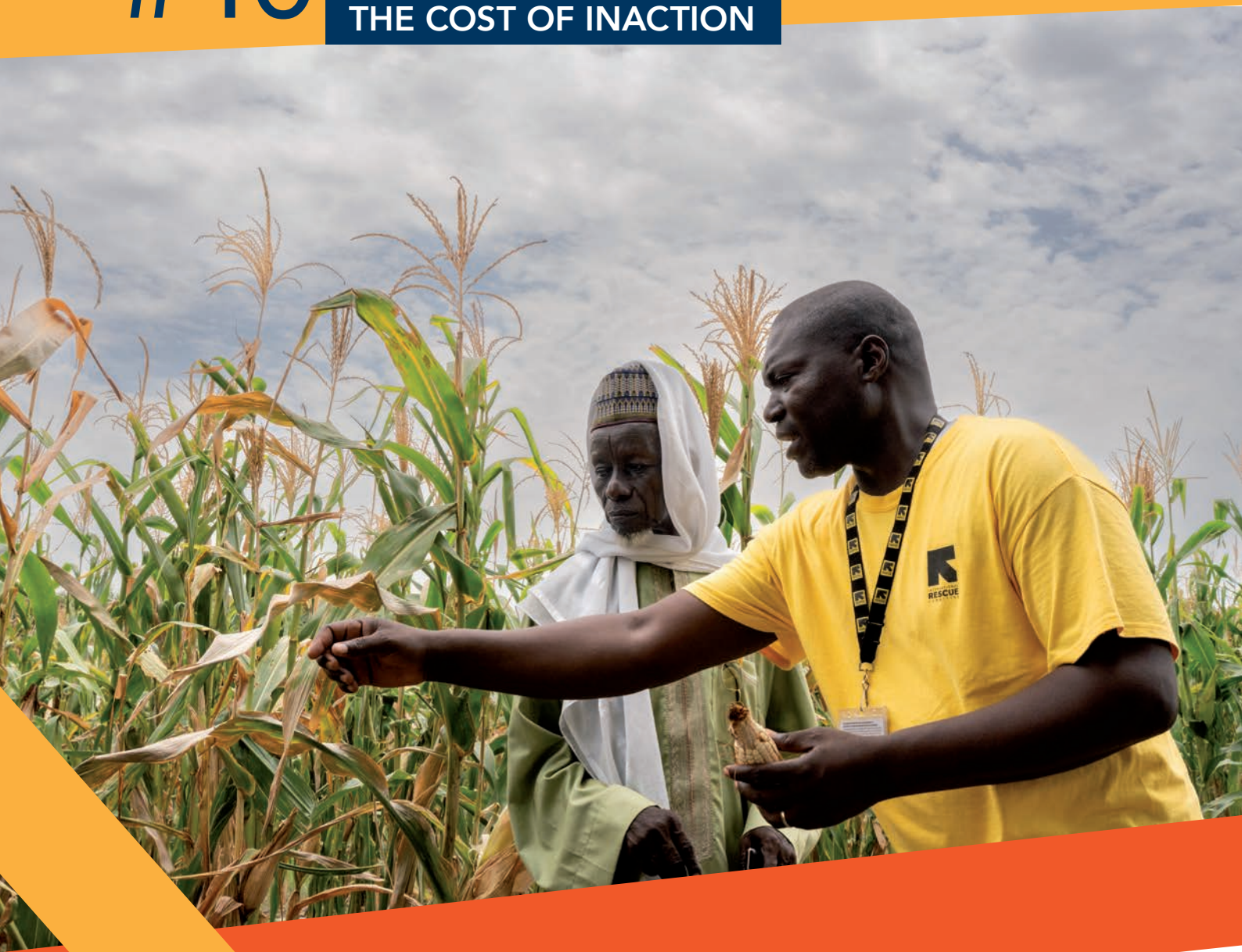
DECEMBER 2025

VOICE OUT LOUD

#40 FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION



VOICE
European humanitarian NGOs.
Standing together.

Contents

VOICE OUT LOUD #40

FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION

Magazine published by VOICE
Brussels – December 2025
Editor: Roberta Fadda
Co-editor: Francesca Giubilo
and Luana Parisius

Cover photo:
© International Rescue Committee

VOICE wishes to thank the
contributors of this issue.
Views expressed herein do not
necessarily reflect those of the
VOICE network.

Editorial

This edition of *VOICE out loud* comes at a decisive moment: major donors worldwide are slashing their contributions to aid, leaving communities exposed to fragility, while the European Union is preparing its new integrated approach to fragility and wider debates on the future of EU external action and financing intensify.

In this environment, there is a real risk that fragile contexts become deprioritised — not because needs are decreasing, but because political and financial pressures are increasing. VOICE message is clear: donors must stay engaged in fragile settings to ensure that communities do not fall behind, ultimately increasing further humanitarian needs.

The contributions in this issue demonstrate what effective engagement can look like — and what is at stake when it is delayed, fragmented, or withdrawn. They also underline a core reality: fragility is not a humanitarian concern. It is a challenge for the whole sector: governance, development, protection, and peace. A credible EU approach must therefore be genuinely multisectoral, drawing on the full range of EU instruments and expertise across the Humanitarian–Development–Peace nexus, and involving Member States through coordinated Team Europe action.

CESVI opens the issue with a compelling case for moving from policy ambition to practical implementation of the HDP nexus. In Myanmar, the EU's Nexus Response Mechanism shows that integrated approaches can work even in highly fragile environments — when local actors are at the centre, when governance arrangements enable coordination, and when funding is flexible enough to follow needs rather than rigid categories.

The Danish Refugee Council addresses one of the defining dynamics of fragility today: forced displacement. As displacement grows globally, the EU's external action must better reflect humanitarian realities in fragile settings. This is not about mobility as an abstract policy issue; it is about people's rights, protection, and the conditions that force families to flee.

Concern Worldwide's contribution brings the debate into sharp focus by showing that principled engagement is possible even in the most constrained contexts — if it is designed with conflict sensitivity from the start, grounded in local realities, and supported by approaches that recognise that progress in fragile settings rarely follows a linear path.

In parallel, the International Rescue Committee offers a forward-looking analysis of how partnerships with the private sector can support more resilient livelihoods, scale innovation, and complement humanitarian and development efforts — while remaining anchored in needs and protection outcomes.

WeWorld's article on northern Mozambique is a stark warning of what happens when assumptions about "transition" outpace reality. Renewed violence, repeated displacement, and shrinking humanitarian space are colliding with funding shortfalls and reduced operational capacity.

Finally, Stichting Vluchteling's "Closer Look" from Sudan reminds us that solidarity is not a slogan — it is a lifeline. As humanitarian space shrinks, local mutual aid groups and first responders are sustaining communities under unimaginable pressure.

This edition concludes with an interview with Barry Andrews, Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Development, bringing a parliamentary perspective to the choices the EU now faces. His reflections speak directly to the responsibilities of EU institutions in safeguarding long-term engagement, resisting short-term political impulses, and ensuring coherence across external action.

Taken together, these contributions point to a clear direction for the EU's integrated approach to fragility as stated in our VOICE Policy Resolution 2025:

- Put people and affected communities at the centre of EU action in fragile contexts.
- Ensure protection, gender equality and inclusion are systematically integrated.
- Operationalise the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus across fragile settings.
- Guarantee sustained, flexible and long-term EU engagement in contexts of fragility.

The cost of inaction is already visible in too many places. The task now is to ensure that the EU's response matches the scale, complexity, and urgency of fragility — and that it does so with principled, sustained engagement at its core.

