Humanitarian Aid in the Polycrisis

A Shift to Local and Systems Thinking Approaches

Policy brief no. 2
March 2025

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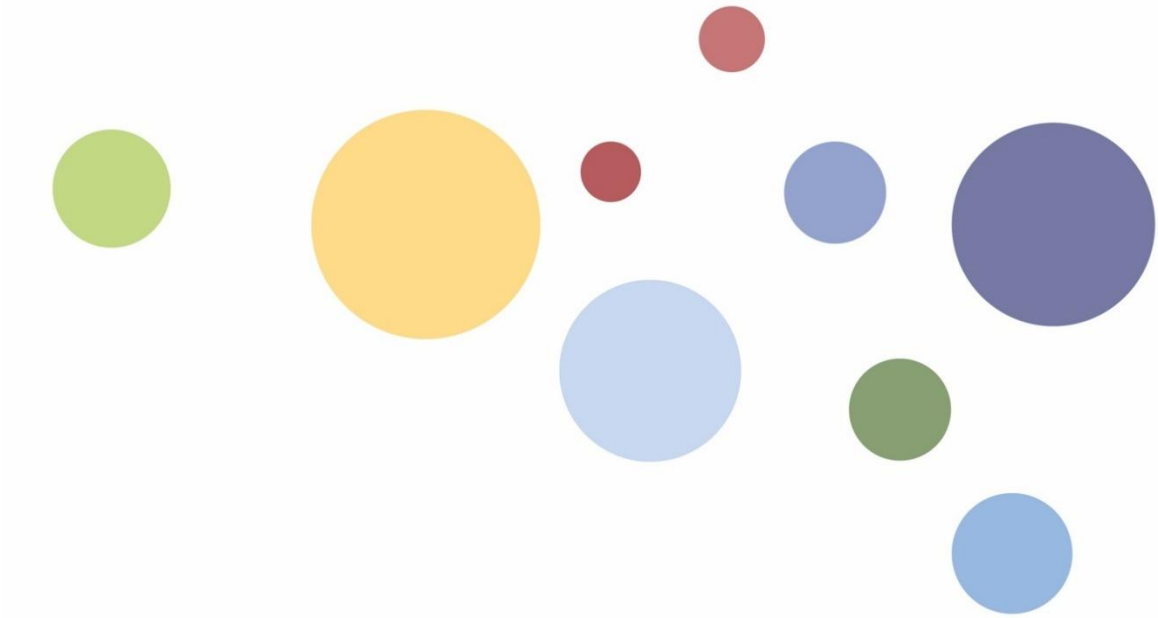

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Jean Monnet Network on External Policy: EU-Africa

Executive Summary

The humanitarian discourse increasingly frames global challenges through the lens of overlapping climate, health, and political crises — often described as a "polycrisis." While this terminology has gained traction in recent years, notably among actors like the World Economic Forum, the dynamics it describes are not unprecedented. Historical crises such as the Darfur conflict and the Sahelian droughts of the 1970s illustrate how environmental pressures, political instability, and communal tensions have long intersected. What is new is the heightened recognition and framing of these intersections by global institutions, albeit often without centring the voices of affected communities. As the number of people in need of urgent assistance is projected to reach 305 million in 2025 — requiring over $47 billion in funding — systemic change remains imperative.
This policy brief offers actionable alternatives to address these pressing challenges by advocating for *localized humanitarian responses* and *system-thinking approaches*.

Localization empowers local actors with cultural knowledge and access to affected populations, while systems thinking enables a deeper understanding of feedback loops and interconnections, offering holistic solutions to interconnected crises.

Key messages

- The need to foster long-term capacity-building initiatives, flexible and equitable funding, and meaningful partnerships. Pre-crisis scenario planning must integrate local actors as stakeholders, alongside international organizations and governments, ensuring context-specific, community-driven responses.

- Despite its potential, localization is hampered by power imbalances and underfunding. Genuine decentralization requires dismantling these colonial legacies, streamlining compliance processes, and promoting trust through transparent communication and accountability. Addressing systemic biases, raising public awareness, and ensuring inclusive leadership — especially by empowering local actors— are vital steps.

- Embedding systems-based approaches into localization efforts ensures that interventions are resilient, adaptive, and attuned to dynamic, long-term systemic risks. Transparent practices that reduce compliance burdens and foster authentic partnerships with local organizations were strongly emphasized during a complementary focus group discussion, conducted to validate and expand upon insights from the literature [1].

