SYMPOSIUM SERIES FOR THE FUTURE OF HUMANITARIANISM

The Future of Humanitarianism

Dilemmas, directions and ideas for radical change

A facilitators' summary of the discussions held during the inaugural meeting of the Independent Symposium Series for the Future of Humanitarianism. It does not represent consensus among participants, nor an endorsed position, but seeks to capture key tensions, dilemmas, and emerging directions that may help carry the conversation forward.

The humanitarian aid system stands at a crossroads amid seismic shifts in the global aid architecture and the contexts within which it operates, not least the exponentially evolving impacts of climate change. Unflinching analysis and bold thinking are needed to develop a vision for a new humanitarianism – one that is effective and fit for purpose in protracted crises. Emergencies are growing in complexity - from climate-induced disasters and protracted conflicts to overt breaches of international humanitarian law by state actors and unprecedented violence against humanitarian staff. At the same time, the humanitarian system is facing multiple crises at once: a crisis of legitimacy, having failed to shift power to those affected by the emergencies it responds to and being unable to meet growing needs or address root causes; a breakdown of the legal frameworks that should protect civilians and humanitarians in violent conflict; and the collapse or contraction of major funding streams for humanitarian aid.

The Symposium Series for the Future of Humanitarianism is an independent initiative set up to foster in-depth, open conversations between leading thinkers within and outside the humanitarian space and to generate radical ideas and collaborations for how to build a better system.

This paper draws on the inaugural meeting in the Symposium Series for the Future of Humanitarianism, convened in January 2026 near Copenhagen under Chatham House Rules. It does not present a blueprint for a wholly new system, nor does it assume that the tensions at the heart of humanitarianism can simply be designed away. Rather, it sets out a diagnosis of the main dilemmas and contradictions shaping humanitarian action today, identifies the direction in which participants believe the cursor must move, and points to concrete areas of follow-on work. The aim is not to claim rupture for its own sake, but to state

more clearly the weaknesses of the present system and the profile of humanitarianism that may be needed in the years ahead.

The participants in the inaugural Symposium were:

Peter Maurer, Karen Kisakeni Sørensen, Tammam Aloudat, Sara Leedom, Lina AbiRafeh, Jeremy Konyndyk, Kennedy Odede, Jakob Øster, Jonathan Austin, Elizabeth Campbell, Kuol Arou, Diego Hakspiel and Shahin Ashraf.

Humanitarianism in crisis

Public funding for crisis response is shrinking and becoming more selective at the very moment when needs are accelerating and compounding across protracted conflict, climate breakdown and economic instability. This is not simply a temporary funding dip. Participants described it as part of a deeper political realignment: in the post-World War II order, humanitarians often operated within a tacit bargain between states and non-state actors: states gave humanitarian actors space to save lives, and the humanitarian sector gave states political cover. That bargain was never neutral, and many who interacted with the system have long recognised the tension between humanitarian principles and the political settlements that enabled practice. Yet it created room for action. Today, those bargains are fraying.

Public resources are increasingly treated explicitly as instruments of foreign policy rather than as contributions to a global public good. At the same time, humanitarianism has often also been a poor instrument of geopolitical influence for the states that funded it. If the need for states to appear benevolent is receding, and if humanitarianism is no longer seen as especially effective in serving sovereign interests, then the space it once occupied becomes more precarious. In short, political cover is no longer required in the same way, and the space for humanitarian action can therefore no longer be assumed.

These shifts are occurring alongside a hardening of public discourse about migration, displacement and "deservingness". In many countries, political actors use exclusionary language and frames of threat, abuse and invasion to erode empathy and normalise hostility towards people affected by crises. As a result, political space for principled, needs-based responses is shrinking, while the range of crises for which solidarity can be mobilised narrows. Humanitarian actors are left with impossible choices, and their claims to neutrality, independence and universality become harder to sustain in practice.

