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# THE HUMANITARIAN RESET EXAMINED

**A strategic briefing for NGOs**

May 2025



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION



# The IASC Humanitarian Reset examined: A strategic briefing for NGOs

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## Introduction

This quick guide aims to support NGOs in understanding and engaging with the ongoing [IASC Humanitarian Reset](#) a reform initiative intended to help reshape the humanitarian system. It is intended to help NGO practitioners, coordination leads, and policy staff navigate the complex reform landscape, and to encourage informed, strategic participation in shaping a more accountable, efficient, and inclusive humanitarian system.

*“Everyone is waiting for a masterplan. There is no masterplan.”*

*NGO Representative*

This guide will be updated regularly throughout the Reset process. We welcome input from ICVA members—please share your feedback at [coordination@icvanetwork.org](mailto:coordination@icvanetwork.org).

The first part outlines the Reset process, while the second part presents member analysis and perspectives on the Reset, addressing the following questions:

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## What is the Humanitarian Reset?

The humanitarian reset refers to a proposed overhaul of the humanitarian aid system aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness in response to “a profound crisis of legitimacy, morale, and funding”. The reset was instigated by Tom Fletcher, the Emergency Relief Chief on 10 March 2025.

In a [letter to the IASC Principals](#), he outlined his vision:

*“We must both regroup and renew at the same time. I propose we do so on the foundation of three strategic priorities: the best possible crisis response with the resources we have; urgent work to reform and reimagine how we work; and shift power to our humanitarian leaders in country, and the people we serve.”*

## What triggered the humanitarian reset?

The humanitarian reset was largely catalysed by the shock of the US suspension and termination of humanitarian assistance that began in late January 2025. However, the reset is not solely a reaction to this crisis: much of the thinking around efficiencies and reduced bureaucracy was already under discussion within the IASC.

In late 2024, at the request of the new ERC Tom Fletcher, a report was produced by Jan Egeland (NRC) and Joyce Msuya (ASG OCHA) outlining [a simplified and more efficient humanitarian system](#) with “proposals for how to ensure faster and more decisive humanitarian decision-making while wasting fewer resources on bureaucratic processes.” The report identified scope to:

- ❑ Reduce internal process,
- ❑ Rationalise overlapping and large coordination bodies,
- ❑ Prioritise between indispensable and optional international meetings and
- ❑ Ensure in-country presence is located where it is most effective, with focused leadership at national, regional and global levels.

Even prior to this report, in the context of reduced funding in 2024 and further reductions anticipated in 2025, OCHA had been implementing a ‘[ruthless’ approach to scope, boundary setting and prioritisation](#). This reprioritisation exercise already led to a reduction of \$10 billion financing requested in the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) from 2023 to the start of 2025, despite rising needs.

The reset therefore builds and extends on existing IASC reform initiatives. It marks an acceleration and deepening of systemic changes, raising critical questions for NGOs — particularly about **who decides what is essential, how priorities are set, and what this shift means for inclusivity, leadership, and accountability across the humanitarian system.**

## How does the reset link with other processes?

### The UN80 initiative

The Humanitarian Reset was announced just **one day before** the [UN Secretary-General's UN80 Initiative](#), which he presented to Member States on 11 March. The UN80 Initiative is linked to the eightieth anniversary of the [United Nations Charter](#) and structured around three workstreams:

1. To rapidly identify efficiencies and improvements under current arrangements.
2. Reviewing the implementation of all mandates given to the UN by Member States.
3. Consideration of the need for structural changes and programme realignment across the UN system.

While both initiatives were launched at the same time, the Humanitarian Reset initially progressed more quickly than the UN80, reflecting the urgent financial pressures affecting the humanitarian system. However, the UN80 is now gaining momentum, with initial recommendations due in June and key budgetary decisions expected by September.

While there are no clear formal links between the two processes, many of the proposed changes to UN agency mandates under the UN80 are likely to influence both short-term decisions and longer-term reforms within the humanitarian system. While broader UN reforms may seem distant, the urgency of the financial crisis facing the UN means that sooner than expected they could trigger shifts in how mandates are interpreted, who coordinates what, and how funding is channelled.

**It is likely that, in the mid- to long-term, the decisions taken under UN80 will have a far greater influence on the future direction of the humanitarian system than the reset itself.**

### The Grand Bargain

The Humanitarian Reset aligns closely with the principles of the Grand Bargain: Both initiatives emphasise efficiency, localisation, and accountability. In March 2025, the Grand Bargain Participation Community of Practice, established to track progress – or the lack of – on Grand Bargain commitments on participation issued a [joint statement](#) to humanitarian leaders demanding a ‘community-led humanitarian re-set’.

Key areas of convergence include:

- **Decentralising Coordination:** Advocating for area-based coordination models that empower local leadership and streamline response efforts.
- **Democratising Data:** Promoting information systems designed and led by those closest to crisis-affected communities, ensuring data accessibility and accountability.

- **Transforming Pooled Funds:** Calling for pooled funds to prioritise local and national actors as primary recipients, reducing barriers to access and enhancing responsiveness to community needs.

