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REPORTS AND DOCUMENTS



Executive summary: *"We Can Adapt to Anything, But Not to War"*

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In August 2026, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in partnership with the Red Cross Society of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan Red Cross and Ukrainian Red Cross Society, published a report entitled "We Can Adapt to Anything, But Not to War": Delivering for People in Conflict Settings: Reflections on an Evolving Humanitarian Landscape.[1] *Here we present the executive summary of that report.*

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Executive summary

Conflicts without end, egregious violations of international humanitarian law and a diminished humanitarian response are having a catastrophic impact on millions of people affected by armed conflict and violence.

From the Democratic Republic of the Congo to South Sudan to Ukraine, communities share stories of living through crisis: losing loved ones, fleeing to find refuge, suffering under daily bombardments, surviving without even the most basic services and struggling to rebuild in the face of the combined impacts of climate and conflict. They also tell stories of mutual solidarity, demand respect for their right to live in safety and dignity, and clearly say how they want humanitarians to support them.

Today, however, humanitarian action faces deep uncertainty. It has always had to navigate complex local and global politics, but the combination of deliberate and mounting obstacles to assisting and protecting people and precipitous drops in funding makes this moment different. Humanitarian responses are being reconfigured to this new reality. Any refashioning of humanitarian action that does not fully take into account the perspectives of conflict-affected communities and humanitarian early responders will, however, remain incomplete.

This report is one attempt to hear these perspectives. It draws on the views shared by communities, a range of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies working in conflict, local authorities, service providers, national and international NGOs, UN agencies, development and climate actors, faith-based organizations and think tanks.

Understanding how these actors see the key trends shaping needs and the environment for humanitarian action, and the dilemmas they grapple with every day, is essential to understanding how to respond to these challenges. So, too, is understanding the impacts of deep cuts in specific contexts; how these have affected the trust and acceptance of humanitarian actors by communities and local authorities; the impossible choices this is forcing humanitarians to make in how they deliver protection and assistance, and on whom they focus their remaining efforts; and the adaptive approaches and partnerships that are needed to meet this moment of profound change.

The key findings include:

- Rising conflict-related violence, developments in how conflicts are fought and a more constrained operational space make it increasingly difficult for humanitarians to deliver for people. At the same time, the convergence of climate risks with conflict is exacerbating humanitarian needs.
- The impact of cuts is sharpening competition and driving geographic consolidation. Funding for critical programmes has declined dramatically, including

1 ICRC, *"We Can Adapt to Anything, But Not to War": Delivering for People in Conflict Settings: Reflections on an Evolving Humanitarian Landscape*, Geneva, August 2026, available at: www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/media_file/2026-09/ICRC_Law_and_Policy_report-We-Can-Adapt-to-Anything.pdf.

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for those focused on protection and on strengthening resilience, with severe impacts on key services to people affected by conflict. Cuts to common services make it increasingly difficult to gauge these impacts in certain contexts, with evidence that some people are falling off the radar entirely.
- A singular back to basics focus is informing many spending and programming decisions, which risks putting aside hard-earned lessons about what constitutes a good-quality response, including adopting longer-term planning horizons and listening to communities.
- While funding quantity has declined, importantly so has funding quality, and together this is shaping responses in ways that undermine comprehensive, effective and principled responses.
- There is no simple answer as to whether the pace and scale of cuts have eroded communities' trust in and acceptance of humanitarian action; this depends on the realities in each context and on the actors involved. Humanitarians must constantly nurture trust through sustained engagement, transparent communication and concrete action.

The trajectory these trends take can be shaped. But doing so requires key stakeholders – states, humanitarians, development actors – to take real action on our collective responsibilities to communities affected by conflict.

What does this look like?

States must renew their investments in preventing and resolving conflicts and commit to addressing global challenges that can only be solved collectively. Humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political solutions. States must respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law, and ensure an enabling environment for humanitarian response. They must commit to sustainably resourcing humanitarian action with sufficient funding that facilitates principled aid delivery, for work that addresses short- and longer-term needs. Finally, states must continue to insist that development actors remain engaged in conflict settings and support them in doing so.

Humanitarians must forge new ties and work together to reinforce the case for addressing the needs and aspirations of people affected by humanitarian crises. This includes upholding the centrality of protection in their programming. They must keep striving to find the right balance between emergency and resilience activities; invest in dialogue with conflict parties and engagement with communities; support community and system resilience; maintain the foundational elements of quality programming; and invest in equal and adaptive partnerships.

Development actors must remain engaged in and expand their work in conflict settings, where poverty is increasingly concentrated and the risk of development reversals is constant. This includes entering into adaptive partnerships with humanitarian actors, building on and scaling proven models.

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