

HUMANITARIAN YEAR IN REVIEW: SHOCKS AND REVERBERATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Aid cuts in 2025 shocked the humanitarian system and forced it into hyper-prioritisation mode. As the year draws to a close, we reflect on this *annus horribilis* – humanitarian funding plummeted to levels not seen for a decade, while the numbers of people forcibly displaced and facing food insecurity are more than double those of 2016. We look back at how this shock played out and what it means for the year and decade ahead (see Figure 1).

Our analysis – which is the fourth in ALNAP’s recent [series exploring prioritisation](#) (ALNAP, 2025a-c) – draws on several months of research, surveys and consultations with humanitarian organisations. It will also feed into the forthcoming edition of the [State of the Humanitarian System](#) (SOHS) report, due to be published in 2026. As evidence in Mali and South Sudan (ALNAP, 2025a) shows, the real costs of the funding cuts have been paid in human suffering: from shortages in food to increases in sexual violence. This paper complements that research by looking at the implications for humanitarian organisations, how they have navigated the system shocks and prioritisation choices, and what this meant for their ability to support people in crises.

Figure 1: Numbers of people forcibly displaced and in high levels of food insecurity, and total humanitarian funding as reported to FTS 2016, 2022 and most recent year of available data

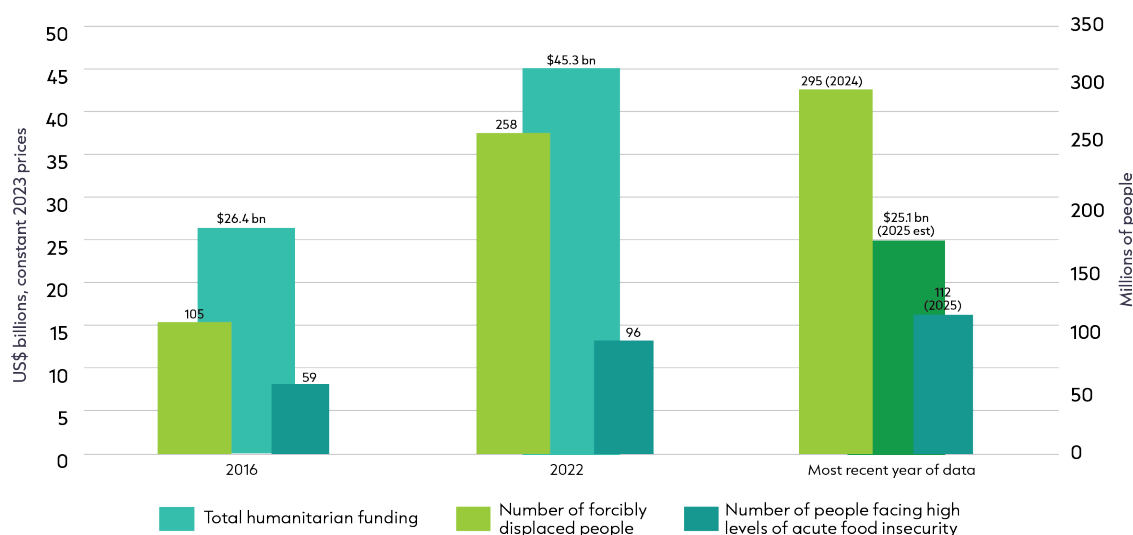


Figure 1 source: United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Refugee Data Finder, Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC) database, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS) (accessed 9 December 2025), Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD DAC) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) World Economic Outlook for deflators.

Figure 1 note: Numbers of forcibly displaced people include refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people (IDPs). The value for IDPs is based on data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) in UNHCR's database. Humanitarian funding data is the global total inside and outside of response plans as reported to FTS, deflated to constant 2023 prices using the average deflators across OECD DAC members. The 2025 value for the volumes of total humanitarian funding is shaded differently, given it is estimated based on the average growth over 2022–2024 of funding inside and outside of response plans as reported to FTS between the end of November and the final annual figures. An actual or projected 2025 value for the number of people facing high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 and above) is not yet available. When multiple sectors are covered, the funds are categorised as multisectoral, as the data does not allow further disaggregation of each grant by the share contributed to different sectors. The current estimate focuses on US.

THE FUNDING STORY OF 2025

Many crises and humanitarian partners entered 2025 already in downsizing mode.

Humanitarian funding was trending downwards from a historic high in 2022, with a sharp 10% contraction in 2024 (ALNAP, 2025d). This was, in part, a return to regular spending levels following a COVID-19 funding spike and responses to major crises such as a scale-up to avert famine in Somalia. But some key donors had also begun signalling longer-term political commitments to reduce and re-prioritise their aid budgets. For many crises, shortfalls had become entrenched as high profile crises – Ukraine, in particular – attracted a disproportionate share of humanitarian funds.

