
the Humanitarian Leader

**When the system cannot hold: Designing an
antifragile humanitarianism**

NANKI K. CHAWLA



THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER

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WORKING PAPER 057
OCTOBER 2025

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Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without years of corridor conversations with passionate, principled, and genuine colleagues and friends—particularly with my very first mentors at Sharek Youth Forum, and over the last eight formative years at IMPACT Initiatives. Lastly, thank you to all the early readers for the encouragement, rounds of review, and thoughtful critique that helped refine this piece of work.

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221 Burwood Highway
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Editor-in-Chief: Max Kelly

Production Editor: Cara Schultz

Layout: Diana De León

ISSN: 2653-1011 (Online)

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Abstract

The abrupt suspension of U.S. humanitarian aid in early 2025, in addition to the famines in Gaza and Sudan, exposed the fragility of the international aid system and triggered a sector-wide reckoning. Written from the perspective of a humanitarian practitioner, this paper argues that current structures are brittle: designed for stability and repeatedly failing under volatility. Drawing on twelve years of operational experience, it explores how an ‘antifragile’ humanitarian model could not just withstand, but improve from disruption. Four design principles are proposed: (1) Start where we are—confront power and political realities; (2) Embrace uncertainty—design for volatility, experimentation, and risk-taking; (3) Do less but better—focus on core life-saving outcomes while discarding ineffective practice; and (4) Respect agency—centre the perspectives and leadership of people affected by crisis, guarding against elite capture. Together these principles point towards a shift from generosity-based, donor-driven aid to solidarity-based, self-sustaining systems of response—anchored in local actors, diversified financing, and multiple centres of power.

Relevance to leadership and systems change

This paper offers a perspective on how the humanitarian system might evolve—not through technocratic reform alone, but through a re-grounding in moral clarity, solidarity, and practical action. It connects narrative, power, and financing—arguing for a shift from a donor-driven model toward self-sustaining humanitarian action, led by those affected by crisis. It closes with a possible path: a global fund for rapid, flexible, and sustainable response grounded in South–South cooperation and triggered by need. Not a blueprint, but a contribution to a wider conversation—and a call for collective reimagination of what it will take to build systems that endure, even when the system cannot hold.

Introduction

The suspension of U.S. assistance to the humanitarian sector in January 2025 sent shockwaves through the aid world. Ground that seemed solid was suddenly shaken—exposing the brittle foundations of an already strained sector. As trucks filled with supplies stalled just metres from starving communities, humanitarians scrambled: confronting not only the sudden interruption of life-saving services, but an existential threat to our legitimacy, identity, and purpose. It was not only operational breakdown, but moral rupture.

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With U.S. contributions constituting almost half (41.8%) of the humanitarian funding base (ICVA, 2025), United Nations (UN)-led reform efforts were quickly launched in March 2025 via the Humanitarian Reset (OCHA) and the UN80 initiative (UN). Despite bold ambition, these efforts were rolled out through the very same leadership structures that they sought to reimagine. At the time of writing, concrete outcomes have yet to be seen—summarised by the sardonic Reuters headline ‘UN report finds United Nations reports are not widely read’ (August 2025).

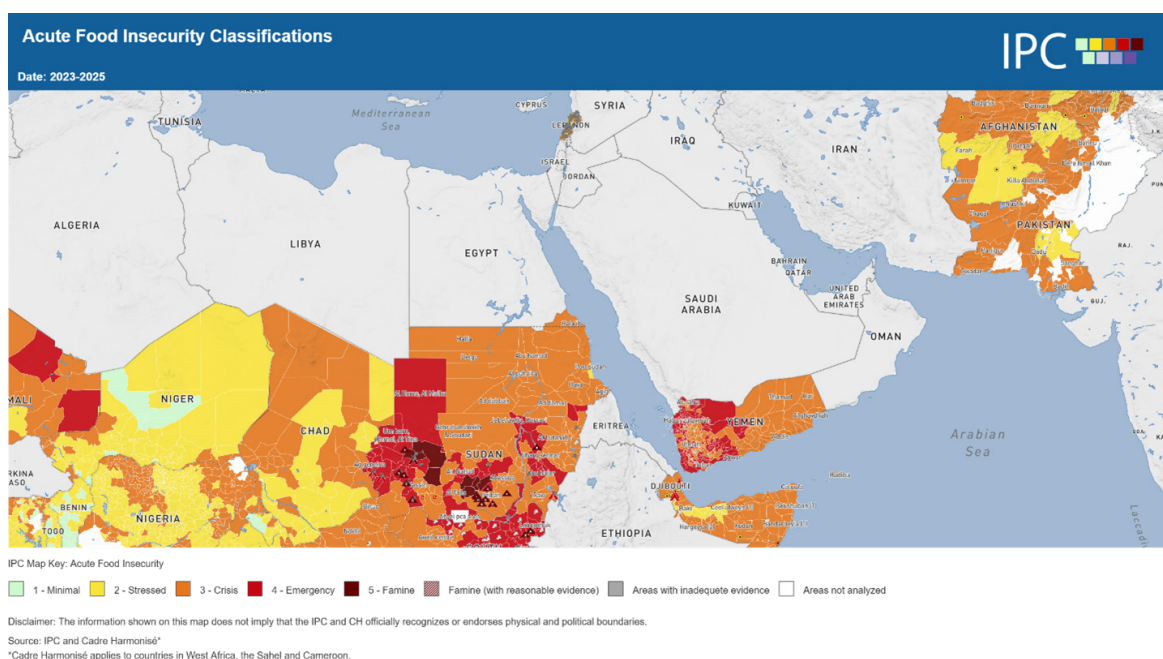
The vision for a New Humanitarian Compact (UN, September 2025) arrived just in time for the General Assembly, framed as a pivot from institutional pruning to strategic reform. Yet perspectives from aid workers—long excluded from centralised decision-making—remain noticeably absent. This paper is indebted to the thoughtful critique and discourse that has unfolded in parallel via *LinkedIn* posts, *Medium* articles, and online dialogue since early 2025.

