

Time for Action: Humanitarian NGOs call for a bold response to fragility

Over the past years, humanitarian needs have been escalating worldwide and now vastly exceed the resources available to meet those needs. While conflict, climate change, economic instability, and health emergencies continue to create new crises or worsen existing ones, the 2025 dismantling of USAID and the significant funding cuts announced by other donors – including European States – have significantly reduced the ability to support crisis-affected communities.

Growing global humanitarian needs are a direct result of an increasing degree of fragility in many contexts around the world. The [OECD's Multidimensional Fragility Framework](#) defines fragility as the combination of risk exposure and limited capacity to cope, measured across six dimensions: economic, environmental, human, political, security, and societal. Of the 177 contexts assessed for levels of fragility, 61 were identified with high and extreme fragility. These contexts account for 25% of the world's population yet host 72% of the world's extremely poor people.

In 2024, despite this alarming trend, [Official Development Assistance](#) from countries in the OECD's Development Assistance Committee declined for the first time in several years. This points to a worrying trend of disengagement by development donors, leaving these contexts with reduced long-term support. An internal survey by VOICE members in countries and regions such as Yemen, the Sahel, Myanmar, and Afghanistan confirms that, even where engagement continues, it often comes with reduced funding or redirection of development funding towards humanitarian activities and basic services - in its strictest definition. This shift limits flexibility and puts long-term development gains at risk.

Disengagement is not an option, as the risks associated with inaction are too high. Failure to act could lead to severe geopolitical consequences and setbacks in poverty reduction - not only for affected communities but for everyone. An increasing number of people may find themselves in crisis situations, placing greater pressure on humanitarian actions. Continued and active engagement also presents an opportunity to reinforce the European Union (EU)'s capacity to address shared global challenges, including those related to climate change, global health, and insecurity.

Given the complexity of today's global challenges and the multidimensional nature of fragility, humanitarian NGOs urge the EU and its Member States to ensure that economic and political interests do not undermine the fundamental principles underpinning the EU's global role. The EU's commitment to developing an "integrated approach to fragility" by 2026 is welcome. This strategy should prioritise people, solidarity, human development, and an evidence-based, context-specific approach.

To this aim, humanitarian NGOs put forward a set of recommendations for the EU and its Member States to ensure a coordinated and multi-sectoral response to fragility that addresses the root causes of vulnerability and contributes to reducing humanitarian needs.

VOICE calls on the EU and its Member States to address fragility by:

- **Prioritising a people-centred approach**
 - Engaging affected communities and supporting civil society organisations, to ensure tailored programmes and access to those in need.
 - Paying particular attention to mainstreaming protection, gender and inclusion.
- **Implementing the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDP) approach**
 - Prioritising an HDP Nexus approach for all contexts facing fragility.
 - Enhancing coordination with local actors and across different departments – whether humanitarian, development, peace or climate.
- **Guaranteeing long-term and flexible commitment to fragility**
 - Maintaining and intensifying engagement in contexts facing fragility, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
 - Ensuring flexible funding through humanitarian, development and climate funding mechanisms, and identifying alternative plans as early as possible in case of shocks.

Prioritising a people-centred approach

A people-centred approach means recognising that each context is different and engaging affected communities in the design and implementation of programmes to ensure that tools and methodologies are adapted to their specific needs. This approach is not only a moral imperative but also a necessity for achieving long-term stability and resilience for all. Policies that place people at the centre seek more inclusive, locally owned solutions that foster trust, empower communities, and promote resilience. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in this approach and must be supported, as they are closest to affected communities and often best placed to provide access to populations that governments are unable or unwilling to reach. The EU and its Member States should look at fragility in all its dimensions. By prioritising a people-centred approach, donors should pay particular attention to mainstreaming protection, gender - including gender-based violence - and inclusion in all policies and plans. This also includes placing special emphasis on conflict-sensitive approaches, multi-hazard risk analysis and ongoing context monitoring, early warning and early action as well as working closely with international and local partners to evaluate risks and adapt responses accordingly.

Implementing the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus approach

To break the cycle of fragility, the EU and its Member States should prioritise an HDP Nexus approach for all contexts facing fragility, ensuring that immediate relief efforts are linked with long-term resilience-building and social cohesion strategies. The EU should uphold its commitments to the nexus approach - from the [2017 Council Conclusions](#) to the [2021 EC Communication on the EU's humanitarian aid](#) - to promote more effective and sustainable responses to complex crises. This requires respect for humanitarian principles, protection of humanitarian access and civic space, and strong engagement of development donors in contexts with fragility. The latter is particularly important to bridge the gap between humanitarian action and Global Gateway projects. The EU should mainstream conflict sensitivity across all programmes, prioritising investment in local peace processes and social cohesion, and ensuring meaningful participation of affected communities. To this end, greater collaboration and coordination with local actors - both in decision-making processes and in the implementation of HDP nexus programmes - are essential for achieving sustainable impact and building resilience. The EU and its Member States should draw lessons from successful [HDP nexus case studies](#) and enhance coordination across departments, whether humanitarian, development, peace or climate, to ensure policy coherence and efficiency. This does not require merging [instruments](#) or budget lines but rather improving the development and use of joint analyses and monitoring mechanisms.

Guaranteeing long-term and flexible commitment to fragility

Building resilience takes time and requires long-term commitment. Because contexts facing fragility are, by definition, less equipped to manage both sudden-onset shocks and slow-onset stressors, development donors must not only maintain but intensify their engagement in these settings. Specifically, they should maintain their commitment in fragile and conflict-affected contexts where cooperation with national governments remains possible, but also where such cooperation is no longer viable. Overall, the EU and its Member States should strengthen their capacity to monitor the evolution of a context, assess the changing needs, and rapidly adjust actions and financing accordingly. Hence, ensuring flexible funding through humanitarian, development and climate funding mechanisms, or unearmarked funding including crisis modifiers, is essential. Donors should guarantee flexibility when designing actions with local actors and identify alternative plans as early as possible in case of shocks. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts where cooperation with the national government is no longer an option, it is crucial to foresee contingency mechanisms that enable the reallocation of development budgets from national authorities to alternative delivery partners. Building new partnerships with local authorities, local actors, and civil society organisations, by identifying new models and channels, is fundamental to sustain development efforts and foster resilience. As many fragile contexts are affected by conflicts, it is equally important to strengthen humanitarian diplomacy to ensure access and respect for International Humanitarian Law, while promoting a regional approach and enhancing multi-donor coordination.

Addressing fragility is not only a humanitarian imperative but also a necessity for the EU and its Member States. It is now the time to break the cycle of crises, support resilience, durable solutions and develop a bold response to fragility.