

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE CONFERENCE

Ethics, Foresight & Innovation

On 7 November 2024, the Estonian Refugee Council hosted its second International Humanitarian Assistance Conference in Tallinn, bringing together experts and organisations from around the world to address pressing challenges in the humanitarian sector. This year's topics were focused on ethical dilemmas, anticipatory action, and the integration of AI in the humanitarian field.

OPENING WORDS

Eero Janson, the Director of Estonian Refugee Council

- Estonia, despite not being a diplomatic centre or a major provider of humanitarian financing, has the potential to lead in humanitarian assistance due to its vibrant civil society, digitalisation, and outside-the-box thinking.
- This year's conference takes place in difficult times, with humanitarian needs skyrocketing due to conflicts in Lebanon, Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Humanitarian financing is failing to meet escalating needs, with potential further decline exacerbated by political shifts, alongside the renewed use of war as a means to achieve political and ideological goals.
- International Humanitarian Law is increasingly disregarded, while the erosion of multilateralism leaves humanitarians to manage escalating crises.
- The sector needs to keep up with discussions on climate change, technological trends, and innovations, weighing the risks and opportunities to distinguish positive use cases from those that may cause harm.

Watch Eero Janson's opening words on [YouTube](#).

OPENING WORDS

Kairi Saar-Isop, the Director General of Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Department at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia

- The humanitarian sector is facing numerous challenges, including underfunded and overstretched resources, with the year 2024 having the lowest percentage of people targeted with humanitarian aid compared to those in need, at 60%.
- There are 360 million people globally in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, but almost half of them do not receive the support they need due to insufficient funds.

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- Attacks on humanitarians and disregard for International Humanitarian Law are alarming, with examples seen in conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, and Ukraine.
- Humanitarian access is increasingly difficult, and lack of accountability fuels humanitarian needs and undermines response efforts, as witnessed in Ukraine.
- The funding cap requires making tough choices to find and protect the most vulnerable, which must be done in an evidence-based and transparent way.

Watch Kairi Saar-Isop's opening words on [YouTube](#).

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Has humanitarianism reached its limits?

Christina Bennett, the CEO of Start Network

- The current state of humanitarian crises together with inadequate responses to predictable disasters are leading to concerns about the limits of humanitarianism.
- Trends in the humanitarian sector are sobering, with over 400 million people in need of assistance due to conflicts and climate emergencies, and most living in contexts that have been in an emergency for more than 5 years.
- The crisis may be a result of humanitarian efforts being under-skilled, under-resourced, and used as political cover for inaction, rather than a failure of the concept itself.
- The humanitarian sector is facing significant challenges, with donors cutting off or drastically reducing their contributions, and private funding being scaled back, resulting in a significant gap between needs and available resources.
- There are calls for humanitarians to do more with less, amidst reform fatigue, while fundamental shifts in geopolitics, climate, technology.
- The sector is struggling with questioning its principles, such as neutrality, in the face of conflicts, where parties to the conflict are not abiding by International Humanitarian Law.
- The use of AI in crisis settings is raising questions about accountability, particularly in cases where AI is used by militaries, and the extent to which such systems comply with International Humanitarian Law.
- The sector is facing escalating protracted humanitarian needs, framed by catastrophic climate hazards and more violence, as well as flatlined funding and a widening gap between needs and resources.

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- The humanitarian sector has reached its limits in a changing world that demands more from international aid, prompting a need to redefine what humanitarian aid is and does.

Watch Chistina Bennett's keynote speech on [YouTube](#).

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

Navigating the ethical dilemmas and moral conundrums in humanitarian settings

Panellists include Juliet Parker, the Director of ALNAP; William Anderson, the Director of Sphere; and Miro Modrusan, a Representative and policy advisor at INTERSOS.

Moderated by Eero Janson, Director of ERC

- Humanitarian organisations face challenges in maintaining impartiality when their activities and movement are restricted by governments or armed groups, having to navigate the tension between professionalisation and localisation.
- The use of standards and principles in humanitarian work is important, but there is a need for more discussion and clarity on what these standards mean and how they can be implemented effectively.
- The concept of ethics, particularly within humanitarian action, is complex and lacks a simplified explanation, involving agreed norms and expectations as well as personal judgement.
- Collective leadership is necessary for making changes and challenging the limitations of the current system, which is often referred to as being in a "midlife crisis," and this collective effort is required to rethink the purpose and direction of humanitarian work.
- The politicisation of aid has been an ongoing issue, with certain crises receiving significant funding while others receive very little due to not being high on the political agenda of donor countries, raising questions about humanitarian impartiality.
- The need for solidarity among humanitarian organisations is crucial, particularly in establishing red lines and pushing back against challenging requirements from donors or governments.
- The current financial constraints may force the humanitarian sector to be more efficient, but it is unclear whether this will be enough to address the growing problems, and there is a need for caution and rethinking of the sector's infrastructure.

