

# Key Highlights - Roundtable

## Shaping the EU's humanitarian and development agenda: From Lessons to Action

**Copenhagen 30 October 2025**

The roundtable took place at a moment of profound uncertainty for the humanitarian and development systems. In 2025, the dismantling of USAID funding combined with a broader decline in global Official Development Assistance (ODA) has left millions without support, sharply exacerbating needs in contexts already marked by extreme fragility. Paradoxically, these contexts, those experiencing conflict, climate shocks, political instability and displacement, remain largely absent from political debates, even as the consequences of neglect intensify.

The roundtable explored how the European Union (EU) should respond at a time of major policy transitions. In the second half of 2025, Denmark assumed the Presidency of the Council of the EU while the Union remained engaged in several high-stakes processes: negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) post-2027, the design of a renewed EU Integrated Approach to Fragility, and preparatory work ahead of COP30 in Brazil, where climate-finance architecture and loss-and-damage mechanisms were contentious issues. In parallel, renewed calls to reform the global humanitarian system, and to shift power and resources to local actors, continued to gather momentum.

The event was opened by Pauline Chetcuti, President of VOICE, and Kristine Mærkedahl Jensen, Chairperson of Global Focus, who set the tone for the discussions by highlighting the urgency of rethinking how the EU and its Member States engage in fragile contexts. They then introduced the keynote address delivered by Marie-Louise Wegter, Director for Humanitarian Action and Civil Society at the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Her intervention underscored the need for principled, flexible and forward-looking EU engagement at a time when Denmark held the Presidency of the Council of the EU and when multiple strategic policy processes were underway.

Throughout the event, participants reflected on how Danish expertise, particularly in flexible financing modalities and long-standing work on fragility, can contribute to shaping these debates. Speakers drew attention to the urgent need for adaptive and responsive EU instruments; meaningful localisation and stronger local leadership; principled humanitarian action in politically sensitive contexts; and the growing role of anticipatory action in climate-related crises. Discussions also focused on the centrality of civil society, including women-led and community-based organisations, strategic risk-sharing, conflict-sensitive programming, and the importance of trust-building and ethical communication in an environment increasingly shaped by disinformation.

The initial closed-door session of the event concluded with remarks from Maria Groenewald, VOICE Director, who thanked the hosts in Copenhagen, the speakers, and all participants for their valuable contributions. She highlighted the human responsibility behind the EU's approach to fragility and the need for a principled engagement across humanitarian, development, and peace actors. She noted the strong emphasis on anticipatory action as a moral imperative and reiterated that flexible, predictable funding within the MFF is essential for effective response.



## Panel I: How to integrate fragility in the future EU humanitarian and development agenda?

Fragility is rising globally, with more than sixty countries currently classified as fragile and increasingly complex crises around the world. Panellists stressed that addressing fragility requires an integrated, flexible and politically informed approach, bridging humanitarian, development and peace instruments. Working in fragile settings is fundamentally a governance challenge: understanding how people cope, navigating political dynamics, and investing in relationships and communication are key to designing meaningful interventions that place people's rights and needs at the centre.

Speakers underscored that donors must be light, adaptable and realistic, prioritising granular knowledge of the context, strong communication capacities to counter mis/disinformation, and the ability to engage across sectors. Examples from the Middle East demonstrated how localised consortia can navigate sanctions, access hard-to-reach areas and reinforce community-led solutions. Effective responses to fragility must also look beyond immediate humanitarian needs to encompass socio-economic vulnerabilities, resilience-building and climate-related risks.

Looking ahead to the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), representatives emphasised the importance of ensuring that EU instruments, particularly Global Europe, remain sufficiently flexible, simplified and equipped to operate in fragile contexts. The resilience objective of the instrument was mentioned as central to enabling integrated programming that bridges gaps between humanitarian assistance and development interventions. Maintaining a principled humanitarian approach was described as essential, alongside investing in strategic partnerships, locally led action and anticipatory approaches.