Beneath these pressures lies a deeper crisis of meaning. As one participant observed, "'humanitarian' means something that happens to other people." If humanitarianism is framed as an optional act of generosity towards distant others – and if most people's only exposure to it is through the marketing of large international NGOs or UN bodies with professionalised communications and a seemingly endless need to raise more resources – it becomes highly vulnerable to budget cuts, nationalist agendas and the erosion of liberal norms. Closely linked to this, in their attempt to grow and cover an ever-expanding number of crises and people affected by them, humanitarian actors have increasingly departed from some of their roots: from rights-based global civil society activism and solidarity towards a fragmented and inefficient system of delivery that is detached from the grassroots, marginalises local and national systems, and often puts the interests of institutions ahead of the priorities and rights of the people it is supposed to serve.

However, this moment is not about a choice between preserving or abandoning humanitarianism. Rather, participants described a series of tensions that can no longer be ignored: between political and apolitical action; between emergency support and transformation support; between local and global forms of authority; between universal principles and highly selective implementation; and between an ethic of solidarity and an institutional system structured around branding and competition. The challenge is not to eliminate these tensions. It is to move the cursor towards a profile of humanitarianism that is more honest about them, more coherent in how it navigates them and more grounded in dignity, rights and solidarity.

Recasting the narrative of humanitarianism

A first task is to rethink the theory and narrative of humanitarianism itself. Participants called for a broader, more grounded understanding of humanitarian action: one led less by discretionary charity and more by rights, dignity and shared responsibility. This does not mean abandoning operational action or denying the value that large agencies can still bring in contexts of acute crisis. Nor does it mean pretending that humanitarianism can or should simply dissolve into development, activism or politics. It means recognising that emergency response sits within a wider moral and political landscape, and that the language of neutrality has too often obscured the real bargains, interests and trade-offs at play.

In that sense, the current moment offers not only a crisis but also an opportunity. Humanitarianism can continue to drift into further fragmentation, technocracy and dependence on elite political will, or it can be re-centred around shared humanity. A more deliberate re-articulation of the norms and principles that justify humanitarian action in the first place, and a clearer insistence that humanitarian action must be grounded in human dignity, equality and protection under international law rather than in discretionary charity or soft power. It also requires naming and resisting the ways in which states co-opt humanitarian language to legitimise exclusion, securitisation and selective empathy.

This, in turn, implies a strategic shift from a narrow, operational notion of humanitarianism to a broader movement of solidarity and social change. Humanitarian action needs an open table – one that welcomes local civil society and private sector actors, social movements, community leaders and affected people as equal partners in defining norms and priorities. Other global movements, such as climate justice and feminist mobilisation, have shown that lasting change often comes from broad alliances and moral clarity rather than from technocratic optimisation alone. Humanitarianism need not mimic those movements, but it can learn from them. It can expand its reach and relevance without losing all distinctiveness.

This does not mean humanitarianism should become everything. But nor can it continue to present itself as a bounded professional sector when many of the actors with the deepest legitimacy, trust and long-term presence sit outside formal humanitarian structures. The future of humanitarian action cannot be defined only by large UN agencies and international NGOs. It must also include local civil society, municipal and community governance systems, refugee-led organisations, diaspora networks, mutual aid groups, social movements and private actors rooted in affected contexts. Participants pointed to a wide field of actors already doing humanitarian work in practice, but rarely treated as central to defining strategy or purpose.

A related implication is that listening alone is not enough. Too often, people affected by conflict and displacement are spoken for rather than heard, their experiences flattened into categories that fit institutional logics. New digital and participatory technologies make it increasingly possible for people affected by crises to contribute direct testimony at scale. That matters, and participants saw genuine listening as part of the scaffolding of solidarity.

But the crisis of legitimacy will not be solved by more consultation if humanitarian actors continue to avoid the political and economic structures that generate vulnerability and violence. Humanitarian actors cannot merely become better neutral listeners. They are already entangled with power through who funds them, where they are present or absent, what they are willing to say publicly and whose violations they are prepared to name. The question is not whether humanitarianism is political, but whether it is willing to be political in defence of the people it claims to serve.

Power, localisation and trust

A second domain of change concerns power and trust. The institutional architecture of the humanitarian system remains largely centralised and risk-averse. Accountability and financial authority still tend to flow upwards to donors rather than downwards to affected people. Authority is still overwhelmingly vested in international actors and technical experts – planners, logisticians, economists and policy professionals – while local knowledge is too often treated as secondary, informal or partial. This is not only a technical problem. It is a question of who is trusted to decide, whose evidence counts and what forms of authority the system recognises as legitimate.