The ugly relic of famine

At the start of the 21st century, famine was largely considered an ugly relic of history. Today, the dark maroon on the Integrated Phased Classification (IPC) map (Figure 1) tells a different story. After two years of genocide in Gaza (OHCHR, 2023; B’tselem, 2025; Human Rights Council, 2025), the worst-case scenario unfolded, culminating in famine being confirmed in August 2025 (IPC). Meanwhile, famine has been worsening in Sudan since it began in Zamzam camp in July 2024.

Despite the World War II promise of “never again” in 1945 and the LiveAid response to the Ethiopia famine in 1985, our commitments to one another have collapsed. As Gaza and Sudan remind us, famine is not a singular event but a cumulative process—months and years in the deliberate making. Analysis from the Feinstein International Center demonstrates that declarations of famine do not always spark the funding and resources needed (2023). Instead today, we are witnessing in livestream a cruelly engineered, man-made famine—not only allowed but aided and abetted—by states once held as responsible for upholding international peace and security.

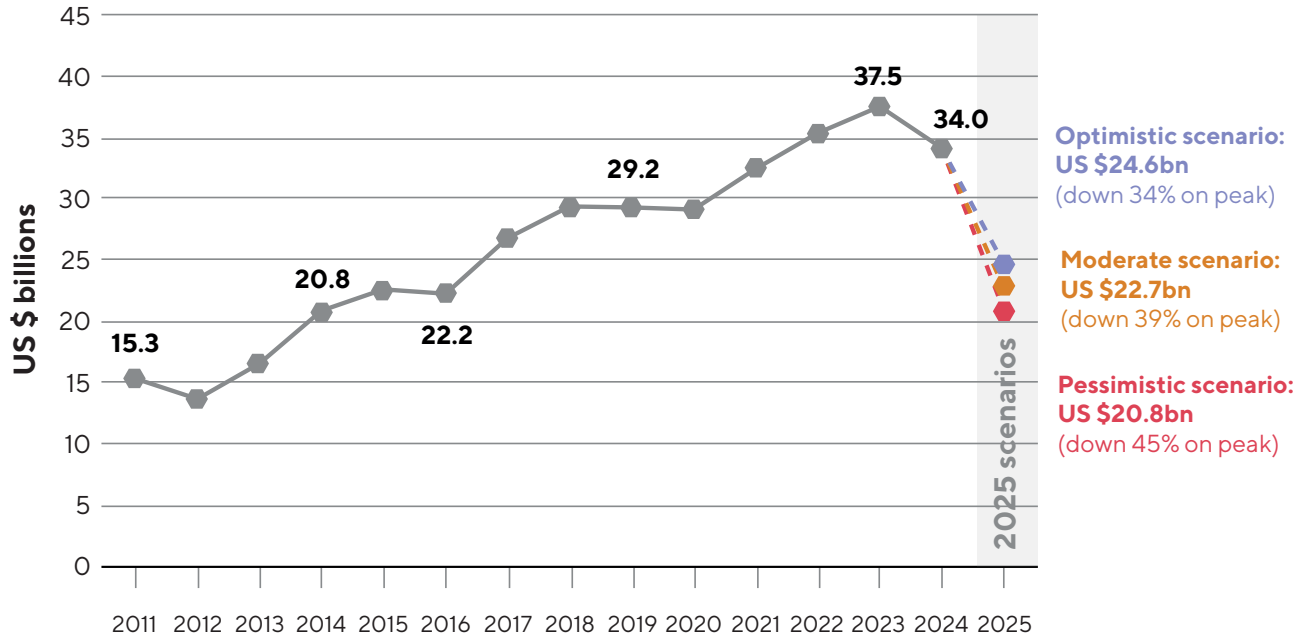
Figure 1: IPC Acute Food Insecurity Map, as of October 2025