[1] The focus group discussion was held on December 18, 2024, and included experienced professionals with extensive backgrounds in development and emergency humanitarian work.

(1) Introduction

At the 2023 World Economic Forum, global leaders and experts discussed the emerging "global polycrisis," a state of perpetual upheaval marked by interconnected and compounding crises. These crises arise when immediate shocks—such as political unrest, price surges, or extreme climate events—interact with slower, persistent pressures like socio-economic inequalities or climate change. Such dynamics can destabilize global systems, including food production, security, and financial markets. For example, inflation control in Western nations can raise debt servicing costs in developing economies, while global shocks—like the European conflict—can exacerbate food insecurity in East Africa. Interconnectedness complicates solutions, as seen with China's lockdowns disrupting global supply chains. Policymakers, facing strained resources, call for collective action, but current multilateral systems lack effective enforcement mechanisms.[2]

When armed conflict erupts or natural disasters occur, entire communities are affected, disrupting daily life and long-term development trajectories. Humanitarian aid is intended to save lives and alleviate suffering during and immediately after emergencies, typically addressing acute needs such as food, water, shelter, and healthcare. It is short-term and life-sustaining. In contrast, development aid targets structural and systemic issues—primarily poverty—that impede institutional, economic, and social progress, with the aim of fostering resilience and sustainable development.

A recurring belief within the humanitarian sector is that major crises act as catalysts for transformative reform. Historical examples support this, such as the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Both events exposed systemic failures—poor coordination, low technical standards, and exclusion of local actors—which led to landmark reform efforts like the Sphere Project, ALNAP, and the Humanitarian Accountability Project. These crises produced collective critiques that drove systemic improvements in accountability, coordination, and funding mechanisms. In recent years, however, this pattern appears to be breaking down.[3] The incidence of climate change-related disasters, including storms, wildfires, droughts, flooding, and heatwaves, has about tripled during the past four decades. As weather-related disasters occur more frequently, environmental concerns become more complex and have a significant impact on many facets of society.[4] Consequently, the humanitarian sector will encounter an increasing number of crises and disasters that are marked by more frequent occurrences, larger sizes, and greater intensity.

Simultaneously, international humanitarian law is increasingly violated without consequences, worsening humanitarian conditions globally.[5] Once regarded as a universal framework for protecting human dignity in times of conflict, its core principles are increasingly being undermined. The IHL in Focus: Annual Report (June 2023–July 2024)[6] reveals a troubling reality: breaches that were once rare and condemned as exceptional are now frequent, widespread, and alarmingly normalized. A powerful illustration of the erosion of international humanitarian norms is Israel's deliberate

[2] United Nations Children's Fund, 2023; Lawrence et al., 2024
[3] Davey et al.,2024
[4] Steinke, 2023
[5] Spiegel et al., 2024.
[6] Geneva Academy, 2025

obstruction of aid to Gaza—a direct violation of international law that exemplifies how state actions are increasingly flouting legal and moral boundaries without accountability. Israel's blockade of Gaza aid is a flagrant breach of international law and an act of inhumanity.[7] The ascendance of populism, frequently coupled with anti-refugee attitudes, has undermined asylum protections in numerous countries. Despite augmented funding from multiple sources, the current humanitarian system is overwhelmed by over 110 million individual forcibly displaced and unprecedented conflict-related fatalities. The situation has deteriorated since 2017, underscoring that the existing humanitarian framework is obsolete and necessitates a reconfiguration focused on the needs and objectives of impacted populations[8]. The humanitarian response to global crises is plagued by "claims of double standards in human rights approaches" and "accusations of outright hypocrisy", especially evident when contrasting Western responses to Ukraine versus Sudan, Myanmar, and Gaza [9].

The current global and national evidence base is insufficient for understanding the complexity of the polycrisis, with a heavy reliance on correlational and descriptive studies, and limited geographic representation, particularly from regions like Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean[10]. These trends highlight both the urgency and the inadequacy of existing systems, indicating the need for a holistic approach.

In the context of a polycrisis the traditional distinctions between humanitarian and development aid become increasingly blurred. Both modalities must work in tandem to address the interconnected drivers and consequences of crisis. Local actors are central to this integrated response: they offer contextual knowledge, access to affected areas, and the ability to navigate complex political and cultural dynamics. Yet, despite the rhetoric of localisation, current models often perpetuate existing hierarchies. International actors continue to control funding streams, coordination mechanisms, and strategic priorities, thereby limiting genuine local leadership and reinforcing unequal power relations within the humanitarian-development nexus.