In March, at the *Leveraging the Bargain* meeting, Grand Bargain Ambassadors presented a proposal of concrete measures to participants with the objectives of (i) safeguarding principled and needs-based assistance, (ii) empowering local partners, and (iii) protecting core functions.

A Caucus on Efficiency Measures was launched and members (Netherlands, Norway, NEAR, ICVA, WFP, IFRC and UNICEF) met weekly to agree on smaller set of achievable measures for 2025-2026 and to lay the ground for broader transformations within the sector in a joint statement. Discussions have been ongoing within constituencies to finalise the set of measures, with NGOs notably reinforcing the need for better acknowledgment of non UN structures in force in any humanitarian context and for localisation of decision-making.

## Refugee response

IASC coordination does not cover all types of humanitarian responses and often operates alongside, or overlaps with, UNHCR-led refugee coordination. Funding for refugee responses, through UNHCR and partners, has been equally impacted by the recent funding cuts. Although UNHCR has not packaged the response as a ‘reset’, critical prioritization and reduction in capacity is also currently ongoing in this system.

Under the [Refugee Coordination Model \(RCM\)](#), UNHCR supports refugee-hosting States and coordinates NGOs and other inter-agency actors through eight [Regional Refugee Response Plans](#) (RRRPs) covering 51 countries. Their mandate spans refugee protection, assistance, and solutions. While refugees have certain protections under the 1951 Refugee Convention, many have comparable material assistance needs to those in protracted internal displacement or rapid onset emergency.

IASC response and refugee response prioritisation have been, until now, treated quite independently, despite their interconnectedness and shared ambitions. In mixed displacement contexts, UNHCR and OCHA should be focused on promoting complementarity between these coordination systems, avoiding duplication, and closing gaps. The differential approaches have again raised longstanding questions amongst NGOs as to the coherence, inclusivity and accountability of overlapping approaches and their ability to center those most affected by crisis and forced displacement, including the communities that host them.

A genuine ‘reset’ of the humanitarian system writ large will require further efforts to promote coherence in all coordination systems, bringing together community-centred needs assessment and analysis, data, planning and response modalities.

ICVA remains engaged with UNHCR on their prioritisation and considerations for operational continuity, as well as promoting coherence with the Humanitarian Reset.

- ▣ ICVA members who would like to engage further should e-mail [davina.said@icvanetwork.org](mailto:davina.said@icvanetwork.org).

