



WHEN EMPATHY FADES: THE COLLAPSE OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSIBILITY IN A STRUCTURALLY BROKEN WORLD

CARLOS LOPES



Global humanitarianism is undergoing one of the most turbulent periods of change in modern history. Empathy, understood not as sentiment but as the recognition of shared vulnerability and interdependence, has historically underpinned the rationale for humanitarianism. When empathy fades, the retreat of empathy is not just a crisis of compassion but a reflection of deeper political trends: the decline of ODA as a structuring principle, the securitisation of displacement, the instrumentalisation of aid, and the growing disconnect between innovation and inclusion. It demands a structural realignment in how global governance treats exposure to risk, capacity for resilience and responsibility for injustice.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is undergoing one of the most turbulent periods of change in modern history. Geopolitical rivalry is intensifying, multilateral institutions are weakened by inertia and fragmentation and climate shocks, demographic divergence and economic dislocation are converging in ways that defy existing governance frameworks. These are not temporary disruptions. They are structural shifts reshaping the global order. Amid this volatility, one would expect humanitarian action – the frontline expression of international solidarity – to rise in prominence. Instead, we are witnessing the opposite.

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The last five years have marked a dramatic decline in the political and financial commitment to humanitarian principles. Official Development Assistance (ODA), once considered a moral barometer of international responsibility, is being diluted, reclassified or redirected. Appeals for humanitarian relief go chronically underfunded, even in cases of mass displacement, famine or large-scale disaster. Established norms of neutrality, impartiality and protection are either ignored or subordinated to national security priorities. These are not isolated incidents. They mark the emergence of a 'new normal' in which empathy is no longer a default expectation but a discretionary political choice.

Empathy – understood not as sentiment but as the recognition of shared vulnerability and interdependence – has historically underpinned the rationale for humanitarianism. It has provided a moral grammar for action when institutions failed, and has animated norms that presume the dignity and worth of all lives, irrespective of location or political utility. Its erosion signals more than moral fatigue. It reveals a systemic realignment in how responsibility is distributed and how suffering is valued – or ignored.

This article argues that the retreat of empathy in global humanitarianism is not just a crisis of compassion but a reflection of deeper political trends: the decline of ODA as a structuring principle, the securitisation of displacement, the instrumentalisation of aid, and the growing disconnect between innovation and inclusion.

2. HUMANITARIANISM AS SYSTEMIC MIRROR

Humanitarianism has long been framed as the last resort of international solidarity: the institutionalised reflex that kicks in when all else fails. But today, as global crises proliferate in scale and complexity, that reflex is faltering. Humanitarian response has become erratic, politicised and increasingly shaped by national interest rather than collective obligation. What we are witnessing is not just donor fatigue or institutional dysfunction. It is the retreat of empathy as a governing principle.

This retreat mirrors deeper transformations in the global order. Demographic divergence, geopolitical fragmentation and economic asymmetries are restructuring the conditions under which humanitarian crises occur, and the political will to address them. The erosion of ODA and the weaponisation of aid are not peripheral developments. They are central indicators of a system that is failing to evolve in the face of systemic risk and structural inequality.

3. ODA IN DECLINE: MORAL RETREAT DISGUISED AS REFORM

ODA, while often criticised for its conditionalities and asymmetries, has historically symbolised a minimal commitment to international equity. But that symbolism is now under strain. Although total ODA reached a record \$211 billion in 2022, more than 20% of this was spent domestically by donor countries on refugee hosting and Ukraine-related costs (OECD, 2023).

Increasingly, assistance is being delivered in the form of concessional loans rather than grants, raising moral and financial concerns about the debt burden in already distressed economies. Between 2021 and 2022, ODA grants to developing countries fell by \$61 billion (OECD, 2023). This shift suggests that what is counted as 'aid' increasingly involves repayment obligations, undermining the principle of solidarity and potentially fuelling a new cycle of indebtedness in the Global South.

At the same time, humanitarian aid – arguably one of the most urgent forms of support – is declining in real terms. In 2022, only 11% of total ODA was allocated to humanitarian needs, despite record global demand (OECD, 2023). In 2024, humanitarian aid fell further, by an estimated 9.6%, totalling \$24.2 billion, partly due to reduced funding for Ukraine (OECD, 2025).

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These trends reflect a troubling reorientation of ODA: away from grants and needs-based relief, and towards loan-based financing and donor-country strategic interest. As a result, the normative foundation of ODA as a mechanism for redistributive justice and international solidarity is being eroded, raising urgent questions about its legitimacy and long-term role in the global development architecture.

The UN's 2023 Global Humanitarian Overview appealed for a record \$51.7 billion. Only 39% was funded by year-end (OCHA, 2023). Appeals for Sudan, Yemen and Haiti were among the least funded. In Sudan, over 7.1 million people have been displaced, but donor pledges have fallen far short of what's required (UNHCR, 2023). Haiti's 2023 humanitarian plan received just 20% of requested funding, despite escalating violence and economic collapse (OCHA, 2023). The Rohingya crisis, now in its seventh year, continues unresolved, with over 950,000 people confined to camps in Cox's Bazar (UNHCR, 2023).

These gaps are not just logistical. They are moral. The weakening of ODA commitments – especially humanitarian components – is a political signal. It reveals a shift away from the idea that vulnerability imposes obligation. What replaces this is a patchwork of ad hoc, discretionary responses conditioned by domestic politics and strategic alliances.