By capturing overpowering social and environmental forces in a streamlined, commercially straightforward, yet incredibly complicated category, polycrisis mirrors Pandora's box. A holistic approach will integrate diverse disciplines, perspectives, and dimensions to address the systemic nature of problems—describing regional subtleties, sociocultural resistance mechanisms, and the intricate links and interdependencies of threats. Systems thinking bridges these evidence gaps by encouraging the use of participatory modelling, dynamic analysis of long-term trends, and interdisciplinary approaches to data collection and interpretation. It emphasizes viewing threats through a systemic risk lens, focusing on interconnected and non-linear causal structures, thus enabling more adaptive, inclusive, and anticipatory responses that are better aligned with the lived realities and evolving challenges of affected communities.

This policy brief addresses two essential questions: Firstly, **How can the humanitarian sector adapt to meet the demands of a polycrisis, while addressing persistent limitations such as underfunding, the undermining of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), and tokenistic localisation?** Secondly, **What strategic changes are required to ensure that humanitarian efforts produce long-term, sustainable impact for affected communities?**

[7] Action for Humanity, 2025.
[8] Spiegel et al., 2024
[9] Gordon-Gibson, 2025.
[10] Kwamie *et al.*, 2024.

(2) Background and analysis

From Polycrisis to Permacrisis

A humanitarian crisis represents an urgent situation that impacts an entire community or population in a specific area, leading to elevated rates of mortality or malnutrition, widespread disease outbreaks, and health emergencies. The shift in the nature of global crises is evident as climate-driven emergencies, once secondary to conflicts, now take a larger role in humanitarian efforts. These climate crises will likely occur more frequently, simultaneously, and have long-lasting impacts in altered environments. They will increasingly overlap with ongoing conflicts and pandemics intensifying resource pressures and fueling new or prolonged conflict dynamics. As such, the climate crisis will permeate all facets of humanitarian action, demanding a shift in focus from isolated disasters to addressing interconnected, cascading risks within a global "polycrisis".[11]

The ongoing polycrisis has significantly raised the demand for humanitarian aid, with 305 million people expected to require urgent assistance and protection in 2025, 190 million of whom face life-threatening situations.[12] This crisis is driven by an unprecedented number of armed conflicts and the rising frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters. OCHA estimates that over $47 billion will be needed to address these critical needs and save lives.[13] However, this mounting pressure on the humanitarian sector risks escalating into a "permacrisis" if not effectively managed. In response, humanitarian actors are now addressing a broader range of crises, often stepping in where governments are unwilling or unable to act such as supply issues, and economic relief. With protracted crises becoming the norm, humanitarian assistance is increasingly seen as a temporary fix in the face of persistent challenges, filling the gaps left by diplomatic failures to resolve underlying causes of need and conflict.[14] Prof. Hugo Slim critiques the gap between needs and response, emphasizing that while modern wars are smaller and famines less frequent, aid budgets continue to rise.[15]

At the same time, humanitarian aid in conflict zones has become increasingly instrumentalized, often serving political and military purposes. Humanitarian policies in conflict zones now operate within a shifting geopolitical landscape, where the commitment to humanitarian principles is increasingly uncertain.[16] Ongoing examples include Russia's war in Ukraine, escalating violence in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon, and civil wars in Sudan and Tigray. At the same time, the global community has to respond to significant natural disasters, such as major earthquakes in Syria, Türkiye, Morocco, and Afghanistan, alongside widespread flooding in regions across Asia, North Africa, and East Africa. Events like the Türkiye–Syria earthquake, Storm Daniel in Libya, and Cyclone Mocha in Myanmar highlight the growing frequency of natural disasters occurring in politically unstable environments that hinder humanitarian access.[17]

Humanitarian aid often becomes an instrument in political and military strategies, particularly in conflict zones. For example, in Africa, armed groups and governments have

[11] Chawla & Smith, 2024.
[12] ECHO, 2024.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Chawla & Smith, 2024
[15] Slim
[16] Alkhalil et al.,2024).
[17] Chawla & Smith, 2024.

restricted access to aid as a tactic to control populations, as seen in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and parts of Sudan. In Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has highlighted how humanitarian assistance can be used to gain influence and to propagate certain national narratives, shaping public opinion and drawing geopolitical lines.[18]