These patterns are sustained by a wider set of incentives. Fragmented mandates, project-based funding and institutional silos encourage competition for visibility and resources rather than collective problem-solving. Donors continue to outsource risks and responsibilities in ways that suit their own constraints, while funding recipients and affected communities have little say in how those risks are defined, distributed or negotiated. In this sense, the operating logic of the system often contradicts the morals it claims to uphold. If humanitarianism is understood primarily as a technical system for delivering assistance and

maximising quantifiable outputs, then fragmentation, expert-led knowledge and perverse incentives may appear to be design problems that can be optimised away. But if humanitarianism is understood as part of a broader effort to advance solidarity, inclusion and social justice, those same features look far more troubling: they risk turning an ethic of shared responsibility into a competitive service industry.

Participants therefore argued that legitimacy and trust can no longer rest on mandates, branding or technical expertise alone. They must be earned through participation, transparency and a more deliberate redistribution of power. That does not mean dispensing with global coordination, pooled standards or specialised expertise. The tension between local and global will remain. But it does mean shifting from a supply-driven system, governed by donor priorities and intermediated by large institutions, towards one that follows locally set priorities more closely and gives local actors real authority over decisions, resources and definitions of success.

This has implications for the role of international agencies. The call is not simply for international NGOs to shrink, but to change roles: from implementers-first to allies-first; from command to collaboration; from delivery to accompaniment. Their comparative advantage may lie less in controlling operations and more in convening, amplifying, resourcing and helping to protect civic space. Practical shifts such as scaling up multi-purpose cash, backing coalition building, strengthening local governance and resourcing rights-based advocacy may all support that move, but only if they are embedded in arrangements that give affected people real influence rather than better managed participation. If humanitarianism is to regain trust, decisions must be made closer to those affected, and institutions must become more open about the inequalities they reproduce internally as well as externally.

At the same time, participants were cautious about simple reversals. Localisation is not, by itself, a substitute for a wider theory of change. Nor is the local always inherently more just. The point is not to romanticise proximity, but to reconfigure authority so that people and institutions closest to crisis have a greater role in defining priorities, while global actors become more honest about the value they add and the power they hold. Here too, the task is not to remove the tension between local and global, but to move close towards proximity, participation and shared authority.

New financial models for a different humanitarian profile

A third domain concerns finance. Humanitarian action remains structurally tethered to an emergency mindset, even as displacement and crisis have become long-term features of political and social life. Protracted refugee situations can last for decades. Camps originally established as temporary have become semi-permanent settlements, where multiple generations live under the fiction of temporariness. Yet financing, legal frameworks and

programme design remain locked into short-term emergency logics that are poorly suited to these realities. Much of the humanitarian architecture still depends on annual or project-based donor contributions. This rewards visible, time-limited outputs rather than long-term inclusion, resilience or structural change. Even where evidence shows that multi-year, flexible funding can be more efficient and more aligned with community priorities, such models remain the exception rather than the rule and are often still channelled through the same incumbent actors. The result is a repeated emergency cycle: crises are framed as acute, responses are designed as short bursts of activity, and then renewed, repackaged and rejustified year after year. The system manages symptoms, documents persistence and reports against short-term indicators, but rarely shifts the conditions that produce the need for aid.

Participants were blunt about the waste built into this model. Strict logframes, compliance-heavy reporting, tightly earmarked budgets and expensive parallel delivery systems too often sustain a bureaucracy of care rather than meaningful transformation. High-cost international presence, multiple layers of overhead and duplicative institutional machinery can make monthly delivery of in-kind aid through large systems a strikingly ineffective use of scarce funds. The issue is not only whether there is enough money in the system. It is how that money is spent, through which institutions, and towards what end.

These financial patterns intersect with restrictive policy environments in host states. Refugees' rights to work, move and access services are often constrained, leaving them treated as temporary outsiders to be maintained through aid rather than enabled to participate as workers, entrepreneurs, residents and rights-holders. The deeper assumption built into much humanitarian finance is that crisis-affected people are recipients of assistance rather than agents of their own recovery and contributors to local development. Where money flows, and on what terms, is therefore not only a technical question. It is a normative statement about whose lives are seen as investable and whose are merely to be managed.