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- However, the growth in humanitarian needs has outpaced the growth in funding, and the current decline in funding is concerning, as the needs are not declining and are actually continuing to grow.
- The importance of understanding and implementing the four fundamental principles of humanitarian work was emphasised, as well as the need for a common understanding among frontline workers, capital base workers, and head office workers.
- Rather than getting rid of the current principles, they should be clarified and built upon to address the complexities of modern conflicts and vulnerabilities.

Watch the panel on [YouTube](#).

THE POSSIBILITY OF FORESIGHT IN CONFLICT SETTINGS

Exploring strategies of preparedness and anticipatory action in conflict settings to mitigate the impact of potential crises before they escalate

Panellists include Christina Bennett, the CEO of Start Network, and Catalina Jaime, Head of climate and conflict at RCRC Climate Center.

Moderated by Sigrid Solnik, Estonian Country Director at ERC

- *The current approach to disaster response needs a rethink, as it is often reactive and late, with a focus on responding to emergencies after they have occurred, rather than acting early to prevent or mitigate them.*
- *This reactive approach can lead to a delayed response, with money and action often arriving too late to make a significant difference in affected communities, sometimes taking weeks or months to reach those in need.*
- *Anticipatory action is advancing in areas that are easier to operate in, but it is challenging in difficult-to-access areas, particularly in conflict zones.*
- *Anticipatory action is not just about having funding for early action, but also about setting up systems on the ground to be able to take action.*
- *Only 1.1% of humanitarian funding is allocated to anticipatory action, despite 55% of emergencies being somewhat predictable and 25% of those being modelable to trigger a response.*
- *The low funding for anticipatory action can be attributed to politics, as responding to emergencies is more appealing than averting them, making it more palatable for governments to respond rather than act ahead of time.*

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- *Anticipatory action requires being globally connected but locally positioned to anticipate, develop models, trigger risks, and preposition funds, especially in areas with high risks and vulnerabilities.*
- *A distinction should be made between anticipatory action and conflict prevention, as they have different goals and approaches, with anticipatory action focusing on preventing the impacts of conflict on a population, rather than preventing the conflict itself.*
- *Anticipatory action should not be conflated with conflict prevention, as it could potentially exacerbate conflicts, and should be seen as one tool among many for reducing vulnerability and building resilience.*
- *A new trend in discussions on anticipatory action is moving from anticipating single specific events to looking at the system and developing processes that monitor multiple risks and look at systems that track displacement, epidemics, and natural hazards.*

Watch the panel on [YouTube](#).

THE ROLE OF AI IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Potential and risks associated with the use of artificial intelligence in humanitarian response

Panellists include Thomas Byrnes, an independent consultant at Market Impact; Robbie Phillips Humanitarian science and technology lead at FCDO; and Karin Maasel the Executive director of Data Friendly Space.

Moderated by Kristen Davis, the CEO and founder of CinqC

- *The use of AI in humanitarian action is not a black-and-white issue, but rather a scale of how and when to use AI, with various examples demonstrating its potential to assist in problem-solving.*
- *AI is inevitably coming to the humanitarian space, with conversations already happening about its use in anticipatory action, and it has the potential to be transformational.*
- *The key to successful AI implementation is not the technology itself, but rather the data, which serves as the "rocket fuel" for AI.*
- *Humanitarians have a lot to offer the AI community through their domain knowledge and data, and should focus on bringing partners together to develop effective solutions.*

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- The use of AI in humanitarian action raises questions about bias, transparency, ethics, and the potential for hallucination models, and is still in its early stages, often referred to as the "toddler phase".
- There are various risks associated with AI tools, including system risks, distributional impact, data protection issues, and waste and duplication, which need to be considered in the humanitarian sector.
- The development of responsible AI in humanitarian action should be collaborative, involving various stakeholders, including local voices and communities, to ensure that the technology is used effectively and safely.
- Humanitarian leadership, whether local or international, cannot afford to sit on the fence when it comes to AI, as indecision can lead to the creation of shadow use cases of AI within organisations that can be incredibly dangerous.
- In 10 years, the humanitarian sector may see a shift towards more personalised aid, enabled by the data processing and analysis power of multi-agent AI models.
- Humanitarians need to maintain their human values, contextual knowledge, and intricacies, and ensure that AI does not "dumb down" the complexity of humanitarian work.

Watch the panel on [YouTube](#).