Pauline Chetcuti
VOICE President

OPERATIONALISING THE HDP NEXUS IN FRAGILE STATES:
INSIGHTS FROM MYANMAR'S NRM EXPERIENCE

THE ISSUE

FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION

Myanmar earthquake response © CESVI, 2025

The humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus represents one of the most ambitious shifts in how the international community addresses protracted crises and fragile contexts. Yet, translating this framework from policy commitment to practical reality remains profoundly challenging. In an era where fragility is deepening globally—driven by conflict, climate change, economic instability, and health crises—the need for genuine integration between humanitarian, development, and peace actors has never been more urgent.[1]

The European Union has long championed this shift. Although the overlap between humanitarian aid, rehabilitation and development was recognised as early as the 1980s, the tools to turn that awareness into a truly integrated approach were still lacking, and interventions continued to follow an ineffective sequential logic. [2] With the formal adoption of the Humanitarian–Development Nexus in 2017[3] and the addition of the peace dimension in 2018, the EU made the Triple Nexus a core pillar of its external action, grounded in principles of coherence, collaboration and complementarity.

Yet translating these principles into practice remains uneven. Significant obstacles persist, from fragmented funding streams and rigid institutional mandates to limited engagement of local actors and inconsistent political will.[4]

Therefore, while the HDP nexus is increasingly embedded in policy, its operationalisation in fragile states still faces significant structural challenges. Yet, in this context the example of Myanmar stands as a beacon of possibility, showing that in highly fragile environments when localisation and collaborative forms of governance are prioritised—and supported by well-coordinated, flexible donor mechanisms—the HDP nexus can be successfully made operational in practice.

This is particularly evident in the experience of CESVI, an Italian NGO active worldwide for more than forty years and operating in Myanmar for over two decades. During this time, CESVI has worked in some of the country's most fragile and hard-to-reach regions, building a deep understanding of local dynamics, community structures and informal governance systems.

1. https://voiceeu.org/publications/voice-policy-resolution-2025.pdf
2. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2012/491435/EXPO-DEVE_SP(2012)491435_EN.pdf
3. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/24010/nexus-st09383en17.pdf
4. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/eu-hdp-nexus-study-final-report-nov-2022_en.pdf

This long-term engagement has proven essential for navigating conflict-affected environments where formal state institutions are often limited in their reach or capacity. It has also enabled CESVI to cultivate trusted relationships with community leaders and civil society networks—actors who are not only essential operational partners but become strategic allies in fragile settings, especially when crises escalate and only local actors can ensure continuity on the ground.

This legacy proved decisive when, on 28 March 2025, a devastating 7.7-magnitude earthquake tore through Sagaing, Mandalay and Southern Shan State. Entire neighbourhoods collapsed. At least 3,757 people lost their lives; over 200,000 were uprooted. In Nyaung Shwe Township—on the fragile shores of Inle Lake, Myanmar's iconic UNESCO Biosphere Reserve—the quake struck a population already battered by conflict, displacement and economic decline since the 2021 military coup. Years of overlapping crises had hollowed out basic services and pushed local communities into a daily struggle for survival.

What CESVI witnessed on the ground in Nyaung Shwe reflects a broader shift in the way the international community understands crisis response. Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the launch of the "New Way of Working," it has become clear that the old, compartmentalised system—where humanitarian relief is followed by development programming and, somewhere in the distance, by peacebuilding—no longer matches the realities of today's fragile states. Conflicts last longer, disasters strike more often, governance systems weaken and needs overlap in ways that cannot be separated neatly into phases.

> "The humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus represents one of the most ambitious shifts in how the international community addresses protracted crises and fragile contexts."

Myanmar earthquake response © CESVI, 2025

In such a landscape, emergency response was never going to be straightforward. Yet CESVI mobilised within hours—not only thanks to its logistical capacity, but because it could immediately rely on the network it had built over two decades with community volunteers, local leaders and civil society partners. This locally grounded ecosystem became the backbone of a response that was rapid, principled and genuinely owned by the communities themselves.

Beyond the immediate assistance delivered in the aftermath of the earthquake, eight months on CESVI's work under the "Toward Tomorrow Recovery in Nyaung Shwe" project[5] offers a clear example of how the HDP nexus takes shape in practice. Backed by the EU's Nexus Response Mechanism (NRM)[6] and implemented through UNOPS, the initiative weaves together humanitarian response, longer-term recovery and livelihood support, and the "small p" dimensions of peace—social cohesion, inclusive dialogue and community-led decision-making—into a coherent, people-centred and locally anchored intervention.

The ability to implement such an approach is closely linked to the broader architecture that enables it. The European Union introduced the Nexus Response Mechanism (NRM) in Myanmar precisely to create the conditions for this kind of integrated action. Launched in 2020, the NRM represents far more than a pilot initiative: it signals a rethinking of how aid can be structured in fragile contexts. Unlike traditional approaches, the

5. The project adopts a holistic, community-driven recovery approach that addresses the interlinked challenges of disaster recovery, environmental degradation, and socio-economic vulnerability. The approach is structured around three mutually reinforcing pillars: Resilient Shelter and WASH, Sustainable Livelihood Recovery, Environmental Stewardship and Community Preparedness.
6. https://www.nexusresponsemechanism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NRM-Programme-Strategy-2020-2023.pdf

> "At a time when rising fragility is driving unprecedented humanitarian needs, coupled with a worrying trend of development donors' disengagement, stepping back is simply not an option."

mechanism functions through a dedicated governance system, bringing humanitarian and development actors together under a single Steering Committee and guided by a tailored monitoring and evaluation framework. Its pooled funding model—uniting resources from ECHO (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations) and INTPA (EU Directorate-General for International Partnerships)—allows assistance to be deployed flexibly according to evolving needs rather than rigid budget lines. Implementation through UNOPS as a third-party provider further accelerates procedures, strengthens risk management and ensures the operational agility required in Myanmar's volatile and access-constrained environment.

Therefore, rather than development actors progressively disengaging from Myanmar as insecurity deepened, the EU maintained and deepened its development engagement precisely because the NRM framework provided a way to make that engagement more flexible, conflict-sensitive, and coordinated with humanitarian response.

Under this framework, CESVI's early work in Nyaung Shwe focused on meeting urgent needs while laying the groundwork for longer-term resilience. Emergency support was paired with measures that introduced higher technical and environmental standards, helping communities better withstand future shocks. As the response evolved, the intervention shifted toward restoring and strengthening livelihoods closely tied to the lake's fragile ecosystem, promoting more sustainable practices that bridge the traditional divide between short-term relief and longer-term development.

The project also addresses the "small p" peace dimensions that are essential in a multi-ethnic area like Nyaung Shwe, where communities rely on shared natural resources. Here, the way assistance is delivered can influence local tensions. CESVI integrates conflict sensitivity throughout the intervention, ensuring transparent decision-making, community participation and accessible feedback channels. By working through trusted local civil society actors, the initiative reinforces inclusive, bottom-up governance that communities perceive as legitimate. These approaches help reduce the risk of aid-related grievances and create space for dialogue and joint management of shared resources—laying the basis for preventing and managing potential conflicts over the longer term. Taken together, these elements demonstrate that community-driven, conflict-sensitive and ecosystem-anchored approaches like CESVI's in Nyaung Shwe can generate credible results across the humanitarian, development and peace pillars of the nexus.

For the international community, Myanmar's experience should serve as a call to scale what works. At a time when rising fragility is driving unprecedented humanitarian needs, coupled with a worrying trend of development donors' disengagement, stepping back is simply not an option. The pathway from aspiration to operationalisation exists; the real question is whether the international community will commit the necessary arrangements, resources and long-term political will to make effective nexus implementation the norm rather than the exception.

Amélie Tapella, Advocacy Officer
CESVI ETS
www.cesvi.eu

FRAGILITY AND DISPLACEMENT:
A PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH TO WORKING ACROSS THE NEXUS

THE ISSUE

FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION

> "... the EU must support a human rights-based and people-centred approach to fragile contexts to mitigate the impacts of forced displacement and instability."

The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) works in approximately 30 countries across the world, the majority of which are affected by conflict and fragility. DRC responds to emergencies and works towards durable solutions to ensure a dignified life for refugees and displacement-affected people. Through its mission to assist, protect, and empower displacement-affected people towards a better future, DRC implements a "triple nexus approach"—i.e. working with humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities.