Participants called for a shift away from fragmented, short-term and charity-based funding towards more predictable, rights-based and inclusion-oriented finance. This means financial models that can frontload resources, support host communities and municipalities, and reward genuine socio-economic inclusion rather than the maintenance of camps and parallel systems. It also means broadening who participates in humanitarian finance: not only multilateral agencies and large NGOs, but local organisations, municipalities, cooperatives, social enterprises, community foundations, faith-based groups and other actors with long-term stakes in the places where crisis unfolds. Emerging instruments such as pooled funds, guarantees, solidarity-linked vehicles, climate-linked mechanisms, parametric instruments and other forms of risk-sharing may all have a role, but only if they are designed to serve human resilience and durable solutions rather than institutional survival.

A fairer financial future would allow communities and their organisations to plan beyond the next donor cycle. It would make multi-year, flexible and reliable funding a foundation rather than an exception. It would also make financial decisions, incentives and trade-offs more transparent and more contestable, including by affected communities and local institutions. Here too, the point is not that all contradictions vanish. There will remain tensions between emergency support and transformation support, between speed and participation, and between humanitarian and development logics. But a different financial architecture could help move the balance away from permanent emergency mode and towards a profile of humanitarianism more closely aligned with dignity, agency and long-term inclusion.

Moving from ideas to action

Global Refugee Inclusion Facility

One concrete area where these ideas are now being taken forward is the proposed **Global Refugee Inclusion Facility**. The next symposium in the series, hosted by CoAction Global in Berlin in partnership with the Refugee Inclusion Accelerator of GIZ in April 2026, explored this idea in more depth. The facility is envisaged as a financing instrument designed to support refugees' right to work, freedom of movement, access to documentation and inclusion in national systems, while removing the need for long-term camps and parallel humanitarian provision.

Its premise is straightforward: in stable host countries, political and policy reform should be treated as a precondition for financing, not an optional add-on. Under this model, financing would combine direct support to refugee households with incentive-aligned transfers to host governments and local authorities for health, education, social protection and infrastructure. In doing so, it seeks to rebalance the relationship between refugees, host states, donors and investors: refugees would be treated not as long-term beneficiaries of emergency aid, but as rights-holders and economic actors; host governments would be supported to include displaced people in ordinary systems rather than manage them through exceptional ones; and donors would invest in a pathway out of permanent emergency mode rather than continue financing its reproduction.

The proposed facility is not a complete answer to the dilemmas set out in this paper. It is, however, a useful test case. It connects the three domains identified by symposium participants: a different narrative of refugees as rights-holders and contributors; a different distribution of power between international actors, host states and affected communities; and a different financial model that backs long-term inclusion over camp-based management. It also illustrates a broader point running through the symposium discussions: transformation is unlikely to happen all at once. It may instead emerge through a series of concrete projects that test how far the system can move from one equilibrium to another.

Other ideas to explore further

The symposium discussions surfaced a wider set of ideas that merit further exploration. These include stronger accountability mechanisms within humanitarian organisations themselves; more honest engagement with questions of restitution, redress and historical responsibility; deeper links between humanitarian action and movements for climate justice, feminism and anti-racism; new ways of using digital technologies to connect listening to decision-making; and a more explicit reckoning with the salary structures, career incentives and internal inequalities reproduced by international agencies. These are not yet a transformation roadmap, but rather areas for subsequent work.

Humanitarianism will continue to operate through tensions and contradictions. The old system was full of them, and any future humanitarianism will be too. The question is not whether those tensions can be removed, but whether they are navigated in ways that serve dignity, solidarity and justice rather than institutional inertia. The symposium series is intended as one space in which those dilemmas can be examined honestly, and where concrete efforts – such as the work on a Global Refugee Inclusion Facility – can begin to test what a different humanitarian profile might look like in practice.

Appendix 1: Travelling to the future

Building better models can be hard if we are not able to imagine what a drastically different system may look like in the future. To inspire radical thinking, we have built four speculative future scenarios extrapolated from the ideas expressed by participants in the Inaugural Symposium.