In a most recent example, the conflict in Sudan has progressed to the point that over 25 million civilians face starvation, as both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are allegedly using food as a strategic weapon in a national scale by obstructing humanitarian aid competing over who can impose greater deprivation. Local initiatives have evolved to assist impacted families, but they are severely hampered by deliberate violence against humanitarian workers and a lack of relief funds.[19] Despite donor assurances, financing for the humanitarian response in Sudan remains severely low, failing to fulfill the immediate needs of those affected by the violence. Experts underscore the need of international funding for local humanitarian organizations, pointing out that community - led initiatives are successfully delivering millions of meals every day through disaster response activities.[20] The ongoing war has not only led to a massive displacement crisis, with around 6.5 million internally displaced and nearly 2 million fleeing to neighboring countries, but it also poses threats to regional stability in the Horn of Africa and beyond.[21] Also, there is a significant gap in empirical research on how localization works in practice, especially in conflict-affected settings like Yemen.[22]

At the same time, the lack of effective governance structures and benchmarking mechanisms may impede the sector's ability to navigate these complex legal landscapes efficiently. The absence of comprehensive data on polycrises can lead to fragmented interventions, diminishing their impact. Additionally, the escalating costs of humanitarian operations and inadequate budgeting practices, coupled with the absence of diversified revenue streams, further strain the sector's ability to respond effectively[23]. Underinvestment in critical areas like capacity building and technology exacerbates, the lack of funding, as well as the dedication of donors to humanitarian principles are among the sector's challenges in responding to interconnected, multi-dimensional crises.

☼ The global humanitarian architecture stands at a crossroads, where the traditional UN-centric approach must evolve to prioritize local needs, signalling a significant departure from past norms.

(3) Reimagining the Humanitarian System through Localization and "Systems thinking"

As armed conflict evolves and the widespread effects of climate change deepen, experts agree that the core humanitarian principles—humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence must be revisited in the way they are implemented.[24]

This reassessment is especially crucial in the context of asymmetric warfare, the growing influence of non-state armed groups, and the increasing challenges posed by sanctions and restrictions that hinder effective

[18] United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024.
[21] Demissie & Soliman, 2024.
[22] Elkahlout et al., 2022.
[23] Next Generation, 2024
[24]Clarke & Parris, 2022; Steinke, 2023

humanitarian responses.[25] While some experts call for a complete rethinking of these principles, there is a broader consensus that the focus should instead be on how these principles are applied in response to the changing and crises. This shift calls for placing affected communities at the centre of responses, with global institutions adapting and potentially relinquishing some of their established power structures to foster a more equitable and effective humanitarian landscape.[26] The global humanitarian architecture stands at a crossroads, where the traditional UN-centric approach must evolve to prioritize local needs, signalling a significant departure from past norms.

In the context of a polycrisis the traditional distinctions between humanitarian and development aid become increasingly blurred. Both modalities must work in tandem to address the interconnected drivers and consequences of crisis. Local actors are central to this integrated response: they offer contextual knowledge, access to affected areas, and the ability to navigate complex political and cultural dynamics. Yet, despite the rhetoric of localisation, current models often perpetuate existing hierarchies. International actors continue to control funding streams, coordination mechanisms, and strategic priorities, thereby limiting genuine local leadership and reinforcing unequal power relations within the humanitarian-development nexus.

Localization emerged as a central reform initiative in the humanitarian sector, gaining traction through key milestones such as the Grand Bargain at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) and the 2018 Global Compact for Refugees.[27] The WHS specifically recognized localization as a core commitment aimed at addressing the historical marginalization of local humanitarian actors.[28] Empowering these actors through capacity development is seen as a pathway to reducing dependence on international aid by strengthening local resilience and operational efficiency, in line with global frameworks like the Sendai Framework and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[29]. However, despite the unprecedented scale and urgency of recent responses, many efforts continued to rely on conventional, top-down approaches, with limited involvement of local stakeholders—resulting in underutilized funding and missed opportunities for more effective, contextually grounded interventions[30]. This persistent reliance on centralized models reflects a broader pattern within the humanitarian sector, where donors, despite their rhetorical commitment to localisation, have made limited tangible progress—largely due to a continued reluctance to relinquish authority and decision-making power[31].

