

Day 1 of the Humanitarian Congress Berlin  
Start at 9:15 a.m.

Coming up next:  
Welcome & Keynote Dialogue

ANALYSIS

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# HUMANITARIANISM IN TRANSITION: FROM SYSTEMIC STRAIN TO STRUCTURAL RUPTURE

## Reflections from Humanitarian Congress Berlin 2026

### Introduction

The Humanitarian Congress Berlin 2026 did not merely revisit familiar debates within the humanitarian sector, it pushed participants to confront uncomfortable truths about the humanitarian system's present condition.

While discussions on localisation, funding gaps, humanitarian law and coordination mechanisms have been recurring themes for years, the tone and substance of this year's congress suggested a qualitative shift.

### Beyond Repetition, Towards Rupture

What is often described as a “**system in transition**” no longer appears as a gradual evolution. Rather, it is increasingly experienced as a structural rupture, one that is unfolding unevenly, unpredictably, and under significant pressure.

This shift was not only reflected in formal sessions but also in the framing of questions and the openness with which contradictions within the system were discussed. The congress provided a rare space where long-standing assumptions were not

simply reaffirmed but actively interrogated. In this sense, the congress functioned less as a platform for consensus-building and more as a forum for critical reflection.

### Political Economy of Humanitarianism: A System Under Strain

One of the most striking dimensions of the discussions was the widening gap between humanitarian needs and available resources. This is often framed as a “**funding crisis**,” yet such a characterization risks oversimplifying the issue. The imbalance is not merely technical or financial, it is deeply political.

A compelling comparison raised during the sessions illustrated this contradiction. While global humanitarian funding reaches tens of billions of dollars annually, the daily cost of warfare in certain conflicts can reach hundreds of millions.

In other words, the destruction of civilian life and infrastructure is significantly more expensive than the provision of humanitarian assistance meant to address its consequences. This paradox under-

scores a fundamental tension within the system that humanitarian action operates downstream of political decisions that simultaneously generate and exacerbate crises.

Moreover, a recurring concern was the dual role of major powers within the system. Same actors that contribute to geopolitical instability are often among the largest humanitarian donors. This creates a structural dilemma in which humanitarian organisations must navigate a system shaped by the very forces that produce the crises they seek to mitigate. As one perspective highlighted during the congress, the system is effectively being sustained within this contradiction, rather than resolved.

### Limits of Technical Reform: Rethinking the Grand Bargain

The Grand Bargain, introduced at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, was intended to address inefficiencies and inequalities within the humanitarian system, particularly by promoting localisation and improving funding mechanisms. Nearly a decade later, it remains a central reference point in discussions on reform.

However, the Berlin Humanitarian Congress revealed a growing skepticism regarding its transformative potential. While the Grand Bargain is often discussed in terms of financial commitments

such as increasing direct funding to local actors, it is increasingly recognized as being **“much more than money.”** Its effectiveness depends not only on measurable indicators but also on the political will of its signatories. As one critical observation noted, **“it is as strong as its signatories want it to be strong.”** This raises a broader question: Can systemic change be achieved through predominantly technical mechanisms?

Discussions suggested otherwise. Localisation, for instance, is frequently treated as a logistical or operational issue, yet it is fundamentally about power, authority, and decision-making. As one intervention emphasized, localisation and the Grand Bargain should not be reduced to funding flows or procedural adjustments, they must be understood as part of a broader systemic transformation.

Furthermore, the context in which the Grand Bargain was conceived has changed dramatically. Global landscape of 2016 differs significantly from that of today. The humanitarian system is now operating within what some have described as a Great Aid Recession marked by increased geopolitical fragmentation, shifting donor priorities, and a more volatile operational environment. Attempting to address contemporary challenges through frameworks designed for a different era may limit the scope of meaningful reform.