SPECULATIVE FUTURES A: From charity to justice

By 2040, the humanitarian sector has undergone a profound normative renewal known as the 'Solidarity Turn.' The shift began when traditional humanitarian principles, weakened by decades of political polarisation, were reimagined through alliances between local mutual aid networks, social movements, and international humanitarian actors. Humanitarianism evolved from a specialised field into a connected constellation of action: linking neighbourhood solidarity initiatives, transnational diaspora organisations, and global advocacy coalitions into a shared moral infrastructure.

At the core of this transformation is the Global Testimony Network, a distributed digital platform gathering first-hand accounts from crisis-affected people worldwide. National solidarity councils feed these testimonies into local decision processes, while international assemblies use them to shape priorities and coordinate resources. Compassion is no longer dictated by proximity or publicity, but by patterns of lived data and collective deliberation across borders.

In this new order, humanitarian organisations operate as connective tissue between movements, facilitating cooperation rather than directing it. Domestic care initiatives, climate justice campaigns, migrant-led associations, and cross-border civic platforms interact in continuous exchange, forming a resilient web of mutual responsibility. The language has shifted too: 'aid' has given way to 'solidarity finance,' 'beneficiaries' to 'co-authors,' and impact metrics to 'reciprocal accountability.'

SPECULATIVE FUTURES B: Trust rebuilt

By 2040, the humanitarian system has undergone a structural transformation known as the 'Shared Mandate Era.' The reforms began after a series of crises exposed the limits of centralised control and top-down legitimacy. Mergers have led to there being just one 'UN Humanitarian Agency' and very few INGOs left - only those working in true solidarity with local actors survived the great transformation. Decision-making power is distributed through polycentric governance assemblies - networks combining local councils, regional humanitarian compacts, and global solidarity boards. Funding no longer flows solely from major donors; instead, participatory budgeting mechanisms channel pooled resources - both public and private - through transparent digital ledgers that trace how priorities are chosen, by whom, and with what results.

Legitimacy has become a lived, relational practice rather than a bureaucratic credential. Affected communities now hold formal voting power over programme design and evaluation. Humanitarian agencies operate more as facilitators than authorities, providing technical capacity while local consortia control strategic direction. Trust is no longer measured through surveys or reputation indices, but through open-data dashboards where every financial and operational decision is traceable to community approval points.

This shift has not been without friction. Established institutions struggled to adapt to horizontal accountability, and some states resisted sharing authority with non-state and displaced actors. Yet, over time, as crises became more frequent and complex, distributed decision-making proved more adaptive and politically resilient. The humanitarian architecture that once centralised power in a few capitals now derives its legitimacy from collective consent across hundreds of local governance nodes: a mosaic of trust rebuilt from the ground up.

SPECULATIVE FUTURES C1: The Global Facility for Refugee Inclusion has ended camps

By the early 2040s, people no longer talk about 'refugee camps' in stable host countries. Refugees arrive directly into towns and cities where registration, documentation and access to services run through ordinary public systems. The first document a new arrival receives is a residence permit with the right to work and move; the second is a digital ID linking them to schools, clinics and social protection. Behind this shift sits the Global Facility for Refugee Inclusion. It does not fund camps or parallel services; it only releases institutional donor financing to governments that enact and implement core rights: work, mobility, documentation and access to national systems. Host states sign inclusion compacts with clear benchmarks. The facility channels long-term budget transfers through national treasuries, and municipalities receive predictable allocations based on registered populations, allowing them to plan new classrooms, clinics and water systems without yearly appeals.

For refugees, this architecture is experienced as choice. Households receive regular digital cash transfers in their first years, paid into normal bank or mobile money accounts. Framed as a launchpad rather than charity, this support helps families secure housing, pay school fees or invest in small businesses, while being integrated into the same social protection infrastructure that serves host citizens.

Humanitarian actors still exist, but their role has shifted from running parallel systems to guarding the rules of inclusion. A small global UN Humanitarian office sets protection standards, tracks whether governments honour their commitments and raises the alarm when rights are rolled back. Former operational agencies now advise ministries, support refugee-led organisations and help negotiate rapid access to the facility when new crises erupt. The defining feature of the system is its conditionality: no funds without real policy change, and automatic scrutiny when states backslide. Over time, this has turned refugee inclusion from an unfunded moral aspiration into a governed, financed public policy - ending not displacement itself, but the assumption that it must mean life on the margins.