In this article, we posit that with forced displacement growing globally and in tandem with (often due to the drivers of) fragility, **the EU must support a human rights-based and people-centred approach to fragile contexts to mitigate the impacts of forced displacement and instability.** This is in contrast to the EU's current external action focus on seeking to control migration and facilitate foreign investments – neither of which have proven to be effective in fragile contexts. Drawing on DRC's experience, we propose to focus on what works: bottom-up, conflict-sensitive programming and multi-sectoral, community-focused interventions that link humanitarian response with long-term programming, as these are essential for building self-reliance, social cohesion, and resilient, peaceful communities in fragile, displacement-affected contexts.

FRAGILITY AND FORCED-DISPLACEMENT

Displacement continues to rise globally, and last year the number of forcibly displaced persons—including refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs)—reached an unprecedented 120 million.[1] In 2025, DRC's *Global Displacement Forecast*[2] report found that global displacement is set to surge by 6.7 million people by the end of 2026 due to armed conflict, climate change, the legacy of war and socio-economic instability. The displacement hot spots have doubled from the previous year, with a steep rise in displacements expected in Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria, Yemen, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Venezuela. The report indicates a direct correlation between forced displacement and fragile contexts; fragility essentially fuels forced displacement, and it is therefore critical to address displacement when working in fragile contexts.

DRC'S APPROACH IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

DRC has extensive experience supporting displaced populations in fragile contexts—mitigating risks and shocks, responding to immediate crises, and addressing long-term needs. Through its "Solutions from the Start" approach, DRC proactively plans the transition from emergency response to durable solutions as soon as conditions allow, strengthening self-reliance, community resilience, and social cohesion from the earliest stages – i.e. the actions DRC takes to contribute to the achievement of durable solutions.[3]

DRC provides assistance across its emergency and solutions programming in four core sectors: protection; economic recovery; humanitarian disarmament & peacebuilding; and WASH/shelter, and infrastructure. Climate and environment considerations are integrated across the four sectors, recognising the impacts of climate change as a cross-sectoral challenge.

A key tool that DRC employs to mitigate displacement and its impacts is Anticipatory Action. DRC links displacement forecasts to scalable, community-driven interventions that reduce the vulnerability of individuals, communities and national systems, enhance their capacity to anticipate and absorb multi-dimensional shocks and prevent the need for costly emergency responses. Anticipatory Actions are strategically deployed across the nexus to mitigate initial displacement, reduce secondary displacement, and enable durable solutions.

1. UNHCR Global Trends Report 2024.
2. 250120_global_displacement_forecast_report_2025_final.pdf - based on the Foresight machine learning model, which accurately predicts displacement trends by analysing 148 indicators based on economic, security, political, environmental, and societal factors, across 27 countries.
3. Durable Solutions are the sustained resolution of displacement for refugees and IDPs, ensuring they no longer face displacement-specific vulnerabilities and can fully enjoy their human rights without discrimination.

Syria: An ECHO funded, DRC community programme to rehabilitate a solar-powered borehole, bringing water to 6000 community members © DRC, 2025

IN PRACTICE: HOLISTIC, TRIPLE NEXUS PROGRAMMING IN SYRIA AND UKRAINE

In both Syria and Ukraine (as well as in many other contexts globally) DRC and partners are meeting needs by responding holistically to displacement and protection needs at community-level, combining agile emergency assistance with early recovery and resilience-building efforts. This approach has proven to be effective in addressing the complexity of needs in fragile contexts.

In Syria, DRC works to help displaced people and communities recover from over 14 years of conflict and destruction and reintegrate multiple waves of returnees from complex displacement situations. DRC supports communities to transition from emergency response to resilience building, in collaboration with partners and local authorities, offering a comprehensive package of protection and cash services (often to female-headed households), alongside infrastructure rehabilitation (e.g. sewerage, solar powered bore holes, shelter), and subsequently providing livelihoods support including training and small business grants. Concurrently, DRC implements social cohesion programming to mitigate community tensions, and conducts humanitarian mine action (HMA) in collaboration with national authorities, whose staff DRC is training and planning to equip. This integrated, multi-sectoral approach is responding directly to what people express that they need, while building individual and community self-reliance and durable solutions for the displaced. In Syria, a bottom-up, triple nexus approach helps foster stability and future prospects for communities still highly vulnerable to socio-economic shocks, renewed violence, and further displacement.

In Ukraine, DRC and partners are responding in a similarly integrated way in conflict and displacement-affected communities at the frontline; DRC's integrated, multisectoral programming bridges emergency response with long-term solutions to displacement, while addressing both the social and economic dimensions of vulnerability. For example, in one programme, following mine and explosive ordnance clearance activities in Mykolaiv oblast, Cash for Agriculture was provided to support small-scale farmers in returning to production following the clearance of land. In the same community, DRC provided Housing, Land and Property (HLP) support to assist with access to land, and vocational training and enterprise support to enable livelihood diversification. Similar to Syria, at the core of DRC's and partners' response in Ukraine is a robust integrated approach that addresses the diverse and evolving emergency needs of conflict-affected communities as well as longer-term solutions to their situation.

> "Integrated and community-based programming across the triple nexus, driven by civil society in collaboration with local actors, and taking into account the needs of displacement-affected people, must be included in the EU's approach to fragility."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU'S APPROACH TO FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Based on DRC's experience, we have some recommendations for the European Union and Member States, to most effectively respond to needs in fragile contexts:

- The EU and Member States must ensure **increased dedicated funding for fragile settings,** complementing the approach of the Global Gateway and humanitarian aid operations and addressing the growing gap between them. In contexts such as Syria, Ukraine, and many others, actors working in the triple nexus struggle to fund the type of community-based, resilience programming that is most effective, leaving communities and people at risk when humanitarian funding ends, and large-scale development funding has not yet reached them. The traditional divide between humanitarian and developing funding streams should thus be reconsidered through a more nuanced lens, with humanitarian and development donors alike extend beyond their strict mandates and coordinating to close gaps in resilience programming.
- **The EU should refocus its approach in fragile contexts on strengthening the rights and resilience of crisis- affected populations.** A people-centred, human rights-based, multi-sectoral, community-based approach works and should be supported and scaled up. This must also include support for Anticipatory Action and HMA – both of which contribute to building resilient communities.
- **EU funding earmarked for "migration" must focus on addressing the needs and rights of the forcibly displaced in these settings** – and not on migration control efforts. As fragility fuels displacement, and displacement is growing exponentially, such a focus can support context-appropriate, sustainable solutions.
- **The EU should recognise and support the important role of civil society operating in these contexts,** partnering with INGOs and local actors, who are well-placed to support communities affected by conflict, climate change, and displacement. NGOs have immense experience of operating effectively in fragile contexts, including where there are de-facto authorities – and are increasingly under-supported despite their expertise.

DRC's experience demonstrates that the needs in fragile contexts are best addressed when communities are empowered to respond to become self-reliant, ending the cycle of aid-dependence and allowing them to access their full rights. Integrated and community-based programming across the triple nexus, driven by civil society in collaboration with local actors, and taking into account the needs of displacement-affected people, must be included in the EU's approach to fragility.

Céline Mias, EU Director and
Fie Lauritzen, Head of Sectors and Thematic Areas
Danish Refugee Council

MAINTAINING PRINCIPLED ENGAGEMENT IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS: CONCERN WORLDWIDE'S EXPERIENCE IN NIGER AND AFGHANISTAN

THE ISSUE

FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION

Afghanistan © Concern Worldwide

In September 2024, the EU Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management was tasked with developing a 'Commission-wide integrated approach to fragility, to ensure that humanitarian, development, peace and other policies all work together to better link urgent relief and longer-term solutions.'[1] At the same time, the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships was asked to 'support a differentiated approach with regard to Least Developed Countries by focusing more effectively on their specific vulnerabilities and to conflict areas, fragile countries, and other complex settings […].'[2] Designed well, these approaches can steer EU external action to save lives, enable meaningful engagement, reduce vulnerabilities and improve development outcomes in fragile contexts, in line with European values and commitments to advance the 2030 Agenda, which has faltered in most high and extreme fragility contexts, according to the OECD States of Fragility 2025 report.