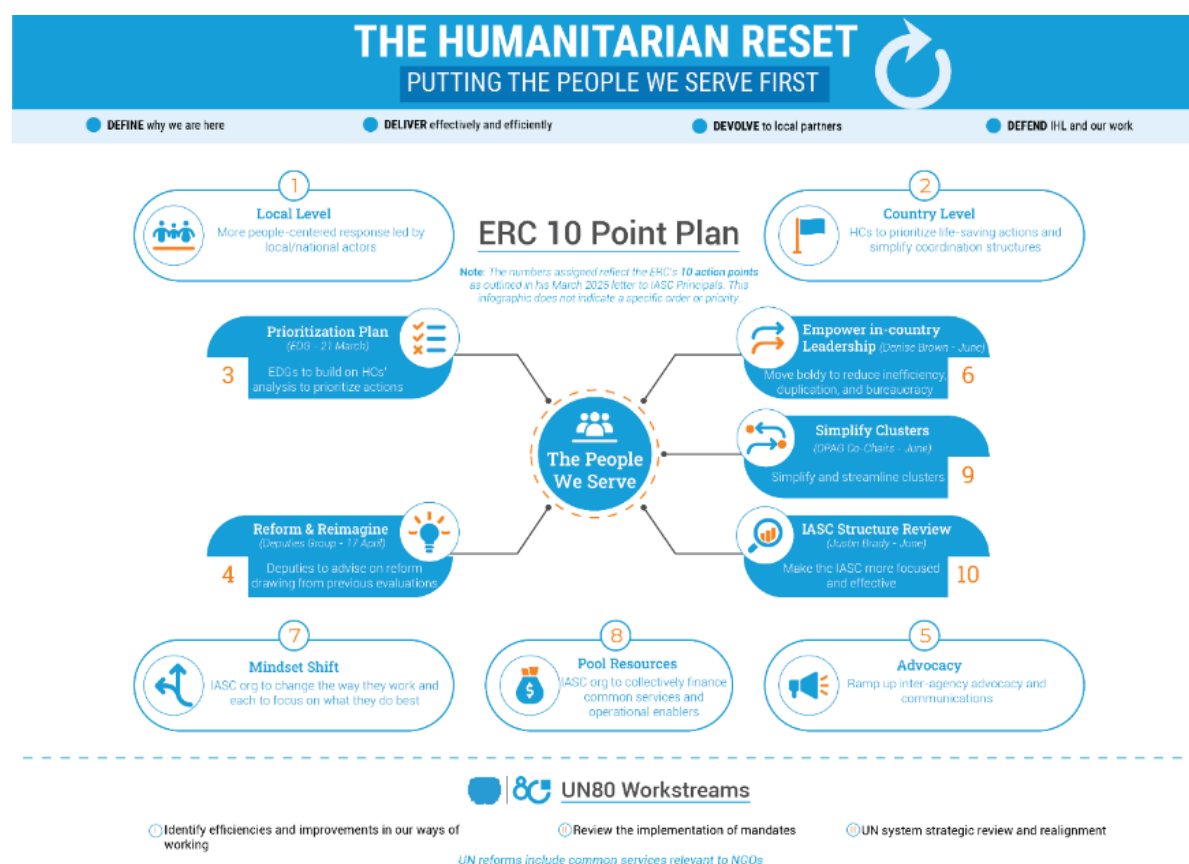
## Development Action

The Humanitarian Reset sets a systemwide target of reaching 100 million people, [almost the same reached by the system in 2024](#) before the current funding crisis. This is likely optimistic, and importantly it means **at least 200 million people in need who were identified at the start of 2025** will not be targeted or reached by humanitarian assistance. While these people and their needs have not disappeared, consideration of alternative approaches to responding to them appear to be falling short.

Various initiatives over recent years (e.g. boundary-setting, efficiencies) and now the humanitarian reset have been framed as ways to help humanitarians refocus on a core mandate - or alternatively go 'back to basics'. While a smaller and more focused humanitarian footprint and ambition is not – in itself - a bad thing, the humanitarian reset cannot be considered separate and distinct from the implications for the wider [sustainable development agenda](#) in which reduction of poverty, hunger and inequality more broadly are the fundamental goals.

The failure of decades of effort to effectively enable a 'nexus' response linking humanitarian and development action seems destined to weaken the reset from the start. For example, the immediate approach to reprioritisation was to remove from HRPs the activities related to recovery, solutions and resilience initiatives. This reinforces the divide of humanitarian from wider development action and is clearly not in line with the [priorities of affected people](#).

## What are the workstreams for the delivery of the reset?



The processes of the Humanitarian Reset are laid out in a 10 point plan and are currently being delivered in parallel workstreams:

Workstream	Objective	Led by
<b>1</b> Putting People First	Emphasize a more people centred response led by local/national actors	-
<b>2</b> Country Strategies	HCs to prioritise life-saving actions and simplify coordination structures	Humanitarian Coordinators
<b>3</b> EDG Prioritisation Plan	EDG to build on HCs' analysis to prioritise actions	Emergency Directors Group
<b>4</b> Reform and Reimagination	Deputies to advise on reform drawing from previous evaluations	IASC Deputies
<b>5</b> Interagency Advocacy and Communications	Ramp up interagency advocacy and communications	OCHA and ICVA

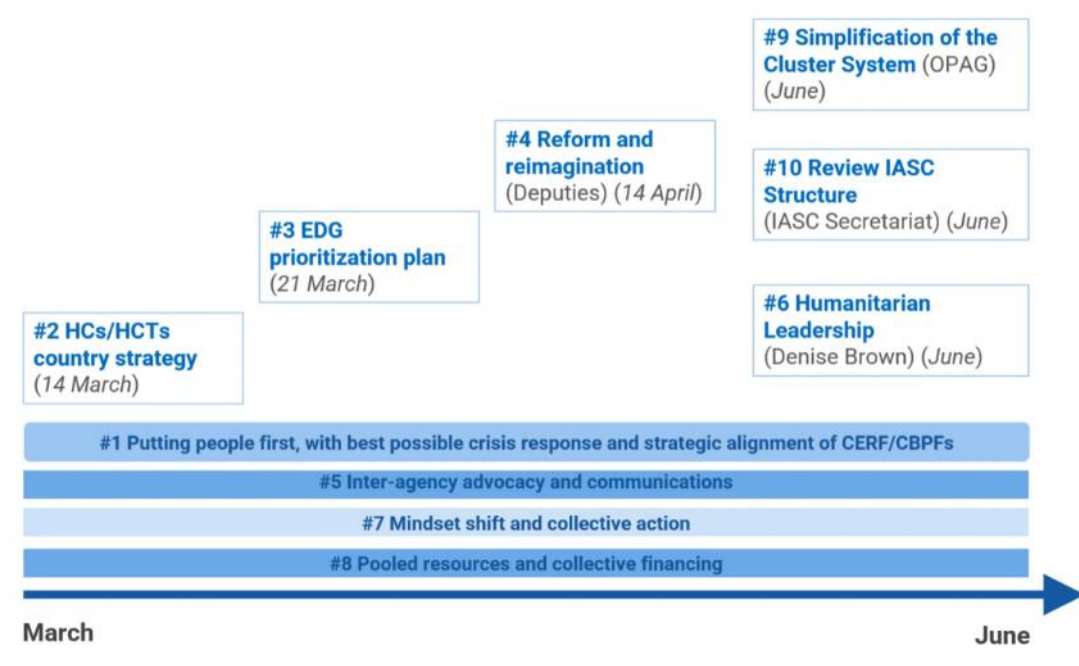
6	Humanitarian Leadership	Empower in-country leadership	Special Advisor to the ERC on Humanitarian Leadership
7	Mindset Shift and Collective Action	IASC org to change the way they work and each to focus on what they do best	Collective responsibility linked to UN80 and NGO restructuring
8	Pooled Resources and Collective Financing	IASC to consider how to collectively finance common services and operational enablers	Collective responsibility (including linked to CERF/CBPFs, other Pooled Funds, and the Grand Bargain)
9	Simplification of the Cluster System	Simplify and streamline clusters	OPAG Chairs
10	Review of IASC Structures	Make the IASC more focused and effective	Head of the IASC Secretariat

