
Left to Bridge the Gap

Humanitarian Assistance in Politically Estranged Settings

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Glossary

ARTF: Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
BHA: Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID)
CBPF: Country-Based Pooled Fund
CDC: Community Development Council
CERF: Central Emergency Response Fund
CIC: Center on International Cooperation
COD: Common Operational Dataset
CVA: Cash and Voucher Assistance
ECDLP: Emergency Community Development and Livelihoods Project
ECW: Education Cannot Wait
FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization
FCDO: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK)
FER: First Emergency Response
CAC: Global Affairs Canada
HDP: Humanitarian-Development-Peace (Nexus)
HDX: Humanitarian Data Exchange
ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
IFI: International Financial Institution
IHL: International Humanitarian Law
INGO: International Non-Governmental Organization
JOP: Joint Operating Principles
LNA: Local and National Actor
MDB: Multilateral Development Bank
MHPSS: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MYP: Multi-Year Programme
MYRP: Multi-Year Resilience Programme
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
NP: Nonviolent Peaceforce
NRC: Norwegian Refugee Council
NSP: National Solidarity Programme
OCHA: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA: Official Development Assistance
OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RC/HC: Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator
SWF: Social Welfare Fund
UCP: Unarmed Civilian Protection
UN: United Nations
UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
UNOPS: United Nations Office for Project Services
USAID: United States Agency for International Development
WERP: Water Emergency Relief Project
WFP: World Food Programme
WHO: World Health Organization

Executive Summary

Left to Bridge the Gap: Humanitarian Assistance in Politically Estranged Settings explores the growing role of humanitarian actors in “politically estranged” settings—contexts where cooperation between national authorities and major international donors has broken down due to factors such as unconstitutional changes in government, comprehensive sanctions, or limited international recognition. Countries such as Afghanistan, Mali, Myanmar, Syria, and others exemplify this trend. As outlined in this report, these environments are no longer rare exceptions but are becoming a more prominent feature of today’s humanitarian landscape.

Across many fragile and conflict-affected settings, development actors already face systemic challenges, including limited presence, inadequate funding, and insufficient capacity to operate at scale. These limitations are sharply exacerbated in politically estranged contexts, where formal development cooperation is often suspended altogether. In many of these settings, the suspension of development assistance and the limited presence of peacebuilding actors have left humanitarian organizations as the primary channel of international engagement. This has placed growing pressure on them to move beyond their core life-saving mandate, taking on roles in sustaining basic services, supporting local infrastructures, and strengthening community resilience amid protracted political disruption.

Pressures on the Humanitarian Ecosystem (Part I)

Humanitarian organizations operating in politically estranged settings face mounting ethical, operational, and legal challenges. With development and peacebuilding actors retreating, humanitarians are increasingly expected to fill systemic gaps, stretching their mandates and risking perceptions of compromised neutrality and independence. This expanded scope coincides with a deepening global funding crisis, forcing difficult trade-offs amid rising needs.

Legal and regulatory constraints exacerbate these challenges. Sanctions and counterterrorism measures—frequently applied in politically estranged contexts—create significant operational barriers, despite formal humanitarian exemptions. These measures often result in overcompliance, delays, and reduced access to financial and logistical resources. Complex compliance requirements and the

reluctance of development financial institutions to engage in high-risk environments have delayed aid delivery, disrupted local partnerships, and hindered principled humanitarian access. The concurrent withdrawal or limited engagement of peacebuilding actors further compounds these pressures, as humanitarian organizations find themselves operating without the conflict resolution and stabilization frameworks that could address underlying drivers of crisis and facilitate longer-term solutions.

Effective Humanitarian Modalities for Politically Estranged Settings (Part II)

While strategies such as community-led programming, pooled and flexible funding mechanisms, and expanded cash assistance are not new, their relevance becomes particularly acute in politically estranged contexts. These modalities allow humanitarians to deliver aid at scale, reinforcing local systems and avoiding entanglement in debates over political legitimacy. Crucially, they help preserve institutional resilience by investing in infrastructure, local capacities, and basic services—ensuring continuity and enabling a smoother transition to recovery when conditions permit.

In parallel, principled humanitarian dialogue—engaging local authorities, civil society, and regional actors—offers an essential tool for expanding access, reducing operational friction, and sustaining relationships that may later support peacebuilding and development. While not a replacement for political solutions, such engagement can create and protect space for neutral assistance, foster trust, and ensure humanitarian priorities are reflected in broader efforts once re-engagement becomes possible.

Recommendations and the Way Forward

This report concludes that humanitarian assistance in politically estranged contexts is both essential and unsustainable if treated as a long-term substitute for development and peacebuilding engagement.

To address this gap, it reaffirms that:

- **Development engagement in politically estranged settings is both feasible and essential**, even when relations with national authorities are restricted.

Development efforts must be **strengthened and focused on providing essential services and technical expertise** in close collaboration with **local actors**. Without such support, humanitarian assistance alone cannot prevent long-term aid dependency, institutional erosion, or social collapse.

And recommends that:

- **Donors provide flexible, predictable, multi-year, and risk-tolerant financing specifically adapted to the realities of politically estranged contexts.** This financing must not only address immediate humanitarian needs, but also support resilience and create conditions for a future transition—from preparedness to relief recovery and longer-term development.
- **Legal and regulatory framework** governing sanctions and counterterrorism be recalibrated to safeguard humanitarian access and operational continuity.
- Humanitarian actors continue to **innovate in delivery, strengthen local partnerships, and engage pragmatically but firmly**, preserving core principles while adapting to new operational realities.
- **Peace actors maintain conflict-sensitive engagement through community-level programming**, while avoiding the **instrumentalization of humanitarian access for political or peace negotiations**, which risks undermining humanitarian neutrality and long-term operational access.

Ultimately, humanitarian aid cannot resolve the structural drivers of fragility and conflict—but it can preserve lives and the possibility of recovery. The challenge is to support these efforts without allowing them to become the default response in the absence of political and development solutions.

1. Introduction

This report follows and complements *Aid Strategies in Politically Estranged Settings*, the 2023 joint study by NYU's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) and Chatham House. That paper made the case for sustained donor engagement in fragile states where formal diplomatic and development relations have collapsed. It focused on how development actors and donors can “stay and deliver” without legitimizing unlawful regimes. This new report picks up the thread from a humanitarian perspective¹, examining what happens when the humanitarian sector becomes the primary, and often only, channel of international assistance.

In 2025, nearly half of country-specific Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans are concentrated in politically estranged contexts.² These are countries where governments have seized power unconstitutionally, are subject to broad international sanctions, or lack global recognition. Development partnerships have largely been suspended. Peacebuilding is constrained. Humanitarians are left to bridge the widening gap—tasked not only with delivering life-saving relief, but increasingly with sustaining essential services, shoring up collapsing institutions, and navigating politically charged operating environments.

And while the terminology used by humanitarian actors may vary—from “de facto authorities” to “unconstitutional change of regime”—the operational dilemmas they face remain consistent: blurred mandates, contested access, strained principles, and legal and financial restrictions that make neutral assistance more challenging to deliver.

These are not temporary challenges; they are both timely and acutely relevant as the humanitarian sector grapples with a deepening funding crisis and an ongoing debate over its future direction—often referred to as the ‘humanitarian reset’.³

Drawing on expert consultations, field experience, recent case studies, and a review of existing literature, this report examines how humanitarian principles, access strategies, and delivery models are being challenged and adapted in politically estranged contexts. This report asks: how do humanitarian actors adapt to meet these challenges, and what support do they need?

It aims to inform policy by identifying not only the risks and constraints facing humanitarian organizations, but also the practical adaptations already underway in these contexts.

The analysis is structured in two parts and includes targeted recommendations for donors, policymakers, and humanitarian practitioners to strengthen response strategies in these complex environments:

- **Part I** explores the pressures on humanitarian action in estranged settings, including the blurring of mandates, legal and regulatory constraints, and the widening disparity between expectations and resources.
- **Part II** examines proven humanitarian delivery modalities—such as pooled funds, community-led programming, localization, cash assistance, and humanitarian dialogue—that are particularly effective in politically estranged contexts. These approaches enable principled aid delivery while preserving essential services and institutional resilience, thereby helping to maintain the conditions necessary for eventual development and peacebuilding engagement.

Methodology

The research methodology encompasses a comprehensive literature review and expert consultations with a diverse range of stakeholders, including Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), humanitarian donors, International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), United Nations (UN) entities, other humanitarian organizations, and policy experts. Experts were selected based on their institutional role, expertise in the humanitarian-development nexus,⁴ decision-making responsibilities, and regional experience. Insights from consultations were synthesized through thematic analysis, and findings have been triangulated with the literature review to ensure consistency and validity.

These consultations were designed to capture expert perspectives on the operational and strategic challenges of working in politically estranged contexts—from a humanitarian perspective.

2. The Impact of Politically Estranged Settings on Humanitarian Assistance

2.1 Humanitarian principles under pressure

Humanitarian action is governed by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, as enshrined in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly's Resolution 46/192 and key donor documents, such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles⁵ and the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.⁶ They are further reinforced by core tenets of International Humanitarian Law (IHL)—particularly the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols—which establish the legal obligation to facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian relief for civilians affected by armed conflict. Together, these frameworks provide the ethical and legal foundation for principled humanitarian action in all contexts, including politically estranged settings.

Unlike development actors, whose presence often requires justifications tied to broader public policy objectives, **humanitarian organizations are guided by humanitarian needs and a "stay and deliver"⁷ ethos which underscores their dedication to providing life-saving assistance even in the most challenging circumstances.** Humanitarian principles bolster the legitimacy of humanitarian efforts in politically estranged settings by appealing to universal values of saving lives, upholding human dignity, and alleviating suffering.