To advance EU nexus commitments, the Commission-wide *Integrated Approach to Fragility* and *Differentiated approach for LDCs* must go beyond humanitarian interventions and include carefully designed development approaches to enable people living in such contexts to progress from meeting basic needs to more sustainable human and economic development. Concern Worldwide's experience in education programmes in Niger and supporting women-led agriculture businesses in Afghanistan demonstrates that even in highly fragile contexts it is possible for EU-supported programming to maintain principled engagement and to strengthen resilience and human development.

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY AT THE CENTRE OF PROGRAMME DESIGN

Education is disrupted and undermined by conflict when schools are destroyed or occupied by parties to conflict, teachers and learners are displaced or intimidated, and unsafe environments limit access to education and learning opportunities. As of April 2025, 1,032 schools were closed in Tillabéri alone, leaving 89,514 children out of school and exposed to risk of enrolment in non-state armed groups, child marriage, and various forms of exploitation.

Concern implemented the Learning Together programme from October 2020 to June 2025 (funded by Agence française de développement) to enable children

1. See EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen Mission Letter to EU Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management, Hadja Lahbib, Sep 2024
2. See EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen Mission Letter the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela, Sep 2024

CASE STUDY: CONFLICT-SENSITIVE EDUCATION ANALYSIS IN NIGER

A comprehensive conflict-sensitive education analysis was the first stage of Concern's *Learning Together* programme in Tillabéri and Tahoua. The programme team collected detailed information on the risks, conflict dynamics and links between education and conflict. They assessed the conflict sensitivity of Concern's planned intervention with communities and identified opportunities to maximise potential positive effects on peace and social cohesion and minimise any negative effects. Gender and social inclusion dimensions were integrated throughout the analysis to capture how contextual and conflict dynamics, along with school-related risk factors, affect individuals across genders, abilities, and socio-economic groups.

Over 180 focus groups and interviews were conducted with inspectors and pedagogical advisors, teachers and headmasters, parents of children in and out of school, and children themselves.

Interviewees described the situation in their villages, the presence of parties to the conflict, illegal tax collection, and their fear of attacks and kidnappings. They described how schools and teachers have been specifically targeted by attacks, resulting in schools being closed either because buildings have been burnt down, threats have been made or because teachers are unwilling to teach in these areas. Girls, who are more likely to be out of school and married off at a young age, and people with disabilities, who are heavily dependent on others for their safety, are particularly vulnerable.

The activities proposed by Concern were discussed in detail with interviewees in order to assess possible risks, to analyse Concern's conflict approach and to co-create mitigation measures to be put in place by the communities, by Concern and by partners. Continuous monitoring of the conflict dynamics throughout the programme cycle led to adaptions to prioritise the security of the children, their teachers, and their communities.

affected by the security crisis in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions to access safe and quality education. Three groups of displaced, refugee or resident children were prioritised: students enrolled in primary schools in the project's intervention communes; children living within the school catchment areas but not attending school for more than a year; and children in areas where insecurity has kept schools closed for extended periods.

The programme components were underpinned by the findings of a comprehensive Conflict-Sensitive Education analysis (see case study). These included an *Interactive audio curriculum* to support over 3,000 children in conflict-affected areas - gathering in small, discreet 'learning clubs' in safe spaces identified by the community - to continue learning in areas with schools closed due to insecurity. *Accelerated bridging classes* helped 6,310 out-of-school children to re-enter formal education and Distance video-coaching, using tablets and smartphones, supported teachers and facilitators to improve their teaching practice in areas inaccessible due to insecurity, benefiting more than 7,110 children.

The EU recognises the transformational impact of education for development and has included Education (including for vulnerable groups) as a priority of its Global Gateway Strategy. Education also reduces protection risks—such as forced recruitment of boys into armed groups, and for girls, early marriage, heightened exposure to gender-based violence, and increased birth rates. Persistently low access to education for girls entrenches the economic marginalisation of women in fragile contexts. As it develops the *Integrated Approach to Fragility* and advances a *Differentiated Approach for LDCs,* the EU has an opportunity to safeguard education for vulnerable children and maximise its transformative potential in fragile settings.

In Afghanistan, through the AWARE programme (2021-2025), Concern and partners supported unemployed and underemployed women, and existing women-led micro and small agribusinesses with potential for sustainable scale-up. Supporting women's economic empowerment in this context requires extreme sensitivity, with careful attention to the economic sector selection. In Afghanistan, agriculture is a culturally appropriate and accessible entry point for women. Technical training, along with assets and business and marketing support was provided to Women's Agribusiness Collectives in the dairy, fruit, almond, saffron and vegetable value chains.

> "Flexibility of donor visibility requirements means that activities can discretely continue in politically sensitive and insecure environments."

The programme fostered a more supportive environment for women's involvement in economic activities at the household and community levels by proactively engaging men, boys and influential religious leaders. Trainings and dialogues created an enabling environment for women to start and grow their businesses, increase decision-making in areas such as land and property, household saving, borrowing and spending, and to be able to gather and socialise in women's collectives, which women participants reported as being beneficial for their mental health.

ENGAGING WITH AUTHORITIES

Given the continued insecurity in Niger, which can abruptly restrict education actors' ability to operate, the Ministry of Education (MoE) recognises the value of tools like distance teacher support and audio-based learning to maintain access to, and continuity of, quality education for children affected by crises. It was crucial to partner with education authorities, including the Ministry of Primary Education and Regional Directorates, as well as the Inspectorate of Literacy and Non-Formal Education, to ensure that the programme supported the National Education Sector Plan and to ensure quality control of formal and non-formal education within programme areas. Programme components were co-designed with the MoE, aligned to MoE standards, and supported by its pedagogical advisers. The programme also aligned with education initiatives of other actors and worked to harmonize approaches across Niger.

Partnerships with local NGOs enabled community mobilisation and support, and programme monitoring in highly insecure areas.

The AWARE programme in Afghanistan was implemented over a period of challenging changes to the context, including Covid-19, armed conflict in northern provinces, the change of political regime and gender-based restrictions. The Concern team and partners demonstrated strong skills in working with local authorities in this environment. With frequent uncertainty around what activities women were permitted to undertake, daily negotiations were often required. A key strength of this programme was its consortium model, with partners leveraging their respective networks to sustain continuous dialogue with local authorities, thereby ensuring programme activities could continue. The approach to engaging authorities—acknowledging the sensitivity of the context while bringing them on board— proved to be highly effective.

Video coaching for a listening club © Concern Worldwide

BALANCING ACCOUNTABILITY WITH NEEDS

Concern's experience in Niger and Afghanistan is that longer-term programming facilitates greater flexibility and adaptability and supports stronger impacts. In both contexts, planned targets were surpassed by the end of the programmes, despite challenging, insecure and evolving contexts which meant certain activities experienced delays, some budgets were not spent at expected paces, and at times coordination was difficult. As well as careful engagement with authorities, it is critical that programme teams operating in fragile contexts allocate sufficient time and resources to ensure community members fully understand and support the selection criteria and the activities being implemented, to reduce potential tensions caused by misinformation or lack of information. Flexibility of donor visibility requirements means that activities can discretely continue in politically sensitive and insecure environments.

CONCLUSIONS

To maximise the impact of EU external action in fragile contexts, policymakers across the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and Member States must ensure that EU external action is informed by local realities and draws on civil society's experience and best practices in supporting at-risk communities in situations of extreme fragility. This will require sufficient time for consultations with civil society—especially organisations based in fragile contexts—so that programming is appropriately designed, context-specific, and grounded in the perspectives of those engaged in consultations and in programme implementation.

Gillian McCarthy,
Advocacy Adviser for Sahel and Central Africa
Concern Worldwide

RESILIENCE THROUGH PARTNERSHIP:
NGO-DRIVEN PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

THE ISSUE

FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION

© International Rescue Committee

At the end of October 2025, the United Nations reported consolidated funding requirements of $45,37 billion for responding to the needs of 181 million targeted people (out of 300 million people in need). The total humanitarian funding for 2025 at that point only reached $18,64 billion, a 26 per cent reduction compared to the $25,29 billion that were reached at the same point in 2024. These figures paint a grim picture of the gap between the needs and the resources available to respond to them – with the gap at risk of growing even further due to conflict, climate change, and funding cuts. In addition, in 2024, nearly 80% of humanitarian funding came from only 10 donor governments, leaving the system highly vulnerable to shifts in priorities.

