian actors cannot abide by all four. As Pantuliano argued, pretending the whole system lives up to all four principles has produced ‘unmitigated mess’ and double standards, compounding the crisis of legitimacy, and now functions as a barrier to entry for local organisations deemed insufficiently neutral.

The current funding collapse is a consequence of a profound crisis of legitimacy that already existed and has deepened over time. The cuts met little resistance precisely because the authority of the international humanitarian system had already been contested, both in donor countries and among many actors in recipient societies. Whether the present moment is best described as a new phase, a breaking point, or the latest in a recurring series of humanitarian crises, the discussion points to a phase of ‘survival humanitarianism’ where triage, overwhelmed capacity, managed decline, and ‘taking from the hungry to give to the starving’ are increasingly common factors.

In this context, localisation acquires greater relevance. The discussion, indeed, shifted toward a more nationally and locally rooted humanitarian landscape, visible in diaspora finance, community responses, local civil society, and what Etienne Berges described as an ‘era of national societies’, operating in an auxiliary role. However, localisation is not automatically emancipatory, and we need to avoid celebrating it rhetorically. Under conditions of austerity, localisation may become a form of risk displacement, where local actors may be asked to deliver the last mile, with all that this entails, while being entirely dependent on sub-contractors.

The discussion of private actors and technology reinforced this broader shift towards a more plural humanitarian ecosystem. Private companies appear not simply as external service providers but as actors embedded in affected societies and humanitarian value chains. However, technological systems raise concerns about eligibility, privacy, access to assistance and accountability.

Finally, the roundtable suggested that what may be ending is not humanitarianism itself, but the dominance of a particular historical model of humanitarian action: internationally led, heavily donor-dependent, institutionally centred in the Global North, and organised around an aspiration to a common set of principles and practices. What comes next is unlikely to be a single replacement model. It may instead be a more plural humanitarian landscape in which international organisations, states, national societies, local civil society, communities and private actors coexist with different sources of legitimacy, capacities and understandings of humanitarian responsibility. International actors should recognise the change and support it. ■

References

- Bennett, C., Foley, M. and Pantuliano, S. (2016) *Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era*. Overseas Development Institute. Available at: <https://odi.org/en/publications/time-to-let-go-remaking-humanitarian-action-for-the-modern-era>.
- European Commission (2026) 'Defending values, driving reform, delivering impact: New measures to strengthen EU humanitarian action', Press release IP/26/1160, 27 May. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_1160.
- European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2026) *Defending values, driving reform, delivering impact: The EU's humanitarian action in a shifting global order*. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, 27 May. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52026JC0025>.
- Foulkes, I. (2025) 'US pledges \$2bn for humanitarian aid, but tells UN "adapt or die"', *BBC News*, 29 December. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdj8jr37y98o>.
- Gordon, S. (2026) 'From principled humanitarianism to survival humanitarianism', *LSE International Development Blogs*, 2 June. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2026/06/02/from-principled-humanitarianism-to-survival-humanitarianism>.
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (no date) *IASC Transformative Agenda*. Available at: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-transformative-agenda>.
- ODI Global (no date) *Global history of modern humanitarian action*. Available at: <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/global-history-of-modern-humanitarian-action>.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2026a) *International aid fell sharply in 2025, says OECD*. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2026/04/international-aid-fell-sharply-in-2025-says-oecd.html>.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2026b) *A historic decline in foreign aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA data*. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/data-explainers/2026/04/a-historic-decline-in-foreign-aid-preliminary-2025-oda-data.html>.
- Stepansky, J. (2026) 'US-led "historic" foreign aid decline in 2025 amid Trump cuts: OECD', *Al Jazeera* 9 April. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/9/us-led-historic-foreign-aid-decline-in-2025-amid-trump-cuts-oecd>.
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2026) *This is OCHA*. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/ocha-2026>.
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2016) *The Grand Bargain: A shared commitment to better serve people in need*. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/grand-bargain-shared-commitment-better-serve-people-need>.



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

A Unique Programme in Strategy Designed for Decision Makers

LSE IDEAS, a centre for the study of international affairs, brings together academics and policy-makers to think strategically about world events.

This one-year **EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME** is at the heart of that endeavour. While studying in a world-leading university you will be able to learn from top LSE academics and senior policy practitioners.

The programme will sharpen your ability to challenge conventional thinking, explore new techniques for addressing risk and threats, and coach you in devising effective strategies to address them.

Residential and non-residential options allow students to learn while holding demanding positions in the public, private and non-governmental sectors.

'Right from the first week I was able to apply the lessons I had learnt to our operational and policy work and to coach my teams to look at issues differently.'

—**Dame Karen Pierce DCMG**
UK Special Envoy to the
Western Balkans, Former
UK Ambassador to the
United States

CONTACT US

ideas.strategy@lse.ac.uk
+44 (0)20 7955 6526
lse.ac.uk/ideas/exec





LSE IDEAS is the LSE's foreign policy think tank. Through sustained engagement with policymakers and opinion-formers, IDEAS provides a forum that informs policy debate and connects academic research with the practice of diplomacy and strategy.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not represent those of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) or LSE IDEAS. This publication is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) and LSE IDEAS should be credited, with the date of the publication. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material therein, the author(s) and/or LSE IDEAS will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this publication.

LSE IDEAS

Floor 9, Pankhurst House
1 Clement's Inn, London
WC2A 2AZ+44 (0)20 7107 5619
ideas@lse.ac.uk
lse.ac.uk/ideas

