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Why Humanitarianism Continues Despite the Famine of Resources: The dreadful logic of suffering

Professor Stuart Gordon explores how, despite major funding cuts in the humanitarian sector, core life-saving areas like food, health, and shelter remain relatively protected due to their urgency and visibility, while other critical sectors like protection and education face deeper neglect, revealing a stark and ethically fraught funding imbalance.

Dear colleagues and friends,

As summer approaches, many of you will be reflecting on the humanitarian sector's current state and future. Across the media there is intense discussion around funding, especially given significant cuts announced this year by figures like Donald Trump, alongside ongoing trends among some European donors to redirect official development assistance (ODA) towards pressing domestic issues or other international priorities, such as defence or refugee hosting. The headlines can appear unrelentingly bleak, understandably causing concern as you consider your careers. However, I offer a perspective suggesting the employment landscape, while evolving, may not be uniformly challenging.

The fundamental need for skilled humanitarian professionals remains incredibly high. While overall aid budgets fluctuate, insiders anticipate that core areas of humanitarian action—those addressing essential human needs and demonstrating clear impact—will continue to be prioritised. Sectors proven popular with donors due to their life-saving nature or alignment with long-term stability (e.g., emergency health, food security, protection, climate change adaptation) are expected to show considerable funding resilience. These are not discretionary; they are desperately needed. Moreover, the sector is adapting, with a growing emphasis on innovation, efficiency, localisation, and new funding models, meaning new opportunities will emerge for those adaptable and skilled. While awareness of challenges is prudent, please don't let the current narrative lead to undue pessimism. The dedication to alleviating suffering remains a powerful driver, and your talent is vital.

The Persistent Need and Evolving Landscape

What fuels this cautious optimism? In an environment of massive aid budget cuts, the factors historically driving funding decisions will likely become more pronounced, creating a varied landscape of resilience. Some sectors will invariably prove more resilient because the perceived cost of *not* funding them is immediate, highly visible, and politically and socially unpalatable, even amidst fiscal austerity.

Sectors addressing core, immediate life-saving needs—namely Food Security, emergency Health interventions, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), and emergency Shelter—are likely to demonstrate this greater resilience. These clusters respond to direct threats to human survival. In crises like the Gaza conflict or the aftermath of the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquakes, the desperate need for food, water, medical care, and shelter was, and remains, starkly visible. Media coverage amplifies these needs, pressuring donors to maintain support. When budgets shrink, abandoning populations to starvation or disease is the hardest line to cross, ethically and publicly.

Furthermore, many large governmental donors have mandates prioritising saving lives in acute crises, and geopolitical interests can shield certain responses. The strong initial funding for the Ukraine crisis, for instance, was heavily influenced by its geopolitical significance. While all sectors in such a response benefit, core life-saving clusters usually form the backbone, remaining relatively better funded. As reported by the OECD and OCHA in early 2025, despite overall ODA and humanitarian aid declining, there's a push to prioritise the most urgent life-saving actions. Finally, donors, especially when resources are scarce, gravitate towards interventions with tangible, quickly demonstrable impacts. Providing food, water, or emergency medical treatment yields immediate, measurable outcomes, making these investments easier to justify.

The Shadow of Selective Funding

Conversely, other critical sectors are likely to be less resilient. Protection, Education in Emergencies, and Early Recovery often receive resources slowly. As seen in protracted situations like the Sudan crisis or the recovery phase of the Horn of Africa drought, these sectors, vital for dignity, long-term well-being, and breaking crisis cycles, struggle for proportional funding even in better times. When budgets are slashed, they are at higher risk. Their outcomes are often less immediately visible or quantifiable in “lives saved” metrics, making them more vulnerable. Reports from UN Women and other agencies in early 2025 highlighted that areas like Gender-Based Violence response (a key part of Protection) were already heavily impacted by initial funding contractions.

Similarly, crises receiving less media attention or not high on the geopolitical agenda will likely see their already underfunded sectors suffer disproportionately. Pressure to focus scarce resources on visible or strategically important emergencies will inevitably draw funding from these less-spotlighted crises, weakening all sectors within them, particularly those not seen as “front-line” survival. In essence, massive aid cuts will likely intensify existing funding disparities. The sectors

appealing most directly to the imperative of saving lives will probably be protected, appearing more “resilient.” However, this resilience comes at the cost of deeper cuts elsewhere, potentially leading to devastating long-term consequences by neglecting critical protection, education, and recovery needs.

Navigating the Bifurcated Reality

The overall humanitarian system, as OCHA officials warned in early 2025, is being forced into “life-or-death decisions” about which programs—and effectively, which people—to prioritise, with profound implications for the breadth and depth of aid available globally. While the public debate on the sector’s employment landscape amidst significant funding cuts is concerning, a deeper analysis reveals this complex, challenging reality. The anticipated “resilience” in core life-saving sectors stems not from an abundance of resources, but from the brutal calculus of prioritisation when budgets shrink; these are areas where the human cost of inaction is most immediate, visible, and politically sensitive.

This selective resilience, driven by donor mandates, geopolitical interests, and the demand for tangible results, unfortunately casts a long shadow over other equally vital sectors. Understanding this bifurcated landscape is crucial for anyone involved or aspiring to be involved in the humanitarian field. The “life-or-death decisions” OCHA warned of will shape the very nature of aid, potentially exacerbating vulnerabilities by neglecting foundational elements of dignity and sustainable recovery. While opportunities may persist, particularly in front-line emergency response, a clear-eyed view of intensified disparities and the profound ethical dilemmas facing the system is essential for navigating careers and advocating for a more holistic, equitably funded humanitarian response.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image credit: Local aid workers load humanitarian aid into World Food Programme helicopters at Beira Airport, Mozambique during humanitarian relief efforts. Via <https://picryl.com/>.

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