Joint statement from civil society representatives in response to Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher's announcement of the 'Humanitarian Reset' initiative
10th April 2025

Humanitarian Reset: A Call for Transformative Change

As civil society from the Global North and South, we welcome the renewed focus on reform in the humanitarian system. However, the "humanitarian reset" proposed by Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher 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.

The ongoing financial shock to the humanitarian sector demands that we move beyond small fixes. This moment demands a bold, principled transformation that shift power, resources, and decision-making to local and national actors who are closest to the communities we aim to support.

For years, civil society has put forward clear proposals for reform, including through the Grand Bargain. Too often, these ideas have failed to make progress. The current reset process initially shaped through the IASC structures, must include local civil society and a greater diversity of international civil society. The reset process should model the kind of inclusive and transparent leadership that our sector urgently needs.

A Vision for Ambitious Change

Decentralising Coordination

Coordination must be rooted in local ecosystems and build around the needs of communities. Area-based coordination is a practical model that enables this. We've already seen success in contexts like Türkiye, where OCHA-led mechanisms strategically phased out to enable more sustainable, locally led responses. In Northwest Syria, cash working groups have evolved into a locally led community of practice. The system must also tackle the duplicative coordination systems for refugee and non-refugee crises, harmonising both into a single area-based model. To scale this approach, we need to apply existing tools, like the comprehensive 'separation of functions' analysis following FCDO's COVID-19 response model and implement the commitments from the Grand Bargain caucus on intermediaries. Coordination should support local leadership, not override it.

Democratising Data

Information systems must be designed and led by those closest to crisis-affected communities. Local and national actors should shape what data is collected, how it's used, and how it informs decision-making. International organisations should serve as facilitators and enablers, helping map local intermediaries and their risk profiles, rather than gatekeepers of information. We envision shared information hubs with dramatically improved quality, transparency, and timeliness. These systems should strengthen local response, guide funding decisions, and reduce duplication. Most importantly, data must be accessible to crisis-affected people so they can hold responders accountable and influence the decisions that shape their lives.

Transforming Pooled Funds

Pooled funds must deliver on their potential to shift both resources and power. Local and national actors should be the primary recipients of pooled funding – not the exception. We call for Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) to allocate principally funding to local and national actors, and for the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to be opened to NGOs. Internationally led pooled funds must reduce barriers to access, create sub-national funding windows responsive to real-time community needs, and be shaped in partnership with civil society, especially where civic space is shrinking. International actors should receive pooled funding in cases where they have a clear comparative advantage, in line with the principle of subsidiarity. Locally led funds, feminist funds, and NGO- and IFRC- managed funds must be prioritised as essential channels for resources, and we see potential to ambitiously reimagine inclusive global-level pooled funding models beyond the CERF. All pooled funds should prioritise locally led cash responses which are more efficient and empower crisis-affected affected people to make their own choices.

Community-Driven Accountability

Accountability to affected populations (AAP) is a non-negotiable expectation for all humanitarian actors. It must start with people affected by crisis and their priorities in terms of how they want to receive support and not with institutional mandates. Local actors, because of their proximity and long-term relationships, are often best placed to lead on this. Resources should support community-led approaches, not top-down accountability frameworks, unsustainable initiatives, or costly technology tools that offer little value. AAP initiatives led by large agencies should be deprioritised. Accountability mechanisms should operate independently of the organisations they are evaluating to ensure appropriate checks and balances.

The Path Forward: A Two-Phase Approach

The transformation of the aid system cannot be imposed from above. It must be shaped and led by those closest to the challenges through a deliberate, time-bound process that balances urgency with ambition. We propose a two-phase approach that opens space for inclusive design now and delivers structural change within the next year.

Phase 1: Operationalise the ERC-led 'humanitarian reset' through an inclusive process that centres civil society (next 3 to 6 months):

- Immediately and genuinely open the space for inclusive collaboration between the ERC, donors, UN agencies and civil society from the Global South and North.
- Ensure direct leadership from local, national and international civil society – especially those marginalised from the current reset process.
- Expand the use of multisector cash programming in the reset to optimise the reach of limited resources.
- Co-design a time-bound roadmap concrete actions for structural change that builds on existing commitments.
- Establish accountability mechanisms with transparent metrics to track progress.

Phase 2: Move towards systemic Transformation (next 6 to 12 months):

- Restructure institutional roles so that international agencies move from implementers to enablers – potentially even merging or consolidating to reduce duplication and redirect resources to local actors.

- This shift – of large agencies from implementers to enablers – must be mirrored in the humanitarian business model. Funding and coordination power should shift toward local actors, including through reformed pooled funds and governance.
- Reclaim cash assistance as a tool for local leadership, with local actors designing and delivering cash systems and international actors in a support role, enabling autonomy and dignity.
- Redesign governance structures to support local government and civil society meaningful leadership across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
- Ensure that accountability to crisis-affected communities is the central measure of success.

The future of humanitarian action is local. To address our world's mounting crises and build sustainable solutions, a genuine humanitarian reset must seek to meaningfully refocus humanitarian action around those closest to communities.

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