### Speakers

- Morgane Buttiens, Policy Officer, DG MENA
- Eva Grambye, Executive Director, Strategy, Programme & Results, Danish Refugee Council
- Andreas Kiaby, Chief Adviser on Humanitarian Aid, Danish MFA
- Annick Villarosa, Acting Head of Unit, Humanitarian Aid Policies and International Humanitarian Law, DG ECHO B4

Moderator: Dr. Jago Salmon, Principal Policy Fellow, Politics and Governance, ODI Global

### Key highlights

- Fragility demands an integrated toolbox mobilising humanitarian, development and other sectors, anchored in political awareness and context-specific understanding.
- Donors must be flexible, light and realistic, investing in long-term relationships that provide a granular and politically grounded picture of what is happening on the ground.
- Communication is critical, both for trust-building with local actors and to counter misinformation in fragile and polarised environments.
- Working in fragility is a governance challenge: effective programming requires understanding how communities cope and how local systems function under stress.
- Locally led consortia offer clear advantages in fragile contexts, including the ability to navigate sanctions, operate in complex crises, and complement one another's capacities.
- Socio-economic drivers of fragility must be addressed to achieve stability, especially in the MENA region, which remains a strategic priority for the EU.
- The upcoming MFF negotiations are a major opportunity to strengthen EU engagement in fragile settings, with a significant planned increase in Global Europe allocations.
- Resilience should be at the core of EU external action, particularly through Global Europe's resilience window.
- Principled humanitarian action must be maintained.





## Workshop: Danish Experience in Engaging on Fragility in the Sahel region

The workshop opened with a short presentation from an international organisation and a local partner from Burkina Faso. Following this, participants moved into three breakout sessions, HDP Nexus, Localisation and Local Leadership, and Dis-/Misinformation, which explored practical lessons for strengthening the EU's approach to fragility. Across the discussions, flexibility and contextual agility emerged as essential. In the HDP Nexus group, participants emphasised that fragile settings require adaptable and needs-driven approaches rather than rigid tools or instruments. Civil society, both local and international, must be treated as a strategic partner and not simply as an implementing arm. The need for principled engagement and special attention to "estranged settings" was also underlined.

The localisation session stressed that the EU's approach to fragility still tends to centre EU priorities, often sidelining local voices. Participants insisted that meaningful impact requires real power sharing, longer-term and more flexible funding, and reduced compliance barriers. INGOs' intermediary role was recognised as important for managing risk, working with authorities, and supporting local partners, but only if coupled with genuine transfer of decision-making authority to local actors.

The dis-/misinformation conversation highlighted the rapidly deteriorating information landscape in the Sahel, where propaganda, hate speech, and AI-generated content undermine trust and create security risks for humanitarian and development actors. Participants emphasised the need for ethical communication practices, stronger engagement with trusted local media, support to community radio, and cautious use of digital tools. Trust, both with communities and between partners, was seen as the foundation of effective communication in fragile settings.

### Speakers

- Jakob Eilsøe Mikkelsen, Head of Region Africa, Save the Children
- Zakaria Nanan, Project Manager, SOS Sahel International Burkina Faso (SOSSIBF)

Moderator: Dr. Jago Salmon, Principal Policy Fellow, Politics and Governance, ODI Global

### Key highlights

- Fragility in the Central Sahel requires long-term engagement, strong contextual understanding and conflict-sensitive programming.
- Civil society organisations must be recognised as strategic partners, not merely implementers.
- Localised rapid response mechanisms significantly improve timeliness and effectiveness of interventions.
- Protection mainstreaming and respect for cultures and traditions must be systematically integrated.
- Local perspectives must shape EU approaches to fragility; EU priorities should not overshadow local voices and needs.
- Close cooperation with national and local authorities across all stages of the project cycle strengthens trust and supports successful implementation.
- Flexibility is crucial: fragile settings require adaptive, people-centred approaches beyond rigid instruments.
- "Estranged settings" need tailored engagement to prevent disengagement or bypassing of affected communities.
- Humanitarian principles must be safeguarded when addressing fragility.
- HDP Nexus approach must be owned jointly by humanitarian, development and political actors.
- Donors must provide greater trust and flexibility to INGOs: reduced co-funding, simpler compliance, longer project durations.
- Ethical, transparent and trust-building communication is essential.