The cuts that hit the sector in 2025 highlighted this fragility and underscored the importance of exploring a range of avenues to build a more resilient and effective system. These should include strengthening coordination with development actors to direct funding towards interventions that support livelihoods in a way that reduces or prevents cycles of need; engaging a diversity of financial stakeholders to contribute to humanitarian outcomes; and investing in innovative solutions that can increase cost effectiveness and drive impact at scale. In each case, engaging the private sector can be an essential part of the way forward – and NGOs such as the IRC have a key role to play in ensuring such partnerships effectively respond to needs.

PARTNERING WITH PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS TO SUPPORT RESILIENT LIVELIHOODS

Building and supporting the economic resilience of people and communities in fragile settings can play a key role in preventing or breaking out of cycles of vulnerability in the face of conflict and climate change. As part of the IRC's efforts to support resilient livelihoods in these settings, our teams foster partnerships with a range of actors to strengthen market systems and facilitate the inclusion of crisis-affected communities in them.

Partnerships with the private sector, such as micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises, can increase the impact of aid programmes, as well as support longer-term sustainability and the local ownership of activities.

In Chad, for instance, the IRC's engagement with the private sector has created benefits for communities and for private sector market actors themselves, creating jobs and diversifying economies – including through climate-smart activities. Examples of actions in sector such as fisheries, agriculture, and livestock production have included:

- Supplying agricultural inputs to private sector actors, including those looking to implement new practices and develop their businesses;
- Providing technical training on climate-smart agriculture, value chain development, and quality assurance;
- Supporting land restoration initiatives, enterprise development, and business growth planning, particularly for beneficiaries looking to start up businesses;
- Supporting professional development centres in creating and implementing trainings, and in seeking relevant certifications that can facilitate employment opportunities;
- Networking and advocacy with government, financial institutions, and others to encourage investment in climate-smart agricultural practices, infrastructure, land rights, and inclusive and secure workforce development programmes;
- Facilitating the creation of savings and credits groups for value chain actors.

INNOVATIVE FINANCE: WORKING WITH INVESTORS TO ACHIEVE HUMANITARIAN OUTCOMES

The IRC has been exploring a range of innovative finance models, moving beyond traditional grant mechanisms to unlock private investment at scale. The 'Advisory Model' is a concept we have developed with the support of DG ECHO whereby humanitarians use their unique contextual expertise and skillsets to advise investors so that projects achieve stronger social impact. 'Investors' can be multilateral development banks (MDBs), development finance institutions (DFIs), or private sector investors – from startups and venture capital to private equity. The IRC has developed a range of advisory model partnerships in fragile contexts, addressing challenges from wastewater infrastructure to climate financing and economic development.

Building on the experience of advising the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) on a €65 million wastewater infrastructure investment in West Irbid, Jordan, to ensure infrastructures would benefit refugees and displaced people in addition to host communities, we have been applying this model with private sector partners across sectors and countries.

> "Building and supporting the economic resilience of people and communities in fragile settings can play a key role in preventing or breaking out of cycles of vulnerability in the face of conflict and climate change."

For example, with Flat6Labs, we are piloting a humanitarian-private sector partnership to launch a unique innovation & entrepreneurship virtual incubation platform focused on startup ecosystem development and capacity building in the Mashreq region. With AquaPoro Ventures, a Jordanian startup developing an innovative water technology to help respond to water scarcity (a water-generating device that produces clean, drinkable water even from dry desert air), we are piloting a 'procurement as investment' pilot, providing IRC operations with a switch to a more effective product while supporting a startup to refine and scale its technology and stimulate innovation in the Jordanian economy.

Mobilising private capital through insurance and outcome-based instruments is another promising avenue. By using insurance as both a financing and risk-transfer mechanism, we can move from reactive, post-crisis appeals to pre-arranged, scalable, and sustainable funding for critical social services – including child protection, services for survivors of violence, and support for displaced populations. This approach mirrors how most non-crisis economies manage risk, creating a stabilising system that can also act as an equaliser for those most exposed to shocks. It opens the door to blended and outcome-based financing models such as social and resilience bonds, that channel private investment toward measurable protection and wellbeing outcomes while rewarding prevention and resilience-building. We are currently structuring such an instrument for gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, tied to the IRC's "Safe at Home" programme. Under the model, investors provide upfront capital, and outcomes payers repay only if results are achieved – tying returns directly to reductions in GBV. The bond design draws on advisory model principles by embedding humanitarian expertise in how financing is structured and delivered.

A third example is that of an innovative facility we are developing that is aimed at expanding financial inclusion for refugees and displaced populations, with a pilot currently set to take place in Uganda. The facility will work with financial service providers to expand lending to displaced populations, deliver financial literacy training to clients, and align incentives across refugee organisations, donors, and financial institutions. By combining advisory expertise with financial mechanisms, the facility builds directly on the advisory model to unlock lending for groups experiencing vulnerability.

© International Rescue Committee

AIRBEL VENTURES: INVESTING IN PRIVATE COMPANIES TO DRIVE IMPACT AT SCALE

To fully exploit the benefits of private sector engagement, the IRC has also launched our own *Airbel Ventures* fund. This fund will make strategic equity investments in early-stage companies with groundbreaking products and services that we believe can serve the humanitarian sector and the needs of the communities we support. Governed by an Investment Committee of external investors together with an IRC Board, this fund will focus on Africa and the MENA region and aim at supporting start-ups driving financial returns and humanitarian impact. Beyond capital, the IRC will also ensure support post-investment, by providing flexible grant funding to pilot products/services with IRC country programmes, in order to help the companies gather evidence across humanitarian markets and eventually scale.

Our first investment was made in Signalytic, a company which provides solar-powered devices that deliver 97% digital uptime in last-mile health clinics that often have limited access to electricity. The investment strategy focuses on emerging business models that address structural gaps in areas such as climate, economic opportunities, education and health. Examples of models of interest include products and services relating to financial inclusion and market access; Voice AI solutions; and agriculture yield forecasting.

> "The IRC has been exploring a range of innovative finance models, moving beyond traditional grant mechanisms to unlock private investment at scale."

Although engaging the private sector is not a silver bullet in the face of the growing challenges faced by the humanitarian sector, the initiatives highlighted above underline how exploring innovative ways to work with private sector actors can help us to respond to needs more effectively and sustainably, and how NGOs can play a leading role in fostering and driving such partnerships to maximise their impact for vulnerable communities. These efforts should sit alongside other innovative finance solutions, including humanitarian debt swaps and development finance partnerships. In an environment where needs are soaring and humanitarian aid budgets shrinking, such approaches will allow us to ensure that the people who need them have access to more support and opportunities.

Lorenzo Angelini,
Senior EU Advocacy Adviser, Humanitarian and Conflict
International Rescue Committee

NORTHERN MOZAMBIQUE:
A CRISIS DEEPENING AMID SHRINKING HUMANITARIAN SPACE

THE ISSUE

FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION

© WeWorld

Northern Mozambique is facing a severe escalation of violence and displacement that threatens to undo years of recovery and stabilization. Recent attacks and funding shortfalls have created a perfect storm, leaving hundreds of thousands vulnerable and raising the specter of catastrophic consequences if urgent action is not taken.

> "The humanitarian reset aimed to streamline aid architecture and prioritize development-oriented approaches amid global funding constraints. In Mozambique, this shift is colliding with a worsening emergency."

ESCALATING CONFLICT AND MASS DISPLACEMENT

The conflict, initially concentrated in Cabo Delgado, has spilled into neighboring provinces, with Nampula emerging as a hotspot. Districts such as Memba and Erati have faced repeated attacks, mass displacement, and widescale destruction of homes, schools, and health facilities. As of mid-2025, IOM and OCHA estimated over 609,000 people remained internally displaced, alongside 701,000 returnees recorded earlier this year.