The 'Stop Work' order in the US in January 2025 and ultimate rescission of swathes of US aid were largely unanticipated and extremely damaging. The US government's abrupt 90-day pause, issued on 20 January 2025 while it reviewed 'programmatic efficiency and consistency with United States foreign policy', led to immediate and widespread disruption (White House, 2025). In the wake of this decision, humanitarian organisations reported a turbulent funding year. They had little to no clarity on whether they would be reimbursed for funds already spent, and if or when committed US funds would resume, particularly in the first quarter of 2025.

Some funding from USAID was later reinstated, but it is only becoming visible now which countries, sectors and partners were spared. Funding coverage for some crises is very low indeed. Unexpectedly, some countries – notably Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Burkina Faso – will still close the year with the US as their leading donor.¹ Periods of frozen USAID activities, where funds were later reinstated, mean that some organisations have underspends and no-cost extensions that will carry over to the first quarter of next year. There is very little clarity on future



A huge rupture in trust

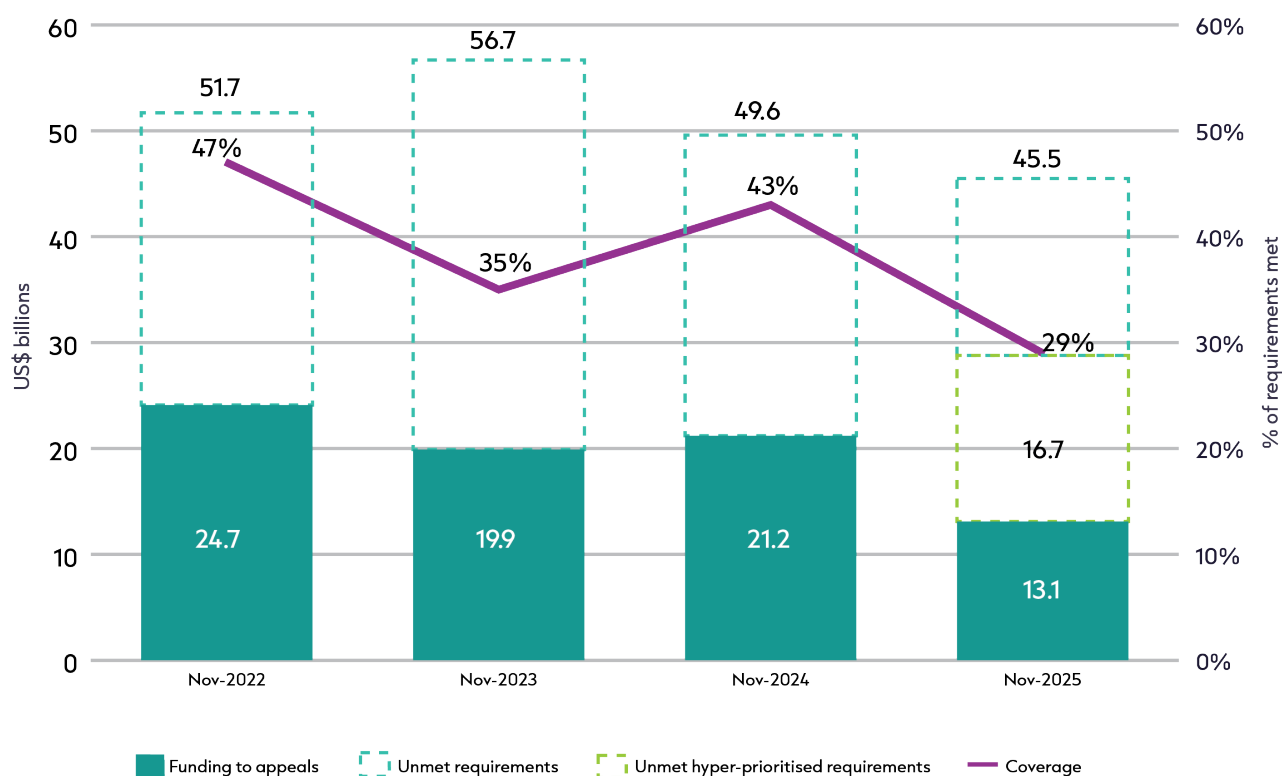
- Anonymous

¹ This funding was heavily concentrated and these five countries received 78% of the US government's country allocable humanitarian funding in 2025.

funding priorities and prospects for US funding beyond this at present.