Although humanitarian principles are universal, their application is increasingly tested in politically estranged environments.⁸ These contexts are often characterized by high levels of instability, contested governance, and restricted operating environments, which create several critical challenges:

- **Blurring of mandates:** The withdrawal of development actors often compels humanitarians to fill the gap traditionally occupied by development aid, such as delivering basic services in collaboration with local authorities. While necessary, this shift risks eroding perceptions of neutrality and independence, exposing humanitarians to accusations of advancing political objectives.⁹

- **Engagement with Estranged or *de facto* Authorities:** Access to affected populations often requires humanitarian actors to engage with governments or non-state armed groups whose legitimacy may be contested. While such engagement is a standard and legally grounded practice in line with humanitarian principles, the perception of legitimization can vary by context, particularly in highly politicized or sanctioned environments. Managing these perceptions requires clear communication, transparency, and adherence to principled frameworks that distinguish humanitarian access from political endorsement.
- **Shrinking Humanitarian Space:**¹⁰ Politically estranged settings often lead to a shrinking of humanitarian space, marked by increased restrictions, threats to aid workers, and pressure to align with political agendas. For instance, in Myanmar, new registration laws forced NGOs to accept military oversight, jeopardizing their independence.¹¹

Reconciling these challenges demands a careful balance between humanitarian principles and pragmatic engagement to avoid humanitarian actors being forced to engage in “trade-offs” to maintain their access and operations.¹²

Communities in politically estranged contexts often distinguish between humanitarian aid and politically driven interventions, a perception that can enable access and safeguard trust even when international political relations have collapsed. This recognition—rooted in the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence—has allowed humanitarian actors to maintain presence and deliver assistance in complex environments where development and diplomatic engagement have stalled.

For example, in **Afghanistan**, humanitarian organizations continued to operate following the Taliban takeover, in part because local communities perceived them as serving urgent needs rather than political agendas. In **Syria**, local NGOs gained access and legitimacy in areas outside government control by visibly aligning their work with humanitarian principles rather than taking a stance on international political issues. Similarly, in **Yemen**, community trust in neutral humanitarian actors has enabled the continued provision of essential services, including food, water, and healthcare, despite the country's extreme political fragmentation.

- Recognizing and building on this community-level distinction is essential for designing humanitarian engagement strategies that are locally accepted and operationally feasible. It helps avoid the reputational risks associated with being linked to contested governance structures or foreign political interests, while reinforcing the legitimacy and sustainability of humanitarian action. In practice, working through respected local figures—such as faith leaders, tribal elders, and informal community representatives—can strengthen trust,

enhance the credibility of humanitarian actors, and secure access in challenging contexts.¹³

2.1.1 Conflict sensitivity and 'do no harm' approaches

Alongside the core humanitarian principles, the "Do No Harm" principle is a foundational pillar of humanitarian action. It underscores the responsibility of aid actors to ensure that their interventions do not exacerbate existing tensions, fuel conflict, or inadvertently create new risks for affected communities. As such, it is closely linked to conflict sensitivity, which involves understanding the context of conflict, analyzing how interventions may affect conflict dynamics, and taking steps to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive contributions to peace.

While humanitarian aid is not inherently designed to address the political consequences that may spill over from crises—such as shifts in power, legitimacy, or control—it must still be delivered with attention to the context. Principles such as conflict sensitivity and *do no harm* are vital for mitigating unintended consequences in politically estranged environments. In these contexts, where deep divisions and governance challenges prevail, aid delivery risks exacerbating existing tensions, deepening the underlying causes of violence, entrenching grievances, or inadvertently sustaining conflict economies.

Research underscores the paradoxical role of humanitarian aid in politically estranged settings, particularly in fragile states governed by “political marketplace”¹⁴ systems: aid flows often become entangled in transactional politics, consolidating elite power structures and fueling war economies rather than fostering stability.¹⁵

To navigate these risks effectively, humanitarian actors working in politically estranged contexts must integrate the following into their strategies:

- **Comprehensive Conflict Analysis:** A nuanced understanding of conflict drivers, power dynamics, and the political economy of aid is essential for designing interventions that avoid reinforcing harmful systems and dynamics. It includes conducting targeted, community-level analyses to help anticipate and address risks such as tensions over aid distribution, perceptions of favoritism, or exclusion.
- **Community-Level Engagement:** Continuous dialogue with affected populations ensures that interventions align with local priorities and address grievances, reducing the risk of resentment or mistrust.
- **Local Accountability Mechanism:** In politically estranged settings—where formal oversight is weak or politicized—establishing robust, community-

based feedback and complaints systems is critical. These mechanisms enable affected populations to voice concerns, flag manipulation or exclusion, and hold humanitarian actors accountable, thereby safeguarding the integrity of aid and reducing the risk of co-optation by political interests.

Embedding conflict sensitivity into humanitarian strategies not only enhances operational effectiveness but also strengthens the legitimacy of humanitarian actors in contested environments. Adopting conflict sensitivity programming as a best practice, as highlighted in frameworks such as the *Conflict Sensitivity and the Centrality of Protection Policy Brief*,¹⁶ is increasingly critical for navigating the unique challenges of politically estranged settings.

2.2 Humanitarian dilemmas: Expanding the scope of humanitarian assistance amid a growing funding crisis.

2.2.1 Expanding the scope and objectives of humanitarian interventions

The absence of development actors in politically estranged settings often compels humanitarians to extend their mandate into “humanitarian+” activities—essentially development-oriented interventions. While these activities help maintain critical services and prevent system collapse, they also raise questions about adherence to humanitarian principles and long-term sustainability.¹⁷

Examples of expanding roles and responsibilities:

- **Provision of basic services:** In the absence of development actors, humanitarian organizations are increasingly delivering essential services, such as healthcare, education, and social protection. For example, following the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) supported over 25 hospitals, and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) took on the responsibility of paying teachers’ salaries. Similar projects were implemented in Yemen’s Houthis-controlled areas in 2017.
- **Support for critical infrastructure:** Humanitarian actors, such as the ICRC, have intervened to repair and maintain water systems in Burkina Faso, addressing long-term needs, even as most donors fund only temporary solutions like water trucking.

- **Managing macroeconomic functions:** In some politically estranged settings, humanitarian actors may find themselves involved in supporting basic macroeconomic functions, such as currency exchange and payment systems. This is particularly relevant in contexts where sanctions or political instability disrupt these critical functions, hindering the delivery of aid.¹⁸
- **Strengthening local systems:** Some humanitarian organizations engage in activities that strengthen local health or education systems as part of their emergency response. This can include training local health workers, providing technical assistance to health facilities, and supporting community-based health or education initiatives.

At first glance, expanding the scope of humanitarian assistance in politically estranged contexts may appear both pragmatic and beneficial. Humanitarian organizations can fill critical gaps left by absent development actors, providing essential services such as healthcare, education, and livelihood support that sustain communities and strengthen their resilience. When designed with a longer-term perspective, these interventions can also reduce communities' reliance on recurrent humanitarian aid by promoting self-reliance and building the foundations for future development engagement.

Additionally, expanded activities can open pathways for dialogue and engagement with local authorities, local communities, and local civil society, fostering trust and laying the groundwork for potential political and development initiatives (see Part 2: *"Delivering Humanitarian Aid in Politically Estranged Settings: Enabling, not replacing Development and Peace"*).

However, these efforts come with notable challenges. Stretching resources to cover development-like activities risks diluting the core mandate of humanitarian organizations and compromising life-saving priorities. Expanding their scope can also blur the lines between humanitarian and political objectives, exposing them to accusations of legitimizing contested authorities or undermining neutrality and independence. Prolonged involvement in non-relief activities may foster dependency and hinder sustainable development transitions, especially in protracted crises. While humanitarian actors may step in to address gaps in governance or basic services, they often lack the specific technical expertise, mandate, or long-term planning frameworks required to carry out such interventions effectively. As a result, these efforts are frequently ad hoc and short-term, limiting their efficiency, sustainability, and potential to make meaningful contributions to broader peace and development goals.

Finally, in a context of shrinking resources and heightened prioritization, humanitarian actors are often compelled to focus on areas where access is feasible and operational costs are lower. While pragmatic, this risks undermining the

principle of impartiality by skewing assistance away from the most vulnerable and hardest-to-reach populations.

- **Humanitarian actors need to carefully assess the needs, risks, and potential unintended consequences of expanding their scope**, ensuring that they prioritize their core mandate of saving lives and alleviating suffering while mitigating potential harm.
- **Clarify and contextualize “life-saving” priorities in politically estranged settings:** While maintaining a clear focus on immediate humanitarian needs, donors and humanitarian actors should recognize that in protracted, politically estranged contexts, sustaining community-level health, education, and livelihoods may be critical to stabilizing populations and preventing recurrent crises. Rather than expanding the humanitarian mandate, this underscores the need for stronger development engagement—specifically, localized, risk-tolerant support to essential services—so that humanitarian assistance is not forced to fill systemic gaps indefinitely.

