



## VOICE BRIEFING

# WHY DIVERSITY, COMPLEMENTARITY AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP ARE ESSENTIAL FOR EU HUMANITARIAN ACTION



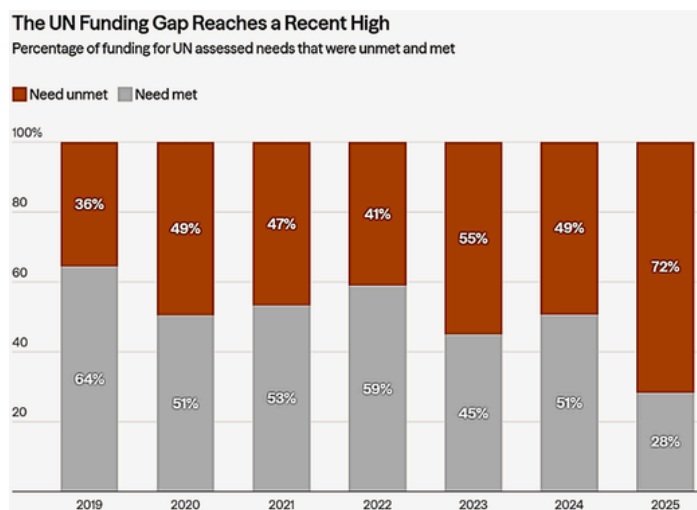
**VOICE**

European humanitarian NGOs.  
Standing together.

# EU HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP AT A CROSSROADS

The gap between global humanitarian needs and the funding made available to respond to them is not new. However, recent severe funding cuts - notably by the United States, but also, to a lesser extent, by some EU Member States - have plunged the humanitarian system into a deep financing crisis. In 2019, 36% of humanitarian needs went unmet due to insufficient funding. Just six years later, in 2025, this figure had risen to 72%. This means that 207 million<sup>1</sup> people in need were left behind – a figure equivalent to almost half the population of the European Union.

At the same time, conflicts are intensifying and becoming more protracted, climate-related shocks are growing more frequent, and violations of International Humanitarian Law are increasing. These severe funding cuts, combined with deteriorating humanitarian conditions for millions of people, are forcing difficult prioritisation choices and triggering renewed debates on efficiency, delivery models and reform of the humanitarian system.



Source: Council of Foreign Relations [The Great Aid Recession: 2025's Humanitarian Crash in Nine Charts](#)

In this context, the European Union and its Member States have become the largest humanitarian donors globally. This position brings not only financial weight, but also responsibility, as EU funding and policy choices will shape behaviour and operational parameters across the system ultimately influencing how the humanitarian system will adapt.

Under pressure, there is a growing risk that responses to the funding crisis prioritise simplification through concentration: narrowing the range of partners, deprioritising essential activities such as protection, education in emergencies or gender-responsive programming, privileging scale over access or defaulting to a limited set of delivery models. While such approaches may appear administratively efficient, they risk undermining humanitarian outcomes and responsiveness to diverse needs, especially for groups at most risk of exclusion.

At this critical juncture, EU humanitarian leadership is not only about allocating fewer resources more efficiently. It is about mobilising additional resources and enabling a system capable of responding to diverse crises in a principled, effective, and legitimate manner. This requires a deliberate redefinition of roles across the humanitarian ecosystem, grounded in diversity, complementarity, and localisation.

<sup>1</sup>. OCHA

# I. Diversity: No one-size-fits-all solutions in a complex world



The appeal of focusing solely on overly simplified delivery models, or concentrating on one category of partners, rests on the assumption that humanitarian crises can be addressed through standardised approaches. In reality, humanitarian action operates across a plurality of contexts, needs and constraints, calling for a diversity of actors to respond to them.



## Plurality of crises

Sudden-onset natural disasters, protracted armed conflicts, epidemics...



## Plurality of needs

Health, protection, water and sanitation, food security, demining, education, psychosocial support, gender-based violence...



## Plurality of constraints

Access, security risks, political exposure, regulatory barriers, level of community acceptance...