A critical component of this evolution is dismantling colonial legacies in humanitarian aid. Empowering local actors is paramount, requiring long-term investments in training, infrastructure, and financial autonomy, while also fostering trust between international organizations and local entities.[32] This is especially necessary as crises increasingly unfold in politicized environments, where international institutions face growing access challenges. As a result, alternative response models may be needed, where national NGOs and local institutions take the lead, and the international system adopts a supporting role. Although entrenched power dynamics may resist this shift, there is a growing recognition of the value of locally driven

[25] Spiegel *et al.*, 2024
[26] Chawla & Smith, 2024
[27] Elkahlout et al., 2022
[28] Strohmeier et al., 2025
[29] Frennesson et al., 2022
[30] Davey et al., 2024
[31] Ainsworth, 2024.
[32] Spiegel *et al.*, 2024

efforts, particularly in regions like Myanmar, Sudan, and Syria.[33]

Localization in humanitarian aid is not just important, but imperative. Local and national actors, who possess the knowledge, networks, and access to affected populations, are better equipped to lead crisis responses. Their involvement ensures that assistance is timely, cost-effective, culturally sensitive, and more relevant to the immediate needs of those affected. Strengthening collaboration with local actors and building their capacity enhances crisis anticipation, fosters community-led solutions, and supports long-term recovery.[34] However, the localisation agenda has struggled due to persistent underfunding, power imbalances, and frustrations among local humanitarian actors. Decentralization efforts, such as direct funding and local representation, have often unintentionally reinforced the power of international organisations. Despite the central role local actors play in aid delivery, international organisations continue to control funding, set agendas, and dictate participation.[35]

Top-down approaches continue to dominate, undermining the intended outcomes of localisation and community participation. This persistence can be attributed to the competing paradigms of resilience and surveillance, which impose contradictory requirements on local actors. As a result, legitimacy work often becomes symbolic rather than substantive, obscuring the systemic challenges within the current model. Meaningful localisation thus requires not only a critical examination of the prevailing power dynamics but also a comprehensive restructuring of aid processes to achieve genuine community empowerment and ownership.[36] While international actors have increasingly relied on local organisations for the delivery of aid, they have failed to transfer meaningful leadership or authority to these local entities. Instead, capacity-building initiatives have perpetuated a cycle of dependency, often prioritising the fulfilment of donor requirements over the strengthening of local autonomy.[37]

Critics argue that true decolonisation and structural change cannot be achieved through minor reforms but require a fundamental transformation of power dynamics within the sector. Humanitarian organisations are under growing pressure from staff, the public, and scholars to confront and rectify colonial legacies and systemic racism[38].

Traditional humanitarianism, rooted in the "principle of neutrality", has long sought to remain apolitical, distancing itself from political and social justice issues. However, while neutrality is essential for maintaining impartiality, it can sometimes hinder humanitarian actors from addressing the root causes of conflict such as political oppression, social injustice, or human rights violations. Critics argue that the instrumentalization of neutrality[39] may in fact reinforce existing power imbalances rather than challenge them. For instance, in Sudan the politicization of civil society under the al-Ingaz regime has become defining, with the regime manipulating CSOs to serve its own interests and effectively erasing distinctions between political parties and civil society[40]. It is important to acknowledge that certain communities—particularly those in conflict zones like Darfur, South Sudan, and others—may themselves be deeply entangled in political and ethnic dynamics, thereby complicating localisation efforts that are

[33] Chawla & Smith, 2024
[34] European Commission, n.d.
[35] Khoury & Scott, 2024
[36]Mulder, 2023
[37] Khoury & Scott, 2024
[38] See McVeigh, 2020; Liesner *et al.,* 2020; Slim, 2020a; Bian, 2022; Khan et al., 2021; Strohmeier et al., 2024
[39] Reidy, 2024; Gordon-Gibson, 2025
[40] Buchanan-Smith, 2024

meant to empower local actors without compromising neutrality.

For localisation to be realised, the power structures within international aid must be addressed by enabling local actors to take the lead, set agendas, and control resources. This shift requires moving beyond tokenistic participation towards genuine empowerment, where local organisations are entrusted with the authority to make decisions and manage risks, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian responses.[41] Despite differing views on decentralization versus transformative shifts in power, it's clear that humanitarian responses must adapt to the cultural contexts and specific needs of affected communities, integrating perspectives such as gender and a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach[42]. A new vocabulary aligned with contemporary humanitarian concepts—such as decolonizing aid, nature-based philanthropy, and equitable impact—can help drive collective action and foster a shared understanding of how to reshape the future of humanitarian aid[43]. This includes critically rethinking the language and imagery used in aid narratives, such as terms like "Global North" and "Global South," and the often-problematic portrayal of Black children in charity campaigns[44]. Moreover, these shifts are accompanied by calls for comprehensive audits of hiring practices to identify and dismantle barriers to building more diverse, equitable, and inclusive humanitarian workforce[45].