4. FROM HUMANITARIANISM TO CONTAINMENT

This shift is part of a larger trend: the reconfiguration of humanitarianism into a system of containment. Refugee flows, once approached as a shared responsibility, are now framed primarily as national security threats. In 2023, more than 3,000 migrants died attempting to cross the Mediterranean, while European funding for sea rescue missions was slashed (IOM, 2023). Agreements with Libya, Tunisia and Turkey have outsourced border control to regimes with poor human rights records, effectively turning humanitarian management into a subcontracted deterrence regime.

This is not new. The seeds of today's containment logic were visible even at the height of humanitarian liberalism. But the change today is the collapse of pretence. Aid is increasingly instrumentalised, not only to maintain geopolitical leverage but also to pre-empt migration, reinforce racialised asylum regimes, silence dissent and project reputational virtue. The result is a humanitarian system that is neither neutral nor equitable, but one that mirrors the strategic preferences of a handful of powerful actors.

5. STRUCTURAL BLIND SPOTS AND THE SDG PARADOX

The SDGs, launched in 2015, promised a universal framework for ending poverty, reducing inequality and building resilience. But they have become a symbol of the international system's credibility gap. By 2023, fewer than 15% of the 169 targets were on track (United Nations, 2023). In many crisis-affected countries – such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria and Afghanistan – there is no serious alignment between SDG planning and ground realities.

The SDGs raised expectations that could not be met within current institutional or financial architectures. They offered a vision of transformation without mechanisms of redistribution. As a result, they have produced not just disappointment, but cynicism – especially among people that continue to face extreme poverty, climate vulnerability and institutional neglect.

The humanitarian–development divide persists in practice despite years of rhetoric about the 'nexus'. Humanitarian financing remains short-term, inflexible and dominated by UN agencies and INGOs. Only 23% of humanitarian aid goes directly to local actors, well short of the 25% target agreed under the Grand Bargain (IASC, 2023). The systemic drivers of crisis – conflict, inequality, climate shocks – are rarely addressed structurally.

6. CLIMATE, TECHNOLOGY AND RISK WITHOUT REDISTRIBUTION

Climate change is rapidly becoming the most significant driver of displacement. In 2022, climate-related disasters displaced over 32.6 million people globally, more than three times the number displaced by conflict (IDMC, 2023). Yet climate finance flows remain deeply skewed. Only 8% of global climate finance reaches low-income countries (Climate Policy Initiative, 2022). Most fragile and conflict-affected states are effectively locked out of funding instruments designed for climate resilience.

Technological innovations in AI and digital data systems are touted as efficiency breakthroughs for humanitarian response. Predictive analytics, biometric registration and algorithmic targeting are now common. But these tools are controlled by a small group of actors, and they often operate with minimal transparency or accountability. In many cases, data is extracted from crisis-affected populations without informed consent, and there is no governance structure to ensure data justice. Far from decentralising power, technological 'solutions' are reinforcing existing hierarchies.

These developments signal the rise of a humanitarianism governed by metrics, not meaning; by performance dashboards, not principles. Risk is measured but not redistributed. Innovation is praised but not democratised.

7. THE COLLAPSE OF MORAL LEADERSHIP

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Nowhere is the collapse of humanitarian norms more visible than in Gaza. Since the onset of renewed conflict in October 2023, over 30,000 people have been killed and more than 1.9 million displaced (OCHA, 2024). Recent updates by OCHA (2025) show that, as of March 2025, Member States have disbursed approximately \$175.3 million out of the \$4.07 billion (4.3%) requested to meet the most critical humanitarian needs of three million people identified as requiring assistance in Gaza and the West Bank. Key humanitarian agencies such as UNRWA have faced funding cuts, political attacks and restrictions on access. Multilateral appeals have been ignored. International humanitarian law has been selectively cited, and often sidelined.

This contrasts sharply with earlier moments. In 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened her country's doors to over one million Syrian refugees. The gesture was logistically significant, as well as politically courageous. 'If Europe fails on the question of refugees,' she said, 'then it won't be the Europe we wished for.' While the long-term impact was contested, the moment mattered. It reaffirmed a vision of humanitarianism rooted in principle, not posture.

Today, that kind of leadership is absent. Gaza is not just an anomaly: it is a demonstration of how far the global system has shifted. The erosion of moral clarity is no longer gradual. It is open, unapologetic and institutionalised.

8. CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING HUMANITARIANISM AS STRUCTURAL JUSTICE

The decline of ODA, the erosion of the SDG framework, the exclusionary logics of climate finance and the technologisation of humanitarian response all reflect a deeper malaise: the abandonment of vulnerability as a shared concern. Humanitarianism is failing not because the world lacks tools, but because it lacks political resolve and moral imagination.

Rebuilding legitimacy requires more than reforming aid delivery. It demands a structural realignment in how global governance treats exposure to risk, capacity for resilience and responsibility for injustice. This means moving beyond charity to embrace fairness. It means placing humanitarianism back within a political economy of solidarity, not as an afterthought, but as a foundation. The words we choose – empathy, dignity, humanity – must regain substance. Their disappearance is not semantic. It is complicity.

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NOTE

This article was first published in *Development Policy Review*, 43, Issue 5, September 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.70036>

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BRIEF 4/2025

Title

When Empathy Fades:
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Responsibility in a Structurally
Broken World

Author

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Date

August 2025

Text editing

Patrícia Magalhães Ferreira

Design

Rita Romeiras

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