2.2.2 Funding crisis, prioritization, and “boundary setting”

The scale of global humanitarian needs has surged dramatically over the years. The number of UN-coordinated appeals has increased from USD 6 billion in 1992¹⁹ to a staggering USD 45.4 billion in 2025,²⁰ reflecting the growing severity and duration of crises. While humanitarian funding has also risen significantly, the gap between needs and resources continues to widen. In 2024, only 50% of the Global Humanitarian Appeal was funded, leaving critical needs unmet and millions without assistance.²¹ By contrast, 64.4% of the appeal was funded in 2004 and 61% in 2014—albeit with significantly lower overall funding requirements.²² This downward trend in coverage highlights a growing strain on the humanitarian financing system at a time of escalating global needs. Today, many of the largest humanitarian appeals originate from politically estranged contexts—such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Yemen—and consistently receive less than half of the requested funding. Exceptions are rare and typically limited to highly visible crises that attract sustained media and political attention, such as the Gaza crisis.

In addition, the humanitarian funding crisis is compounded by the effective disappearance of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as a major donor.²³ As one of the largest and most influential humanitarian funders, USAID’s withdrawal has left a significant gap in global response capacity, particularly in protracted crises and politically estranged settings. This abrupt shift has strained already underfunded appeals, forced program cuts, and intensified reliance on a shrinking pool of donors, further undermining the predictability and scale of humanitarian assistance at a time of record global needs.

The growing complexity and scale of humanitarian crises necessitate difficult decisions about boundaries, prioritization, and the scope of humanitarian action. In 2024, recognizing the increasing gap between needs and resources, the humanitarian community, led by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and supported by donors, launched a global conversation about “boundary setting”²⁴ to reassess how humanitarian responses can be prioritized without compromising principled action. According to OCHA, setting boundaries in humanitarian action is not about limiting ambition but about improving focus and impact.²⁵ However, boundary setting alone cannot solve the underlying funding deficits.

To break the cycles of crisis and dependency, the international community must address the root causes of funding deficits and the escalating humanitarian needs that drive them. Without a renewed commitment to long-term, sustainable development interventions in politically estranged settings, humanitarian actors face the stark challenge of doing more with fewer resources amid protracted crises, constrained funding, and escalating needs.

2.2.3 Beyond short-termism: Investing smartly in politically estranged settings

While financing short-term crisis responses is politically and publicly more appealing, supporting long-term initiatives in politically estranged contexts entails higher risks, financial commitments, and uncertain outcomes. This dynamic perpetuates a bias towards short-termism, leaving these settings trapped in cycles of recurring crises and making it much more expensive to undertake development.

However, evidence²⁶ consistently demonstrates that preparedness, including early intervention, disaster prevention, adaptive systems, and pre-arranged financing, is more cost-effective than addressing full-scale crises. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) calculates that every dollar invested in anticipatory action could give families seven dollars in benefits and avoid losses. Yet despite research indicating that more than half of humanitarian emergencies are predictable and over 20 percent are highly foreseeable, in 2023, less than 1 percent of humanitarian funds were dedicated to such interventions.²⁷ This messaging, which appeals to fiscal responsibility, is increasingly coupled with arguments for localization—empowering local and national actors to deliver aid. Local actors, as first responders, bring proximity and cultural insight, enabling swift, context-sensitive aid delivery. Pre-positioning funds with local organizations ensures communities can respond quickly to crises without needing to engage with estranged authorities, preserving neutrality and operational independence. In addition, studies suggest that localized

interventions can be up to 32% more cost-efficient than those led by international actors.²⁸

- By emphasizing principles of efficiency, effectiveness, and the moral imperative to act, humanitarian donors can make a stronger case for sustained engagement in politically estranged settings—while also using language that development donors recognize and respond to. This does not imply mandate substitution, but rather a strategic framing to encourage complementary development action where it is most needed.²⁹

2.3 Sanctions and counterterrorism measures: Key barriers to humanitarian action in politically estranged settings

2.3.1 The chilling effect of counterterrorism policies³⁰

Bilateral sanctions and counterterrorism measures often create significant barriers for humanitarian actors operating in politically estranged settings. These measures, while intended to curb illegal activities, can inadvertently obstruct humanitarian operations by imposing stringent restrictions on financial transactions and supply chains.

A key concern highlighted by humanitarian actors is the broad and often vague definition of "material support" to terrorist groups in national and international counterterrorism legislation. The fear of inadvertently violating these laws, even when providing essential humanitarian aid, prompts humanitarian organizations to over-comply. This leads them to restrict their activities, avoid certain areas or beneficiaries, and even forgo partnerships with local NGOs, ultimately hindering their ability to reach those most in need.

In politically estranged contexts, counterterrorism financing regulations present a significant operational barrier by constraining the ability of humanitarian actors to access and transfer funds. Financial institutions, wary of secondary sanctions and compliance risks, often engage in "de-risking" by terminating or denying banking services to NGOs working in areas controlled by sanctioned or non-recognized authorities. This forces humanitarian organizations to rely on informal mechanisms—such as hawala networks³¹ or physical cash transport—which can carry higher risk, limited accountability, and increased operational costs. In settings like Syria, Gaza, and Afghanistan, these financial constraints not only delay critical aid delivery but also limit the scale and flexibility of response efforts. The resulting access

bottlenecks compromise the humanitarian imperative and penalize affected populations despite the legal protections afforded under international humanitarian law.

- By providing **tailored legal training to their staff**, humanitarian organizations can help them navigate counterterrorism laws and sanctions, ensuring compliance while maintaining operational effectiveness.

2.3.2 Humanitarian exemptions and their limitations

UN Security Council Resolution 2664 (2022) acted as a significant step towards protecting humanitarian action. This resolution recognizes that counterterrorism measures can hinder aid delivery and urges member states to ensure that their implementation does not obstruct impartial humanitarian activities. The resolution's introduction of humanitarian exemptions within UN sanctions regimes aims to provide a clear legal basis for organizations to deliver aid without compromising their principles or facing legal repercussions.

However, the scope of its application is limited as exemptions only apply to asset-freeze measures under UN sanctions. This leaves humanitarian actors grappling with restrictive autonomous measures imposed by individual states or regional organizations, many of which lack similar exemptions. Humanitarians continuously advocate for the urgency of extending the application of humanitarian exemptions to encompass these autonomous regimes,³² as their impact on humanitarian operations can be equally significant.³³

While temporary exemptions proved effective during crises like the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake and the 2021 Niger floods, their limited duration and ad hoc nature necessitate ongoing negotiation and advocacy.

3. Delivering Humanitarian Aid in Politically Estranged Settings: Enabling, Not Replacing, Development and Peace

3.1 Humanitarian practices and funding modalities relevant to politically estranged contexts

While humanitarian delivery modalities are primarily designed to meet immediate needs, they are increasingly being implemented in ways that help stabilize communities and strengthen local capacities. In politically estranged and fragile settings—where development and peacebuilding actors are often absent—such approaches can lay the groundwork for recovery and resilience, contributing indirectly but strategically to broader development and peace outcomes.

3.1.1 Localization and community-led action

Localization has emerged as a cornerstone of the humanitarian agenda, emphasizing the importance of placing communities at the heart of aid delivery. The Grand Bargain³⁴—an agreement between some of the largest donors and aid providers—includes commitments to channel at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders³⁵ as directly as possible. Pooled fund mechanisms specifically targeting local organizations are gaining traction as an effective way to channel resources directly. In 2024, 45% of Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) funding was channeled to local and national partners, the highest proportion ever.³⁶

Localized approaches are particularly effective in politically estranged settings, where international humanitarian actors often face access and legitimacy challenges due to political sensitivities, distrust, and security risks. Localized approaches provide a pragmatic, principled, and context-sensitive means of delivering aid when traditional state-based or international channels are constrained.

Localization also holds significant potential for advancing peace and development in politically estranged contexts. By empowering local actors, humanitarian initiatives can:

- **Enhance community ownership and trust:** In politically estranged settings, local and national actors (LNAs) are often viewed as more legitimate and credible than external organizations. Empowering LNAs to lead humanitarian responses ensures that aid aligns with the priorities of affected populations, fostering a sense of ownership and trust. This is particularly important in estranged settings where international actors may be seen as aligned with opposing political or foreign interests.³⁷
- **Improve access:** Politically estranged contexts are often marked by limited access for international actors due to political tensions, sanctions, or security risks. LNAs, with their established networks and relationships, are better positioned to navigate these constraints. In Afghanistan, for example, local organizations have been able to deliver aid in Taliban-controlled areas, bypassing many of the restrictions faced by international agencies.
- **Build resilience and reduce dependency:** In politically estranged contexts where international engagement is often limited or sporadic, localization offers a pathway to sustainability. By investing in the capacity of LNAs, humanitarian efforts can transition to longer-term solutions. In the example of Syria, training local health workers and supporting community-led education initiatives have sustained critical services in areas where international presence is minimal.
- **Support social cohesion and dispute resolution:** Beyond delivering aid, LNAs often play a crucial role in maintaining the social fabric through informal governance functions. In many estranged settings, local actors have facilitated community-level dispute resolution, coordinated protection efforts, and engaged in conflict mediation—functions that go beyond humanitarian mandates but help stabilize communities.

However, operationalizing localization in politically estranged settings faces several challenges, including:

- **Capacity building:** LNAs in politically estranged contexts frequently operate in environments with minimal external support, resulting in weak administrative, financial, and operational capacities. These gaps make it difficult for them to scale their impact, meet donor requirements, or manage the complexities of large-scale humanitarian responses.
- **Donor reluctance:** Concerns about corruption, misuse of funds, and violations of sanctions deter donors from funding local actors, especially in politically estranged settings. The absence of robust oversight mechanisms in politically

estranged settings creates challenges in ensuring that local actors adhere to donor standards for transparency and accountability. Mismanagement of funds, whether perceived or actual, can erode donor trust.