## What is the timeline for the reset?

Figure 1 below outlines the key deadlines for each workstream deliverable in the lead up to next IASC Principals meeting in Geneva on 17 June 2025. **This meeting will convene the IASC Principals to develop a more comprehensive Humanitarian Reset plan.**

Beyond the immediate discussions and limited consultative processes, NGOs are encouraged to begin considering ‘Phase 2’ of a Humanitarian Reset – post June 2025 - and how we can try to ensure more inclusive decision-making on the future humanitarian landscape.

**Figure 1: Humanitarian Reset Timeline**



## What is the status of the discussions in each of the workstreams?

*“It’s rough. Really brutal choices are being made and the sector will probably shrink by one third. The money that’s been cut isn’t going to come back anytime soon, and there may be more funding cuts ahead.”*

[Tom Fletcher, ERC](#), 1 May, Press Statement during his Afghanistan visit

A brief overview of the discussions and guiding documents informing each workstream is provided below.

### 1. Putting People First

The ERC has prioritised re-centering the entire humanitarian system around those people most in need. This workstream does not have a specific lead or a tangible set of indicators, it is the aspiration that underpins the entire exercise – articulated as identifying power and giving it away to those closer to communities.

These aspirations are not new, each of the past two ERCs has tried and [putting people at the centre](#) was key to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. Over the past decade improving the system’s [accountability to affected people](#) has been a constant refrain. However, [evaluations and analysis](#) continue to show that the system falls short: The 2023 Independent Report on the Grand Bargain, for example, found [no evidence of a substantive shift in how](#) aid is delivered at community level.

Country level efforts towards the Humanitarian Reset have yet to reverse this trend, as demonstrated in a joint statement from representatives of civil society in West and Central Africa to the ERC, which flagged:

*“Essential consultations with national NGOs, local authorities, and affected communities—clearly stated as a priority in your declaration of 10 March 2025—have not been meaningfully conducted”*

This shortfall is not due to a lack of advocacy or interest from NGOs and beyond:

- ❑ In a [joint statement to humanitarian leaders](#), the **Grand Bargain Community of Practice on Participation** urged the ERC and IASC Principals to ensure the Humanitarian Reset is driven primarily by the needs and priorities of communities in crisis.
- ❑ Ground Truth Solutions published [What crisis affected communities need from a humanitarian reset](#), based on two years of conversations with people on the front lines of crisis. Their message was clear: *“The humanitarian reset must be led by what crisis-affected people need. The world cannot afford – morally or financially – a humanitarian system that isn’t shaped by this principle.”*
- ❑ OCHA’s [Flagship Initiative Second Year Learning Report](#) makes significant references to the need for greater application of putting people first in the context of the

humanitarian reset. The summary note of the associated Learning Event ‘**A people-driven humanitarian reset**’ concludes *“the vision for change was consistent across the speakers: the humanitarian system must meet with communities where they are and fund what they ask for in coordination with the partners who are present.”*

Although framed as the central issue, the absence of clear leadership or a workplan for implementation means it remains unclear how the aspirations will be realised.

On 20 May, ICVA, with support from Ground Truth Solutions, wrote to the ERC to emphasize the need to **place this issue at the top of the agenda** for the 17 June IASC Principals meeting. The letter highlighted that while practical solutions exist, they will require commitment from Principals to truly prioritise the voices of those most affected by humanitarian crisis.

*“Engagements with humanitarian leaders reveal a troubling trend: the process is deemed too rapid to allow community consultations, or that in an era of radical cuts, there is a reluctance to incorporate community inputs due to fears of raising false expectations. This approach undermines the very principle of ‘putting people at the centre’ and disrespects the agency of communities in crisis. If the architects of the humanitarian reset cannot prioritise the perspectives of those directly affected, **whose interests are truly being served?**”*

## 2. Country Strategies (HCs/HCTs)

The ERC tasked Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) to prioritise life-saving actions and simplify coordination structures. As part of this directive, HCs were asked to produce country-specific reports outlining the impact of the funding crisis on the implementation of humanitarian strategies and their corresponding operational plans.

28 HCs submitted reports to the ERC between 13-19 March, and OCHA conducted analysis of these. While some maintain a “business as usual” approach, others propose a more ambitious agenda for change. Some HCs held discussions with HCT members and included NGOs in their strategic planning, whereas others did not.