## Panel II: Acting before it is too late – the role of anticipatory action in the COP30 agenda

Anticipatory action (AA) aims to act ahead of predictable hazards to minimise humanitarian impacts before they fully unfold. Against a backdrop of rising climate-related disasters, food insecurity and displacement, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings, panellists underlined that AA is faster, cheaper and more dignified than traditional reactive responses. However, despite growing evidence, investment remains marginal, and the gap between early warning and early action persists, particularly where systems are weak or conflict restricts access. Speakers stressed that AA must be people-centred, inclusive and embedded within national systems to be effective. Local leadership, community knowledge, trust-building and integration of traditional and scientific forecasting emerged as essential components. Examples from Somalia, Ethiopia, Nepal and Zimbabwe showed how locally led triggers, community-managed committees and government-owned systems can transform preparedness and resilience. Yet financing challenges remain: flexible and predictable funding, preparedness budgets, and crisis modifiers are still limited and often short-term.

The discussion also explored how anticipatory action connects with the COP30 agenda. Although AA is not an official UNFCCC negotiation item, its principles are deeply relevant to adaptation, loss and damage, and climate finance. EU and Member State delegates were encouraged to champion AA as a practical, cost-effective measure to address climate-induced humanitarian needs, promote locally led adaptation, strengthen national systems and ensure that early actions are prioritised in climate finance structures.

### Speakers

- Kamal Farah, CBDRM Technical Advisor, SomRep, CARE International in Somalia/Somaliland
- Anne Mette Meyer, Senior Anticipatory Action and Climate Lead, Danish Red Cross
- Jette Michelsen, Climate negotiator to the UNFCCC, Danish MFA
- Jannie Østergaard Nielsen, Climate Adaptation and Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator, ADRA DK
- Annick Villarosa, Acting Head of Unit, Humanitarian Aid Policies and International Humanitarian Law, DG ECHO B4

Moderator: Sigrid Bjerre Andersen, Policy Advisor at Global Focus.

### Key highlights

- Acting before crises strike is essential: Anticipatory action (AA) is faster, cheaper, and more dignified than traditional humanitarian response, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
- AA only succeeds when local communities own the process, shape the triggers, and lead decisions. Traditional knowledge must be recognised and combined with scientific forecasts.
- For sustainability, AA must be integrated into national disaster management frameworks, backed by laws, policies, budgets and government leadership, not treated as NGO-led projects.
- Bridging early warning and early action remains the biggest gap: Forecasts exist, but systems to translate them into timely action are weak, especially in conflict-affected areas.
- Flexible financing is critical: Crisis modifiers, pre-arranged finance and shock-responsive social protection allow for early interventions. Without flexible funding, planned anticipatory actions risk reverting to reactive humanitarian response.
- Capacity-building for local and national authorities is essential to manage triggers, deliver early actions and coordinate actors, especially in fragile contexts.
- Avoid parallel systems: AA frameworks must be coherent and collectively owned. Fragmentation undermines trust and efficiency.
- Anticipatory action supports resilience building: Early actions help protect livelihoods, agricultural systems and household assets, reducing long-term humanitarian needs.
- Climate finance must address vulnerability: More predictable, concessional and accessible funding is needed for locally led AA and adaptation, particularly for fragile and conflict-affected settings.
- EU and Member States should champion AA as a cost-effective measure to reduce climate-induced humanitarian needs and reinforce the humanitarian–development–climate nexus.



## Launch of Global Focus's Report on financing modalities in Denmark's development aid

Global Focus presented its new report "Enhancing Financing Modalities: Danish and EU Approaches to HDP Nexus and Localisation", offering an in-depth analysis of how funding structures can better support humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) coherence and strengthen local leadership. The introduction emphasised that crisis-affected people do not care about terminology such as "nexus", what matters is timely, predictable, needs-driven support. Denmark's long-standing tradition of flexible, multi-year funding and integrated HDP approaches was highlighted, while acknowledging that full localisation and systemic integration are still a work in progress.