Generating different operational requirements, expertise, timelines, and risk profiles.

A diverse range of actors provides different capacities, access modalities, expertise and relationships with communities. This is what allows the humanitarian system to collectively reach populations in need wherever they are and to address a variety of needs. Reducing that diversity means that the system becomes less resilient, less adaptive, and less capable of maintaining access where conditions deteriorate. The challenge is therefore not to reduce diversity, but to organise it more deliberately.

## II. Complementarity: “as local as possible, as international as necessary”

Complementarity means that humanitarian action should be carried out by those best placed in each context, based on access, legitimacy, capacity and proximity to affected populations<sup>2</sup>. The principle “as local as possible, as international as necessary” captures this logic. Local leadership is prioritised wherever possible, while international actors provide support where required. Complementarity recognises that all humanitarian actors bring legitimate value, while acknowledging that this value is context dependent.

<p><b>Local and National NGOs</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present before, during and after crises: the backbone of the humanitarian system</li> <li>• Proximity, continuity and contextual knowledge</li> <li>• Rapid response, long-term community relationships and accountability</li> <li>• Enhance legitimacy, ownership and the right of affected populations to shape the responses that concern them</li> </ul>
<p><b>INGOs</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential complementary role: enabling, connecting and supporting locally led responses</li> <li>• Surge capacity, rapid scale-up and community proximity</li> <li>• Share operational, financial and security risks with local partners when acting as intermediaries</li> <li>• Specialised technical expertise, cross-context learning and advocacy</li> <li>• Expression of European solidarity</li> </ul>
<p><b>UN agencies</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential role in coordination and system-wide leadership</li> <li>• Large-scale logistics and supply chains</li> <li>• Political and normative mandate critical for protecting humanitarian space</li> <li>• Humanitarian diplomacy, engagement with states and development and promotion of normative frameworks</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup>. ICVA Think Piece - Humanitarian Complementarity: Rebalancing Power for a People-Centred System

# III. Diversity and complementarity: What do they offer?

When diversity and complementarity are deliberately supported, they deliver tangible outcomes. Below some examples:

## A) Access

Access is not only a matter of mandates or resources, but of relationships, acceptance and risk tolerance. Supporting a diverse range of actors ensures that humanitarian action can continue when access for some becomes impossible.



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### Example: South Kordofan, Sudan

In highly constrained environments, complementary roles between international NGOs, national organisations and local community networks enable humanitarian response to continue even when access becomes restricted.

#### Challenge:

Protracted conflict, military control, extreme remoteness and near-absence of infrastructure (no roads, no mobile network, satellite-only communication).

#### Result:

Despite sustained insecurity, long-term engagement and trusted relationships with local leaders, faith groups and traditional authorities have enabled LM International to maintain continued humanitarian access for over 20 years in areas largely inaccessible to other actors. This has allowed the delivery of multi-sectoral support, including the construction of 40 school blocks of two classrooms each, restoring access to education for thousands of children, rehabilitation and expansion of water infrastructure (including solar-powered systems), and support to smallholder farmers to restore agricultural production and improve food security.

# III. Diversity and complementarity: What do they offer?

## B) Quality and innovation

The plurality of humanitarian actors brings a large set of expertise grounded in community engagement, driving innovation and quality.



© Solidarités International

### Example: Burkina Faso

Complementarity between actors with different mandates, expertise and operational approaches can combine immediate humanitarian response with longer-term service sustainability.

#### Challenge:

Acute instability and displacement, combined with immediate humanitarian WASH needs and weak continuity of water services.

#### Result:

In an unstable operating environment, Solidarités International, working in partnership with the National Office for Water and Sanitation and another INGO, delivered a WASH response that addressed urgent humanitarian needs while progressively adapting towards sustainable water service delivery. Close coordination between actors with different mandates and ways of working enabled constructive dialogue and effective delivery for affected populations, while safeguarding the long-term functionality of services. The specialised WASH expertise provided by Solidarités International was a key enabling factor for the quality and sustainability of the response.