And yet it is—at this very moment in history—that we see state commitments to humanitarian assistance faltering (Figure 2). The true impact of the ravages of climate

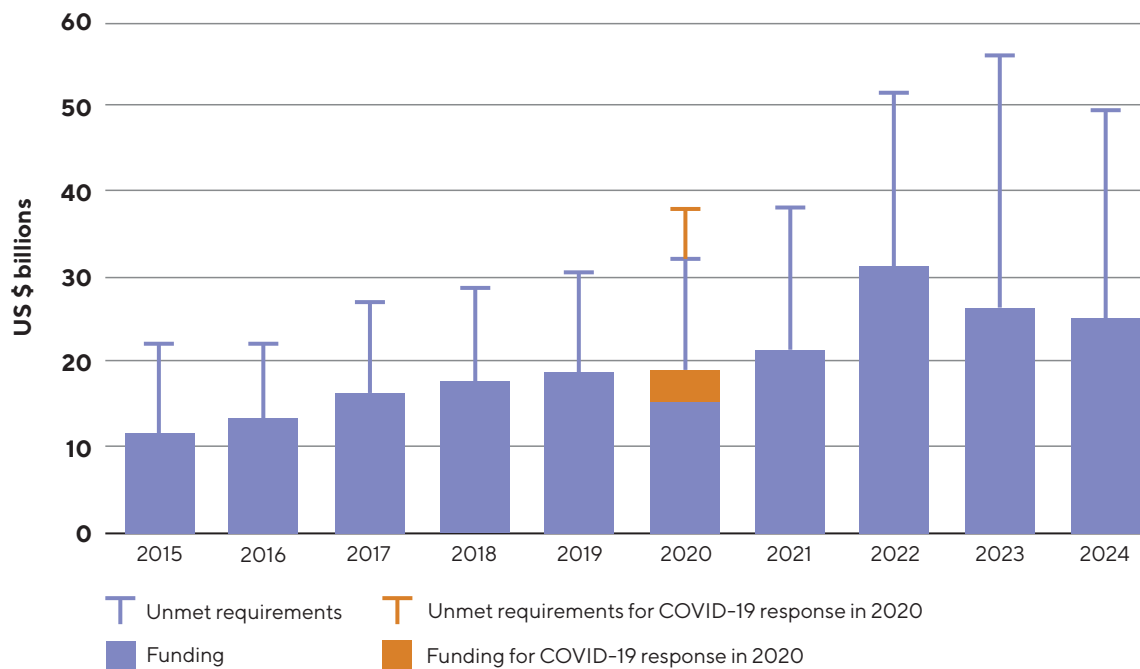
change still remains to be seen, while every day the gap between needs and resources widens (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Humanitarian financing scenarios



Source: ALNAP Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2025

Figure 3: Funding and unmet requirements, UN-coordinated appeals 2015 – 2024



Source: ALNAP Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2025.

This crisis has exposed a system that is fundamentally fragile—over-centralised, politically compromised, and founded more in narrative myth than reality. As the world changes, it too must evolve: a system designed for the volatility and chaos of human life and crisis.

Referencing Nassim Taleb’s book *AntiFragile* (2012), this paper offers four design principles for a humanitarian system that does not only survive chaos, but is built to adapt and flourish through it:

1. Start where we are
2. Do less, but better
3. Embrace uncertainty
4. Recognise agency.

Figure 4: Four design principles for a new humanitarianism



Source: Nanki K Chawla

Antifragility as an antidote?

Taleb contrasts fragility—systems that “do not like volatility and... randomness, uncertainty, disorder, errors, stressors” and cannot stand the test of time—with antifragility, which “is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better” (Taleb, 2012, p12). This is not simply resilience rebranded, but a fundamental shift in how we think about and respond to shocks and stressors.

The concept has been both influential and contested. Proponents see value in reframing uncertainty as a potential source of strength (Aven, 2015), extending antifragility into domains as diverse as supply chains (Nikookar, 2021) and complex systems (Axenie et al., 2023). Critics, however, point to imprecise definitions

and polemical style (The Guardian, 2012; Silver, 2016). For my purposes, its lack of precision is a strength rather than a weakness: a provocative heuristic that provides room for interpretation, optionality, and slack in its application across disciplines.