In 2023, humanitarian funding to local and national actors increased significantly, with direct allocations rising by 71% to US$1.7 billion, primarily due to substantial contributions from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This surge raised the share of total funding to local actors from 2.3% to 4.5%, with local governments and NGOs receiving the majority. Despite these gains, achieving full transparency and accountability remains challenging, particularly due to the role of intermediaries and multilateral organizations like the UN. Notably, UN country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) continued to channel significant resources to local actors, although their overall volume declined. Moreover, while some pooled funds, such as the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), have seen a decrease in funding to local actors, other locally led humanitarian funds have emerged, providing greater autonomy and flexibility for local NGOs to address context-specific needs[46].

Fostering networks of experts and promoting funding structures that encourage cooperation is critical. Intermediaries, coalitions, and infrastructure organizations play a pivotal role in facilitating these efforts.[47] However, traditional funding models often prove slow and overly bureaucratic, hindering the capacity for effective responses in polycrisis situations. More flexible, pre-approved funding models offer the advantage of allowing quicker, more responsive interventions while engaging a diverse range of stakeholders[48]. These new financial models should be performance-based, with a strong emphasis on delivering both measurable impact and returns on investment. Promoting the localization of aid allows local actors to lead culturally sensitive, relevant responses. Addressing the humanitarian-development-peace nexus is key, advocating for sustainable funding and AI integration to enhance humanitarian health responses.[49] As global crises intensify, the

[41] Khoury & Scott, 2024.
[42] Spiegel et al., 2024).
[43] NetHope, 2024.
[44] Elahee, 2021.
[45] Liesner et al., 2020
[46] Development Initiatives,2024
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] Spiegel et al., 2024

emphasis on anticipatory action and real-time analysis becomes increasingly critical. While local initiatives show promise, existing systems remain fragmented, and humanitarian analysis often struggles to keep pace with rapidly evolving challenges. This highlights the necessity for a coordinated, adaptable, and data-driven approach to humanitarian response, complementing localization strategies. Tools such as AI and machine learning can significantly enhance decision-making, improve resource efficiency, and boost the overall effectiveness of interventions.[50] Multidimensional and longitudinal datasets that incorporate indicators from diverse global threats provide a strong foundation. For example, in Burkina Faso, Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems have expanded to include climate indicators, enhancing early-warning systems.[51] However, scholars argue that these datasets should also integrate emerging threats, such as conflict, to improve crisis preparedness.

Despite these advancements, significant policy gaps persist, particularly in understanding the complex interactions between climate change, conflict, and health. Burkina Faso's experience illustrates a common challenge among national plans: while national policy frameworks acknowledge interactions of emerging crises, they often fail to implement them effectively, resulting in critical gaps in operationalization.[52]

Participatory approaches, including soft systems methodology and critical systems heuristics, offer a structured way for stakeholders to address systemic challenges collaboratively. By expanding stakeholders' understanding of system boundaries and behaviours, this approach enables a more comprehensive way to hypothesize complex interactions between global threats.

Gaps in data accessibility, as well as underinvestment in institutionalization, monitoring, evaluation, and participatory planning, have been identified as obstacles to policy implementation. In response, it is suggested that complexity science-based applied *systems thinking* can enhance our ability to analyze polycrisis threats through varied research methodologies.[53] Systems thinking tools, such as dynamic modelling, process maps, and causal loop diagrams, allow real-time testing of system properties like feedback, emergence, and tipping points.

Additionally, participatory approaches, including soft systems methodology and critical systems heuristics, offer a structured way for stakeholders to address systemic challenges collaboratively. By expanding stakeholders' understanding of system boundaries and behaviours, this approach enables a more comprehensive way hypothesize complex interactions between global threats.

In terms of systemic risk, climate change, conflict and pandemics act as risk multipliers, whose effects can and should be studied over time through longitudinal research, highlighting the impact of time delays often missed in cross-sectional studies.[54] This is crucial because correlational, descriptive studies often neglect the role of time as a complex factor, with most global literature relying on cross-sectional, short-term findings that fail to capture the hidden temporality of systemic changes. A systemic risk perspective promotes research that considers the tensions between near-imperceptible, irreversible interactions (like climate change) and acute interactions that

[50] NetHope, 2024
[51] Barteit *et al.*, 2023
[52] Kwamie et al.,2024
[53] *Ibid.*
[54] *Ibid.*

cause system shocks (such as conflicts, pandemics, and epidemics.[55]

