



## Crisis in International Humanitarian Aid Offers Opportunities for Poland

Patryk Kugiel

The combination of the reduction of foreign aid by the United States and ever-increasing humanitarian needs are widening the funding gap for humanitarian aid worldwide. To preserve the life of victims of conflict and disaster and stabilise the international situation, it is necessary not only to mobilise additional funding but also to end the protracted crises. An increase in humanitarian aid by the EU is key to protecting its interests, including the need to reduce irregular migration. A significant increase in humanitarian funding by Poland would strengthen its image as a state in solidarity with others and give it greater influence in international organisations.

**Growing Needs.** Wars launched in recent years (e.g., Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine) and protracted crises (e.g., Yemen, Venezuela, Afghanistan) have triggered the greatest humanitarian needs in decades. In 2023, the number of ongoing state-based conflicts rose to 59, the most since World War II and double the number as recently as 2011. The UN estimates that 70,000 civilians were killed in wars in 2023 alone (a 72% year-on-year increase). By mid-2024, UNHCR assessed that nearly 123 million people had been forced to flee their homes due to persecution, war, violence, or human rights violations, 5% (5.3 million) more than in 2023. Of these, 72.1 million were displaced within their national borders (internally displaced persons, IDPs) and 42.7 million were refugees. This represents a significant increase compared to the situation in 2010, when there was a total of 43 million forcibly displaced persons, including 27.5 million IDPs and 15.4 million refugees.

The deterioration of the global humanitarian situation is also influenced by climate change, which most severely affects people in the poorest countries. The crisis is exacerbated by the grave economic situation in the least developed countries as a result of the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and rising foreign debt. The OECD estimates that the number of people living in a so-called fragility context has risen to 2.1 billion by 2025, 500 million more than in 2016. The UN

estimates that this year 305 million people will be in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. As a result, for 2025 the UN launched its third-largest humanitarian appeal ever to raise \$47 billion for 180 million people most in need, through 42 action plans. A similar appeal for 2024 was only 49% funded, compared to 65% in 2019.

**Multiple Challenges.** The [Donald Trump administration's suspension and eventual reduction of foreign aid](#) will widen the funding gap in 2025. The U.S. covered 42% of UN-coordinated humanitarian spending in 2024. Economic problems and the need to invest more in defence have also prompted major European donors (e.g., UK, France, Germany) to cut aid budgets in recent years. The funding gap is forcing humanitarian organisations to scale back operations or reduce food rations. As a result, fewer people have a chance at sufficient food, medical assistance, or safe shelter. Concentrating the limited budgets of European countries on aid to Ukraine at the expense of other places will not only increase disillusionment in the developing world but also will exacerbate humanitarian crises in the extended European neighbourhood.

The effectiveness of aid is further hampered by political, security, and/or technical challenges. A key development is the more frequent violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and the growing threat to humanitarian workers—

370 were killed in 2024 alone (the highest number ever, mostly in Gaza), including a Pole, Damian Soból, and 228 were injured. [Israel's accusations against UNRWA](#) are hampering the delivery of aid to Gaza, while Russia is restricting aid access to [parts of Ukraine that it illegally controls](#). In addition, military coups in a number of countries (e.g., in the Sahel, Myanmar, Afghanistan) create problems for the EU and democratic states in delivering aid when there are unrecognised governments. At the same time, the imposition of economic sanctions exacerbates the humanitarian situation.

The prolonged provision of aid, in turn, makes a country dependent on external support and limits its ability to develop its own economy. Humanitarian crises last longer and longer—already more than 10 years on average. The humanitarian-development nexus (a combination of short-term life-saving action and pro-growth interventions) has not been effective, so continued support is leading to an increasing dependence of foreign aid. In some situations, such as in [Afghanistan, the reverse process is occurring—a return to providing humanitarian aid instead of development aid](#)—as a result of imposed restrictions on cooperation. An unrealised demand of humanitarian organisations remains the “localisation” of aid, meaning the provision of assistance by local partners.

**Poland's Role.** Poland is a fractional player in the global humanitarian system. Until 2021, the value of its support was about \$20-50 million per year. In 2022, it increased humanitarian aid to \$225 million as a result of the support provided to Ukraine, attacked by Russia. This represented 8% of Poland's total bilateral development assistance. In 2023, the value of humanitarian aid dropped to \$87 million. In total, between 2022 and 2023, Poland provided \$274 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, or 88% of Poland's total humanitarian aid. In 2024, Poland provided \$19 million in humanitarian aid in response to UN appeals, accounting for 0.1% of global humanitarian outlays.

Polish aid reaches those in need through the government administration, Polish humanitarian organisations (usually as a result of an open call for projects), and contributions to international organisations. However, the effectiveness of aid delivery is limited not only by scarce resources but also by lengthy competition procedures, the lack of a permanent funding mechanism for emergency response, and multi-year framework cooperation agreements with humanitarian organisations. Poland also does not make sufficient use of cooperation with international organisations to increase its influence on their activities and build its own position. An example is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to which Poland contributes CHF 1.5 million (\$1.75 million) annually. Raising the level of contributions to CHR 10 million (about \$11.7 million) would give it a place in the elite Supporting Donors Group and a privileged dialogue

with the ICRC, leading to a better exchange of information and experience in many areas, not only humanitarian aid. It would also signal Poland's commitment to IHL, enhancing its credibility on the protection of all international law.

**Conclusions.** The growing global aid funding gap is further exacerbating humanitarian crises around the world, destabilising more regions. To counter this, action is needed in two ways. First, there must be increased support from developed countries for funding humanitarian organisations, which, besides the aid's benefits, will enhance the credibility of the West. In view of the reduction in aid by the U.S., it is the EU that should more effectively implement commitments to increase funding for all official development assistance (ODA) to 0.7% of GDP and to increase the share of humanitarian aid in ODA to 10%. While doing so, the EU should also consider putting stronger pressure on emerging economies (China, India, UAE, Saudi Arabia, etc.) to increase their contributions so that they take more responsibility for resolving crises in their neighbourhood. Increased humanitarian spending can be seen as an investment in the security of the EU and the stability of its neighbourhood.

Second, in the face of certain financial constraints, attempts should be made to increase the efficiency of the funds spent (e.g., through localisation, improved humanitarian-development-nexus implementation) and to reduce humanitarian needs. In order to reduce countries' dependence on external aid, consideration must be given to reintegrating some of them into international economic cooperation by reducing economic sanctions. Although such a decision would be controversial and risky, such as Syria where the Union conditionally lifted sanctions and provides aid, shows it is worth pursuing in the current circumstances. The diplomacy of the EU and its Member States should become more active in finding ways to end wars (including in Gaza, Sudan, Yemen, and the DRC) and take the lead in reforming UN peacekeeping missions. The EU should also focus its development assistance on building the resilience of states and societies to external shocks and crises.

Poland, too, can take more responsibility for assisting victims of conflict and crisis. To this end, there is a need to increase spending on general ODA, with the share of humanitarian aid eventually rising to as much as 10%. Additional funding will allow Poland to become more active in mitigating humanitarian crises (e.g., through NGOs), as well as to influence international organisations. Poland should consider further raising contributions to international institutions (e.g., ICRC, World Food Programme) to a level that allows greater influence on their functioning. This would strengthen Poland's image as a responsible state and one in solidarity with those in need around the world, as well as one caring for compliance with humanitarian law.