Currently, the UN coordinated response plans look set to close the year with less than half the funds received in 2022 (see Figure 2). Adjusted for inflation, this funding level is similar to that achieved in 2016 (US\$14.5 billion) – when the international humanitarian system and its ambitions were considerably smaller.²

Figure 2: UN coordinated response plans funding against requirements (end of November, 2022–2025)



Source: OCHA and UNHCR Refugee Funding Tracker (RFT) data from Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) documents on funding for the previous year for 2022 to 2024. OCHA FTS data and UNHCR RFT data for 2025, downloaded 1 December 2025. OCHA data from <https://humanitarianaction.info/> for hyper-prioritised requirements.

Notes: The funding data for the previous year in each GHO document is up to date as of mid- to late-November each year, while 2025 data captures funding for the entire month of November 2025.

ORGANISATIONAL TRIAGE AND THE ROLLING TOLL OF JOB CUTS

The impact of the funding freeze was swift for organisations heavily exposed to US support and those lacking significant core funding and reserves. Organisations had to navigate liquidity shocks, drawing down reserves, the risks of incurring ineligible costs, legal risks of breaking labour and contract laws, and non-payment of suppliers. Many have also described the loss of trust and the breakdown of relationships with communities, local partners, governments and suppliers as projects abruptly ceased

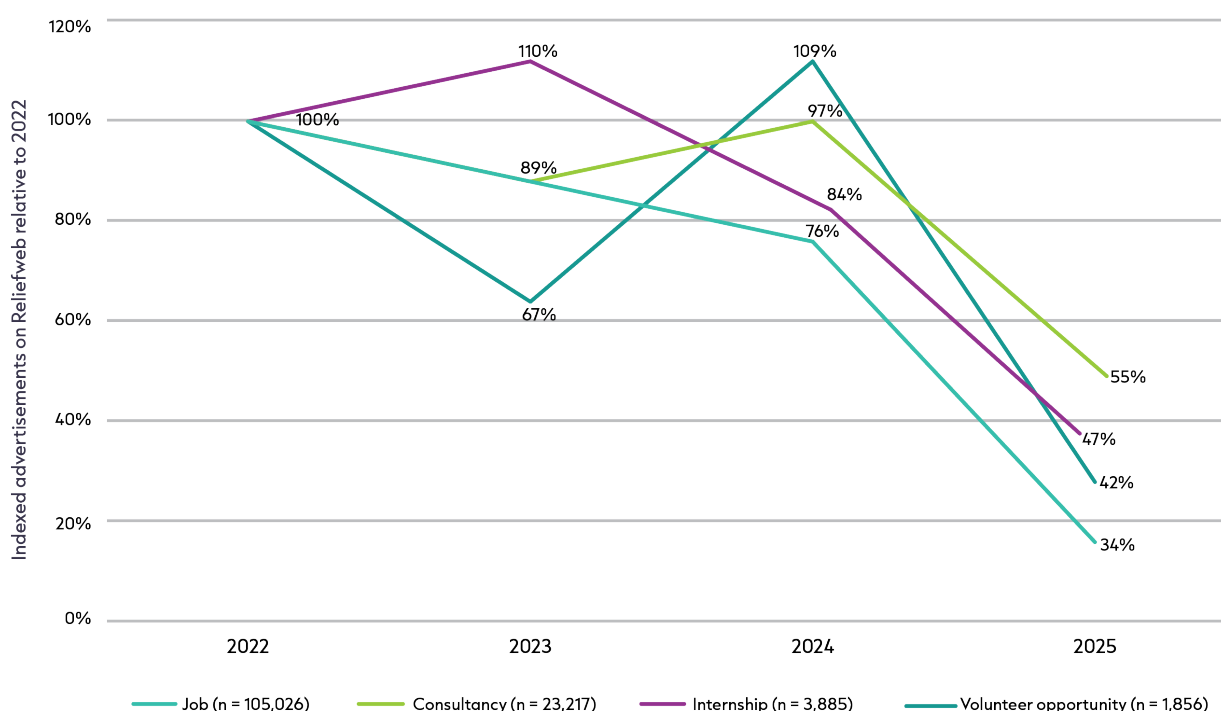
² See OCHA (n.d.). Figures are adjusted for inflation using the average deflator for OECD DAC countries in 2023 prices. The amount of funding to appeals in 2016 in current prices was US\$12.5 billion.

operating (ICVA, 2025a and 2025b).

Heavy job losses have been felt across all types of humanitarian organisation. Job losses publicly announced in 2025 by eight UN agencies, eight international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) alone amount to more than 31,000 roles, with indications of more to come.

Similarly, new employment opportunities nose-dived in 2025, with postings of job vacancies halving across the sector compared with 2022 (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Job postings to ReliefWeb by type, end of October 2025 relative to 2022 levels



Source: Reliefweb API, accessed 3 December 2025.