- **Risk of politicization and co-optation:** In estranged environments, LNAs may be perceived as aligned with specific political factions or ethnic groups. This can undermine their ability to deliver impartial aid and complicate adherence to humanitarian principles. For instance, in Myanmar, local actors have faced challenges maintaining neutrality in areas controlled by armed groups.³⁸

Despite these challenges, community-driven approaches represent a critical pathway for fostering sustainability and strengthening local systems in the absence of international actors.

- Donors should be **encouraged to fund Micro-Grant Programs** for high-risk contexts and simplify application processes to enable small local NGOs to access funds for immediate community needs in politically estranged settings, such as rural Myanmar or Afghanistan. For instance, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has piloted providing microgrants of up to EUR/USD 10,000 to local partners (later revised to EUR/USD 25,000), representing a shift from their usual direct assistance model to enabling partners' responses.³⁹
- To reduce the risk of politicization and co-optation of local actors in politically estranged contexts, donors and international agencies should adopt a **diversified and transparent localization strategy**. This includes supporting a **broad range of local organizations**—across ethnic, geographic, and political lines—and investing in **context-specific training** on humanitarian principles, neutrality, and conflict sensitivity.⁴⁰

Case study: Community-based service delivery in politically estranged Afghanistan⁴¹

Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Afghanistan became a politically estranged context, prompting the suspension of direct development assistance to state institutions. In response, the World Bank restructured its support through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), shifting implementation to UN agencies and local partners. A key component of this approach was the continued use of Community Development Councils (CDCs)—originally established under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP)—to deliver basic services and support livelihoods at the village level.

Implemented through the Emergency Community Development and Livelihoods Project (ECDLP), this model enabled the continuation of development-oriented programming without direct engagement with the de facto authorities. CDCs, supported by actors such as the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), UNICEF, and the World Food Programme (WFP), managed local service delivery in sectors such as health,

education, water, and sanitation, effectively bridging the gap between humanitarian relief and longer-term development efforts. Humanitarians facilitated local health, education, water, and livelihood services by overseeing procurement, logistics, technical support, and risk-managed disbursement—while maintaining a humanitarian posture.

This case illustrates how localized, community-driven models, backed by international financing and humanitarian coordination, can maintain essential services in politically estranged environments—balancing risk, preserving neutrality, and sustaining community resilience.

3.1.2 Cash and voucher assistance: Flexibility, empowerment, and peacebuilding

Cash and voucher assistance (CVA) has become an indispensable tool in politically estranged settings, offering beneficiaries the flexibility to address their most urgent needs. By bypassing the logistical complexities of in-kind aid, CVA represents a cost-effective, dignified, and adaptable solution that aligns with the principles of impartiality and neutrality.⁴² For instance, in Yemen, the Social Welfare Fund (SWF) continued to operate despite the conflict, with the support of UNICEF and the World Bank through a functioning payment system. This allowed for the distribution of cash transfers to vulnerable households.

Beyond immediate relief, CVA contributes to broader peace and development dividends by:

- **Reducing economic hardship:**⁴³ Mitigating financial stress and lowering the risk of conflict or unrest.
- **Stimulating local economies:** Injecting liquidity into local markets, promoting small businesses, and encouraging economic stability.
- **Promoting social cohesion:** CVA can enhance social cohesion when designed with a conflict-sensitive lens. By addressing socio-economic disparities and targeting both displaced and host populations equitably, for instance, it reduces tensions and perceptions of exclusion. CVA also stimulates local markets, fosters shared economic benefits, and enhances trust when implemented through inclusive, transparent processes. However, it must be carefully designed to avoid exacerbating inequalities or market strain.

Multi-purpose cash assistance allows for a holistic approach, meeting diverse needs simultaneously—whether for food, housing, education, or healthcare. This enhances beneficiaries' self-sufficiency and accelerates recovery processes, making CVA an invaluable component of humanitarian strategies in politically estranged settings. Indeed, CVA can be delivered through a variety of modalities, increasing access in

challenging environments: CVA can be delivered through financial institutions, mobile money platforms, or even community-based distribution networks, making it adaptable to the specific context. **This flexibility is crucial in estranged settings where access to certain areas might be restricted due to security concerns or political obstacles.**

However, there are practical challenges to implementing CVA in politically estranged contexts, **such as limited banking infrastructure, currency fluctuations, and security risks.**⁴⁴ In addition, this approach requires robust market analysis and safeguards to prevent exacerbating local inequalities or inflation.

- Humanitarian actors are encouraged to collaborate with local mobile banking providers in settings like Yemen, where traditional banking services are unavailable, to implement secure cash transfers.
- Humanitarian organizations can also leverage blockchain to address corruption risks.⁴⁵ Implementing blockchain-based tracking ensures transparency in resource distribution in regions with contested governance.

Case study: Lessons from Jordan—How blockchain could be used for CVA in politically estranged settings⁴⁶

While implemented in a more traditional setting, the WFP Building Blocks project in Jordan offers important insights for aid delivery in politically estranged settings. Launched in 2017, the initiative used a private blockchain platform to manage cash-based food assistance for Syrian refugees in Azraq and Zaatari camps.

Through blockchain, WFP created an immutable, transparent ledger to record all transactions—linked to biometric authentication using iris scans. This system eliminated the need for third-party financial intermediaries, allowing for direct and real-time transfers to beneficiaries. It reduced transaction costs, enhanced data security, and allowed for auditable aid flows that donors could monitor remotely.

Although implemented in a cooperative setting, Building Blocks presents a scalable model for politically estranged contexts, where formal engagement with governments is restricted, and risks of corruption or aid diversion are high. Its core features—secure data handling, transparency, and operational independence—could enable humanitarian actors to maintain principled aid delivery while navigating contested governance environments. In such settings, blockchain could facilitate CVA through local partners while minimizing exposure to politicization, improving donor confidence, and safeguarding humanitarian space.

3.1.3 Anticipatory action: Proactive responses with long-term benefits

Humanitarian actors define “anticipatory action”⁴⁷ as acting ahead of predicted hazards to prevent or reduce acute humanitarian impacts before they fully unfold. Anticipatory action focuses on proactive measures to mitigate predictable crises rather than reactive responses. These interventions, including early-warning systems, pre-positioning of supplies, and disaster insurance mechanisms, not only reduce the human and economic costs of crises but also create ripple effects that support community recovery and resilience.

Politically estranged contexts are often characterized by protracted crises, weakened institutions, and a heavy reliance on humanitarian aid. **These factors increase the potential impact of predictable hazards, such as droughts, floods, or disease outbreaks, making proactive mitigation measures even more crucial.** Yet even with strong local engagement, anticipatory action depends on the ability to move aid quickly and efficiently. In politically estranged contexts, supply chains are often fragile due to limited infrastructure and constrained access routes, which can undermine early response efforts.

The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), established by the UN General Assembly in 2005, has taken on an important role in supporting the set-up and financing of several anticipatory action pilots, led by OCHA in close collaboration with the broader humanitarian system, including in politically estranged settings such as Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Niger, or Yemen.⁴⁸

- In politically estranged settings, anticipatory action is most effective when grounded in inclusive, locally-driven approaches. CVA, which is recognized as an effective tool in estranged settings, can be integrated into anticipatory action frameworks. This can empower local communities to respond to predicted hazards, fostering self-sufficiency and reducing reliance on external aid. However, achieving effective coordination can be challenging in contexts where relationships among authorities, international organizations, and local actors are strained or adversarial.
- For anticipatory action to be efficient in politically estranged contexts, **humanitarian organizations and donors should invest in conflict-resilient supply chains.** It is indeed critical to support infrastructure that ensures pre-positioned supplies reach remote, high-risk regions, even during access restrictions, for instance, using logistical hubs at the sub-national level that minimize dependence on central governments.

Case study: Maintaining supply chains through third-party logistics in Afghanistan⁴⁹

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 and donors subsequently halting direct engagement and development funding to central authorities, humanitarian operations faced severe disruptions to national-level logistics and procurement systems. In response, humanitarian and development actors turned to third-party logistics providers, most notably UNOPS, to maintain supply chains and sustain access to essential goods and services.

Through projects like the Afghanistan Water Emergency Relief Project (WERP)—funded by the World Bank's ARTF—UNOPS coordinated procurement, warehousing, and last-mile delivery of water infrastructure supplies, bypassing central government systems. This model allowed for the pre-positioning of materials in secure sub-national hubs, maintaining the flow of goods even as regulatory uncertainty and political interference intensified in Kabul.

Reports by Humanitarian Outcomes (2022, 2023) show that agencies relying on neutral third-party partners were better able to withstand political pressure, reduce aid diversion risks, and preserve humanitarian principles in contested areas. These supply chain adaptations helped maintain essential services in remote provinces without empowering contested authorities—offering a replicable model for other politically estranged settings.

3.1. 4 Investing in local infrastructure: Bridging immediate and long-term needs

In politically estranged settings, humanitarian actors often rehabilitate essential infrastructure to maintain basic services and community functioning. This includes repairing rural health clinics and hospitals (e.g., NGO-supported mobile health units in northwest Syria), rehabilitating damaged water networks and boreholes (as seen in southern Somalia), restoring schools and learning spaces (e.g., community-based education centers in Afghanistan supported by UNICEF), rebuilding irrigation canals and smallholder farming infrastructure, and repairing local roads and footbridges to ensure aid delivery and market access. Investments in local infrastructure are particularly relevant in politically estranged settings due to their dual role in addressing urgent humanitarian needs while fostering long-term stability and development. These settings often face extreme infrastructural neglect due to limited state capacity, political isolation, or ongoing conflict. Targeted investments in infrastructure not only enable faster and more effective aid delivery but also help build resilience and local self-reliance. By improving access to markets, healthcare, and schools, these projects:

- **Reduce distances to essential services:** Close proximity to hospitals, schools, and markets enhances immediate accessibility and long-term economic growth.
- **Promote market activity:** Enhanced transportation infrastructure fosters market activity and community integration, driving grassroots economic development.