As humanitarians, we are in the business of volatility. Yet our systems are surprisingly unprepared. Over the past six years, we have experienced a series of what Taleb calls “Black Swans... large-scale unpredictable and irregular events” that elude prediction—COVID-19, the Ukraine war, the Syria/Turkey earthquake, the Gaza genocide. While hindsight can make events seem foreseeable, much of the sector was caught off guard. As Taleb observes: “We know a lot less about hundred-year floods than five-year floods” (p7). While the rapid progression of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will sharpen foresight, omniscience remains out of reach. Even when alarm bells rang early, as in the 2024 Somalia drought, AI will not fix a lack of political will or slow response times.

The relative stability of the post-WWII world—anchored in peace narratives and steady aid financing—bred a false sense of durability. We became complacent. Recent shocks—even those not considered Black Swans—have revealed our unpreparedness for both exogenous crises (conflict, natural disaster) and endogenous ones (funding cuts, access constraints). They underscore the fact that humanitarianism is deeply entangled with other complex systems: politics, markets, climate, and governance. Thinking of humanitarianism as a self-contained sector is a misnomer.

If we accept that humanitarian needs will not disappear, that the current system is fragile, and that the humanitarian imperative remains, then we can also accept that humanitarianism sits at the fault lines of other failing systems. To move towards antifragility, we must shed sectoral insularity, confront our own fragilities, and build bridges across sectors. Only then can we begin to close the chasm between humanitarian needs and response.

Each design principle explores how fragility manifests in humanitarianism: fragile foundations (DP1), fragile decision-making (DP2), fragile scope (DP3), and fragile power (DP4).

Design principle 1: Start where we are

Smoke and mirrors: The political (and moral) economy of humanitarianism

“There is no longer any such thing as fiction or non-fiction; there’s only narrative.”—E.L. Doctorow (quoted in Cohen, 2001)

The foundational principle—start where we are—is a call for moral clarity, honest reflection on embedded fragility, navigating around power as it operates, and operating with eyes wide open rather than behind blinders.

“The magical vision of humanitarian principles”

The principles—humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence—can be a powerful anchor for humanitarian action. In a 2024 blog, Marina Sharpe pertinently asks: “whether these principles can accurately be designated “the” humanitarian principles; about how they came to govern the whole humanitarian sector...and... about whether the principles can even have objective character and content?”

After the 1859 Battle of Solferino, Swiss businessman Henry Dunant mobilised a volunteer response, later authoring a book whose ideas led to the founding of the ICRC and the adoption of the Geneva Conventions. Over time, with “independence” incorporated, these core four filtered to NGOs and eventually the UN. Glasman (2020) too questioned their universality: “this magical vision of humanitarian principles is dangerous... In fact, these “universal” principles are the result of very real conflicts. They reflect interests that can be situated and dated.”

Solferino was a very different battlefield to what we see today—European, symmetrical, and fought on horseback (Fondation Napoléon, 2020). Today’s wars are fought as much through narrative control as through advanced weaponry, against a backdrop of rising authoritarianism, widening inequality, and pervasive misinformation. The principles remain powerful when used as tools of moral clarity, but when treated as universal truth, they slip into myth—easily co-opted to justify inaction or selective response. Acknowledging this history does not require abandoning these principles—but it does demand interrogating them honestly.

A system to preserve power, not peace?

Like the principles, the UN came out of a particular moment in history. Framed as a remedy for the horrors of World War II, the bloody process of decolonisation is often obscured in its origin story (Betts, 2012), when the very same nations responsible for colonisation were being entrusted with permanent stewardship of the Security Council. Designed to uphold the power structure of the time, European principles and post-war lessons were extrapolated to universal truths. While the illusion held, a global moral hierarchy was created and upheld through a narrative of generosity.

Humanitarian assistance has saved lives over the past 80 years, but when planes that deliver grain also drop bombs, the façade of generosity-based assistance crumbles. As donors reduce aid budgets and become more explicit in aligning aid with foreign policy interests (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2025), it has become easier for perpetrators of abuses to deny access to populations facing the most acute humanitarian needs. Worse, states and non-state actors push back on humanitarian assistance, not out of principle, but to shield their own abuses from scrutiny.

If the U.S. suspension of assistance has taught us anything, it is that antifragility requires more than a single anchor, whether moral, financial, or political. Honouring the universal right to life, dignity, and safety means honouring the complex history that brought us here and being open to multiple perspectives on what morality, capacity, and value looks like.