Notes: The values for each job type in each year are relative to 2022 values as the baseline for this analysis. Budget cuts affecting Reliefweb's ability to posts all job openings received may have contributed to the drop in 2025.

Local and national actors (LNAs), who typically have less core funding and lower reserves, were hit hard early in the year. In OCHA's survey of the impacts of the aid freeze conducted in February 2025, LNA respondents reported the highest proportion of frozen funds (95% of 477 respondents), with 55% of LNAs reporting staffing cuts (compared with 45% of INGO and 37% of UN respondents) (OCHA, 2025a). A recent survey conducted by the Somali NGO Consortium (2025) among their members found that, by October, 75% of LNAs had closed field offices or project sites and 95% reported laying off staff. This compares with 47% of INGOs closing field offices and project sites and 68% implementing job cuts.

Some LNAs weathered the storm and maintained programming 'accordion-like' with low/no pay – but they were left highly exposed to legal, financial and security risks. Only one third of LNAs in Somalia reported that they would be able to continue operating beyond

the next six months without additional donor funding (ibid.).

Experiences of INGOs varied widely depending on their funding reliance on the US government and on their organisational reserves.



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- INGO staffer

Some had already undergone downsizings and restructurings in the previous two years, adjusting to falling revenues after the 2022/2023 funding peak. One INGO that had intentionally placed a cap on funding from single donors to reduce exposure had substantial reserves, enabling it to maintain staff and services throughout the period of uncertainty when US awards were under review. Others announced job cuts early, in the first weeks and months of 2025, but later revised these numbers as some USAID funding was reinstated. Although no two experiences seem to have been the same, many INGOs will end the year having passed through an unanticipated restructure and staff downsizing exercise.

Sources suggest that national staff of international organisations were hit first as they were at the implementation end of US-funded programmes that were shut down. In the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), for example, national societies bore the first impact of staff cuts,

with Secretariat-level cuts only being announced at the end of the year.

UN agencies reacted with job cuts later and were hit with a wider UN funding crisis as the year progressed. UN agencies announced and enacted job cuts later in 2025. The notable exception is the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which is highly dependent on earmarked project funding and was heavily reliant on US funding. IOM announced substantial job cuts in March 2025.

The initial USAID funding shock to UN humanitarian operations was quickly leapfrogged by a much deeper funding crisis within the wider UN system. This was due to unpaid contributions to the UN's regular budget. The UN80 reform process has devolved into an exercise in managing this budgetary crisis – negotiations with member states on next year's budget are expected to run up to the wire on Christmas eve. Further substantial UN job cuts are expected next year, with the UN Secretary General announcing an 18.8% reduction in staffing (2,681 positions) in the 2026 budget as unpaid contributions rise to US\$1.59 billion (Aljazeera, 2025).



The decision-making process was fully obscure in an effort to protect fixed term staff on the expense of consultants. Senior leadership refused to engage in an open conversation but rather used scare tactics to silence dissent.

- UN regional staffer

The leaders of organisations have been criticised over the ways in which they have managed the crisis. Through our [anonymous feedback platform](#) we heard multiple complaints that management decisions were not consultative or transparent. In some cases, decisions prioritised protecting management positions and those on fixed-term contracts, over strategic considerations and maintaining service provision.

One INGO staffer told us, for example, that ‘It felt like country offices bared the brunt of the cuts, while SMT and senior leaders in global roles prioritised saving their positions. Where was the humanitarian mandate in this conversation? We didn’t know, because their decision-making process wasn’t shared in a transparent and logical manner.’ While a UN regional staffer felt that ‘the decision-making process was fully obscure in an effort to protect fixed term staff on the expense of consultants. Senior leadership refused to engage in an open conversation but rather used scare tactics to silence dissent.’ Others reported feeling jaded, burnt out and demoralised – echoing findings from Community World Service of remaining staff feeling ‘overburdened and morally conflicted’ (Nayanaran, 2025). Conversely, many respondents expressed that, on balance, their organisations did the best they could under the circumstances.³

A SHRINKING LENS AND A SHRINKING FOOTPRINT

The funding cuts have drastically changed the coverage, presence and capabilities of humanitarian actors globally. Adjusting to the funding shock has cycled through three phases. The first, a disorderly contraction. The second, a planned reduction in the scope of what the system targets through the Humanitarian Reset process led by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which accelerated the ongoing process of redefining the scope and boundaries of UN-led response plans. And third, a longer-term adjustment to these two conditions, where humanitarian presence is concentrating and humanitarians are bracing for the consequences of focusing only on those in acute need.

In the immediate aftermath of the USAID ‘Stop Work’ order, organisations deployed whatever tactics they could to maintain programme presence. They triaged the most urgent work, seeking bridging grants and back-filling from internal resources as they awaited decisions amidst protracted uncertainty. Some USAID funding was later reinstated, though capabilities were often lost during the stop-work period. Country and field offices without funding prospects began to close and organisations reprioritised and restructured.