The report notes that today's global financing landscape is stretched to its outer limits: ODA budgets are being cut, domestic and geopolitical interests increasingly shape donor spending, and climate change and conflict continue accelerating needs. This context demands financing modalities that are flexible, efficient and responsive to priorities in partner countries above all else. While Denmark has piloted promising models, EU funding instruments remain comparatively rigid, overly compliance-heavy and insufficiently accessible to local actors.

Launched in the context of the Danish EU Presidency and ahead of negotiations on the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2034), the report is intentionally timed. It invites a discussion on how future EU funding structures can better sustain HDP coherence, uphold commitments to localisation, and remain fit for purpose in increasingly fragile and politically sensitive environments.

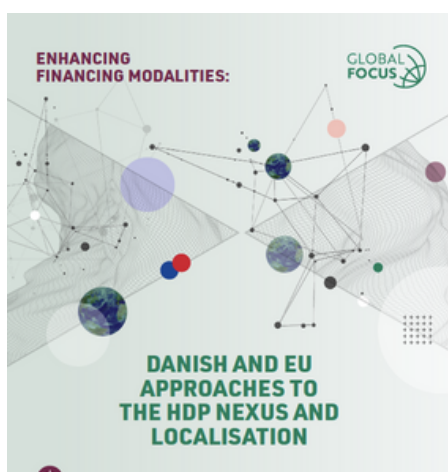
### Speakers

- Kirsten Hjørnholm, International Director for Policy, Evidence & Fundraising, ActionAid Denmark
- Jonas Nøddekær, Secretary General, DanChurchAid
- Andrew Sherriff, Associate Director of Institutional Relations and Partnerships, ECDPM
- Sabine Zwaenpol, Acting Head of Unit G5, Resilience, Peace and Security, DG INTPA, European Commission

Moderator: Anders Tharsgaard, Director at Beta and consultant on the report Enhancing Financing Modalities

### Key highlights

- Global financing for humanitarian, development and peace efforts is under acute strain, with donor budgets shrinking while needs rise.
- Climate change and conflict continue widening the financing gap and driving long-term vulnerabilities.
- Denmark's experience demonstrates that flexible, multi-year and adaptive funding can strengthen HDP coherence and localisation.
- Across EU instruments, predictability and localisation remain limited despite strong political commitments.
- People affected by crisis care about timely, effective support, not institutional terminology.
- Funding modalities must prioritise needs in partner countries, not domestic geopolitical pressures or donor-driven priorities.
- Limited donor risk appetite and fragmented audits create high entry barriers for local organisations.
- Decision-making remains overly centralised, with limited space for country-level responsiveness.
- Local organisations face chronic underfunding of overheads and disproportionate administrative burdens.





## Recommendations for the EU and/or its Member States

- Prioritise a people-centred approach by engaging affected communities and supporting civil society organisations, to ensure tailored programmes and access to those in need.
- Pay particular attention to mainstreaming protection, gender and inclusion.
- Prioritise an HDP Nexus approach for all contexts facing fragility.
- Enhance coordination with local actors and across different departments – whether humanitarian, development, peace or climate.
- Mainstreaming conflict sensitivity across all programmes.
- Maintain and intensify engagement in contexts facing fragility, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
- Recognise civil society – both local and international not only as implementers but as strategic partners. This requires creating space for engagement and deliberate inclusion of local actors in decision-making.
- Support locally led initiatives for empowering civil society at national, regional, and community levels.
- Safeguard humanitarian principles: Humanitarian principles remain non-negotiable and must be safeguarded in all EU engagements.
- Ensuring flexible funding through humanitarian, development and climate funding mechanisms, and identifying alternative plans as early as possible in case of shocks.
- Ensure humanitarian and development funding remains principled and driven by a people-centred approach, rather than being influenced by political or economic shifts.
- Strengthen collaboration across humanitarian, development, peace and climate sectors as well as coordination between EU services and Member States.
- Integrate anticipatory action into humanitarian, development, climate donors' policies and programming.
- Increase overheads and adopt simplified, harmonised compliance and reporting formats, including lump-sum options where appropriate.
- Harmonise compliance requirements across EU and MS donors and adopt proportionate, risk-based audit.