- The HC inputs indicated that operations were making hard choices to reduce and re/de-prioritize applying various methods. In at least 13 countries, the reprioritization resulted in a geographic reconcentration of humanitarian response. In over half the contexts, “Lifesaving” and “Protection” Strategic Objectives were used to define the most urgent priorities.
- Adapting and streamlining coordination progressed at varying degrees across different operations, with no “one-size fits all” approach. A major reduction in coordination capacity was reported, leading to discussions on potential

adjustments to the coordination architecture. The sub-national level emerged as a clear area of focus in streamlining coordination.

- ❑ Some HCs reported they were prioritizing communication with communities to manage expectations, and localizing response was a priority measure identified by at least two thirds of all HCs. Some declared this is an opportune moment to “push” with local and national governments to increase ownership over response and coordination.

Many NGOs flagged concerns around the impacts of reprioritisation on Protection and how the centrality of protection and protection programming, which is often critically underfunded, would be maintained. The Global Protection Cluster has a website looking at [Positioning Protection in Humanitarian Action 2025: Foreign Aid Funding Cuts, Humanitarian Reform, and Cluster Transition](#) where related aspects of the reset are shared.

[Reprioritised HNRPs are being published online](#) as they are finalized. Given the critical lack of funding in many responses, it will be important to monitor whether these reprioritised plans have any impact on operational presence and donor decision making.

How can NGOs engage?

- ❑ National and International NGOs can engage in ongoing discussions at the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and should contact the relevant NGO Forum or Country Directors who are representing there for more information.
- ❑ Engagement on related issues will continue through the ICVA Humanitarian Programme Cycle Working Group [HPCWG]. All members are welcome to join, for more information please email [coordination@icvanetwork.org](mailto:coordination@icvanetwork.org).

### 3. EDG Prioritisation Plan (IASC Emergency Directors Group)

The Emergency Directors Group held its Annual Review of Operations in February. In the leadup to this meeting, the ERC tasked the ERC to complete a rapid prioritisation plan to guide immediate decisions across operations. The EDG submitted its prioritisation recommendations to the IASC Principals on 21 March. While the full document is restricted, a summary is available to ICVA members.

The EDG recommended the following eight parameters to guide prioritised operations:

1. A people-centered approach
2. Adapting programming for greater efficiencies, including a shift to cash-based programming.
3. Streamlining and simplifying coordination structures
4. Prioritising and streamlining needs assessments
5. Maintaining humanitarian access and promoting humanitarian principles,
6. Preserving common services and operational enablers such as security services and logistics.

7. Responsible transition, reinforce national systems to foster self-reliance
8. Mindset shift

In order to reduce the scope of humanitarian coordination and refocus IASC resources and attention on a smaller set of crises, the EDG proposed an accelerated transition of humanitarian coordination architecture in eight countries: **Cameroon, Colombia, Eritrea, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Zimbabwe.**

This accelerated transition involves the reconfiguration of the humanitarian coordination architecture, including:

- ❑ Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) roles and designations;
- ❑ The continuation or dissolution of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs);
- ❑ The Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC);
- ❑ Cluster coordination mechanisms.

Timelines and specific adjustments will vary by context, and may have significant implications for operational leadership, visibility, and access.

**Joining the dots:** the following countries (out of those listed above), form part of Regional Refugee Response Plans. Therefore, an accelerated transition will have implications for those response plans, and advance planning and coordination will be required.

- ❑ Colombia: Venezuela Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) (Co-led with IOM).
- ❑ Iraq: Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) (Co-led with UNDP).
- ❑ Libya: Included in the Sudan Refugee Response Plan ([since July 2024](#)).
- ❑ Pakistan: Included in the Afghan Situation RRP.

### HOW CAN NGOs ENGAGE?

- ❑ ICVA members are represented at the EDG by ICVA's Head of Humanitarian Coordination and two member representatives (currently NRC and Trocaire).
- ❑ ICVA has established a new Coordination Transition Working Group [CTWG] that brings together NGO leaders from the transition contexts along with regional and global support. This group is open to all members, for more information contact [coordination@icvanetwork.org](mailto:coordination@icvanetwork.org)
- ❑ ICVA has established a core-group on refugee response prioritisation, which engages directly with UNHCR. ICVA Members can reach out to [davina.said@icvanetwork.org](mailto:davina.said@icvanetwork.org) to be included.

## 4. Reform and Reimagination (IASC Deputies)

On 17 April, the IASC Deputies Group submitted its final recommendations for **Reimagining the Humanitarian System** to the ERC and IASC Principals for their feedback and consideration. It will be tabled at the next IASC Principals meeting. While this document is not public, it is available to ICVA members through our Humanitarian Reset Working Group.

The paper presents the following overarching considerations for a reformed, re-imagined humanitarian system:

- ❑ **Prioritise saving lives** based on greatest needs and highest vulnerabilities (including factors such as age, sex, ethnicity, gender orientation, disabilities and others), and **discontinue activities** that the humanitarian sector is not best placed to lead.
- ❑ Strive for **integrated impact and outcomes** in affected communities by consolidating mandates and services, lightening processes, and aligning planning, funding, programming, and coordination.
- ❑ **Embed local participation and communication** with affected communities as standard practice, with increased related accountability of international actors.