This represents a massive undocumented contraction of operational presence. UNHCR, for example, reduced its operational presence in around 185 locations, closing field units and offices and consolidating functions at capital level (UNHCR, 2025). OCHA in Colombia reportedly reduced its presence from 16 to just 4 sub-offices plus its capital office. INGOs described reducing their regional presence – consolidating services and

³ Of 50 respondents, only 12 (24%) disagreed with the statement ‘The organisation did the best they could in the circumstances’.

functions in their headquarters, and closing field offices and some entire country programmes. LNAs are facing severe impacts. At least 120 member organisations of the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) reported office closures, staff layoffs or pay cuts, and it is likely that those most severely affected did not report their cuts.

The impacts of this rapid contraction in services are still largely undocumented.

Humanitarian organisations described critical gaps in services. This includes vanishing treatment centres for moderate malnutrition, increasing the likelihood children will not receive treatment until they reach acute levels of malnutrition; the collapse of gender-based violence (GBV) referral pathways; the end of food security activities in highly food insecure areas, including in Cox's Bazaar refugee camps; and cholera outbreaks in areas where water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programmes closed abruptly.

The humanitarian scope of ambition contracted alongside its footprint. The collective prioritisation under the Humanitarian Reset included an announcement in March from



Let them (UN) do their thing, we'll get on with ours. What has their prioritisation got to do with us?

- Anonymous

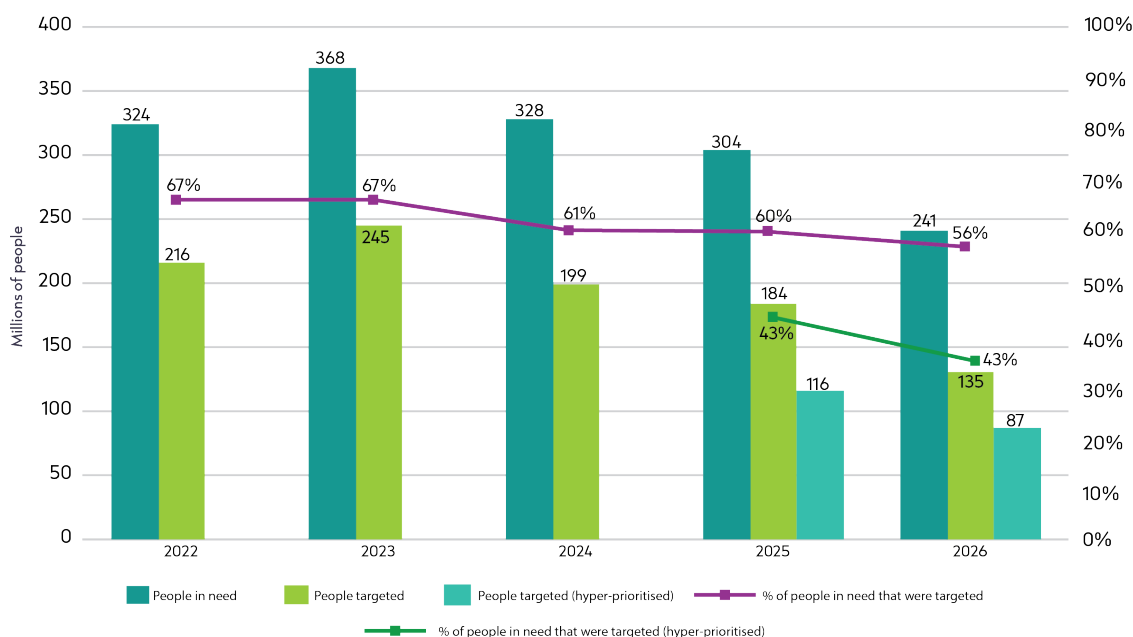
the IASC Emergency Directors Group that eight countries – Cameroon, Colombia, Eritrea, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan and Zimbabwe – had been selected for an 'accelerated transition' out of the humanitarian coordination architecture.

This was followed by a global 'hyper-prioritisation' of the UN-led Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans (HNRPs), dramatically reducing the numbers of people targeted and funding requested. Of around 300 million people determined as being in need of humanitarian assistance at the beginning of 2025, the

number targeted within the appeal was reduced from 181 million to just 116 million people. The GHO for 2026 further reduces the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance to 239 million. It notes, however, that the reduction reflects 'more focused analysis, rather than a reduction in suffering'⁴ (OCHA, 2025b). The 2026 GHO also retains both the number of people 'targeted' and a much lower 'hyper-prioritised' target.