The situation worsened dramatically after September 2025. More than 200,000 people were displaced between January and October, and another 330,000 fled renewed insurgent attacks in the final four months. In one week in November alone, 66,000 people—mostly women and children—escaped after villages were burned and schools and health facilities destroyed.

A HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM OUTPACED BY NEEDS

The humanitarian reset aimed to streamline aid architecture and prioritize development-oriented approaches amid global funding constraints. In Mozambique, this shift is colliding with a worsening emergency. By October 2025, only US$73 million had been mobilized against a US$352 million requirement for conflict response. Funding coverage for clusters ranges between 1% and 30%, while the number of operational partners has sharply declined.

This scale-down is occurring as needs remain acute, leaving gaps in food assistance, health services, and protection. UN reports indicate only 40% of those in need receive food aid, with frequent stockouts. Schools are increasingly used as shelters, disrupting education and social stability.

> "Despite shrinking budgets and coordination structures, NGOs remain vital."

The assumption that humanitarian needs would decline—creating space for development interventions—has proven false. Renewed violence, repeated displacement, and the destruction of infrastructure are eroding social services and reversing recovery gains.

Compounding the crisis is the abrupt withdrawal of USAID programming in 2025, which previously supported critical health and social services. The suspension led to 2,500 job losses, jeopardized 114 programs, and triggered systemic shocks, including disruptions in HIV treatment and maternal health services. Analysts warn these cuts have already caused excess mortality and deepened vulnerabilities in communities dependent on aid pipelines.

THE INDISPENSABLE ROLE OF NGOS

Despite shrinking budgets and coordination structures, NGOs remain vital. Organizations like WeWorld continue delivering assistance through a humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus approach—crucial because the transition from emergency aid to long-term development is rarely linear.

Their work prioritizes education continuity for displaced and conflict-affected children, protection and support for teachers, and social cohesion initiatives to prevent recruitment by armed groups. Education functions as a stabilizing force, preserving human capital and strengthening community resilience.

WeWorld has piloted a Conflict Sensitivity Toolkit enabling local youth and communities to conduct participatory conflict analysis and lead social cohesion activities. Students, teachers, and parents are engaged in Disaster Risk Reduction school committees, receiving training, conducting child-inclusive risk mapping, and developing contingency plans that integrate conflict-related risks.

These contextualized DRR initiatives, combined with similar efforts at community level, empower communities and ensure sustainable, locally led disaster preparedness in areas facing overlapping conflict and climate hazards.

> "To prevent a deeper humanitarian catastrophe, the reset must be recalibrated to reflect on-the-ground realities."

A CRITICAL CROSSROADS

To prevent a deeper humanitarian catastrophe, the reset must be recalibrated to reflect on-the-ground realities. This means maintaining core life-saving services—food, health, WASH, education, and protection—while supporting flexible cash assistance and prioritizing front-line actors, including local NGOs and municipal services. Life-saving humanitarian interventions cannot be replaced by development programs; they must coexist and complement each other. This demands adequate capacity, sustained funding, and strong coordination at community and local levels to ensure integration.

Failure to act now will not save money; it will multiply costs in human lives and future recovery.

Northern Mozambique stands at a crossroads. Without urgent, context-sensitive action and renewed funding commitments, the region risks sliding into a cycle of violence and deprivation, erasing hard-won gains and leaving a generation without hope.

WeWorld

FROM CHARITY TO SOLIDARITY:
SUPPORTING FIRST RESPONDERS IN SUDAN

A CLOSER LOOK

Emergency Response Rooms. © Stichting Vluchteling

The Netherlands Refugee Foundation, or Stichting Vluchteling (SV), was founded in 1976 to provide life-saving assistance to people displaced by conflict, violence, and natural disasters. With our partners, we provided support to 1.2 million people in 30 countries thanks to 89 different humanitarian aid programmes in the previous year.

It's been 2,5 years since the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) erupted in Khartoum. It marked an unprecedented turning point, descending Sudan into a full-scale civil war. It has become the largest humanitarian and displacement crisis on record, with famine declared in several localities and close to 12 million people uprooted since the start of the conflict.

The people of Sudan suffer the consequences of unspeakable atrocities: cities are besieged, essential services have collapsed, communities at large are trapped between armed groups and suffer direct attacks which include mass murder, abductions and rape. The capture of El Fasher is but a recent example.

Whilst millions need humanitarian assistance, humanitarian access has never been more constrained. International aid organizations are navigating a shrinking operational space. Yet, life-saving aid continues to reach people, in large part due to Sudanese communities who organized themselves into so called mutual aid groups such as the *Emergency Response Rooms* (ERRs).

Rooted in the Sudanese tradition of Nafeer - an Arabic word meaning "a call to mobilize" - the ERRs are decentralised, informal networks of volunteers that utilise expertise and resources that are available within their communities. Without being hindered by bureaucratic and administrative delays or restrictions placed on them by de-facto authorities, they are one of the very first to respond to the most urgent needs, far before international organizations have kickstarted their operations.

In addition to their adaptability, their real strength lays in the fact that their accountability is grounded in lived experiences, values and aspirations of the communities themselves, rather than accountability to remote institutions or donors.

Recognising mutual aid groups are a strong embodiment of the core humanitarian principle of humanity and of solidarity, we wanted to support these groups.

PARADIGM CHANGE

To do so requires us to rethink the concept of partnership itself. Over time, humanitarian donors and organizations have increasingly grown to protect institutions more than people themselves. Humanitarian partnerships have come to rely on strict compliance and accountability standards. While these frameworks aim to ensure safety, accountability and quality, the Sudan context exposed their limitations. Applying conventional due diligence would make collaboration with informal, volunteer-led structures of first responders impossible.

For us at SV, this shift required more than procedural adjustments; it demanded a paradigm change. Instead of prioritizing institutional compliance, we reframed

> "Whilst millions need humanitarian assistance, humanitarian access has never been more constrained."

accountability around community trust and tangible humanitarian outcomes. This meant revisiting policies, adapting programme cycles, and encouraging staff to move from a risk-based to a trust-based mindset. We introduced flexibility in documentation, allowing for alternative forms of evidence and nuanced risk assessments rather than standardized decision-making.

This approach encouraged us to ask different questions. Instead of asking "what do they lack?" we now look at what strengths already exist, and how we can support without disruption. It also meant dismantling the institutional reflex to control and replacing it with openness, humility, and a willingness to learn from local actors. These changes did not weaken our standards; they repositioned them to reflect realities on the ground, bolstering community-led action and resilience while preserving dignity and humanity.

We also came to realise that in the global landscape of mutual aid, the ERRs in Sudan are uniquely well organized. They set up local and regional representing bodies responsible for real-time prioritization and developed the so-called "F-system" for tracking microgrants - a structured process to ensure effective planning, approval, and documentation for all the ERRs and their partners. The reciprocal accountability towards their communities and the applied transparency within each emergency room, means that funding is spent very rationally.

With guidance from pioneers such as Local2Global and Proximity2Humanity, we proceeded with our first grant to the ERRs through the pooled funding mechanism of their Local Coordination Council (LCC). The LCC is a growing coordination entity that includes representatives from 13 state ERRs. Through the LCC, member organizations triage priorities and direct finite resources to those locations in Sudan where the needs are the most urgent.

CASE BOX

In November 2025, SV visited the ERR of Tawila in North Darfur. A team of six people was waiting to welcome us and tell us about the work they've been doing since the group was established in 2024. At that time, displaced families started arriving to Tawila. "There was not a single organization here at that time, and there was a lack of nearly everything. We wanted to support our brothers and sisters" - Abdulhamid told us. So, with the risk of their own life, those who still had private vehicle started driving up and down from El Fasher to Tawila, transferring people in need. Sometimes they would bring stock of water bottles in the vehicles which they bought from their own savings. "When there was shooting, we would leave the bottles and focus on picking patients and get out as fast as we could". As the needs grew , they started buying supplies from their own savings, collecting donations and asking market vendors for discounts on large quantities. Since then, they started to provide shelter NFIs, offering protection services for women and children and started a number of community kitchens, which the ERR is still doing in coordination with the NGOs. "We have no relation with the political or military side. We coordinate with NGOs and with HAC for ease, nothing more" said a lady who'd just came in, apologizing. "I work as nurse, and just finished my shift". At the back of the office, some men were stacking a car with blankets and mats, so high that we were afraid the car would tip over. "We will distribute these to the people who arrived today from El Fasher", a man explained while wiping the sweat of his forehead.