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While some UN experts called on the international community to prevent genocide against the Palestinian people as early as November 2023 (OHCHR), the stalemate in the Security Council and the lack of a viable enforcement mechanism exposed a hollow centre. “There’s no case of such minutely engineered, closely monitored, precisely designed mass starvation of a population as is happening in Gaza today” (de Waal, *Democracy Now*, 2025).

The UN Commission of Inquiry’s declaration of genocide in September 2025 exposes two truths: first, most institutions—even those intended to act as a check on larger UN agencies and governments—are too entangled in the preservation of institutional power to speak facts plainly. The second is that we do not learn from our mistakes. Gaza cracked open the fractures of other system failures: Rwanda (1994), Srebrenica (1995), and the Rohingya crisis (2017) (Lippold, 2024).

What “start where we are” demands

UN80 reform gestures towards a leaner, more inclusive system, but whether these ambitions will pass muster among member states—and actually be implemented—

remains to be seen. This is not the first major reform effort (Slim, 2025), but it is the first contraction forced by financial necessity. Sceptics rightly question whether reform will deliver “a humanitarian system that is leaner, more inclusive, and closer to people in need, or one that consolidates control in fewer, more powerful hands” (Byrnes, September 2025).

If there remains a smidgen of hope for the former, three things are required. Firstly, acknowledging the inequities, fragilities, and power imbalances baked into the system’s foundations. Secondly, leaders who share risks and are accountable for outcomes, so that the consequences of fragility do not fall hardest on those the system is meant to serve, and finally, a genuine transfer of power, resources, and decision-making authority to people affected by crisis.

We as humanitarians may not be able to change global power structures. But we can bring the honesty of informal corridor conversations into public forums. We can recognise harsh realities and still strive to do better. We can hold the humanitarian imperative at the centre—and hold ourselves accountable to it.

Starting where we are is two-fold. We can continue to push for a deeper reckoning within the formal system, and we can support and learn from actors already building new mechanisms, value propositions, and alliances.

Design principle 2: Embrace uncertainty

Humanitarians are curiously averse to uncertainty. The system has institutionalised annual prioritisation and planning processes aimed at projecting certainty of who is in need, where they are, and who we have reached. In reality, these performative processes often conceal the real dynamics underneath. During the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) process at country level, it is an open secret that leadership often require the reverse-engineering of the People in Need (PiN) numbers to match perceived donor expectations—selecting analysis methods that inflate or deflate numbers for politically palatable outcomes.

In contrast, prioritisation for emergency response is rarely conducted with any precision or political will, with decisions largely made based on noise, media interest, or reputational risk. When I was co-chairing the Needs Analysis Working Group (NAWG), a body for emergency prioritisation in South Sudan, I recall the Logistics Cluster coordinator telling us they had cancelled the emergency flights to a severely at-risk location, because no one had signed up. Responders cited lack of resources or information, but often it was also psychological shut-down: prioritising one location

meant abandoning another. Over the years, we watched as the same areas slipped up and down the higher end of the severity scale, and expanded as the crisis worsened. We had no capacity to respond to all the needs, or even really a fraction.

As humans, we are wired for stasis. Things become normalised because that is how our survival instincts function. As humanitarians, we must hold on to our basic humanity; without the sense of horror creating urgency, it is easy to become blasé in the face of suffering. Instead of the pretence of certainty, we have a duty to the populations we serve to be honest about what we do and do not know, what we can and cannot anticipate, and what we can and cannot do.

Embracing uncertainty with antifragility

If our systems allowed honesty, flexibility, and adaptation from failure, we might actually be able to move towards antifragility in two dimensions: exogenous shocks—the core response to humanitarian emergencies, whether conflict or natural disasters, and endogenous ones—funding cuts, access constraints. Antifragility offers a lens to rethink the functionality, use, and execution of the system’s core components:

1. Decision-making—structures and coordination at global and country level.
2. Execution—in planning and delivery.
3. Enabling—assessments and analysis, security and access, coordination.

Each component must be grounded in the humanitarian imperative, with accountability as the system’s moral backbone—not an add-on.

Parts of a whole

The funding crisis revealed that we (understandably) see each institution as a discrete whole, rather than as a sub-unit of a larger system. As Taleb (2012) explains, “the fragility of every startup is necessary for the economy to be antifragile” (p65). After many years of relative prosperity, the most recent crisis has exposed vulnerabilities that had accumulated under a veneer of stability (p191). With funding-driven competition, our structures tend towards maintaining the status quo rather than ensuring outcomes. If we had viewed the humanitarian system as an ecosystem with sub-units, perhaps we would not have allowed local organisations to bear the brunt of the aid cuts.