⁴ The methodological basis for this reduction is unclear. The GHO describes a 'refined methodology that pinpoints where and who has been most affected by shocks – including conflict, climate and geological disasters, epidemics and animal and plant pests and diseases – and determines the most critical needs within these areas'. And it references the intersectoral severity as defined in the Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) (OCHA, 2025b).

Figure 4: People identified as being in need and targeted in locations covered by the GHO, 2022–2026



Source: OCHA data from <https://humanitarianaction.info>, accessed 10 December 2025.

Notes: The numbers of people in need and people targeted only represent locations and response plans covered by the GHOs each year, which change year-on-year. These numbers, therefore, do not include people in need or targeted in locations in countries without GHO response plans or in subnational locations in GHO countries without data due to access constraints or other reasons. In addition, the methodology used by OCHA and its partners to identify people in need and targeted changed over the analysis period. The denominator to calculate the percentage of people that were targeted within the hyper-prioritised GHO out of those identified to be in need in relevant locations in 2025 is 271 million people, as it covered 11 fewer response plans than the original GHO for 2025. The people in need figure within the GHO 2026 (at the time of writing) also includes the 1.7 million people targeted for assistance within the Ukraine 2026 regional refugee response plan (RRP), which is not yet reflected on <https://humanitarianaction.info>. Data for 2026 is up to date at the time of writing but largely based on estimated figures for most response plans, with a few regional response plans (eg, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan) missing entirely and possibly to be added later.

Even prior to the 2025 cuts, OCHA-led guidance for the HNRPs sought to tighten the scope of humanitarian needs. Emphasis on a specific set of core shocks and severity levels saw the numbers of people recognised as being in need of humanitarian response (People in Need – PiN) fall by 25% from the 2023 HNRPs to the 2025 plans. This proved controversial in principle and in practice. It was justified by those who argue the necessity of scaling back broad humanitarian ambition, which has extended into resilience, recovery and development-like service provision. And it was contested by those arguing the moral imperative for capturing the full extent of needs, unfiltered by funding feasibility.

As these scope questions took on renewed urgency in the context of the 2025 cuts, concerns intensified around how the system would count people in need. One interviewee told us: ‘the very least we owe affected people is to capture their needs and advocate for them’, while others voiced concerns that populations experiencing actual need are going unseen because they fall the wrong side of shock or severity thresholds.



The very least we owe affected people is to capture their needs and advocate for them.

- Anonymous

Humanitarian organisations are now adjusting to the consequences of this dramatic narrowing in scope and targeting. One senior humanitarian in Somalia described in this new reality as the system prioritising resources for the ‘starving’ (IPC Phase 4/5) by taking resources from the ‘hungry’ (IPC Phase 3). They raised concerns that areas currently in IPC 3 will receive less assistance and become more likely to transition into IPC 4.

A feedback loop between presence and ambition looks to be taking root. The geographical focus is influencing where agencies retain operational presence – and operational presence and capacity is a factor in prioritising which populations will be targeted (OCHA, 2025c). So, as situations change, vulnerable populations in deprioritised areas are more likely to go uncounted and unassisted. Concerns were also raised that the designation of eight countries for ‘accelerated transition’ signals that donors are deprioritising these countries. While the rationale includes a transition to a nationally centred response, in practice the designation was reportedly imposed without



UN agencies are openly fighting. What does prioritisation mean when UN agencies are in a open bid for survival?

- LNA representative

consultation with country teams, and with no time and diminishing resources to put in place for such a transition.

Across ‘transition’ and HNRP countries, reduced humanitarian scope has been accompanied by expressions of hope that development actors will fill the vacuum. Yet this isn’t the case, by default or by design. Data shows that development finance has been in decline in protracted crises (ALNAP, 2025d). In Somalia, for example, OCHA reported in November

that over 200 health facilities are now non-functional or closed and nutrition supplementary feeding sites have reduced from 617 to 300. This affects hundreds of thousands of people. It is the consequence of the closure of major development programmes on top of the humanitarian funding cuts (OCHA, 2025d).⁵

TOWARDS MANAGED DECLINE – BRACING FOR SUSTAINED AND CONTINUED CUTS

Signals from major humanitarian donors indicate an even tougher 2026. The US government’s priorities remain uncertain. US funding overall is expected to be significantly reduced next year. The fiscal year 2026 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) funding bill includes the creation of a new US International Humanitarian Assistance account. This has a budget request of US \$5 billion, 42% lower than the budget approved for humanitarian aid in 2025 (US Department of State, 2025).