### Learning from Past Evaluations

At the request of the IASC Deputies Group for evaluative evidence to support their recommendations to the IASC Principals on the future direction of the humanitarian reset, the [IAHE Steering Group](#) developed a brief analysis of findings, lessons, and recommendations from recent Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs).

Note: This document is not public, it is available to ICVA members through our Humanitarian Reset Working Group. For more information email [coordination@icvanetwork.org](mailto:coordination@icvanetwork.org).

It proposes four key recommendations:

1. Refocus coordination to achieve integrated and locally-led responses and impact
2. Transform humanitarian financing and scale-up cost-efficient modalities
3. Integrate Humanitarian Diplomacy and Advocacy at the core of crisis response
4. Work towards increased development and IFI financing, especially in deprioritised humanitarian settings to support transitions.

### How can NGOs engage?

- ❑ The IASC Deputies will meet to discuss the reset in Geneva on 03 June.
- ❑ ICVA members are represented at the IASC Deputies group by ICVA's Director of Engagement, and the Vice Chair of the ICVA Board (currently Plan International).

## 5. Interagency Advocacy and Communications

To strengthen strategic communications around the impact of the humanitarian funding crisis, the ERC established the **IASC Comms Situation Room**. This small group of senior communication leads from UN agencies and NGOs meet fortnightly and shares weekly updates on opportunities, content and tactics.

The group aims to ensure that communications across humanitarian agencies are aligned, responsive, and impactful. Recognising the growing scepticism around the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, the group is also exploring new tactics and collective approaches. Leadership has emphasised the need for communications to be *calm, creative, collective, and courageous*—engaging critics constructively, amplifying humanitarian voices, and ensuring messaging remains community-centred, principled, and responsive to evolving narratives.

### HOW CAN NGOS ENGAGE?

- ❑ NGO humanitarian communications, advocacy and policy staff are welcome to the ICVA-OCHA led [Advocacy & Communications Team](#), which is closely linked with the IASC Comms Situation Room. This platform helps NGOs and NGO networks to influence strategic narratives from a civil society perspective, access resources and share stories. Contact [communications@icvanetwork.org](mailto:communications@icvanetwork.org) for more details or to get involved.

## 6. Humanitarian Leadership

Denise Brown, former RC/HC in Ukraine and the Central African Republic, has been appointed as Special Advisor to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) on the Humanitarian Reset. Her mandate is to lead a mission to develop a new generation of outstanding humanitarian leaders and foster an enabling environment within Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs). She also advises the Under-Secretary-General on wider strategic prioritisation.

This workstream has been the most visibly consultative of NGOs, and over the past months the Special Advisor has engaged widely with different groups of national and international NGO leaders. Of particular note:

- ❑ A discussion on 05 May between the ERC and a diverse group of National NGO leaders (with the support of ICVA)
- ❑ A discussion on 16 May with NGO Forum Directors (with the support of ICVA)
- ❑ Meetings with small-groups of national NGO leaders in East/West Africa, MENA, Asia and LAC regions (with the support of NEAR Network).

These discussions have underscored both the opportunity - and need - to radically decentralise decision-making and place communities and frontline responders at the centre of leadership, funding, and accountability.

To ensure humanitarian action is truly inclusive, locally led, and fit for purpose, NGOs called for UN agencies and INGOs to:

- ❑ Reposition themselves as technical enablers, not gatekeepers,
- ❑ Provide direct, flexible funding to locally led and governed structures,
- ❑ Tailor coordination structures to each context,
- ❑ Establish a framework of mutual accountability where front-line responders, HCs and international actors are answerable to local constituencies,

Building on these consultations with NGOs, UN agencies, host government and donors - and informed by her own leadership experience - the Special Advisor has proposed a public accountability framework that would underpin a humanitarian reset. The framework envisions empowered Humanitarian Coordinators, who make increased use of Pooled Funds in creating decentralised and agile coordination for people-centred humanitarian action.

- ❑ This framework was discussed in a workshop at the annual Humanitarian Coordinator Retreat on 21-22 May.

## 7. Mindset shift and collective action

Limited information is available on this workstream, which for the UN seems to have been largely subsumed into UN80 discussions.

There have been scattered proposals including around complementary withdrawals of likeminded INGOs and even some talk of mergers and acquisitions between INGOs, [echoing discussions from over a decade ago](#). However most of the initial focus has been on downsizing not (yet) on more transformative changes.