As volatility accelerates, we must build in optionality in how we make decisions, how they are executed, with whom, and what enabling agents are required.

Fragile systems require certainty and linear plans. But crises (and the world) do not work this way. We must embrace experimentation, learning from errors, and build in “layers of redundancy” learning from natural systems (ibid., p44). Projecting certainty is itself a form of fragility. Nimbleness will only be possible if we are honest, outcome-driven, and decisive in cutting away what doesn’t work.

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Anticipating Black Swans with AI

Forecasting is improving rapidly—AI and hybrid models are already pushing the boundaries of what can be anticipated, particularly for climate hazards and disease outbreaks. Yet models built on incomplete or biased data often misfire, generating false alarms and failing on the very “Black Swans” that matter most. Forecasting can inform anticipatory action (Coughlan de Perez et al., 2015; WFP, 2020), but it also risks creating a false sense of security. It must complement, not substitute, systems designed to adapt when forecasts fail (Hegre et al., 2019; Scarpino & Petri, 2019).

Recent advances highlight both potential and limits. Deep-learning models can now predict conflict patterns at subnational levels (von der Maase, 2025), while hybrid approaches integrating food security, climate, and displacement data have improved anticipatory triggers in the Sahel (Kjærum et al., 2025). Policy reviews stress that operationalising these models requires safeguards, transparency, and local engagement (Centre for Humanitarian Data, 2022; PreventionWeb, 2025; HeiGIT, 2025).

AI will enable major strides in forecasting and risk analysis, but foresight will always remain partial. If we fail to confront the climate impacts of AI itself (UNEP, 2024), we risk compounding the very crises we aim to prevent. What we need is foresight where possible, and antifragility where foresight inevitably fails.

Towards antifragility

Antifragile humanitarianism is not just reactive. It is designed to benefit from disruption—adaptability, feedback loops, and experimentation are baked into the system’s DNA.

1. Agility requires slack—without experimentation, we cannot meet today’s challenges.
2. Buffers are essential—with no space for failure, there is no space for iteration and improvement.
3. Real time, actionable feedback loops—integrated into decision-making structures, rather than an added extra.

From coordinating emergency responses, I have learned that no two crises are the same. We can share lessons on preparedness, adaptability, and speed, but the combination of *what, how, who with, and barriers to delivery* is almost always unique. An antifragile approach embeds this truth into its core, not only designing for it but fundraising for it.

We do not need a system that survives only when the world cooperates. We need one that adapts, responds, and reconstitutes itself—even when the centre fails. When focus meets flexibility, humanitarians are better prepared to face a universal truth: the only certainty is change.

Design principle 3: Do less, but better

Humanitarian triage?

Experimentation and buffers have a cost. In the face of “humanitarian triage” (Byrnes, 2025), it seems counterintuitive to suggest our systems need slack. As “hyper-prioritisation” means we target just over a third (38%) of the almost 300 million people in need (GHO, 2025), the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) Tom Fletcher states we must do “less with less.”

Let me propose an alternative: do less, but better.

Do less but better

If triage is where we are, we must design a system that focuses on what truly matters.

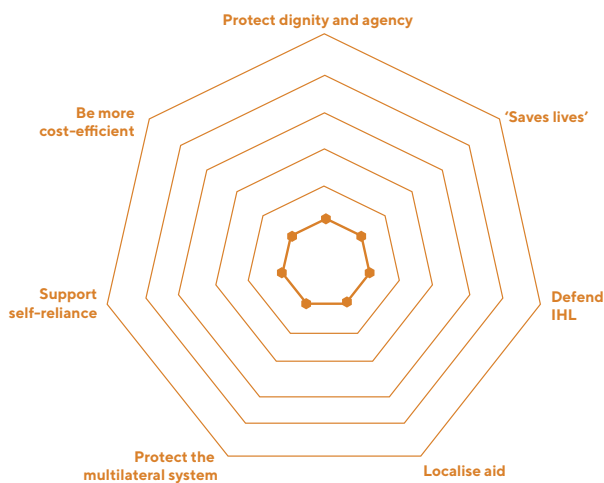
Slack is not inefficiency. It is the deliberate creation of margins for iteration, buffers against collapse, and options when plans fail. Doing less but better is the discipline of stripping away what does not save lives. Together they are not contradictory but complementary: focus on what matters most, while leaving space to adapt when the unexpected arrives.

Drawing on McKeown’s *Essentialism*, building a “faster, leaner, and more accountable” humanitarian system (UN, September 2025) requires four steps:

Step 1: Which (and whose) problem are we trying to solve?