© Stichting Vluchteling

SV is now exploring other ways to assist other mutual aid groups in Myanmar, Gaza and Syria.

COMPLEMENTARY PARTNERSHIPS

While we argue mutual aid deserves increased visibility and funding, this does not mean it should replace traditional humanitarian assistance all together, rather it should be one element of a complementary response. For us, partnerships with larger, more formal humanitarian organisations will remain crucial for now, to scale interventions, provide specialised technical expertise, and for offering operational support when needed.

Regardless of the type of partner we support, it remains unmistakably clear our support cannot be limited to funding alone. The same communities and partners who are holding the humanitarian response together cannot - and should not- be expected to withstand a crisis fuelled by deliberate political choices that put them at significant risk. Since the start of the war, more than a 100 volunteers have been killed. This means we need to collectively confront the drivers of risk: the deliberate denial of access, the targeted attacks on civilians and aid workers, the obstruction of aid, and the support from external states that enable the conflict.

Due to the influential role of the EU and its strong bilateral economic and diplomatic relations with countries that play a proven role in the conflict, it can make an effective contribution to ending the large-scale violence and atrocities committed by the warring parties.

We urge the EU to significantly scale up diplomatic efforts coupled with political consequences for states supporting warring parties who violate international humanitarian law to uphold its credibility and call for urgent action to secure principled access, protection of civilians and aid workers and safe passage for people trapped in besieged cities such as El Fasher.

The Netherlands Refugee Foundation
Stichting Vluchteling

"We urge the EU to significantly scale up diplomatic efforts coupled with political consequences for states supporting warring parties who violate international humanitarian law."

Interview with Barry Andrews, MEP for Dublin and Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Development (DEVE)

1. The EU is preparing a new Integrated Approach to Fragility at a time when multiple crises are deepening. From your perspective, what should the EU do for communities living in fragile contexts and ensure they receive the attention, funding, and political commitment they need?

From my perspective, through its approach to fragility, the EU must ensure a strong political commitment to address fragile contexts in a holistic and coordinated manner. This commitment must be backed by sufficient financial ambition, so that fragile contexts are not deprioritised when geopolitical or budgetary pressures increase. This includes systematically supporting local authorities, civil society, women's and youth organisations, and humanitarian actors, who are often the first responders and the last to leave. Funding instruments must be more accessible, flexible and predictable for local actors.

Secondly, the EU must put the humanitarian–development–peace nexus into practice, not just into policy. In financial terms, this could mean tackling practical obstacles such as different funding streams, requirements and programming cycles, and creating predictable, multi-year funding windows that allow seamless transitions from humanitarian to development and peacebuilding actions. Of course, this requires strategic coherence across all EU instruments. It should be based on joint analysis, planning and response strategies across all EU actors, particularly DG ECHO, DG INTPA, FPI, and the EEAS.

Regarding Global Gateway, the EU's flagship infrastructure investment strategy, we must ensure that fragile contexts are not left behind. Over half of the countries where Global Gateway operates are categorised as fragile by the OECD. Making the strategy work effectively in highly fragile and conflict-affected countries requires fundamentally different, tailored approaches. Traditional infrastructure investments require strong governance, predictable regulatory environments, security, and calculable risks—conditions often absent in fragile settings. The success or failure of Global Gateway investments in fragile contexts depends on how this funding is integrated into the political, security, economic, environmental, societal and human context of these fragile areas. Global Gateway's so-called "360-degree approach" is crucial here: if it is tailored to each fragile context specifically and integrates climate and conflict sensitivity in infrastructure planning and implementation, this approach can prepare the ground for investments by ensuring an enabling environment. We must carefully consider how infrastructure projects in fragile contexts interact with power dynamics and local tensions. We have to ensure that Global Gateway investments in fragile contexts do not make pre-existing vulnerabilities worse but deliver long-term, inclusive socio-economic benefits for local communities, foster social cohesion and strengthen local governance.

2. Do you see growing pressure to redirect development resources away from fragile states toward short-term geopolitical or migration objectives? What are the risks of disengagement, and how can the next MFF protect long-term support to the people most affected by conflict and instability?

I see a growing pressure to steer development resources away from fragile and conflict-affected contexts towards short-term geopolitical, security or migration-management objectives. This risk is visible in the way the Commission's proposal for Global Europe brings together internal and external EU priorities, particularly now that clear spending targets have been removed.

Without ring-fenced commitments, there is a real risk that long-term objectives, especially in fragile contexts, are crowded out by immediate political priorities. This is a concern, as the Treaties are clear that the primary objective of EU development cooperation is the reduction and, in the long term, the eradication of poverty.

Furthermore, I also have concerns about the suitability of Global Gateway in fragile contexts. It is true that Global Gateway can play a positive role if firmly anchored in development objectives and aligned with partner countries' priorities. However, in my opinion, large-scale infrastructure or purely economic investment-driven approaches are often not suitable for fragile contexts, where the necessary framework conditions, in terms of governance mechanisms, anti-corruption frameworks, civil society oversight and substantial accompanying investments in human development etc, are not in place.

Disengaging from fragile states is not a neutral choice. It increases instability, deepens inequality, and weakens already fragile institutions. In the long run, it also fuels the very drivers of conflict, forced displacement and irregular migration that the EU claims to want to address.

The next MFF must therefore provide stronger protection for long-term support to people affected by conflict and instability. This includes re-establishing clear development priorities and safeguards within Global Europe, ensuring that poverty reduction remains the guiding principle for programming decisions.

> 3. Forced displacement is rising in fragile settings. How should the EU adjust its policies to address the root causes of displacement and strengthen protection and resilience in crisis-affected countries?

Forced displacement in fragile settings requires a coherent EU response that addresses root causes rather than relying on short-term containment. Policy Coherence for Development must be central, ensuring that EU actions on migration, trade, climate, security and development reinforce rather than undermine stability and resilience in partner countries.

It is in this context that we in DEVE have to approach the Commission's proposal for the Global Europe Instrument and ensure that EU investments and support to partner countries, including through Global Gateway, deliver a genuine 360-degree approach. This means investing in inclusive growth, climate adaptation, basic services and governance to address the drivers of displacement while strengthening resilience in crisis-affected contexts. Such investments must be people-centred and conflict-sensitive, and should not be tied to migration control objectives or development conditionality.

The DEVE committee is currently working on an own initiative report on reinforcing development cooperation to address irregular population movements and their root causes in partner countries where our suggestions will be formulated and prepared early in spring.

> 4. Many VOICE members stress the importance of anticipatory action and resilience-building programming in reducing humanitarian needs and preventing further destabilisation. How can the EU better support these approaches?

There is ample data to make the economic case for anticipatory action. Anticipatory action interventions have been shown to have benefit-cost ratios of up to 7. Also, anticipatory action typically has lower procurement and distribution costs than post-shock response, which takes place in a much more challenging economic and logistical context. And beyond the numbers, anticipatory action prevents households from resorting to destructive coping strategies like selling land and assets, keeping children out of school, or skipping meals - actions that have long-term negative effects on their nutrition, education and health status.

There are several ways in which the EU could support anticipatory action more. First, while the EU has made important commitments to anticipatory action at a policy level, funding for anticipatory action frameworks has lagged behind. Only a fraction of the EU's and Member States' humanitarian budgets is allocated to preparedness and resilience building. The EU should make sure that funding for anticipatory action is scaled up in the next MFF. We could also reflect on a mechanism for a faster trigger-based release of funds when early warning indicators are met.

Second, the EU should continue to invest in early warning systems and forecasting, including by strengthening national and local early warning capacities, particularly in high-risk regions. The EU should also further mainstream climate resilience across all programming, by applying the Resilience Marker to all humanitarian projects to ensure that interventions systematically reduce risks and strengthen coping capacities, and by integrating climate risk assessments into all major investments vulnerable to climate impacts.

