

The Cost of Global Aid Fatigue: Consequences of Shrinking Humanitarian Funding

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Source: Reuters

The world is going through an unprecedented crisis. Several regions are in active conflict, and humanitarian needs are rising faster than the world's capacity to respond. The year 2025 alone witnessed one of the highest levels of state-on-state confrontation in recent history, including multiple instances where nuclear-armed states stood face-to-face. With deepened geopolitical tensions, these incidents have also intensified human suffering. Communities that are already vulnerable are being pushed deeper into crisis, such as displaced people, struggling to find enough food, and lacking even the most basic protections. Yet, at a moment when need is the most, global humanitarian assistance is showing signs of fatigue. Funding is shrinking, priorities are turning

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inward, and donor commitment is weakening. The gap between rising needs and falling support is widening. It is not just a policy failure, but a moral one. Behind every budget cut are real people: families skipping meals, children leaving school, and communities losing access to basic healthcare and safety.

Causes of Global Aid Fatigue

The erosion of humanitarian funding is not the result of a single shock. There are several factors that are at play for the budget shrink in developmental aid. One of the key factors responsible is the economic recession. In the aftermath of the pandemic, many donor countries are grappling with inflation, rising debt burdens, and the high costs of domestic recovery. While domestic uncertainty puts pressure on the fiscal budget, foreign aid becomes one of the first sectors to go through budget cuts. With the rise of nationalist politics, this becomes a trend where governments prioritize domestic constituencies and frame external assistance as secondary to national interest. As the countries are facing internal pressures, public support for humanitarian aid is also fading. In many donor countries, people are increasingly questioning whether aid truly makes a difference, while rising nationalist sentiment is turning attention inward. Aid is supposed to be treated as a moral responsibility. Unfortunately, it is now treated as a tool of national interest and quick returns. As a result, aid budgets are increasingly easy targets for cuts. At the same time, problems within the humanitarian system itself have also weakened donor confidence. Ongoing issues like bureaucratic delays, poor coordination, and the difficulty of showing long-term impact have created a barrier to using aid effectively. As a result, funding is increasingly shifted toward short-term, visible results, rather than deeper, long-term solutions.

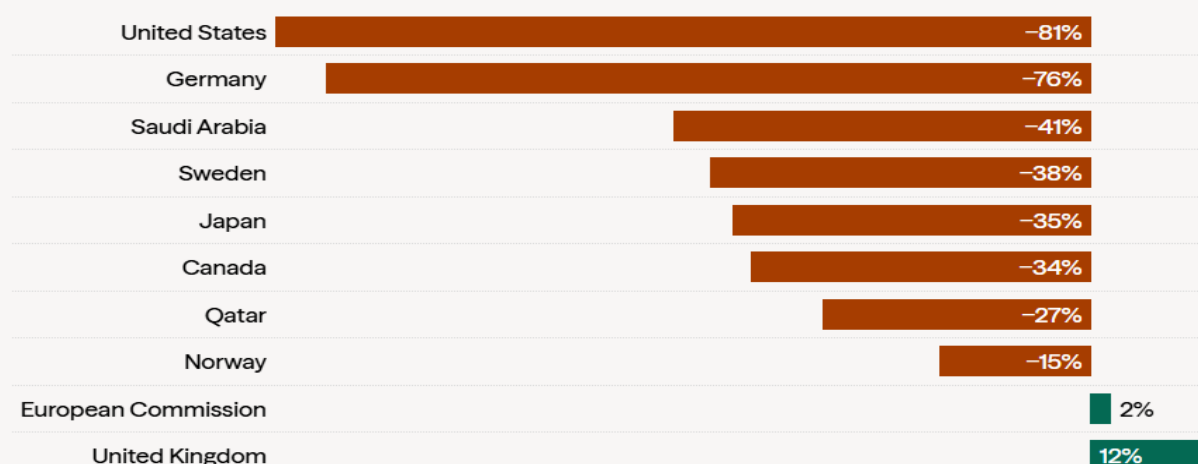
However, the term aid fatigue requires more scrutiny. What the world is witnessing regarding the decline in humanitarian aid is a more politically deliberate move rather than a shortage of money. Global military expenditure reached \$2.44 trillion in 2023, which reached the highest level with a 37% increase between 2015 and 2024². Governments now allocate, on average, 7.1% of their total spending to the military. In contrast, humanitarian and development financing remains constrained and increasingly uncertain. Official Development Assistance from OECD countries stood at \$204