Politically estranged areas often lack the capacity to engage in large-scale development planning. Strategic infrastructure rehabilitation serves as a bridge between emergency humanitarian assistance and longer-term development goals, preparing these regions for eventual reintegration into broader national or international frameworks. However, it is important to note that these types of initiatives and investments are not always feasible or relevant—especially in the case of conflict or active conflict zones.

3.1.5 Investing in health and education initiatives: Building resilient systems

Humanitarian actors consulted for this research acknowledge that robust health and education systems are foundational to societal resilience, particularly in politically estranged settings. In these settings, health and education systems are severely disrupted due to weak governance, funding shortages, and contested authority. Services are often inaccessible, unequally distributed, and under-resourced, with marginalized groups facing the greatest exclusion. Skilled workers may leave, and systems risk fragmentation or politicization, further undermining their effectiveness. These challenges weaken societal resilience, leaving communities vulnerable to poverty, inequality, and prolonged instability.

Dual-mandate organizations, such as UNICEF and WHO, play a pivotal role in bridging the humanitarian-development divide by strengthening national systems capable of enduring and responding to shocks. This role is especially vital in politically estranged, constrained contexts, where formal development assistance may be paused or restricted. These agencies typically operate at the technical and service delivery levels—minimizing political exposure—and apply safeguards such as third-party monitoring, pooled funding, and partnerships with local actors to uphold humanitarian principles. Their core objective is to maintain continuity in essential services—such as immunization campaigns, health infrastructure, and water systems—even when other actors disengage. When carefully managed, this approach supports longer-term resilience while preserving neutrality, impartiality, and operational independence.

By integrating humanitarian and development objectives, these agencies empower local health and education systems to function effectively even under stress. Such investments address immediate needs while also laying the groundwork for long-term stability. For example, in politically estranged settings, UNICEF reinforces national health and education systems by supporting vaccination and nutrition programs and ensuring the continuity of education systems during crises.

In this context, Education Cannot Wait (ECW)⁵⁰ stands out as a compelling model. For donors wary of directly managing funds in high-risk settings, ECW provides an interesting funding mechanism. By contributing to ECW, donors support crisis response initiatives without assuming the risks associated with instability, corruption, or inefficiencies in estranged settings.

Operating in politically unstable or high-risk areas requires a higher tolerance for risk, and ECW's structure is specifically designed to navigate these challenges. Its consortium-based model, which includes partnerships with UN agencies, NGOs, and local actors, ensures that education initiatives can continue even when national-level engagement is not feasible. In such cases, ECW operates at the provincial or regional levels, maintaining its impact in complex environments.

The organization's Multi-Year Resilience Program (MYRP) framework exemplifies its adaptive approach, allowing for program redesigns during implementation to respond to shifting needs. This adaptability makes ECW a critical funding bridge, ensuring continuity of operations in politically sensitive contexts. Moreover, ECW's commitment to adhering to humanitarian principles and implementing rigorous due diligence processes reassures donors while maximizing the effectiveness and sustainability of its interventions.

By investing in health and education in politically estranged settings, humanitarian actors such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as mechanisms like ECW, not only address immediate humanitarian needs but also create pathways for long-term resilience, poverty reduction, and peacebuilding. Such investments are crucial for fostering inclusive societies capable of recovering from crises and achieving sustainable development.

Case study: Education cannot wait—Delivering education in crisis while managing donor risk

ECW is the UN global fund for education in emergencies and protracted crises. Hosted by UNICEF and launched in 2016, ECW mobilizes pooled donor funding to support access to education for children and youth affected by conflict, displacement, and disasters.

How does it work?

ECW operates through two main funding windows:

- **First Emergency Response (FER):** Rapid, short-term funding to kickstart education activities in new or escalating crises (e.g., grants to Gaza, Haiti, and Sudan).
- **Multi-Year Resilience Programmes (MYRPs):** Longer-term investments (three–four years) that strengthen education systems in fragile and politically complex settings such as Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia.

Why it matters for politically estranged contexts?

In settings where traditional development engagement is politically sensitive or restricted, ECW provides a risk-managed model for delivering education:

- **Pooled fund structure** allows donors to contribute without direct financial engagement with contested governments.
- **Implementation via UN agencies and vetted local partners** helps preserve neutrality and reduce exposure to politicization.
- **Robust safeguards and third-party monitoring** ensure transparency and accountability in high-risk environments.

ECW demonstrates how pooled, flexible, and well-governed funding mechanisms can sustain essential services, such as education in politically estranged contexts—balancing donor risk, operational independence, and local ownership.

3.1.6 Peace supportive effects of humanitarian assistance

In politically estranged contexts, where state legitimacy may be contested, humanitarian actors—while not mandated to build peace—can nonetheless contribute indirectly to local peace dividends by supporting protection and mediation activities that address both immediate safety concerns and some of the underlying drivers of violence. Although such contributions are often fragile and difficult to sustain in the absence of broader political engagement or development investment, they can offer critical stability gains in settings where few other actors are present.

Key approaches include:

- **Civilian self-protection and mediation:** These initiatives support at-risk communities in developing their own safety mechanisms and engaging constructively with armed groups or other parties to a conflict. This approach reduces reliance on external actors and builds local resilience. Examples include mechanisms such as local reconciliation committees in Syria, which

have been used to mediate community disputes and facilitate dialogue with armed actors to prevent violence and protect civilians.⁵¹

- **Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP):** This method involves deploying trained civilians to areas of conflict to provide direct physical protection to threatened populations, reduce violence, and strengthen local capacities for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.
- In addition, interventions targeting economic exclusion, inequality, and psychosocial trauma help **address the conditions that fuel grievances and instability**. For example, in northeast Syria, humanitarian agencies have provided cash transfers, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and inclusive service delivery to mitigate intergroup tensions, build trust, and prevent local escalation—despite the absence of formal governance structures or recognition.

Case study: Nonviolent Peaceforce⁵²—Unarmed civilian protection in practice

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), a leading international NGO, operationalizes UCP to safeguard vulnerable populations—such as displaced people, women, and marginalized communities—in active conflict zones. NP teams maintain a visible, nonviolent presence in volatile areas and facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties to deter violence and enable humanitarian access.

Beyond immediate protection, NP invests in local violence prevention infrastructure by training community members in early warning systems, safe negotiation, and conflict resolution. This approach fosters long-term community resilience, enabling civilians to manage disputes constructively and independently, even after NP staff have withdrawn.

In politically estranged settings, such strategies are particularly relevant because they prioritize local actors and non-partisanship, adhering closely to humanitarian principles. These efforts foster trust and cooperation, even in contexts of contested governance or restricted access for traditional peacebuilding actors. **By addressing the root causes of violence—such as exclusion, mistrust, and resource competition—and empowering local capacities for conflict management, these initiatives complement broader peacebuilding frameworks such as the UN Sustaining Peace Agenda.**

Moreover, such programs enhance the safety and dignity of affected populations by offering locally led, context-sensitive solutions. In doing so, humanitarian actors contribute not only to immediate protection but also to the long-term stabilization of politically estranged regions, laying a foundation for resilience, reconciliation, and sustainable peace.

3.1.7 Operationalizing the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus in politically estranged settings

In politically estranged settings, implementing nexus-responsive approaches⁵³ is challenging due to complex political constraints, the breakdown of formal development partnerships, the withdrawal of development actors, and the limited scope of peace operations, which creates coordination gaps.

A critical consequence of this development withdrawal is the loss of technical expertise and advisory capacity. Development actors, particularly international financial institutions and bilateral donors, not only bring funding but also contribute essential sectoral and economic knowledge, institutional development frameworks, and long-term planning capacity. Their absence places humanitarian actors in the position of having to fill technical voids—without necessarily having the tools, expertise, or mandates to do so effectively.⁵⁴

To adapt to these multifaceted constraints, humanitarian actors have developed targeted operational strategies to sustain a nexus-oriented approach:

- **Diagnostic tools and data sharing:** In politically constrained contexts, robust diagnostics and shared data systems are essential. Data-sharing platforms help coordinate efforts, reducing duplication and improving complementarity, even in fragmented operational landscapes. Tools such as the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) and Common Operational Datasets (CODs) facilitate a common understanding of needs and geographic priorities, even in settings where political sensitivities limit joint planning.
- **Localized and small-scale solutions:** In politically estranged settings, large-scale, multi-actor collaboration among HDP partners is often constrained by donor restrictions, reputational risks, and the absence of recognized authorities. In response, humanitarian actors have pursued smaller, technically focused initiatives—such as community-driven service delivery or risk-managed cash systems—that demonstrate feasibility, build trust, and create entry points for future development investment. These initiatives are not always designed to unlock direct development funding, but they can inform donor confidence and show that targeted, principled engagement is possible—even without formal political agreements.
- **Leveraging flexible funding mechanisms:** Innovative and flexible funding mechanisms are vital in politically constrained environments:
 - *Pooled Funds:* Mechanisms like the CERF, CBPFs, and thematic funds such as ECW provide quick disbursements to crisis-affected areas, bypassing political bottlenecks. However, aligning these funds with other

mechanisms and demonstrating impact beyond quantitative metrics remains a challenge.

