

Workshop on Humanitarian Issues

Key Themes

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Context Presents Opportunity for Change

The Trump administration's reconfiguring of US institutions and policies will have a dramatic impact on the humanitarian sector. The scope and speed of US actions has shocked the system, making it difficult for actors - multilateral organisations, donors, implementing agencies, and recipient countries and populations – to react and to coordinate their response.

The [US has withdrawn](#) from key multilateral institutions, such as WHO, and is undertaking a review of its participation in others. The administration has shuttered USAID, restructured and downsized the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, and eliminated the State Department Office of Global Criminal Justice that [addresses war crimes](#). The administration also implemented a series of [new US policies](#) regarding refugees and migrants, including his suspension of the refugee resettlement program, barring asylum on US territory, and the denial of due process to migrants.

The US provided approximated 40% of global health and humanitarian programming, and the abrupt loss of this funding is having devastating [consequences](#). Participants provided concrete examples of [the impact of the US cuts](#), including the loss of 43% of funding for humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. In Sudan, US funding cuts forced 80% of humanitarian funded food kitchens to close. [WHO's emergencies program](#) faces a budget cut of 25% - the US had funded 20% of emergency appeals and 25% of its core budget.

The dramatic decline in US diplomatic and financial support for humanitarian action comes at a time when the humanitarian system is under immense strain. Humanitarian need is higher than ever before, yet [ODA for humanitarian assistance fell by 9.6 % in 2024](#) – even before the US cuts.

Workshop participants discussed the widespread erosion of respect for humanitarian principles, humanitarian space, and international humanitarian law. The geopolitical context has contributed to this erosion of respect for humanitarian principles while [instrumentalizing humanitarian need and assistance](#). Humanitarian actors continue to work in internationalized conflicts – where donor governments are supporting parties to

the conflict. Other challenges emerge when a party to the conflict is labelled a ‘terrorist entity’, placing restrictions on the ability of humanitarian organisations to undertake the necessary engagement with these actors to deliver humanitarian assistance.

Canadian Influence

Participants debated what this context means for Canadian humanitarian engagement. While Canada cannot replace US funding or leadership, participants stressed that this context provides Canada with an opportunity to exercise leverage and influence in the humanitarian sector.

Participants pointed out that this opportunity comes at a time when Canada’s influence reputation and relevance within the humanitarian space has declined. Participants cited three key reasons for Canada’s fading influence.

First, Canada has the reputation of more talk than action, with one participant quoting the saying: “After all is said and done, so much more is said than done.”

Second, Canada has failed to take a firm stand on humanitarian suffering in all contexts, including the application of international humanitarian law.

And third, Canada is slow to react; while its slow deployment of resources poses less of a problem for protracted emergencies, it limits Canada’s ability to respond to sudden onset emergencies or situations that dramatically worsen.

The Why - Moral Imperative for Canadian Engagement

When discussing the ‘why we engage’ questions, participants emphasised the importance of staying true to core humanitarian principles, including the moral principle of human dignity - the inherent value of humanitarian assistance is that it saves human life. This moral imperative is in Canada’s national interest.

Some participants expressed their concern that Canada is straying from its commitment to core humanitarian objectives/principles, potentially undermining Canada’s ability to work effectively in that space. Participants perceived a disconnect between the political level and the bureaucracy related to their commitment to humanitarian principles.

The What - Canadian Value Added

Participants discussed the potential for greater Canadian leadership and influence within the humanitarian space within several areas:

Reinforce International Humanitarian Law (IHL): Participants stressed the importance of Canada reinforcing its commitment to international humanitarian law through its diplomacy and action. The erosion of respect for IHL has led to a culture of impunity. Many within the humanitarian community are concerned that Canada has sacrificed international humanitarian law, contributing to a culture of impunity and a lack of accountability for IHL violations. Some participants discussed Canada's lack of consistent support for the application of IHL (and the ICC) across conflicts. Canada does not believe it has a positive obligation to stop IHL violations when it is not a party to the conflict by using domestic courts to adjudicate cases of IHL violations.

The humanitarian-development-peace 'nexus': Participants discussed if and how Canada could support [learning and best practices](#) for humanitarian engagement in the humanitarian-development-peace triple nexus. Humanitarian action occurs concurrently with efforts to end conflict and create the conditions for peace. Activities such as negotiating a ceasefire, bringing parties to the table, and brokering peace agreements can impact on humanitarian access and impartiality. Participants discussed the challenges of working within the nexus, where donors may push implementing organisations to blur the boundaries between humanitarian and peacebuilding/development in ways that instrumentalises assistance and places organisations and populations in danger.