Meanwhile, funding cuts among European donors are set to take effect from 2026 as governments prioritise spending on defence and shift their aid focus to domestic

⁵ This trend was already in train before the 2025 funding shock. Donnelly and Dhingra (2024) note, for example: ‘During a recent visit to Somalia, we heard how geographical prioritisation has meant that more stable areas have been deprioritised as part of the humanitarian response. But development donors have yet to fill the vacuum, meaning that hard-won gains in areas hosting thousands of IDPs and recovering from drought may be reversed.’

priorities. Germany cut its humanitarian aid budget by almost half in 2025 and at that lower level in 2026.⁶ The United Kingdom (UK) is tapering off its official development assistance (ODA) from 0.5% to 0.3% of gross national income (GNI) by 2027, with an expected cut of around £4.5 billion in 2026, following cuts of around £500 million in 2025; France cut its ODA budget by EUR 2.3 billion in 2024/2025 with expected further cuts of EUR 700 million in 2026 (Donor Tracker, 2025). Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium are also enacting cuts. Canada also recently announced new cuts from 2026 of CAD 2.7 billion over the next four years (Zimonjic, 2025).



US govt cuts were overnight and poorly managed – that was the most problematic part of it. That’s different to Germany, Netherlands and UK. There are ways to manage that differently.

- Anonymous interviewee

Some exceptional funding measures were put in place in 2025. Sweden and Switzerland front-loaded allocations from emergency response or reserve funds to maintain programming following USAID cuts. Some larger INGOs called on their funding reserves to keep responses open and avoid immediate lay-offs. Such measures are unlikely to be repeated as donors and partners look to consolidate reserves and regularise their expenditures in line with revised budgets.

Looking ahead, organisations are anticipating the reality of the reduced funding prospects and adjusting their planning accordingly. Some are using the

moment for strategic reflection about their role and focus. One staffer observed: ‘US govt cuts were overnight and poorly managed – that was the most problematic part of it. That’s different to Germany, Netherlands and UK. There are ways to manage that differently.’

The Emergency Relief Coordinator’s March 2025 Reset message set out a call for cooperation in the face of collective scarcity. It notes that the IASC had ‘agreed to be ruthless in eliminating turf wars, and challenging our organizations to work genuinely together’ (OCHA, 2025e). There are some location-specific examples of operational inter-agency collaboration and resource sharing to maintain critical service delivery (ALNAP, 2025a). Yet the wider picture is of reduced collaboration, including reduced participation in cluster coordination mechanisms, and increased competition for funding. One LNA representative observed: ‘UN agencies are openly fighting. What does prioritisation mean when UN agencies are in an open bid for survival?’ UN agencies plan to issue their own separate appeals documents for 2026, setting out a wider scope of needs and ambition than that included within the hyper-prioritised HNRPs.

Localisation progress was affected by the competition for funds. A NEAR review on the impacts of the aid cuts highlights some good practice from international organisations, amid a general trend of retreat from leadership on localisation (NEAR, 2025).⁷ Sources

⁶ Germany recently announced that it will also restructure its aid departments which includes the dissolution of the Department for Crisis Prevention, Peacebuilding, and Humanitarian Aid within the Foreign Office.

⁷ These good practices include: listening to partners; good communication; exploring alternative funding for local organisations; prioritising local organisations in asset and resource allocation; mobilising flexible funding; collaborative cost saving; supporting the fundraising of local and national organisations; creating visibility for local and national organisations.

suggest that many LNAs are losing connection with the international system for a variety of reasons: some because they face closure, some because they have been excluded as coordination capacity diminishes, while others are intentionally distancing themselves. One source referred to 'a huge rupture in trust' and diminishing expectations of the UN-coordinated system: 'let them do their thing, we'll get on with ours. What has their prioritisation got to do with us?'

FLYING BLIND – INSIGHT GAPS FOR EVIDENCE-BASED PRIORITISATION

The recent funding cuts have severely weakened the system's analytical capacity. This has resulted in a 'looming evidence crisis'.⁸ This year has seen a massive loss of dedicated analytical staff and a diminished operational footprint of key data-gathering actors, and it has revealed the systemic vulnerability of reliance on single donors (primarily the US) for essential data 'enablers'.

Capacities to understand and monitor people in need and evolving crises are under serious threat. When USAID cut its funding to the famine early warning system FEWSNET at the start of 2025, many saw it as presaging a worsening 'data drought' (TNH, 2025). The interconnectedness of the information system means that the loss of critical sources has a cascading effect – and this has prompted concerns that humanitarian response plans in some countries are running on outdated information.



There is this misunderstanding that community consultation is something that the system can't afford at this stage.