The paper [Humanitarian Reset - a decolonial perspective](#) argues that “*a true reset cannot be launched without analysing the historical contexts, including the period of colonisation and the prevailing colonial matrix of power, which created and now perpetuates the power imbalances.*”

## 8. Pooled Resources and Collective Financing

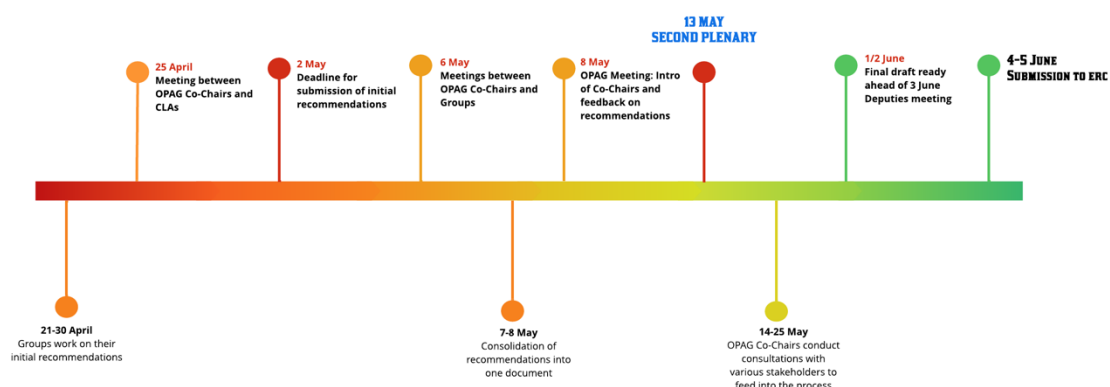
This workstream aims to re-examine how pooled funds—particularly the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs)—can support common services and critical enablers like logistics, coordination, security, and analysis. There is also growing discussion about how NGOs can collectively advocate for, and manage, shared funding instruments at national and regional levels.

## 9. Simplification of the Cluster System

The ERC requested the OPAG Chairs (Gabriella Waaijman, Save the Children & Ted Chaiban, UNICEF) to work with the Global Clusters and Cluster Lead Agencies to

propose a simplification and rethinking of cluster coordination and present options to the IASC Principals in June. The timeline for the process is outlined below.

### Cluster Reform Timeline - as of 30 April 2025



Although this process was heavily dominated by Cluster Lead Agencies and Cluster Coordinators, there were various avenues for NGO engagement.

- Representatives from four NGOs were directly engaged according to their cluster roles:
  - Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) – Housing, Land & Property (HLP) Area of Responsibility (AoR)
  - Save the Children - OPAG Co-chair, Education Cluster
  - Danish Refugee Council (DRC) - Mine Action AoR
  - International Medical Corps (IMC) – Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG) Co-Chair).
- Local and National NGOs were invited to complete the Global Cluster Coordination Group's Localisation and People Centred Approaches survey which was available in English, French, Spanish & Arabic (18-28 April).
- Consultations were arranged with the Strategic Advisory groups (SAGs) of the Global Clusters, which include NGOs. Some clusters also undertook country level consultations with cluster members.
- In May, ICVA members met with Ted Chaiban, and the ICVA Humanitarian Reset Working Group met with Gabriella Waaijman to discuss the draft recommendations.

### HOW CAN NGOS ENGAGE?

The draft recommendations are open for feedback, including from ICVA Members, until 25 May.

## 10. Review of IASC Structures

The interim head of the IASC Secretariat in Geneva has started outreach on the future role and structure of the Secretariat. This outreach builds on consultations and discussions from late 2024, during which the IASC Secretariat submitted a proposal for the [preferred future IASC Subsidiary structure](#) to the Emergency Relief Coordinator. #

### What are NGO concerns about the reset?

Civil society representatives from the Global North and South, including ICVA, have broadly welcomed a renewed focus on reform in the humanitarian system. However, many also question whether the reset is the vehicle that will enable this.

Discussions with ICVA members and partners have identified the following key concerns with the humanitarian reset:

#### 1. Financial duress – not strategic, people-centred vision – is driving the reset

The Humanitarian Reset is unfolding primarily in response to acute funding shortages, rather than a shared long-term vision for strategic transformation. As a result, attention has largely focused on what to cut and where, while much-needed reflection on [how to improve the system](#), and its constituent agencies, has largely been secondary.

The suddenness of the funding cuts has severely limited the space for a strategic rethink of the humanitarian system, as agencies are in crisis mode. UN agencies and NGOs have already been forced to make rapid, decisions about what to cut. These decisions have often been taken in isolation, under pressure, and without a coordinated vision or [meaningful consultation with affected communities](#).

While some actors, [such as Christian Aid](#) are revisiting their strategies and ways of working, most appear to be continuing a business-as-usual model, albeit it a drastically reduced one. The funding cuts are unlikely to be a temporary contraction, but the emergence of the new norm. Agencies must now fundamentally adapt their business models and ways of working, or risk becoming irrelevant in a reshaped humanitarian sector.

In the statement [Our Shared Commitment to Principled Humanitarian Action](#) ICVA and members highlighted that quick reactions and the drive for efficiency must not override the imperative for principled, high-quality, inclusive humanitarian action that promotes and protects humanity and human rights. While the urgency of financial constraint is real, it must not crowd out the opportunity — and the imperative — to collectively reimagine a humanitarian system that is fit for purpose. Lives, dignity, and trust in humanitarian action depend on it.