ALNAP identified seven competing priorities for humanitarianism (see Figure 5). When co-hosting a series of panels with Hugo Slim in 2024 on defining and prioritising humanitarian need¹, what became quickly clear is the lack of a single definition of what constitutes lifesaving. Is life-saving assistance defined by what is delivered, or how? Are physiological needs prioritised over dignity and agency? And who decides?

Figure 5: Humanitarian Priorities



Source: ALNAP

This lack of clarity is itself a source of fragility. It undermines the moral basis of our decisions and leaves decision-making, execution, and enabling agents vulnerable to political pressure, media noise, and inter-agency competition. Donors and institutions have their own definitions, while people affected by crisis often prioritise long-term agency over short-term aid (GTS, 2025). Evidence is critical to identifying and prioritising community needs, but too often there is a missing link between evidence, planning, and response (IMPACT, 2025).

Humanitarians cannot solve every need. We must define what is essential to saving lives (ICVA, June 2025)—and build referral pathways to other sectors for what is not.

¹ Examples include:

- OCHA and WFP largely utilise standardised analytical frameworks, the Joint Interagency Analytical Framework (JIAF) and the IPC, respectively.
- Clusters use their own sectoral severity classifications.
- Donors often utilise internal models for cross-country standardisation.
- UNHCR and IOM use status-based vulnerability approaches.
- Civil society critique a “truck and chuck” approach that risks moral detachment.

Step 2: Acknowledge the trade-offs and eliminate what doesn't serve

If we narrow to truly life-saving interventions, some people will fall outside the humanitarian mandate. Organisations may lose relevance. Some powerful actors will lose influence. This is not just reform; it is identity loss. McKeown notes that “studies have found that we tend to value things we already own more highly than they are worth” (McKeown, 2014). Sunk-cost bias explains why agencies cling to mandates, coordination bodies, or processes long past their use-by date. At every level we must ask: will this institution, process, or activity make the highest possible contribution towards saving lives?

Progress stalls when everything is a priority. A system designed without limits overloads its people to the point of collapse. Burnout is not just an HR issue; it is systemic fragility that directly undermines decision-making in an industry where mistakes cost lives.

Step 3: Take the path of least resistance

Humanitarian operating environments are difficult and growing in complexity as multilateralism erodes and access reduces. This is precisely why we must take the path of least resistance—not the easy way out, but the one that works. Protocols should embed optionality: clear rules of thumb and adaptable parameters so the untested can be executed under pressure. This is what will create agility.

We can make deliberate choices to:

1. Push for a system-wide call to shift to cash first (CaLP, 2025).
2. Empower local responders first (ICVA, July 2025).
3. Make financing flexible first (Polo, 2025).

To do this, we must abandon insularity. Domain dependence has limited progress. We must borrow, adapt, and trial efficiencies from other sectors, including the private sector. These shifts require ceding power, exploring alternative financing, and looking beyond the bounds of ‘the humanitarian sector’. Most of all, the path of least resistance must enable agency for people in crisis—not institutional self-preservation.

Step 4: Build systems that serve people, not institutions

“The ethical case for accountability to affected populations is straightforward: affected populations are the primary stakeholders” (Hilhorst, D et al, 2021). Recognition of this underpinned the Grand Bargain (IASC), yet there has been little real progress. Decision-

making and resources remain concentrated in a few centres of power (ICVA, 2024).

This is by design. Financing has driven system development, so accountability tilts upwards to donors, not downwards to people. Leaders moulded by this system are poorly placed to reform it. Asking the right questions—and accepting the answers—requires a different mindset.

A people-first accountable system means accepting that real change requires institutional and personal sacrifice and reusing the same tools will not yield better results.

We must reassess what holds assumed value: international over national, UN over NGO, capital staff over field staff.

Until we flip the mental model from vertical to horizontal, transformation will stall. Earlier sections have spoken of moving beyond fragile generosity. Now we face a choice: cling to fragile paternalism, or build anew in solidarity—and in doing so, design systems that grow stronger through disruption rather than collapse under it.

Design principle 4: Respect agency

This brings us back to the moral and political economy of aid. Navigating power as it really functions, embracing uncertainty, and doing less but better will remain meaningless without respecting the agency of people affected by crisis.

Navigating power as it really functions, embracing uncertainty, and doing less but better will remain meaningless without respecting the agency of people affected by crisis.

The politics of language

Narrative shapes thought. Thought leads to action. And in humanitarian work, action determines lives. As the aid sector has professionalised, so has its language. We refer to “affected populations” as if they were a single, homogenous other. But behind this term are individuals, families, and communities with their own perspectives, capacities, and needs. This narrative flattening reinforces a divide: those who give, and those who receive; those with assumed knowledge and those without.