- Anonymous

Humanitarian planning and response rely on a highly interconnected information ecosystem (Simons, 2025), which has suffered funding precarity. This ecosystem includes the Multi-Sectoral Needs Analysis (MSNAs) conducted by REACH, an independent organisation. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) is another 'critical enabler' – its primary data collection underpins analysis in up to 95% of recent HNRPs and it feeds into the Index for Risk Management (INFORM) used in several donors' decision-making. IOM staff reported that around half of its operations were

seriously impacted by the USAID aid cuts. While some were temporarily secured, all 80 of the active DTM operations are under serious stress and three quarters face possible closure in 2026 without additional funding.

The reduction in monitoring systems, including lower frequency of surveys already seen in 2025, raises the risk of the system failing to detect existing needs and emerging crises. This includes famine risk and disease outbreaks – hampering the prospects of early action. The implications extend to the political and funding realms too, as the robustness of humanitarian analysis comes under increasing scrutiny by overstretched donors, and

⁸ Key informant interview

by governments seeking to present counter-narratives to deny or downplay crises.

Donors have backfilled some gaps, but the outlook is uncertain. Recognising the growing problem, early in 2025 the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) convened a group of donors to focus on support to these critical enablers. Individual donors reported stepping in with bridge funding over the year to keep services running. Proposals have been mooted to fund data enablers through global funding models but, given that the overall level of funding is shrinking, the administrative costs of this have been questioned.

Putting communities at the centre emerged as a priority at the policy level but moving beyond performative consultation is a matter of intense debate. As the aid cuts took hold, there was both a return to headline commitments to consult populations affected by crisis and, conversely, a retreat from putting this commitment into practice. As one source put it, 'Humanitarian Country Teams are having to make cut-throat decisions and yet wanting to appear as people-centred as possible'.

In line with the Emergency Relief Coordinator's Reset call to 'put people facing crises first' (OCHA, 2025e), OCHA notes that 'while there has been growing engagement of communities in the HPC – between HPC 2023 and HPC 2025, the percentage of countries where people were consulted during response planning increased from 68% to 85% – this has not gone far enough' (OCHA, 2025c). However, the proposals for the 2026 Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) process set this within narrow parameters – calling for use of agencies' existing community engagement to identify preferences and wherever possible selecting available response modalities that align best with these. This has been met with mixed responses – some recognise the limited room for manoeuvre, and many others are concerned that it amounts to 'kicking the ball down the road'⁹ to agencies who are decreasingly resourced and inclined to prioritise it. One source noted 'there is this misunderstanding that community consultation is something that the system can't afford at this stage', rather than something that humanitarians can ill-afford to neglect.



Humanitarian Country Teams are having to make cut-throat decisions and yet wanting to appear as people-centred as possible.

- Anonymous

Experiences have differed between countries – an agency representative expressed concern that, in South Sudan, there was 'no room' in the HNRP for the findings of community consultations. In both Somalia and Colombia, meanwhile, country teams have been working to strengthen community engagement and use decentralised approaches to coordination under the Flagship Initiative, which may provide models for new approaches to community engagement even under resource constrained conditions. In Somalia, for example, the Humanitarian Country Team has engaged Ground Truth Solutions to review its secondary community consultation data with a view to using it better. And in Colombia, harmonised and agreed-upon tools for community consultation have been developed, and the use of artificial intelligence to synthesise data and information is being accelerated (SIDA et al, 2025).

⁹ Key informant interview

WHAT NOW?

While we come to terms with the enormous shock that the humanitarian system has suffered in 2025, it also bears reminding that the numbers of people affected by crises has continued to grow rapidly throughout the last decade (see [Figure 1](#)).

'Renewing and reimagining humanitarian action with idealism, humility and hope' (OCHA, 2025f) will require a fundamental change. This includes demanding that insularity and resource competition be replaced by a new level of transparent collaboration (ALNAP, 2025b). It requires a paradigm shift to centre the priorities of populations affected by crisis and the responses that they continue to lead. And it means moving urgently beyond a 'managed decline' of existing systems, towards 'building a collective future' where international capacities complement domestic ones in 'new constellations of care' (Krugman et al, 2025).

As humanitarians look ahead to 2026 and beyond, their capacity to make such critical strategic decisions in the face of uncertainty is undoubtedly undermined – not just by lack of resources but also lack of well-evidenced reflection. There are both anecdotal and projected indications of the impacts of aid cuts: from a rise in morbidity and mortality (Cavalcanti et al, 2025; Clark et al, 2025) to hunger (FAO and WFP, 2025) and sexual violence (ALNAP, 2025a). Yet the full picture of these impacts will likely remain undocumented by international organisations as they withdraw their presence and their gaze from large numbers of deprioritised populations.

Without a more considered attempt to learn from 2025 – and, crucially, to learn from those affected most by the choices that have been made – the humanitarian system's ability to make difficult judgement calls in the most trusted way is at risk. It will, in the words of a humanitarian worker in Mali, be 'moving forward blindly' (ALNAP, 2025a).

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