Further, the EU should empower national and local actors to achieve structural, system-wide changes. It should channel more funding to local and national responders (in line with its commitment on localisation) and invest in local capacity for risk assessment, early action planning, and response.

Finally, anticipatory action can also be explored in conflict settings. When systems analyse hate speech, misinformation patterns, political tensions, military movements, and social factors, they can help identify where violence may erupt. The EU could enhance its diplomatic and mediation efforts when there are early warnings of political tensions or strengthen social cohesion programmes when there are clear signs of increasing tensions between displaced and host communities. Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all type of solution, and success of anticipatory action in a political context depends heavily on the political judgment of when and how to engage, the legitimacy of the EU as a political actor in a given context, and sustained investment in relationships before crises erupt. This can be a challenge for humanitarian actors, who need to act in a principled way, and extends into the realm of EU diplomacy.

5. In many contexts such as Myanmar, Sudan, and other countries, NGOs face shrinking civic space and growing operational risks. How can the EU maintain principled and sustained engagement in these environments, while ensuring that partners can operate safely and effectively?

Civic space is under pressure around the world.[1] Threats against CSOs and human rights defenders take many different forms: legal and regulatory barriers, administrative and judicial pressures, repression, harassment and intimidation. As a result, many are forced to operate undercover and under constant threats.

Examples include attempts to criminalise NGOs helping migrants in rescues at sea, online polarisation and defamation campaigns against humanitarian and development operations in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and Israeli government-led efforts to smear Palestinian human rights defenders, activists and organisations, which have caused real economic, social and political harm.

Donors can play a crucial role in protecting civic space, but they need to coordinate better. They must also remain cautious that their support does not inadvertently lead to a backlash that increases restrictions on civic space, particularly in politically constrained environments, by doing regular context analysis informed by local actors.

The role of donors is to support, not direct, development processes in partner countries. Donors need to recognise the responsibility and agency of local actors' own development for sustainable change, identifying the challenges they face, and considering the most context-appropriate modalities needed to overcome them. Providing support for locally led development processes is a way to mitigate negative narratives that partner-country civil society is a proxy for foreign interests.

One very practical way in which the EU can contribute is by offering very concrete support to humanitarian workers who face specific threats or have been victims of attacks. The "Protect Aid Workers" mechanism is a rapid-response mechanism for aid workers and their immediate families who have suffered injury, kidnapping, arrest and other critical incidents. Under Protect Aid Workers, humanitarian organisations can receive protection grants to cover the cost of protection measures and post-incident support for staff, as well as grants to cover legal fees for staff who are or have been threatened with arrest and detention. Just last month, Commissioner Lahbib signed an agreement in Strasbourg to allocate an additional EUR 850.000 to the project, bringing the EU's overall contribution to 6 million in the last 3 years. So far, over 450 people have been supported.

6. Looking ahead, what role do you see for the European Parliament in safeguarding EU engagement in fragile contexts, and how can MEPs contribute to a more coherent Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus in practice?

The European Parliament has an important role in promoting sustained EU engagement in fragile contexts and a more coherent Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus in practice by exercising democratic scrutiny of the European Commission. Relevant Commissioners regularly appear before the Development and Foreign Affairs Committees to explain the policy choices they are making. Both our Committees play this role to the fullest to promote coherence and democratic accountability across the Union's external action.

Parliament also co-decides on EU legislation - the negotiations on the next Global Europe Instrument are only in the starting blocks. One challenge will be to make sure that the new instrument fully reflects the need for tailored, integrated approaches to fragility and that this is translated in effectively joined-up working methods.

Importantly, as one arm of the budgetary authority, the Parliament can also promote EU engagement where needs are greatest. In the last few annual budgetary procedures, our Committee has consistently and successfully topped up humanitarian funding to support the EU's response to acute humanitarian situations, as well as for preparedness actions.

Lastly, MEPs can contribute concretely by using committee work, own-initiative reports, and budgetary oversight to advocate for breaking down silos between EU instruments and institutions. Members also systematically engage with key humanitarian and development partners, including local civil society, NGOs and the UN. communicating about who we support, how we do it, and the values that guide our work. The EU is proud to stand as a credible and reliable humanitarian actor in today's volatile world. It is our responsibility and the message that both European citizens and the people we support deserve to hear.

Interview conducted by VOICE

1. Examples and recommendations drawn from: Co-ordinating Action for Civic Space Toolkit for implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance (June 2025). https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/06/co-ordinating-action-for-civic-space_176b67ee/61416414-en.pdf

VOICE MEMBERS 2025

AUSTRIA

- CARE Österreich
- Caritas Österreich
- SOS Kinderdorf International

BELGIUM

- Caritas International Belgium
- HIAS Europe
- Médecins du Monde (MDM) Belgium
- Oxfam Solidarité - Solidariteit
- Plan Belgium

CROATIA

- International Medical Corps Croatia

CZECH REPUBLIC

- ADRA Czech Republic
- Caritas Czech Republic
- People in Need (PIN)

DENMARK

- ADRA Denmark Nødhjælp og udvikling
- CARE Denmark
- Dansk Folkehjælp Danish People' Aid
- DanChurchAid (DCA)
- Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
- Mission East Mission Øst
- Save the Children Denmark

FINLAND

- Fida International
- Finn Church Aid
- World Vision Finland

FRANCE

- Action Contre la Faim
- ACTED Agence d'Aide à la Coopération Technique et au Développement
- CARE France
- Handicap International Humanity and Inclusion
- La Chaîne de l'Espoir
- Premiere Urgence International
- Médecins du Monde (MDM) France
- Relief International
- Secours Catholique - Réseau Mondial Caritas
- Secours Islamique France
- Secours Populaire Français
- Solidarités International
- Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF)

GERMANY

- ADRA Deutschland
- Aktion gegen den Hunger
- Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB) Deutschland
- CARE Deutschland
- Deutscher Caritasverband Caritas Germany
- Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe
- International Rescue Committee Germany
- Johanniter-Unfall-Hilfe
- Malteser International
- Medico International
- Plan International Germany
- Welthungerhilfe
- World Vision Germany

ITALY

- Caritas Italiana
- CESVI - Cooperazione e Sviluppo
- COOPI
- INTERSOS Organizzazione Umanitaria Onlus
- Jesuit Refugee Service
- Oxfam Italia
- Terre des Hommes Italy
- WeWorld

IRELAND

- Concern Worldwide
- GOAL Global
- Trócaire

THE NETHERLANDS

- CARE Nederland
- Cordaid
- Mercy Corps
- World Vision Netherlands
- Oxfam Novib
- Save the Children Netherlands
- The Netherlands Refugee Foundation
- War Child
- ZOA

NORWAY

- CARE Norway
- Norwegian Church Aid
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
- Save the Children – Redd Barna

POLAND

- The Polish Center For International Aid (PCPM)
- Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH)

SLOVAKIA

- Habitat for Humanity International
- People in Peril

SPAIN

- Acción Contra el Hambre
- Alianza por la Solidaridad-ActionAid
- Ayuda en Acción
- Caritas Española
- EDUCO
- Médicos del Mundo
- Oxfam Intermón

SWEDEN

- LM International (Läkarmissionen)
- PMU Interlife
- Svenska kyrkan - Church of Sweden

SWITZERLAND

- Geneva Call
- Medair

UNITED KINGDOM

- CAFOD
- Christian Aid
- Plan International UK
- Save the Children UK

93 members
18 countries

VOICE
European humanitarian NGOs. Standing together.

VOICE is the network of 93 European NGOs promoting principled and people-centred humanitarian aid. Collectively, VOICE aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of the European Union and its Member States' humanitarian aid. The network promotes the added value of NGOs as key humanitarian actors.

Funded by
European Union
Civil Protection and
Humanitarian Aid

This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union through its Humanitarian and Civil Protection department. The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

www.VOICEeu.org

voice@VOICEeu.org

voice_eunetwork

VOICE EU

@voiceeu.bsky.social

VOICE asbl
Rue Royale 71 1000 Brussels Belgium
Company number: BE0475213787 RPM Brussels

VOICE
European humanitarian NGOs.
Standing together.