When inclusion is rhetoric rather than structure, exclusion is easier to entrench. Localisation then feels more like optics management rather than an actual shift of power. NEAR (2025) reports “silence from many INGOs, retreat from public leadership on localisation...” resulting in “recentering inward: prioritising institutional stability over commitments, withdrawing from shared risk, political self-censorship.” Nowhere is this more glaring than the UN80 report, which fails to mention localisation at all.

When referring to crisis-affected countries or the (loosely defined) Global South, what we often mean is people living in countries where the state is unwilling or unable to provide basic services. Arundhati Roy (2016) warns against “sealing in communities, reducing and flattening their identities into silos.” Dividing people into rigid hierarchies, she argues “precludes solidarity.” This applies far beyond India’s caste system. Lived experience of conflict, dispossession, and marginalisation is not confined to Palestinians, Sudanese, or Haitians—it also marks indigenous communities in Canada, Australia, and the U.S.; Holocaust survivors; and Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland. This is not to equate suffering, but to remind us: the desire for safety, security, and self-determination is universal.

Elite capture

Flattening narratives serve a dual purpose: they project helplessness while hiding local elites who profit from maintaining the status quo—through war economies (Keen, 2022) or developmental stunting. Olúfemi O. Táíwò’s *Elite Capture* shows how elites co-opt movements to serve themselves. Giving these individuals platforms in the name of “localisation” reifies hierarchies rather than dismantles them. As Roy (2016) puts it: “Micro-elite capture cannot be the only answer to macro-elite capture.”

Respecting agency in practice

Antifragility thus requires nuance: navigating power at every level and recognising the agency of people in crisis to make their own decisions. It requires multiple centres of power, decision-making, and financing with accountability checks and safeguards built in from inception. Structural shifts must be more than cosmetic: relocating UN staff from Geneva to Nairobi is not decentralisation; it is cost-cutting dressed as reform.

Respecting agency must go beyond policy documents; the deeper shift is towards solidarity—an ethic that closes the gap between giver and receiver, and treats survival as shared stakes. It means choosing approaches that embody dignity by design. It means listening to

the knowledge, expertise, and perspectives of affected people. It is about building trust not just to deliver assistance, but to redistribute power—and trust that it will be wielded well.

Without respect for agency, our work remains hollow, condescending, and neo-colonial. Real ceding of power will be painful and messy. But without it, antifragility collapses into the status quo dressed in new jargon.

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From critique to construction: a step toward self-sustaining aid

“The responsibility of a writer as a moral agent is to try to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them.”—(Chomsky, 2001)

As the gap between needs and resources keeps expanding, we cannot afford to sit only in critique; we must move from analysis to action. The first principle calls for moral clarity, acknowledging uncomfortable histories and embedded fragilities. This section is a personal reflection and an invitation for a collective one.

Through this paper, I have tried to offer perspective shaped by twelve years in the sector and the gut-wrenching horror at the events in Gaza since October 2023. I have tried to balance principles with pragmatism, while acknowledging that I too have struggled to put these principles into practice. Having worked across local organisations, INGOs, and the UN, it has been evident how quickly systems entrench fragile self-preservation.

I do not believe that we will see a world without humanitarian needs. If we can accept this hard truth, we must also accept the responsibility to build something better. To make this shift—from generosity to solidarity. From dependency to self-sufficiency.

These design principles are not intended to sit in a dusty policy document. They should be interrogated, debated, revised, or rejected entirely. They are meant to provoke a question: what would it take to do things differently?

A new model

For my part, I am working on a blueprint to design and test a model for a global fund for rapid, flexible, and sustainable crisis response, one that is:

1. Self-sustaining in financing
2. Anchored in horizontal solidarity
3. Triggered by evidence, not politics
4. Verified independently, overseen transparently
5. Prioritising people and local actors first
6. With international backstopping, only when requested.

This blueprint is not finished. It is evolving through wide consultation with people affected by crisis to define what they need, and how to deliver it. In parallel, I am engaging with experts in innovative finance, de-risking mechanisms, philanthropists, and public institutions. What sets this apart is its anchor in the Global South—its partners, funders, and vision.

There are others designing new approaches. Rather than bringing competition and insularity with us, I hope we can demonstrate genuine collaboration and work together towards building new networks grounded in shared learning. It will be messy; it will not be perfect. But holding tight to an inwardly collapsing structure is worse. Better imperfect progress than fragile paralysis.

If you have been affected by crisis, if you believe in the humanitarian imperative, if you are part of an institution willing to interrogate what you do and why, or if you are a funder willing to back a shift towards agency, dignity, and self-sufficiency, I hope to hear from you.

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