² Xiao Liang et al., *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2025), .

billion in 2022, dwarfed by their combined military spending of \$1.36 trillion, more than six times higher³. At the same time, the World Bank and OECD estimate that developing countries face an annual financing gap exceeding \$4 trillion to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Between 2024 and 2025, the World Food Programme's budget collapsed from \$10 billion to \$6.4 billion⁴. The United States alone cut roughly \$160 million in agricultural aid, terminating 64 projects across 51 countries⁵. The World Health Organization faces a \$600 million shortfall⁶. Peacekeeping missions have withdrawn 14,000 personnel from some of the most dangerous conflict zone⁷. These are not only the results of tired donors. It is a political and moral retreat disguised as a budgetary necessity. This difference shows a troubling reality: the resources are diverted toward security and defense while the very foundations of human security are being

Humanitarian Aid Funding Has Dropped Globally Since 2022

Percentage change in humanitarian aid funding from 2022 to 2025 for the largest 10 donors



Note: Includes humanitarian aid funding as reported by UN OCHA as of December 19, 2025

Source: UN OCHA

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³ Xiao Liang and Nan Tian, "Military Spending and Development Aid after the Invasion of Ukraine," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, January 18, 2024, .

⁴ World Food Programme, "WFP Warns That Six Critical Operations Are Facing Significant Food Aid Pipeline Breaks by Year-End," *World Food Programme*, October 15, 2025, .

⁵ "American Farmers Raise Alarm as US Cuts Funds for UN Bird Flu Fight," *Financial Times*, May 9, 2025, .

⁶ Reuters, "UN Agency Says 13.7 Million People Face Severe Hunger Due to Global Aid Cuts," *Reuters*, October 15, 2025, .

⁷ AFP, "Peacekeeping Forces to Be Cut 25 % Due to Budget Strains: UN," *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), October 10, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/world/news/peacekeeping-forces-be-cut-25-due-budget-strains-4006271>.

Humanitarian Consequences of Funding Cuts

When humanitarian funding shrinks, it is the most vulnerable who are hit hard. Many communities rely heavily on consistent external support because they have few other ways to cope. When that support is reduced or withdrawn, they are left with limited options to adjust or recover. In this context, hardship becomes almost unavoidable. The effects ripple across every aspect, from access to food and healthcare to safety and livelihoods, pushing already fragile communities into even



greater risk.

Food Insecurity

The World Food Programme's budget dropped from \$10 billion in 2024 to \$6.4 billion in 2025. This \$3.6 billion gap indicates that a significant number of people are likely to be pushed into hunger. The WFP now expects 16.7 million people to lose food assistance entirely⁸, with another

⁸ World Food Programme, *Food Security Impact of Reduction in WFP Funding* (Rome: World Food Programme, July 22, 2025), .

13.7 million pushed into emergency hunger levels⁹. When these figures are translated into conditions on the ground, their human impact becomes visible. For example, in Somalia, emergency food and cash assistance dropped by 56 per cent between 2024 and 2025. The number of people receiving help fell from 1.8 million to roughly 800,000. At the same time, 4.6 million Somalis, a quarter of the population, are already experiencing crisis-level food insecurity. CARE International reports that families are eating once a day, or not at all. Health and nutrition clinics are shutting down as budget cuts force to lay off staffs¹⁰. In Mali, when rations were reduced, hunger increased by 64 per cent. In areas that maintained full rations, hunger fell by 34 per cent. The relationship between aid and outcomes could not be clearer. Yet the World Food Programme now warns that 55 million people across the region could face crisis-level hunger in 2026 without increased funding¹¹. Nigeria provides another stark example. During the lean season, food programs reached just 72,000 people in February 2026, a fraction of the 1.3 million who needed help. That is not a funding shortfall. That is a near-total collapse of the safety net. The Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh have a \$56 million shortfall forced the World Food Programme to cut rations by one-third. But hunger was not the only consequence. Eighty per cent of refugees lost adequate water and sanitation services. Malnutrition risk increased. The UN experts warned that the cuts could drive Rohingya to trust their lives to traffickers rather than face starvation in the camps¹².

