

SAVING LIVES, UPHOLDING RIGHTS

Recommendations to Bridge Humanitarian Aid and
Human Rights Amid Global Realignment

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Powered by Geneva-based Progress & Change Action Lab and Berlin-based Palimpsest GmbH, Human Rights Compass brings together human rights actors to analyse policy changes in real time, coordinate responses, and build the long-term resilience of the human rights community.

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FOREIGN AID AT A CROSSROADS

The [2025 Global Humanitarian Overview](#) (GHO) estimated that 307.1 million people in 73 countries were in need of humanitarian assistance as of late February 2025 – enduring severe suffering due to protracted conflicts, economic instability, climate emergencies and displacement. Global needs were expected to rise and the funding to decline, “making the cost of inaction higher than ever before”. At about the same time, the shockwaves of the new US administration’s decision to abruptly freeze several types of government funding reverberated through the international humanitarian community.

As the source of 30 per cent of global official development assistance (ODA) in 2024, the US funding freeze in February 2025 had an almost immediate negative impact on lifesaving programmes worldwide: provision of HIV treatment, emergency food supplies in famine-stricken areas, and vaccines for diseases such as malaria, polio and tuberculosis. The impact was particularly acute for civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Global South, many of which were forced to scale back or shut down their operations altogether.

Beyond the immediate effects of the suspension and the prospect of a long-term withdrawal of US funding, looms the broader question of the future of humanitarian assistance. Reduction in foreign aid is global: even countries with a longstanding tradition of donorship, such as the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, have recently “deprioritised” foreign aid funding and plan further cuts — notably these are made alongside significant increases in defence funding. Before the Trump administration’s cuts came into effect, ODA in 2024 had already fallen by 7.1 per cent in real terms compared to 2023 (OECD).

The proportion of global assistance funding allocated to human rights is modest — and also affected by these cuts. For example, [in 2023](#) almost 45 per cent of USAID foreign aid went

to disaster relief, humanitarian aid and vital healthcare programmes, whereas only 3.2 per cent was spent on human rights and the rule of law. In absolute terms, funding for human rights has always been infinitesimal compared to allocations on humanitarian aid. Yet its worldwide impact has been considerable in terms of improving human security — protecting the rights of vulnerable communities, women, LGBTQ persons, supporting independent media, lawyers and human rights defenders (HRDs), and justice and rule of law initiatives.

The increased scarcity of resources caused by the [Global Realignment](#) exacerbates a perceived trade-off between humanitarian and human rights work. This risks further marginalising, politicising human rights and reducing related funding. This trend is not limited to authoritarian regimes or populist agendas, but is permeating political and policy dialogues more widely.

Officials of the second Trump administration have redefined humanitarian assistance narrowly as a form of support that is “life-saving only”. This reductionist, “human-rights-free” view of humanitarian emergencies ignores their complexity and multidimensional nature. It also disregards the fact that human rights violations are often among the main causes and the consequences of humanitarian crises. Effective foreign aid should not intervene solely to address imminent threats to life, but to build resilient communities, and reinforcing inclusive development and peace.

To halt this trend, it is urgent to reaffirm that humanitarian crises are also human rights crises, and that humanitarian efforts and human rights work are complementary. It is important — and urgent — to debunk the false dichotomy suggesting that “life-saving” relief can operate outside a rights-based framework or that human rights are disconnected from people’s survival and dignity.

BRIDGING HUMANITARIAN AID AND RIGHTS

» Resist Defining Foreign Aid as an Emergency Aid (“Life Saving Only”)

Recommendation:

States must reject the restrictive framing of foreign aid as intended solely for immediate life-saving interventions, and instead plan and fund aid strategies that address underlying human rights violations, inequalities, and root causes of crises.

Action-Oriented Explanation:

Limiting foreign aid and assistance to short-term life-saving activities — as advocated by the US State Department’s 28 January 2025 Waiver — ignores the human rights abuses that are structural drivers of conflict, repression, and instability. Planning interventions and allocating funds only to address immediate life-threatening situations is misguided; it creates cycles of crisis, prolongs suffering, and ultimately undermines the effectiveness and impact of aid.

States must ensure that national and multilateral foreign assistance strategies integrate human rights, the protection of civic space, gender equality, and anti-discrimination measures as essential components of crisis prevention and response. Furthermore, UN member states have a particular responsibility to respond to needs expressed in the context of peacekeeping missions. The lack of such response — e.g. in the case of Haiti after 2023 or the Central African Republic in 2025 — creates a void to be filled by individuals and states pursuing their own agenda and poses a direct threat to the credibility of the UN Charter and multilateralism as a whole.

» Make Human Rights a Top Priority in the UN System

Recommendation:

The United Nations must reaffirm human rights as an overarching priority in all its areas of work — peace and security, development, and humanitarian action — and operationalise this commitment throughout the UN system.