- *Multi-Year Programs (MYPs⁵⁵)*: MYPs offer flexibility in uncertain environments, allowing for realignment during implementation through a "crisis modifier." This adaptability ensures continued funding and services despite shifting political and crisis dynamics, bridging short-term humanitarian needs with long-term development objectives. Donors such as the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Australia, Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and the now-dismantled USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) have supported this funding mechanism (non-exhaustive).

Through diagnostic tools, localized solutions, and flexible funding mechanisms, humanitarian actors in politically estranged settings are able to implement "nexus-responsive" programming. By adapting their strategies to the unique constraints of these environments, they ensure interventions remain effective, context-sensitive, and aligned with immediate needs while contributing to creating an environment conducive to long-term peace and development goals.

3.2 Expanding humanitarian dialogue: Risks and opportunities

3.2.1 Opportunities

Humanitarian dialogue, primarily aimed at ensuring the safety, security, and operational continuity of humanitarian efforts, holds the potential to foster trust, sustain communication, and provide a foundation for addressing broader issues in politically estranged settings.

Humanitarian dialogue is essential for negotiating access, advocating for the protection of civilians, and ensuring compliance with international humanitarian and human rights laws. While its primary focus is operational, in politically estranged settings, it creates opportunities for:

- Reminding all parties of their legal obligations.
- Sustaining regular communication that addresses the needs of affected populations.
- Serving as a neutral platform to defuse tensions and prevent the politicization of humanitarian aid.

- Laying the groundwork for trust-building and relationship maintenance, which could support future discussions on political or development challenges.

Humanitarian dialogue often transcends immediate relief, creating opportunities to discuss long-term challenges that underpin fragility and conflict (e.g., social inequality, economic under-development, human rights violations, corruption, refugees or displacement crisis, etc.).

Resident Coordinators and Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HCs) play a crucial role in these contexts. **Their dual mandate allows them to bridge humanitarian and development efforts, and in some cases, contribute to peacebuilding**⁵⁶. For example, in Afghanistan, RC/HCs have maintained humanitarian aid delivery while fostering limited dialogue on development-oriented issues with *de facto* authorities. This dual role highlights the potential for humanitarian dialogue to transition into discussions that address deeper developmental and political concerns.

- To maximize the potential of humanitarian dialogue, humanitarian organizations must invest in their capacity to negotiate access at all levels. This involves training personnel in negotiation techniques, developing context-specific access strategies, and leveraging collective humanitarian influence through consortia or pooled resources.

3.2.2 Challenges and risks associated with expanding humanitarian dialogue

While humanitarian dialogue holds significant promise, it must be approached with caution to avoid risks that could undermine its purpose.

Maintaining clear boundaries between humanitarian and political objectives is essential to mitigate these risks. **Humanitarian actors must ensure their dialogue remains focused on saving lives and addressing immediate needs, without overstepping into political or development realms that could compromise neutrality.** The use of Joint Operating Principles (JOPs), as seen in Syria, Yemen, or Afghanistan,⁵⁷ provides a practical framework for managing these risks. By establishing clear, context-specific guidelines for interaction with local authorities, JOPs help ensure that humanitarian principles are respected in operational decision-making. When carefully crafted and developed through an inclusive and consultative process to secure broad buy-in, they foster a shared understanding among humanitarian actors and mitigate the risk of inconsistent approaches that could compromise access or legitimacy.⁵⁸

Humanitarian assistance is sometimes used as an 'easy' entry point to facilitate more complex and challenging peace or development conversations. This is especially

true in politically estranged settings. For instance, in Yemen, negotiations on humanitarian access with different factions were key in preventing a full-scale famine in 2020. These negotiations also paved the way for peace dialogues. In 2020, the UN envoy to Yemen redoubled efforts to negotiate a ceasefire, leveraging the avoidance of humanitarian catastrophes to help restart broader peace talks. However, this approach introduces the risk of politicizing humanitarian dialogue and making humanitarian access conditional on political undertakings. **Humanitarian actors have been vocal about avoiding the use of humanitarian assistance as a bargaining chip in political and peace negotiations. They have also warned against the politicization of humanitarian access, as it may compromise their ability to operate safely and respond to the most urgent needs.**

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that in politically estranged settings, humanitarian actors often operate with limited leverage. The absence of formal diplomatic channels and the withdrawal of development actors can further reduce the influence humanitarian organizations can exert. While it can facilitate access, reduce immediate tensions, and raise awareness of human rights concerns, **humanitarian dialogue cannot resolve core political conflicts, enforce accountability, or achieve long-term political solutions. It also cannot transform political legitimacy, ensure security, or address structural injustices, such as poverty and inequality.** Humanitarian dialogue, focused on immediate relief, lacks the capacity to implement long-term development goals or address systemic issues without broader political engagement and comprehensive peace processes.

- Humanitarian actors and donors should promote the development, adoption, and resourcing of JOPs in politically estranged settings. These principles should be developed through inclusive and consultative processes with wide buy-in, tailored to the political sensitivities and operational realities of each context.
- Protect Humanitarian dialogue from political co-optation: UN leadership, member states, and diplomatic actors must ensure that humanitarian negotiations are not instrumentalized as entry points for political or peace agendas. The use of humanitarian rationale to initiate ceasefires or peace talks, without safeguards, risks undermining neutrality and jeopardizing long-term access

Conclusion

Why Humanitarian Aid Can't Do It All—The Need for Broader Support

While humanitarian aid provides critical relief, it is **inherently not designed to serve as a standalone pathway to development or peacebuilding**. Its limitations are both structural (e.g., scope, budget, capacity, objectives) and systemic (e.g., lack of coordination with other components of the nexus, siloed approaches), highlighting the critical need for broader engagement across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

Key challenges and limitations of relying solely on humanitarian aid in politically estranged settings include:

- **Limited scope & scalability:** Resources allocated for crisis management are insufficient to address long-term structural vulnerabilities and/or respond to them on a large scale. By design, humanitarian aid is limited in its capacity to address the structural drivers of crises: humanitarian's mandate and funding mechanisms are typically designed for short-term interventions, ill-equipped to address the underlying causes of fragility, conflict, and underdevelopment.⁵⁹ In addition, while humanitarian actors increasingly engage in activities beyond immediate relief, such as supporting livelihoods or basic services, these efforts are often insufficient in scope and duration to foster lasting change.
- **Risks of creating dependency cycles:** Humanitarian interventions often focus on repetitive short-term aid to the same populations without fostering sustainable progress. The repeated provision of short-term humanitarian assistance, without a concurrent focus on development and peacebuilding, can inadvertently create a cycle of dependency. This cycle traps populations in a state of prolonged reliance on aid, hindering their ability to build resilience, pursue sustainable livelihoods, and break free from the grip of recurring crises.⁶⁰ This gap is exacerbated by a lack of political will to direct funding towards long-term structural solutions, even as global humanitarian needs outpace available funding. In estranged settings, the limited number of multi-year projects that can transition affected populations from immediate relief to development outcomes in estranged settings perpetuates cycles of dependency.

As a joint NGO statement for the launch of the 2025 Global Humanitarian Overview noted: “With limited complementarity with development and other

actors, it is unclear who will target those left behind. Despite exceptional prioritization efforts, humanitarian funding lags behind, and ODA cuts impact both humanitarian action and development gains.”⁶¹

Overreliance on Humanitarian Aid and Institutional Gaps: In politically estranged settings, the absence of development and peacebuilding actors often leaves humanitarian organizations as the only international presence. While they may attempt to compensate through expanded roles, this reliance creates significant gaps that humanitarian assistance alone cannot fill. For example, sustained engagement with multilateral development banks is often envisioned as a stopgap solution. However, in practice, operational collaboration remains limited: smaller humanitarian organizations face high transaction costs and burdensome procedural requirements, which are ill-suited to the flexible, rapid-response nature of humanitarian work.

- **Emergence of a "grey zone:"** Recent research indicates the emergence of a "grey zone" in protracted crises,⁶² where the boundaries between humanitarian and development interventions are increasingly blurred. Humanitarian actors are often compelled to assume roles traditionally associated with development, such as supporting basic services, institutional resilience, or community recovery. This creates challenges for both funding and coordination, as traditional humanitarian funding mechanisms may not be suitable for longer-term, development-oriented interventions, and development actors may still be hesitant to engage in contexts considered politically estranged. Without complementary development engagement—including sustained presence, capacity, and investment—humanitarian interventions in politically estranged settings will fail to address the root causes of vulnerability.

Humanitarian aid is vital but insufficient on its own. Without sustained political and financial investment in long-term development solutions, politically estranged contexts will remain trapped in cycles of emergency response and aid dependency.

Recommendations

FOR DONORS, IFIs, AND MEMBER STATES

Enable and expand development engagement in politically estranged contexts.

Donors and member states should strengthen development engagement in politically estranged contexts, recognizing that such engagement is both feasible and essential to reducing long-term aid dependency and social collapse. While political and institutional barriers persist, especially where formal government relations are restricted, flexible and innovative approaches—including support to local development actors, third-party delivery, and multilateral platforms—must be scaled up. This requires dedicated investments to increase the presence, capacity, and adaptability of development actors in these settings. Without such engagement, humanitarian assistance alone cannot sustain essential services or support transitions out of fragility.

Simplify funding processes and expand micro-grant programs for local NGOs in high-risk settings.

Donors should simplify application and reporting requirements to make funding more accessible to small local NGOs, particularly in politically estranged and high-risk contexts. This includes supporting micro-grant programs that enable these actors to respond quickly to immediate community needs with flexible, low-barrier funding.

Provide flexible, predictable, multi-year, and risk-tolerant financing specifically adapted to the realities of politically estranged contexts.

