

## Humanitarian Resistance: Advocacy Within and Against Current Systems

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*We are gathered here today with a burning passion to re-engineer the ivory tower the Empire of Giants where global is the North local is a myth most of us lost somewhere in between Global South and Global North.*

(Excerpt from the spoken word poem written and performed by Jeevika Vivekananthan at the 2023 Humanitarian Leadership Conference)

The humanitarian system is no longer fit for the purpose of dealing with the scale of severity of crises in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The evidence of this is both quantitative and qualitative. Figures suggest needs are rising – the number of people identified as in need of humanitarian assistance by United Nations (UN) coordinated mechanisms swelled by over 87% over 2018-2021 (Olbrecht et al., 2022, p. 10). Yet humanitarian programming is grossly underfunded. According to data as of January 2024, UN-coordinated humanitarian appeals in 2023 received only \$22.15 billion USD of the \$56.69 billion USD requested (Financial Tracking Service, 2024). This is only 39% of the required funds. The gap between required and unmet funds has been increasing for years, from 61% of appeals funded in 2012 to only 51% of the required funding provided in 2021 (Olbrecht et al., 2022, p. 19). The 2023 figures are thus both particularly worrying in their potential to set a record low of unmet requirements, as well as part of a larger trend of insufficient funding. Funding is also not going to local organisations, despite high-profile commitments by donors to do so (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2022).

Qualitative evidence points to challenges related to but also beyond the financial. A recent study of the perceptions of over 4,500 aid workers identified coordination and operating environments as major challenges to humanitarian response (Bollettino et al., 2023). Questions

around the efficacy and relevance of the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence have led to calls for new humanitarian principles (Clarke & Parris, 2022; Maya, 2022). Humanitarian data “leans heavily on a post-colonial Anglocentric viewpoint” (Hoffman 2021, p. 3), missing opportunities for learning from Indigenous knowledge.

Why is the humanitarian system stuck, and – perhaps more importantly – what are some of the ambitious and pragmatic ways various actors are reinvigorating change? This was the core question posed by the most recent Humanitarian Leadership Conference (HLC) titled *Re-Engineering the Global Disaster Response System*. Held in April 2023 by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL), a Deakin University/Save the Children Australia partnership, the biennial conference brought together 352 delegates from 67 countries for two days of online discussion. Two keynote speakers, independent research and policy analyst Themrise Khan and humanitarian/disaster professional and policy development strategist Adelina Kamal, anchored discussions with their provocations on thinking how humanitarian response could and should change. In addition, 89 delegates attended in-person sessions in Melbourne/Naarm that concluded with a poetry performance by scholar and poet Jeevika Vivekananthan, excerpted above and available on YouTube.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. (2023, 30 June). *CHL Conference 2023 – Closing Plenary Poetry Reading by Jeevika Vivekananthan*, Deakin University. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHAm7Hf8yMk>

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This op-ed draws on Khan and Kamal's remarks, as well as the broader pool of presentations from the conference, to highlight a key theme: resistance. Resistance is important both as it relates to the current systems and also as a broader political action.

### **Resisting the Humanitarian Status Quo**

Authors have defined resistance as it relates to humanitarianism in different ways, and several crises have been the basis for concepts of humanitarian resistance. Writing about the Armenian genocide, Mouradian (2016) defined humanitarian resistance as the "actions carried out illegally, or against the will of the authorities, to save Armenian deportees from annihilation." Contemporary migrant solidarity movements in Europe have seen some approaches that are complacent with the humanitarian status quo – or as Dadusc and Mudu (2020) wrote, the Humanitarian Industrial Complex – while others actively resist border regimes' borders and the commodification of migrants (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Maya, 2022). Slim (2022, p. 7) drew on both the historical and contemporary to propose that humanitarian resistance "is the rescue, relief and protection of people suffering under an unjust enemy regime." Humanitarian resistance is enacted by people and groups who have a political opposition to the regime, and do so in defiance of the regime.