Action-Oriented Explanation:

The integrated vision laid out in 2005 by the then-Secretary General Kofi Annan, [“In Larger Freedom”](#), and later reinforced through the Responsibility to Protect and other system-wide commitments, remains essential. Those assessments were based on the understanding that long-term security and development are mutually dependent, and that neither can exist without the rule of law and respect for human rights. The “Human Rights Up Front” [initiative](#) (2016) attempted to renew the UN’s commitment to preventing and responding to serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

In 2025, the UN must reinforce its internal coherence by systematically incorporating human rights analysis, risk assessment, and accountability mechanisms into all its programmes. This includes equipping UN Country Teams, Resident Coordinators, and Humanitarian Coordinators to respond to early warning signs and rights violations, while ensuring effective coordination with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and local rights organisations. Protecting human rights must not be treated as an optional or a thematic concern — it must guide the UN’s response to all crises and in all country contexts. This should underpin the proposals of the UN80 initiative.

» Anchor Humanitarian Action in Local Leadership and make it Rights-Based

Recommendation:

States and the United Nations must commit to a humanitarian model that prioritises local leadership, anchors interventions in human rights protection, and channels substantial resources to independent community-based organisations.

Action-Oriented Explanation:

In a state of “disdain for the global order”, humanitarian principles must be contextualised and localised. Localisation ensures that humanitarian assistance — where it must be agreed with de facto authorities (such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, the military junta in Burma or military factions in Sudan) — seeks to avoid exacerbating human rights violations. Pooled multilateral aid instruments should favour independent local organisations and those promoting rights-based work in such fragile and conflict-affected areas.

Localisation is indeed key to both effectively delivering aid and documenting abuses. Local organisations can also play an important role in risk assessment, as aid needs to better reach populations that are not typically considered the most vulnerable (such as deported and detained civilians, children separated from their families, incommunicado detainees, LGBTQ persons, Roma and Sinti, migrants, political opposition, etc.).

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and UN Resident Coordinators must therefore systematically apply a human rights-based approach to humanitarian programming and coordination. When appointed as Humanitarian Coordinators, UN Resident Coordinators should consult with local human rights defenders and women-led groups in planning cycles, to test assessments against local knowledge. Meanwhile, Humanitarian Country Teams should include human rights risks into their vulnerability assessments.

» Defend Civic Space as Precondition for Effective Aid and Protection

Recommendation:

UN agencies and rights-minded states must prioritise the protection of civic space in humanitarian and development cooperation, provide tools to sanction repression and incentivise openness.

Action-Oriented Explanation:

States must ensure that rights-based work does not become a casualty of retrenchment. National development and humanitarian strategies should earmark humanitarian funding for programmes that advance legal empowerment, protection of civil society and promotion of civic space, and gender justice — as it was done in Ukraine with an ambitious democracy and rule of law programme in 2022-2025, until the US funding freeze put many of its elements on hold.

UN Resident Coordinators and donor embassies should jointly develop country-level civic space baselines and incorporate these into the funding criteria for humanitarian and development cooperation. Aid partnerships should be conditional on non-interference in civil society and protection of HRDs and humanitarian workers. Meanwhile, rights-minded states should provide flexible, quickly disbursed funds for at-risk categories, including women HRDs in fragile states.

» Establish a UN Compact to Defend Gendered Rights in Crisis Settings

Recommendation:

The United Nations should establish a formal compact across humanitarian and human rights bodies to prioritise protection of gender-based rights and accountability for gender-based violence in crisis response.

Action-Oriented Explanation:

The UN system should implement a compact between OHCHR, UN Women, the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, OCHA, and the Humanitarian Country Teams to ensure that gender-based human rights violations — including conflict-related sexual violence, violations of reproductive rights, exclusion from aid — are subject to systematic monitoring, reporting, and response.

Member States should fund dedicated women's rights focal points within humanitarian clusters and support the mainstreaming of feminist principles across humanitarian response frameworks. The UN Secretary-General should explicitly endorse this Compact, and it should be reflected in the UN Security Council briefings and Human Rights Council resolutions, as a way of implementing UN Security Council [resolution 1325](#) on women and peace and security (2000).

This Human Rights Compass Policy Brief is the result of a convening of over 30 leading international human rights organisations and their experts, which was held on 15 April 2025. Powered by Geneva-based Progress & Change Action Lab and Berlin-based Palimpsest GmbH, these recommendations reflect the discussions of the Human Rights Compass Convening of 15 April 2025 and additional research undertaken by Progress & Change Action Lab and Palimpsest GmbH. The Policy Brief has been reviewed by an editorial committee composed of Progress & Change Action Lab and Palimpsest GmbH and participants to the Convening.

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