This financing must not only address immediate humanitarian needs but also support resilience and create conditions for a future transition—from relief to recovery to longer-term development.

Increase contributions to multilateral pooled funds to support collective response efforts.

This includes increased contributions to established mechanisms, such as the CERF, CBPFs, and thematic funds like ECW, as these funds can provide quick

disbursements to crisis-affected areas, bypassing political bottlenecks and directly channeling resources to local and national partners.

Advocate for the expansion of humanitarian exemptions within sanctions regimes.

This advocacy should focus on extending the application of humanitarian exemptions beyond asset-freeze measures under UN sanctions to also encompass restrictive autonomous measures imposed by individual states or regional organizations, which currently lack similar protections and significantly hinder humanitarian operations.

Support diversified and transparent localization strategies that reduce politicization risks.

To mitigate the risk of politicization and co-optation of local actors in politically estranged contexts, donors and international agencies should adopt a diversified and transparent localization strategy, which includes supporting a broad range of local organizations—across ethnic, geographic, and political lines—and investing in context-specific training on humanitarian principles, neutrality, and conflict sensitivity.

Donors and IFIs should maintain or re-establish technical advisory support and economic monitoring in politically estranged settings, even when direct budget support is not possible.

This can be done through third-party arrangements, remote monitoring systems, or partnerships with neutral actors (e.g., ICRC, UN agencies). Such sustained technical collaboration i. supports service delivery systems (e.g., health, education) by bridging capacity gaps; ii. enables informed planning and adaptive programming, and iii. fosters continuity and credibility for eventual development re-engagement.

FOR PEACE ACTORS

Avoid instrumentalizing humanitarian access for political or peace negotiations.

Peace actors and diplomatic entities must resist using humanitarian negotiations as entry points for broader political agendas. While humanitarian dialogue may create opportunities for trust-building, co-opting humanitarian rationale for ceasefires or peace talks without proper safeguards undermines humanitarian neutrality and jeopardizes long-term access to affected populations.

Support local peace infrastructure that can function during political estrangement.

Peace actors should invest in local reconciliation committees, traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, and community peace networks that can continue operating even when formal peace processes are suspended.

Coordinate with humanitarian actors on conflict analysis and "do no harm" approaches without compromising humanitarian independence.

Peace actors can share contextual analysis and support humanitarian organizations' conflict-sensitive programming while respecting humanitarian principles.

Maintain technical expertise and relationship-building capacity for eventual re-engagement.

Similar to recommendations for development actors, peace actors should preserve institutional knowledge, maintain relationships with civil society, and keep channels open for when formal peace processes become viable again.

FOR UN AND MULTILATERAL ACTORS

Empower RC/HCs to catalyze development engagement and align efforts in the absence of traditional coordination frameworks.

In politically estranged contexts, where development actors are often absent or under-resourced, RC/HCs should be empowered and resourced to convene humanitarian agencies, local organizations, and any remaining development or technical actors, advocate for essential services, and coordinate interim arrangements that fill the gap left by development disengagement. Rather than bridging two fully present systems, RC/HCs can leverage their dual mandate to initiate or sustain development-like efforts, including community-level service delivery and capacity support, in collaboration with humanitarian and local actors. This role also includes advocating for eventual re-engagement by development institutions when conditions permit.

Support dialogue frameworks that foster cooperation and build trust with estranged or contested authorities.

These dialogue frameworks are essential for negotiating access, advocating for the protection of civilians, and ensuring compliance with international humanitarian and human rights laws. They serve as a neutral platform to defuse tensions, prevent

the politicization of aid, and lay the groundwork for trust-building and relationship maintenance.

Design resilience-focused programs that address immediate needs while building long-term capacity.

This includes designing programs that extend beyond immediate relief to support essential services such as healthcare, education, and livelihood support ("humanitarian+" activities), strengthening local systems, and implementing proactive measures through anticipatory action to mitigate predictable crises.

Develop integrated coordination platforms that streamline collaboration across sectors and mandates.

This involves utilizing robust diagnostic tools and shared data systems such as the HDX and CODs to facilitate a common understanding of needs and geographic priorities, even when political sensitivities limit joint planning.

FOR HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS (UN AGENCIES, INGOS, NGOS, AND IMPLEMENTING ACTORS)

Carefully assess the scope of humanitarian action, weighing risks and trade-offs of mandate expansion.

Humanitarian organizations operating in politically estranged settings must meticulously evaluate the potential risks associated with expanding their core mandates to include development-oriented or "humanitarian+" activities. While such expansion can fill critical gaps left by absent development actors and sustain essential services, such as healthcare, education, or livelihood support, it carries significant trade-offs. Organizations must prioritize their core mandate of saving lives and alleviating suffering while mitigating potential harm and carefully assessing needs, risks, and unintended consequences.

Revisit the definition of “life-saving” interventions to include services that sustain local capacity and reduce long-term vulnerability (e.g., community health, education, livelihoods).

In protracted, politically estranged contexts, humanitarian actors and donors should adopt a more flexible and adaptive understanding of what constitutes "life-saving" priorities. This broader definition should encompass interventions that sustain local capacities, such as community-led health services, education initiatives, and

livelihood support, which are critical for maintaining stability, reducing long-term vulnerabilities, and preventing repeated crises. Recognizing these interventions as essential, even if not traditionally defined as purely humanitarian, helps clarify operational boundaries and supports more effective, context-adapted responses.

Invest in staff training to navigate political sensitivities and negotiate access.

To effectively operate in politically estranged environments, humanitarian organizations must invest in comprehensive staff training. This training should focus on navigating sensitive political environments, developing context-specific access strategies, and enhancing negotiation techniques at all levels. Such investment allows personnel to build trust and enhance the credibility of humanitarian actors by, for example, working through respected local figures, such as faith leaders or tribal elders, thereby securing and maintaining access in challenging contexts. It also enables organizations to leverage collective humanitarian influence through consortia or pooled resources during negotiations.

Enhance humanitarian negotiation capacity at local, subnational, and national levels.

Building upon staff training, humanitarian organizations must proactively enhance their negotiation capacity across all operational levels—from community and subnational engagement to national-level discussions. This enhanced capacity is crucial for negotiating safe and unimpeded access to affected populations, particularly with estranged or de facto authorities whose legitimacy may be contested. Effective negotiation at all levels can help defuse tensions, prevent the politicization of aid, and lay the groundwork for trust-building and relationship maintenance, which can even support future discussions on broader political or development challenges.

Provide legal support and internal training on counterterrorism regulations to reduce delays and protect compliance.

Humanitarian organizations must provide tailored legal support and internal training to their staff on navigating complex counterterrorism laws and sanctions regimes. This is critical to mitigate the significant risks of over-compliance and self-censorship that often result from broad and vague definitions of "material support" in national and international legislation. Such measures help ensure compliance with regulations while maintaining operational effectiveness, reducing financial constraints, avoiding "de-risking" by financial institutions, and ultimately preventing delays in critical aid delivery caused by fear of inadvertently violating laws.

Leverage innovative financial services approaches, such as mobile banking systems, in contexts where traditional banking is inaccessible.

In politically estranged settings where financial institutions engage in "de-risking" or traditional banking infrastructure is limited, humanitarian actors are encouraged to work with local mobile banking providers. This approach enables the implementation of secure and flexible cash transfers, offering adaptability to specific contexts and reducing reliance on higher-risk informal mechanisms, such as hawala networks or physical cash transport.

Utilize blockchain-based tools to improve transparency in aid tracking and mitigate corruption risks.

Humanitarian organizations should leverage blockchain-based tracking solutions to address corruption risks and enhance transparency in resource distribution, especially in regions with contested governance. This technology can reduce transaction costs, enhance data security, and provide auditable aid flows that improve donor confidence, making it a scalable model for principled aid delivery in politically estranged settings where formal engagement with governments is restricted and risks of aid diversion are high.

Invest in conflict-resilient supply chains and pre-position aid to ensure timely delivery in remote or contested areas.

To ensure aid reaches remote, high-risk, and politically estranged regions even during access restrictions, humanitarian organizations and donors must invest in conflict-resilient supply chains. This involves supporting robust infrastructure that enables the pre-positioning of supplies, for instance, by establishing logistical hubs at the sub-national level, which minimizes dependence on central governments.

ALL ACTORS

Strengthen localization through inclusive approaches, ensuring support to a diverse range of local organizations across regions, ethnicities, and sectors.

To effectively operationalize localization, all international actors must adopt a diversified and transparent localization strategy. This means actively supporting a broad range of local organizations—across ethnic, geographic, and political lines—to reduce the risk of politicization, co-optation, or perceptions of favoritism. This inclusive approach should also involve investing in context-specific training on humanitarian principles, neutrality, and conflict sensitivity for local partners.

Support interventions that foster local resilience and reduce aid dependency, recognizing that humanitarian programming—when designed effectively—can complement future development and peacebuilding efforts.

All actors must prioritize investments in interventions that build long-term local resilience and actively work to reduce aid dependency, especially in protracted, politically estranged settings. Supporting "humanitarian+" activities, such as investments in local infrastructure, health, education, and livelihood support, can help transition communities towards self-reliance and lay the groundwork for future development engagement. The absence of complementary development and peacebuilding investments perpetuates cycles of dependency, leaving communities vulnerable to recurring crises. By framing aid delivery in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and moral responsibility, donors can strengthen the case for sustained engagement across the HDP nexus.