⁹ Ummkalthum Dubow, "The Human Cost of Funding Cuts: Lives and Futures at Risk in Somalia," *CARE* (August 7, 2025), <https://www.care.org/news-and-stories/somalia-funding-cuts-lives-futures-at-risk/>.

¹⁰ Ummkalthum Dubow, "The Human Cost of Funding Cuts: Lives and Futures at Risk in Somalia," *CARE* (August 7, 2025), <https://www.care.org/news-and-stories/somalia-funding-cuts-lives-futures-at-risk/>.

¹¹ World Food Programme, "Humanitarian Aid Cuts Push Millions Deeper into Hunger amid Rising Violence and Population Displacement in West and Central Africa," *World Food Programme*, January 16, 2026, <https://www.wfp.org/news/humanitarian-aid-cuts-push-millions-deeper-hunger-amid-rising-violence-and-population>.

¹² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Bangladesh: UN Experts Decry Devastating Second Round of Rations Cuts for Rohingya," press release, June 1, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/06/bangladesh-un-experts-decry-devastating-second-round-rations-cuts-rohingya>.

Health Systems

External health aid is projected to decline by 30 to 40 per cent in 2025 compared to 2023¹³. These numbers translate into medicine shortages, clinic closures, and declining immunization coverage. Broader estimates suggest up to 9.4 million excess deaths globally due to declining health financing. These are not worst-case scenarios. They are current projections based on existing cuts. CARE International has been forced to close over 150 health facilities, leaving 1.5 million people without access to basic healthcare in Somalia. Mobile health units that served 80,000 people have ceased operations entirely. CARE warns that without emergency services, disease and mortality rates, particularly among women and children, will rise sharply. Nigeria has seen child malnutrition move from serious to critical levels as nutrition and health programs go underfunded. In Yemen, partial funding cuts have left over 80 per cent of the population without access to clean water and sanitation, heightening the risk of communicable diseases¹⁴.



Source: The Guardian

¹³ World Health Organization, "WHO Issues Guidance to Address Drastic Global Health Financing Cuts," *World Health Organization*, November 3, 2025, <https://www.who.int/news/item/03-11-2025-who-issues-guidance-to-address-drastic-global-health-financing-cuts>.

¹⁴ Ummkalthum Dubow, "Somalia Funding Cuts: Lives and Futures at Risk," *CARE*, August 7, 2025, <https://www.care.org/news-and-stories/somalia-funding-cuts-lives-futures-at-risk/>.

The erosion of disease control programs is particularly alarming. Disruptions to tuberculosis interventions have been so severe that previous funding gaps have already contributed to around 700,000 additional deaths. Current cuts threaten millions more in high-burden countries. Measles, cholera, and other preventable diseases are resurging as vaccination coverage and disease monitoring decline¹⁵.

Displacement and Instability

Funding shortfalls do not just worsen existing displacement. They create conditions that generate more displacement. Refugee and IDP camps become more precarious. Host communities face increased strain and often respond with resentment. By the end of 2024, approximately 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced globally¹⁶. The UNHCR faces persistent funding shortfalls, with contributions remaining near 2015 levels despite displacement numbers that have risen dramatically. Recent cuts from major donors, including the United States, have deepened these shortfalls.

The UN peacekeeping system is also cracking under financial pressure. The 2025–2026 peacekeeping budget stands at \$5.38 billion, but a \$2 billion shortfall driven by unpaid contributions, including over \$2.2 billion in arrears from the United States, has forced major cuts¹⁷. Missions have implemented approximately 15 percent expenditure reductions, leading to the withdrawal of 13,000 to 14,000 personnel from key operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic¹⁸. Missions have implemented approximately 15 per cent expenditure reductions, leading to the withdrawal of 13,000 to 14,000 personnel from key operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic.