Development in the nexus: The challenges of the nexus extend beyond humanitarian access. Participants discussed the importance of social development initiatives in emergencies, including education and health. Sustainable and scaleable education and health programming is possible in emergency settings, but it requires donors to commit to long term, flexible programming.

Efficiency and Effectiveness: The cuts in US assistance have led [humanitarian actors](#) to heighten their efforts to minimize inefficiency, duplication and bureaucracy. (Initial areas of focus include common services, needs assessments etc.). Canada could engage in and support such efforts, working with likeminded partners as it did during the [Good Humanitarian Donorship](#) initiative of 2005. Canada could support the humanitarian sector's effort to overcome the lack of resources with resourcefulness.

More Effective Multilateralism: A significant percentage of Canadian humanitarian ODA is dispersed through multilateral organizations. Particularly given the withdrawal from US engagement with many multilateral organisations, this provides an opportunity for Canada to push for more effective and efficient multilateralism in the field.

Gender and Other Marginalised Communities: Canada has a longstanding reputation as a champion of gender equality and marginalized individuals/communities. Participants agreed that the humanitarian sector has not taken gender as seriously as it should, and

that the topic of gender equality was [contentious in the humanitarian sector](#). While participants cautioned that efforts to overtly promote gender equality can place humanitarian operations at risk in some settings, they agreed that gender analysis – as part of broader intersectional analysis - is critically important for aid delivery (albeit a simplified version of GBA). Gender equality can be promoted in subtle but critically important ways in the most challenging of contexts, for example through human resources. [From VP - Gender analysis in all settings, including humanitarian, must balance its [focus on process](#) with identifying what gender equality looks like through a [benchmarking approach that focuses on results](#).]

Localisation: Participants discussed how the humanitarian sector has failed to realise the promise of localization, with only a small portion of the overall humanitarian assistance budget allocated to local organisations. Others cautioned that the sector needs have an honest conversation regarding some of the dilemmas of localization, and the need for technical support and advice. Some participants pointed out that GAC is initiating policy conversations on localization, and supporting pilots to develop locally led frameworks.

Joint Learning and Innovation: Participants discussed the opportunity for joint learning in these settings, particularly when we focus on our common interests and shared problems. Humanitarian engagement can benefit Canadians by teaching us about adaptation and resilience to climate emergencies, effective engagement with communities to build trust, etc. Canadians can also benefit from innovations developed for humanitarian settings – they may be transferable to Canadian contexts – in marginalized communities including some indigenous communities, to climate emergencies etc.

Private sponsorship model: While the discussion did not sufficiently focus on migration and refugees, participants pointed to the private sponsorship model as a Canadian success story.

The How - Canadian Diplomacy

Participants discussed the importance of Canadian diplomacy for humanitarian engagement. Currently Canada is punching below its weight, with participants suggesting that government is not getting the best advice from the field on how to effectively engage.

Participants also warned of the impact of ‘values based’ foreign policy on humanitarian action. Diplomats need to better respect humanitarian principles (independence, neutrality, impartiality, and humanity) and understand their *raison d’être* - to ensure safe access to populations in need. Participants underscored the dangers of the politicization and instrumentalization of humanitarian assistance.

Participants stressed that Canadian diplomacy could play a convening role, for example, by working with non-traditional donors and support localization/humanitarian leadership. But to play such a convening role, Canada needed to engage with countries we do not 'like.'

The How – Build Canadian Support for Humanitarian Engagement

Participants shared their concern that Canadian public support for humanitarian engagement might be fading. There is a need to explain to Canadians the benefits of humanitarian aid and the impact of Canadian assistance, without compromising the ability to deliver that aid according to humanitarian principles.

Participants discussed the importance of Canadian connectivity to humanitarian assistance through the deployment of technical support/expert deployment as well as initiatives such as youth internships.

The How - Academic Engagement

Participants discussed the importance of civil society partnerships that actively engage researchers. While Canadian organisations such as CIC and CANWACH work to facilitate collaboration and advocacy within the non-governmental community, their engagement with academia is minimal. Such research engagement is particularly important in the 'nexus' to facilitate our understanding of how to promote peace in these environments, incorporating evidence from security, humanitarian, health, development, and conflict and peace scholarship. Critical research questions include how to undertake engagement in the 'nexus' without instrumentalizing or politicizing aid, as well as resilience and trust.