Courtesy: Humanitarian Congress Berlin via LinkedIn



Day 1 of the Humanitarian Congress

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From Milestones to Momentum: The Evolution of Humanitarian Action

Adelina Dwi Ekawati Kamal | Co-Founder and Steering Committee Member, Southeast Asian Women Peace Mediators (SEAWPM)  
 Dr. Michael Court | CEO, Global Support and Development  
 Arbie Baguios | Director, Aid Reimagined  
 Christof Johnen | Director International Cooperation, German Red Cross  
 Chair: Dr. Sema Genel Karaosmanoglu | Director, Hayata Destek / Support to Life (STL)

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### Localisation and Plural Humanitarianisms

Localisation was one of the most prominent themes throughout the congress, yet discussions moved beyond the familiar rhetoric of inclusion and partnership. Instead, they pointed to the persistence of structural barriers that prevent local actors from fully participating in decision-making processes.

At the same time, an important conceptual shift emerged in the recognition of plural humanitarianisms. Humanitarian action is not a singular, standardized system but a diverse set of practices shaped by context, necessity, and agency. In many crises, local communities act as first responders, organizing relief efforts through informal and often non-institutional mechanisms. These forms of response may not align with international standards, yet they are often more immediate, adaptive, and contextually grounded. This plurality challenges the dominance of a centralized, international model of humanitarianism and calls for a broader understanding of what constitutes legitimate humanitarian action. It also raises questions about whose knowledge and practices are valued within the system. In this sense, localisation debates are ultimately debates about system design, not merely implementation.

### Country-Based Pooled Funds: Bridging the Gap or Reinforcing the System?

Within this broader discussion, Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) emerged as a particularly important and contested mechanism. Often presented as a practical tool to operationalise localisation, CBPFs are designed to channel funding more directly to national and local actors while improving coordination at the country level.

On paper, CBPFs represent one of the more tangible achievements of the Grand Bargain. They offer flexibility, context-specific allocation, and, in some cases, increased access for local organisations. However, discussions in Berlin suggested a more ambivalent reality.

First, while CBPFs may expand access, they do not necessarily redistribute power. Decision-making structures often remain embedded within international coordination mechanisms, where local actors may participate but do not always shape outcomes. Access to funding, in this sense, does not automatically translate into control over priorities. Second, CBPFs operate within the same broader system that is currently under strain. In a context of shrinking global funding, pooled funds themselves face increasing pressure, leading to heightened competition and stricter allocation criteria. Rather than transforming the system, they risk becoming instruments for managing scarcity.



Courtesy: Ärzte der Welt via LinkedIn

Finally, CBPFs highlight a central tension within localisation debates: Is the goal to integrate local actors into the existing system, or to transform the system itself? If the latter is the objective, then funding mechanisms alone cannot deliver the necessary change.

### International Humanitarian Law: Norms Under Pressure

The most provocative discussions during the congress revolved around the state of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). While IHL remains a cornerstone of the humanitarian framework, its relevance and enforceability were openly questioned. A stark observation captured the sentiment expressed in several sessions: **“when power dictates, power prevails.”** In such contexts, legal norms are often subordinated to political and military objectives. Erosion of respect for IHL is not merely a legal issue but a reflection of broader shifts in the global order, where accountability mechanisms are increasingly weakened.

This has significant implications for humanitarian action. If the protection of civilians and adherence to legal norms can no longer be assumed, operational space for humanitarian actors becomes more constrained. Moreover, instrumentalization

of humanitarian agendas by powerful states further complicates efforts to maintain neutrality and independence.

### Conclusion: From Transition to Transformation

The Humanitarian Congress Berlin 2026 highlighted a critical moment for the humanitarian sector. The notion of a system in transition, while still relevant, may no longer fully capture the depth of the changes underway. The challenges facing the system are not only operational but structural, requiring a rethinking of its underlying assumptions and power dynamics.

Addressing these challenges cannot be achieved through technical adjustments alone. It requires a more fundamental engagement with questions of power, legitimacy, and accountability. As emphasized during the congress, the first step is not to implement change but to understand its nature, to define what is changing and why.

In this context, the humanitarian system stands at a crossroads. Whether it can move beyond managing crises to addressing their root causes will depend on its ability to confront its own contradictions and embrace a more inclusive and pluralistic vision of humanitarian action.