## 2. Decisions are being made without collective agreement

While proposals for the Reset are meant to be finalised in mid-June, many organisations have already implemented their own decisions and significant changes are underway. In effect, the Reset is being implemented de facto — before it has been debated, agreed, or designed.

This pre-empts meaningful reform and undermines any opportunity for co-created solutions. Without a coordinated transition strategy, the sector risks entrenching a more fragile, fragmented version of the current system — one that is smaller but still fundamentally flawed. Moreover, the decisions being made now may limit future possibilities for reform, as sunk costs and reduced capacities shape what comes next.

## 3. The system is resistant to change – even when the path forward is clear

There is no shortage of thought leadership on what needs to change. The system's flaws are extensively documented - through its own [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations](#) (IAHEs), independent studies, donor-funded analysis and NGO learning initiatives. These have produced a wealth of clear, actionable recommendations.

Yet despite years of advocacy, evidence, and reform proposals, the system remains **deeply resistant to transformational change**. This is particularly evident in areas where progress has long been promised but repeatedly stalled, such as accountability to affected populations, localisation, protection and gender-based violence, and diversity and inclusion.

The Humanitarian Reset is in essence an attempt to implement a major change management process, both at institutional and systemwide levels. Transformational change requires a shared vision, incentives and resources aligned with new behaviours, clear accountability lines and a culture shift that prioritises **trust and inclusion**. Without

Civil society representatives have written that the Humanitarian Reset *“is not so much a (much-needed) reset as it is a preliminary starting point. A true reset must lead to more fundamental changes to longstanding humanitarian power structures that have contributed to exclusion, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability to crisis-affected people.”*

They outline [A Vision for Ambitious Change](#) to address this.

“The system needs to be cracked open to allow scrutiny and challenge as new reforms are pitched and shaped. Voices from outside the centres of power must influence the “humanitarian reset”.”

[Lydia Poole, The New Humanitarian](#)

these core components, the Reset risks becoming another reform moment that fails to deliver the change communities have long been promised.

#### 4. The system must better enable NGO leaders in coordination

The reset, coupled with UN80, will inevitably impact on the scope, scale and quality of expensive UN-led coordination services. Meaningful reform necessitates scope for out of the box thinking, yet **the current approach is centering established coordination actors as the architects of the reset**. This risks sidelining the critical contribution and potential of innovations such as NGO-led coordination, area-based approaches and local leadership.

In a world where the IASC coordination footprint is shrinking, a new vision of **coordination as a service** is needed. It calls for a reimagined role for OCHA, shifting from a power broker and controller to an enabler and facilitator of coordination including through providing technical support, trainings and tools for those stepping into coordination functions, and resources to sustain their action. It also means defending the humanitarian space to enable complementary local and international NGO action.

Strategic questions must be asked - such as:

- ❑ How can the reset improve HCT accountability and ensure genuine inclusion of NGOs, particularly local actors, to enable their real influence in resolving strategic and operational challenges?
- ❑ How can locally-driven coordination help the frontline agencies implementing the response strengthen accountability to people, not just to donors?
- ❑ What are the essential core services that OCHA and other specialized coordination actors must deliver, and what functions could instead be externalized and effectively fulfilled by others?
- ❑ What context-specific criteria should guide the selection or adaptation of coordination models on a country-by-country basis?
- ❑ How can coordination better enable capacity sharing in areas such as access, safety and security and risk management.

Without grappling with these questions, we risk preserving outdated structures and missing the opportunity for smarter, more strategic cost-cutting that could genuinely strengthen the system.

### **Adapting Coordination through NGO-led Models**

Over the past decade, the presence and role of NGO fora has evolved considerably. While in general their focus has remained limited – providing a space for NGOs to exchange and coordinate their external representation – there are several examples of NGOs providing a suite of coordination services. These range from access working groups to full-fledged sectorial coordination when and where the UN were unable to offer those services. However, these efforts have remained largely unrecognised by the system, often struggling to link formally with standard structures.

## **5. The Reset's Achilles heel: the politicisation of aid and incentive structures**

The humanitarian reset is unfolding within a broader environment that is increasingly hostile to principled and effective humanitarian action. Humanitarian financing from major government donors is becoming overtly politicised, with donor government interests pressuring agencies to align with political priorities rather than needs-based approaches.

At the same time, internal performance incentives within many agencies reward fundraising success over delivering principled humanitarian aid or collaboration. Leaders are encouraged to prioritise institutional survival (or growth), over quality. This not only risks denying assistance to those most in need, but also fosters a more transactional, fragmented system.

The reset must acknowledge that context is king—and the context shaping this reset is one of rising geopolitical pressure and shrinking humanitarian space. Unless the structural incentives and political pressures are addressed, the reset risks entrenching a system that values the appearance of coordination and partnerships over true localisation, meaningful accountability, principled delivery, and impact for people in need.

## **How are Donors Reacting?**

Donors have also been doing their own thinking and analysis of the way ahead. ICVA is engaging donors in dialogue on issues related to their funding of coordination systems and services.



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