# III. Diversity and complementarity: What do they offer?

## C) Continuity and system resilience

Complementarity allows the system to absorb shocks, adapt roles and maintain presence over time, reducing disruption to affected populations when conditions deteriorate.

### Example: Mali

Complementary partnerships reinforce local actors and systems, helping sustain humanitarian responses and strengthen resilience in fragile contexts.

#### Challenge:

Hard-to-reach areas affected by persistent insecurity and limited institutional presence.

#### Result:

In a highly volatile environment, an International Rescue Committee-led consortium, bringing together international and local organisations, strengthened health system capacity to respond to child malnutrition while supporting economic resilience and local governance. Health facilities were better equipped to manage malnutrition spikes, and livelihoods support increased income for 64% of assisted households despite ongoing insecurity. Over the course of the project, local governance capacity improved significantly: whereas only health services were operational at the outset, veterinary services and the municipal office were functioning by the endline, reinforcing service continuity and social cohesion.



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### Example: Gaza

Complementarity between locally rooted teams and international logistical and technical support can enable the rapid expansion of essential health services.

#### Challenge:

Escalation of hostilities severely disrupting access to primary healthcare and overwhelming already fragile local health services.

#### Result:

Following the escalation, Médecins du Monde rapidly scaled up primary healthcare delivery, establishing four and then seven clinics providing services to more than 40 000 people each month. This rapid expansion was made possible by long-standing engagement on the ground and the dedication of local teams, backed by international logistical and technical support enabling continuity of essential care despite the deteriorating security context.

# III. Diversity and complementarity: What do they offer?

## D) Accountability

Plurality reinforces the various accountability relationships that co-exist in the humanitarian system between people affected by crisis, humanitarian organisations, donors, and political decision makers.

### Example: the HotPot Platform

System-wide collaboration between humanitarian organisations can strengthen accountability.

#### Challenge:

Delivering large-scale multi-purpose cash assistance while ensuring safe, ethical and accountable use of sensitive personal data, avoiding duplication and reinforcing trust between actors.

#### Result:

To strengthen coordination, efficiency and accountability, the Cash Working Group endorsed a Data Stewardship Framework guiding the responsible management and sharing of personal data among humanitarian actors. As part of this framework, the Collaborative Cash Delivery Network, a global network of INGOs, developed the 'HotPot Platform', providing a practical solution for data deduplication, ensuring that assistance reaches those most in need without overlap.

## EU Solidarity

EU INGOs also embody European civil society in action. Rooted in voluntary engagement, they mobilise public support, private resources and awareness of humanitarian crises, strengthening the democratic legitimacy of EU humanitarian action.

### What do European citizens think about EU humanitarian aid?



# 10 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES

As system-shaping donors, the EU and its Member States can use their policy, partnership and funding choices to encourage diverse, complementary and locally led responses, in order to reach as many people affected by crises as possible.

To this aim, the EU and its Member States should:

1. **Maintain a diverse partner base**, recognising that diversity underpins access, quality and resilience.
2. **Apply the “best-placed actor” principle** explicitly in funding decisions, based on specific contexts and needs.
3. **Prioritise locally led action**, including through flexible funding and direct financial support to local and national NGOs
4. **Recognise EU humanitarian civil society as a strategic asset** for legitimacy, accountability and public support.
5. **Ensure proportionate due diligence** and compliance, avoiding the de facto exclusion of local and civil society actors.
6. **Support NGO-led pooled and innovative funding mechanisms** that enable local leadership.
7. **Enable the EU INGO intermediary role**, including by supporting the true cost of quality humanitarian action (overhead costs, security costs...).
8. **Invest in shared services**, such as coordination, data, security, and logistics, that serve a diverse ecosystem.
9. **Protect civil society space**, including independent NGO advocacy in the EU and international fora, as a strategic asset for principled humanitarian action.
10. **Renew commitments for the EU and its Member States to allocate 0,7% of Gross National Income to Official Development Assistance** by 2030, including at least 10% to humanitarian action.