In humanitarian discussions, evidence is being framed more narrowly (including donors), emphasizing ideas such as causality, attribution, efficiency, value for money, and rigor[56]. The tension between 'evidence-based' decision-making and the localization agenda creates a disconnect that hampers The effectiveness of both approaches, as local knowledge is often sidelined in favor of externally-driven, standardized forms of evidence.[57]

(4) Policy Recommendations

In response to these growing challenges, scholars are focusing on identifying "leverage points" to guide societies away from destabilization and toward stability. Government officials are urged to adopt policies rooted in a scientific, interdisciplinary approach that integrates biophysical, economic, cultural, and humanities insights. Scholars propose applied systems thinking that can enhance the evidence base and guide complex policy actions, especially in countries severely impacted by polycrisis, by enabling better theorizing, participatory solutions, and methods to hypothesize, visualize, model, and test solutions over time.[58] This broader approach, incorporating diverse perspectives across sectors and regions, is vital for creating a comprehensive framework to develop effective crisis response strategies.[59] Several initiatives, including the Past4Future group, Future Earth's IHOPE group, and the Cascade Institute, are already working to gather policy-relevant insights on navigating polycrises.[60]

The Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health and the Lancet Commission are particularly focused on transforming the humanitarian system, especially regarding health in the context of conflicts and forced displacement. These initiatives highlight the need for systemic change, better integration of local knowledge, enhanced interagency cooperation, and inclusive decision-making processes. Similarly, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) has introduced its Strategic Plan for 2023-2026, which calls for a coordinated, context-specific response that prioritizes community resilience and strong protection for vulnerable populations. The plan advocates for innovative humanitarian financing and strategic review of emerging risks to adapt to the evolving global environment.

[55] Kwamie et al.,2024
[56] Eyben,2013
[57] Turner, 2024.
[58] Kwamie et al.2024.
[59] Hoyer et al., 2023
[60] Ibid.

Key recommendations for the future of humanitarian aid in polycrisis are presented below, based on the findings from the focus group discussion and the literature review.

Policy recommendations

Sector Changes:

i. Organizations should adopt collaborative, technology-driven systems that focus on outcomes and evidence-based methods.
ii. Creating a polycrisis data repository: Supporting evidence-based policymaking through centralized, comprehensive data.
iii. Promote equity in data gathering and research by involving diverse stakeholders.
iv. Improving impact management through reliable, transparent data, leveraging AI for insights, and emphasizing data literacy are essential.
v. Organizations should also prioritize training in data analysis, privacy, and ethical technology development while addressing unconscious bias.
vi. Humanitarian organizations should also embrace a data justice approach, ensuring transparency and reflecting the real impact of local participation to address structural inequalities and avoid symbolic legitimacy work.
vii. Ensure that evidence is not used merely as a top-down tool to enforce practices from international agencies on local actors, but as a collaborative resource that allows local actors to make informed decisions.
viii. Reframe accountability structures to prioritize the long-term interests and needs of affected communities, rather than donor-driven short-term goals.
ix. Empower Southern organizations to develop context-specific, culturally appropriate responses by granting them epistemic autonomy in humanitarian programming
x. Avoid echo chambers by engaging diverse societal and political perspectives, ensuring humanitarian discourse remains inclusive and impactful.
xi. Policymakers should better integrate the interactions between climate change, conflict, and pandemics in national policy frameworks.

Cross-Sectoral changes

i. Integrate systems thinking methodologies like dynamic modeling and participatory approaches that involve communities in data collection and interpretation, alongside traditional quantitative methods
ii. Encourage dialogue and collaboration between donors, international agencies, local responders, and affected communities to ensure that evidence is relevant and reflective of the local context.
iii. Co-design adaptive and equitable policies that address interconnected threats (e.g., climate change, conflict, and pandemics).
iv. Allocate funding toward joined-up, cross-sectoral strategies and collective outcomes (e.g., linking humanitarian and development goals), especially in protracted crises.

Organizational Changes

Rethinking the roles of international and national NGOs is necessary for a more integrated humanitarian response.

i. Involving the next generation: Appointing qualified, competent young changemakers who want to influence both capital flow and development direction. Young people's tech-savviness drives the shift to data-driven social development.
ii. Embracing technology: Enhancing reporting and communication with reduced resource strain. Particularly AI-driven funding models will improve reporting, transparency, and maximize returns.
iii. Establish pre-crisis plans with local organizations and maintain a registry of pre-validated actors for clear emergency roles.
iv. Develop tailored and long-term capacity-building programs that address the specific cultural, social, and operational needs of local organizations.
v. Concerns about conflicts of interest arise when NGOs are heavily funded by governments involved in conflicts. Scrutiny and reduced co-funding were recommended to prevent biases.
vi. A shift from in-kind donations in conflict zones was urged to avoid inefficiencies and promote sustainable aid, alongside public education on effective giving.
vii. Comprehensive post-crisis evaluations should be publicly shared to improve transparency and future responses.