Mouradian and Slim both highlighted the potential for humanitarian resistance to stand against political forces. Both Khan and Kamal touched on this theme. Kamal spoke of humanitarian resistance in Ukraine, Syria, and Myanmar. She argued that humanitarian resistance is not being met with adequate support but is instead challenged. Khan highlighted the importance of civic space and argued that the humanitarian system should not focus on formal organisations but on resistance and advocacy movements.

Although many of the contexts referenced in the discussions of humanitarian resistance were those of conflicts and wars, the broad principles were considered to apply beyond such contexts, to include those of natural disasters. This broader conceptualisation can be summed up as a framing of solidarity, as called for in the UN's Agenda for 2030. Solidarity as a humanitarian principle may be seen to capture the intent of standing alongside people experiencing crises, whether they be born from wars and conflicts or from natural hazards turning into disasters. There was active debates throughout the conference on the value of exchanging neutrality for solidarity or resistance, with some humanitarian practitioners reminding of the practical value in being seen not to take sides in political crises.

A further implication of reframing humanitarianism to include solidarity is that it may be considered to be in contrast to the Results Agenda. From former USAID Administrators to current localisation advocates, many critiques have occurred regarding the Results Agenda and its focus on quantifiable, tangible results that can be reported to the governing institutions of higher-income donor countries (Natsios, 2010; National Workshop on Localizing Humanitarian Aid in Ukraine, 2023). A solidarity framework returns to the importance of acting in solidarity with the people affected by crises rather than on the primacy of financial efficiencies. It also removes any sense of overbearing control and technical superiority that many localisation and decolonisation supporters believe is embedded in the current results-driven humanitarian system.

Civil society was a major player in Khan's remarks, which linked resistance in a broader political sense to resistance to the humanitarian status quo. She spoke of an inordinate focus on "the I of INGO," namely the international part of international non-governmental organisation. Mainstream humanitarian discourse might meet such an assertion with the idea of localisation, but Khan eschewed localisation and decolonisation frameworks. She called instead to "decentre everyone in order to equalise." Kamal took a more favourable view of localisation, but called out widespread scepticism of local leadership that pushes people to stick to the status quo.

In many Conference sessions, this sense of redrawing the humanitarian system was palpably felt as the need to reconsider the multitude of actors and relationships providing assistance and how they work together to alleviate suffering. These ranged from advocating greater use of advanced technologies and recognising the skills and leadership capabilities of national government ministries and local civil society organisations, to who to target with the updated Core Humanitarian Standard. The role of diaspora in resourcing assistance, as well as the increasing diversity of funding instruments beyond grant-based finance systems, featured heavily. This returns us to the idea of resistance, of resisting the status quo and enabling a new re-engineered global disaster response system.

## Conclusion

The 2023 HLC highlighted two dimensions of humanitarian resistance: turned inward, into the politics of the humanitarian system itself; and turned outward, as resistance to the political regimes contributing to humanitarian suffering. The initiatives and perspectives shared at the 2023 HLC will continue to shape a newer system more fit for the purpose of dealing with the scale and complexity of current and future crises.

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### Authors' contribution

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## Keynote Remarks

Themrise Khan's keynote is available online:

Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. (2023, 1 June). *CHL Conference 2023 – Re-engineering the global disaster response system Welcome & Keynote Session*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1YW6xj7OoU>

Additionally, a concept paper building on these remarks is available online:

Khan, T. (2023). Envisioning an alternative ecosystem for global development and humanitarianism. *Centre for Humanitarian Leadership*. <https://centreforhumanitarianleadership.org/research/publications/envisioning-an-alternative-ecosystem-for-global-development-and-humanitarianism/>

Adelina Kamal's keynote is available online:

Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. (2023, 1 June). *CHL Conference 2023 – Re-engineering the global disaster response system – Keynote: Adelina Kamal*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XBqxBcUzpm>

Additionally, a working paper building on these remarks is available online:

Kamal, A. (2023). Beyond the 'egcosystem': A case for locally lead humanitarian resistance. *The Humanitarian Leader* (Working Paper 041, Nov 2023). <https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/thl/article/view/1907/1616>

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