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Endnotes

¹ It is important to underscore that, in many politically estranged contexts, the primary humanitarian responders are often national and local non-governmental remain consistent: blurred mandates, contested access, strained principles, and legal and financial restrictions that make neutral assistance more challenging non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These actors are often best positioned to navigate operational complexities, maintain access, and deliver assistance in politically sensitive environments where international actors—including the UN—may face access restrictions, legitimacy challenges, or political resistance.

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025* (New York: United Nations, December 4, 2024), www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfes.

³ The term *humanitarian reset* refers to a proposed overhaul of the humanitarian aid system aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness in response to what has been described as “a profound crisis of legitimacy, morale, and funding.” See Tom Fletcher, “The Humanitarian Reset — Message from Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher to the humanitarian community,” OCHA, March 10, 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/news/humanitarian-reset-0>.

⁴ Also referred to as humanitarian-development collaboration.

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¹¹ Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Lene Groenkaer, *Weathering the Storm: Why and How Development Financing Actors Should Stay Engaged during Political Crises* (Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, February 2024).

¹² A common trade-off involves granting limited access to opposition-controlled areas in exchange for continued operations in government-controlled areas, even if needs are greater elsewhere, thereby compromising impartiality. See Martin Barber and Mark Bowden, *Ensuring Better Outcomes for Civilians in Armed Conflict What Role for Humanitarian Principles?* (Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The term “political marketplace” refers to a system in which aid and assistance become commodities that are traded and exchanged within a complex web of political and economic interests.

¹⁵ Martin Barber and Mark Bowden, *Ensuring Better Outcomes for Civilians in Armed Conflict: What Role for Humanitarian Principles?* (Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023).

¹⁶ Global Protection Cluster and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Conflict Sensitivity and the Centrality of Protection: Policy Brief,” *ReliefWeb*, March 24, 2022, www.reliefweb.int/report/world/conflict-sensitivity-and-centrality-protection-policy-brief.

¹⁷ Even outside politically estranged contexts, the protracted nature of many crises forces humanitarian agencies to grapple with making short-term assistance more sustainable while responding to new emergencies that punctuate long-running instability.

¹⁸ Amid the conflict in Yemen, UNICEF, with funding from the World Bank, took over the implementation of cash transfer programming originally run by the Yemeni Social Welfare Fund.

¹⁹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2000* (May 2000), <https://devinit.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2000-GHA-report.pdf>.

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²¹ Ibid.

²² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Financial Tracking Service*, n.d., <https://fts.unocha.org/home/>.

²³ In 2024, the United States accounted for **44.5% of contributions to the Global Humanitarian Appeal**, providing over **USD 11 billion** in humanitarian funding (OCHA Financial Tracking Service). In 2023, USAID administered approximately **USD 43.8 billion in foreign aid**, representing around **60% of all U.S. foreign assistance disbursements**—underscoring its central role in both development and humanitarian programming.

²⁴ Boundary setting can be understood as defining the limits and legitimacy of humanitarian action—how far, with whom, and for how long—in a changing landscape where humanitarian actors are often called on to do more, with fewer resources, and under increasingly complex political conditions.

²⁵ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *OCHA's Strategic Plan 2023-2026: Transforming Humanitarian Coordination* (New York: United Nations, February 7, 2023), www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/ochas-strategic-plan-2023-2026-transforming-humanitarian-coordination.

²⁶ Recent studies, including those from the High-Level Panel on Closing the Crisis Protection Gap, highlight the importance of shifting from reactive models to preemptive risk financing and adaptive social protection systems. Similarly, the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) emphasizes the need for scalable, shock-responsive safety nets as part of a more resilient crisis response architecture.

²⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), "The Impact of Disasters on Agriculture and Food Security 2023: Avoiding and reducing losses through investment in resilience," FAO (2023): <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7900en>.

²⁸ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025*, (New York: United Nations, December 4, 2024), accessed December 9, 2024, www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfres.

²⁹ Cliffe et al., "Aid Strategies in "Politically Estranged" Settings."

³⁰ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), *Results Group 3 Subgroup on Counter-Terrorism Working Document: Desk Review of Relevant Literature on the Impact of Counter-Terrorism Legislation and Measures on Principled Humanitarian Assistance – Key Recommendations* (Geneva: IASC, 2023).

³¹ "Hawala are informal money transfer companies that transfer funds both domestically and internationally. This type of system was originally developed to facilitate trade between distant regions where conventional banking institutions were either absent, weak or unsafe. They operate parallel to – and usually independently from – regular banks." *Guidelines: How to Use Hawala in Somalia* (prepared by Adeso on behalf of the Somalia Cash Based Response Working Group [CBRWG], 2020).

³² *Autonomous regimes* refer to unilateral or regionally imposed sanction frameworks established by individual states or regional organizations, as opposed to multilateral sanctions adopted by bodies such as the UN Security Council

³³ International Peace Institute (IPI), *Safeguarding Humanitarian Action in UN Sanctions and Counter Terrorism Regimes: The Impact and Implementation of Resolution 2664*. New York: International Peace Institute, 2023.

³⁴ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), *The Grand Bargain*. Accessed December 15, 2024, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>.

³⁵ *Local actors* refer to community-based or grassroots organizations rooted in a specific locality, typically led and staffed by individuals from those communities. *National actors* are civil society organizations or institutions operating at the country level, primarily governed and staffed by nationals, and may include national NGOs or Red Cross/Red Crescent societies.

³⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025* (December 4, 2024), www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfres.

³⁷ Celine Giuliani and Dan Schreiber, "International Cooperation in a Complex World: The Art of Navigating Politically Constrained Settings," *LinkedIn*, March 27, 2024. www.linkedin.com/pulse/international-cooperation-complex-world-art-settings-celine-giuliani-lborc/.

³⁸ Martin Barber and Mark Bowden, *Ensuring Better Outcomes for Civilians in Armed Conflict: What Role for Humanitarian Principles?* (Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023).

³⁹ Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Overseas Development Institute (ODI), "NRC - Catalogue of Quality Funding Practices to the Humanitarian Response: 2nd Edition," Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)," November 7, 2024.

⁴⁰ International Peace Institute (IPI), *Safeguarding Humanitarian Action in UN Sanctions and Counter Terrorism Regimes: The Impact and Implementation of Resolution 2664* (New York: International Peace Institute, December 2023).

⁴¹ World Bank, "Emergency Community Development and Livelihoods Project – Project Information Document," World Bank, 2022, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/>.

⁴² CVA makes up about one-fifth of total humanitarian assistance and reached USD 7.9 billion in 2022. See CALP Network, "What Is CVA," <https://www.calpnetwork.org/cash-and-voucher-assistance/what-is-cva/>.

⁴³ The 2021-2025 African Development Bank Group's Strategy for Addressing Fragility and Building Resilience in Africa (2022-2026) emphasizes that failing economic and financial management, coupled with a lack of consensus on development priorities, can exacerbate violence and corruption. This suggests that economic hardship, stemming from mismanagement and unequal distribution of resources, is a significant underlying factor in conflict. See African Development Bank, "Bank Group's Strategy for Addressing Fragility and Building Resilience in Africa (2022-2026)," *African Development Bank - Building Today, a Better Africa Tomorrow*, April 5, 2022, www.afdb.org/en/documents/bank-groups-strategy-addressing-fragility-and-building-resilience-africa-2022-2026.

⁴⁴ CVA can expose recipients to targeting or extortion, raise tensions over perceived aid inequality, and pose operational and reputational risks for humanitarian actors, especially in sanctioned or insecure environments.

⁴⁵ Hossein Baharmand et al., "Developing a Framework for Designing Humanitarian Blockchain Projects," *Computers in Industry* 131 (October 1, 2021): 103487, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compind.2021.103487>.

⁴⁶ World Food Programme (WFP), "Building Blocks Project Summary," <https://innovation.wfp.org/project/building-blocks>.

⁴⁷ UN Humanitarian, "What Is Anticipatory Action?" *YouTube*, May 17, 2021, Accessed December 15, 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEiolOvU3Wg.

⁴⁸ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Anticipatory Action," www.unocha.org/anticipatory-action?_gl=1%2A1padg0%2A_gcl_au%2AOTc3NzU1MjI2LjE3Mjk4ODU1NDM.%2A_ga%2AOTcyNTk1NTM5LjE3MTIzMjI1ODI.%2A_ga_F60ZNX2F68%2AMTczMzYwNDM1OC4zLjAuMTczMzYwNDM1OC42MC4wLjA.

⁴⁹ United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), *Afghanistan Water Emergency Relief Project (P179311) Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF)* (August 2024), <https://content.unops.org/documents/Afghanistan-Water-Emergency-Relief-Project.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Education Cannot Wait, "Our Strategy," Education Cannot Wait, www.educationcannotwait.org/about-us/our-strategy.

⁵¹ Sophie Haspeslagh and Zahbia Yousuf, *Local Engagement with Armed Groups in the Midst of Violence*, 2015.

⁵² Nonviolent Peaceforce, *Strategic Plan 2021-2025* (Brussels: Nonviolent Peaceforce, November 2021), https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NP_Global_Strategy_2021-2025_Final_November_2021.pdf.

⁵³ Nexus-responsive approaches are programming and coordination models that intentionally align humanitarian relief with longer-term development and, where relevant, peace objectives—while remaining sensitive to political dynamics and grounded in principled, context-specific action.

⁵⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Sustaining Engagement and Impact in Conflict-Affected Contexts through the World Bank-ICRC Partnership* (Geneva: ICRC, April 2024), shop.icrc.org/sustaining-engagement-and-impact-in-conflict-affected-contexts-through-the-world-bank-icrc-partnership-discussion-draft-pdf-en.html.

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⁶¹ “Joint NGO Statement: Global Humanitarian Overview 2025.” December 3, 2024.

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