Funding Changes

Regarding funding recommendations, the following strategies should be prioritized:

i. Outcome-driven investments: Aligning financial returns with measurable social benefits.
ii. Community-focused fundraising: Fostering collaboration among local organizations.
iii. Specialized platforms: Verifying organizations, easing transactions, and promoting global giving.
iv. Results-oriented funding: Simplifying processes, enhancing coordination, and ensuring accountability.
v. Collaborative financing: Uniting multi-donor and public/private funding for greater impact.
vi. Co-funded models: Blending innovative funding methods for measurable outcomes.
vii. Simplify funding models to make them accessible to smaller, community-based organizations.
viii. Create a global, unearmarked crisis response fund managed by a trusted entity for rapid, need-based allocations.
ix. Develop mechanisms to forecast disaster impacts, enabling immediate fund mobilization and timely interventions.

(5) Conclusion

Humanitarian mega-crises have historically driven some reform, but recent ones (like Ukraine and COVID-19) have failed to deliver deep change. Power imbalances, institutional self-preservation, and bureaucratic inertia block progress. While climate change may force transformation, true reform might depend on pressure from outside the traditional aid system[61].

As humanitarian needs grow amidst funding cuts and increasingly complex crises, international systems face immense strain, heightening the risk of systemic failure.[62] Many argue that the overlap of climate change, conflict, COVID-19, and other global challenges is slowing progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.[63] Addressing these challenges requires a paradigm shift that emphasizes both scaling-up humanitarian action to meet rising demands and skilling-up capacities to deliver effective responses.[64]

Systems thinking is particularly relevant for addressing polycrises, such as the interplay of climate change, conflicts, and pandemics, which are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In its scope, strengthening local institutions and shifting international aid towards a more facilitative role can greatly enhance the effectiveness of crisis management.[65] This transition involves empowering local responders, ensuring culturally attuned approaches, and fostering inclusive governance at all levels. The localization agenda calls for international organizations to adopt a supportive role enabling equitable leadership and decision-making.

Given rising authoritarianism, climate-related disasters, and inequality, the humanitarian system must acknowledge the hierarchies of politics and power and work transparently with them[66]. To inform local communities, NGOs, and donors and enable proactive, community-led responses, it is imperative to use real-time data for monitoring and decision-making. [67] Globally, maintaining UN humanitarian leadership and encouraging significant involvement from both domestic and foreign NGOs in IASC frameworks can lessen the over-reliance on UN operations and encourage integrated responses, especially in situations where there is little international presence[68]. At the same time, the focus on "shifting the power" is critiqued as being insufficient, arguing that rather than shifting power, there should be a withdrawal from the sector to allow Southern organizations more autonomy.[69] Also, the superficial use of "evidence-based" rhetoric for fundraising or political purposes should be avoided, as it often obscures the true intent of evidence in humanitarian practice.[70] Last but not least, limited data access and underinvestment in monitoring, evaluation, and participatory planning contribute to poor policy implementation. To improve crisis

[61] Davey et al.,2024.
[62] Chawla & Smith, 2024.
[63] Kwamie et al.,2024
[64] Steinke, 2023.
[65] Chawla & Smith, 2024
[66] Gordon-Gibson, 2025.
[67] Chawla & Smith, 2024.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Singh, 2024.
[70] Turner et al., 2024.

responses, the humanitarian system must evolve to focus on transdisciplinary research, involving diverse stakeholders and accounting for both slow (climate change) and acute (conflict, pandemics) threats.[71] In sum, collaboration is the cornerstone of transforming the humanitarian sector and is essential to achieving these goals.

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[71] Kwamie et al.,2024

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Acknowledgements

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Europe's Civic University Alliance

Co-funded by the European Union

The CIVIS network is a consortium of 21 universities in Europe and Africa. In October 2023, it initiated the PolyCIVIS project, focused on confronting the Polycrisis in Europe and Africa through Research, Policy and Education. The PolyCIVIS project is funded by the European Union, Erasmus+.