¹⁵ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), *At a Breaking Point: The Impact of Foreign Aid Cuts on Women's Organizations in Humanitarian Crises Worldwide* (New York: UN Women, May 2025), <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/at-a-breaking-point-the-impact-of-foreign-aid-cuts-on-womens-organizations-in-humanitarian-crises-worldwide-en.pdf>.

¹⁶ Chico Harlan, "Global Aid Cuts Could Lead to 9.4 Million Deaths by 2030, Study Projects," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2026/02/02/foreign-aid-cuts-deaths-lancet/>.

¹⁷ United Nations Peacekeeping, "Budget Gaps Threaten Global Peace Efforts," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, October 15, 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/budget-gaps-threaten-global-peace-efforts>.

¹⁸ Reuters, "UN to Slash a Quarter of Peacekeepers Globally over Lack of Funds," *Reuters*, October 8, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/un-slash-quarter-peacekeepers-globally-over-lack-cash-2025-10-08/>.

The Unequal Burden

The cuts are not affecting everyone equally. A UN Women survey found that 90 per cent of women's organizations in crisis settings have been financially affected, with nearly half expecting to close within six months under current funding conditions. Programs for gender-based violence prevention, reproductive health, and women's livelihoods have been disproportionately reduced¹⁹. In Nigeria, only 2 per cent of women in need of sexual and reproductive health services received them under the current funding gap. Children's education has also taken a direct hit. In Bangladesh, tens of thousands of Rohingya refugee children lost schooling after donors cut education programs. UNICEF suspended thousands of learning centers for lack of funds, leaving 300,000 of 437,000 Rohingya children without classes. The only schools still operating are community-run, charging fees that parents fleeing genocide can rarely afford²⁰.



Source: UN Women

¹⁹ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), *At a Breaking Point: The Impact of Foreign Aid Cuts on Women's Organizations in Humanitarian Crises Worldwide* (New York: UN Women, May 2025), <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/at-a-breaking-point-the-impact-of-foreign-aid-cuts-on-womens-organizations-in-humanitarian-crises-worldwide-en.pdf>.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: Foreign Aid Cuts Affect Rohingya Children's Education," *Human Rights Watch*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/25/bangladesh-foreign-aid-cuts-affect-rohingya-childrens-education>.

The International Rescue Committee has identified 13 countries as the hardest hit by aid cuts: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Mali, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen. These countries already host 29 per cent of the world's extreme poor but receive only about 9 per cent of humanitarian aid. The cuts are therefore falling hardest on places that were already the least prepared to absorb them²¹.

Conclusion

The consequences of shrinking humanitarian funding do not remain confined to isolated crises; they ripple across regions, systems, and generations. This humanitarian crisis due to the fund cut points to a deeper, systemic failure. It shows that this issue requires more than incremental increases in aid. It demands a fundamental recalibration of global response. Humanitarian financing needs to become more predictable and based on actual need, rather than shifting with political priorities. At the same time, the global governance system must be strengthened to protect aid from political influence. Increasingly, aid is being shaped by geopolitical interests instead of objective need, turning it from a neutral lifeline into a strategic tool. This not only skews where resources go but also risks leaving vulnerable populations at the mercy of external politics. To prevent this, stronger governance, greater accountability, and safeguards against political pressure are essential. At last, humanitarian efforts can no longer operate in isolation because today's crises are deeply interconnected and cannot be addressed separately. Ultimately, the cost of aid fatigue is not measured in budgetary terms but in human outcomes. If current trends persist, the world is not simply withdrawing assistance; it is institutionalizing vulnerability at a global scale.

²¹ International Rescue Committee, "Global Aid Crisis: 13 Countries Most Affected by International Aid Cuts," *International Rescue Committee*, June 16, 2025, <https://www.rescue.org/13-countries-impacted-aid-cuts>.