



A MORE FEMINIST, DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO HUMANITARIAN AID

The future of Scotland's Humanitarian Emergency Fund

DISCUSSION PAPER

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1. A HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM IN CRISIS

The world faces intensifying climate disasters, growing conflicts and a damaging rollback of human rights. Every 12 minutes, a civilian dies in armed conflict.¹ Around 400 million children, roughly one in five, live in or are fleeing conflict.² Lives are being devastated by horrific violations of international law, such as in Gaza and Ukraine. A deadly Ebola outbreak is now compounding existing humanitarian needs in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).³

Despite the increasing need within the humanitarian system, 2025 saw funding for humanitarian crises fall to the lowest level in a decade, and Official Development Assistance (ODA) fall by more than 23% from 2024. This is “the largest annual contraction on record”,⁴ resulting in what the United Nations (UN) describes as “brutal cuts to humanitarian operations” with programmes “slashed” and hundreds of aid organisations forced to close.⁵ Consequently, aid reached 25 million fewer people in 2025 than the year before, meaning millions of people faced hunger, limited access to life-saving health care and poor or non-existent shelter.⁶ Worryingly, this funding crisis is getting worse. At present, the UN has raised just 25% of the \$33 billion needed in 2026 to assist 252 million people experiencing crisis due to conflict, climate disasters, epidemics and crop failures.⁷

This woeful situation is the inevitable consequence of aid cuts by multiple Global North countries. For example, last year the UK Government announced it is cutting ODA from 0.5% of Gross National Income to 0.3% by 2027, the steepest cut of any G7 country. Its own Equality Impact Assessment acknowledges that this will ultimately result in “deaths impacting in particular those living in poverty, women, children and people with disabilities”.⁸ The UK Government claims these cuts are necessary to fund increased defence spending. In reality, they’re a political choice. Instead of cutting aid, a modest new 2% tax on the wealth of the very richest, just 0.04% of the population, could fairly raise up to £24 billion each year. Improving existing taxes on wealth could raise tens of billions more.⁹

Beyond aid, a failure to resolve the causes of conflict and instability is leading to more protracted, recurring and lethal conflicts.¹⁰ This comes as rising carbon emissions result in ever worsening climate disasters and corresponding humanitarian need.¹¹ Meanwhile, rights are being rolled back, specifically women’s and LGBTQIA+ rights.¹² This is particularly damaging in a context where just 0.1 per cent of ODA directly reached women’s rights and women-led organisations between 2014 and 2023.¹³ Against this backdrop, a combination of aid cuts and the continued absence of tax and debt justice will only further fuel instability, deepen poverty and result in lost lives and futures.

2. SCOTLAND: BUCKING THE GLOBAL TREND?

While other nations in the Global North step back, Scotland has an opportunity to choose a different path. The Scottish Government rightly believes that “smaller nations can have a disproportionate international impact” and can contribute to addressing global challenges.¹⁴ While powers over foreign affairs are reserved to Westminster, successive Scottish Governments have carved out a small but powerful role in showing what global solidarity can look like: principled, impactful, and led by human dignity and respect. This is borne from a welcome recognition that supporting those affected by humanitarian crisis is central to “Scotland’s responsibility as a good global citizen”.¹⁵

As the new Scottish Parliament begins, and against the backdrop of the damaging global funding crisis, Scotland must deepen its solidarity with people affected by crisis by substantially boosting humanitarian aid and peace-building efforts, while championing and embedding feminist, decolonial and locally-led approaches throughout its policies and programmes. It must rebalance power by changing how it sees and acts in the world, and by moving more money, decision-making, and influence to communities in the Global South.

The Scottish Government is currently evolving its approach to humanitarian funding following an independent review of its Humanitarian Emergency Fund (HEF).¹⁶ While it has accepted all recommendations either in full or in part, the details of a future model for the HEF remain unclear. While responsibility for establishing a revised delivery model rests with the Scottish Government, this discussion paper seeks to set out the actions that Scotland, as a small subnational state, can and should take to deepen its solidarity with the Global South and strengthen its role as a global humanitarian leader. While the limited scale of the Scottish Government's funding creates some trade-offs, this paper outlines practical steps towards a more feminist and decolonial model. We remain committed to working collaboratively with the Scottish Government and partners to develop and deliver Scotland's humanitarian response.

3. OXFAM'S HUMANITARIAN APPROACH

The humanitarian system was created in a historical, cultural and geopolitical context which inevitably replicated some of the values, behaviours, and culture of colonial and patriarchal systems. This has resulted in unequal power dynamics and relationships becoming embedded within the humanitarian system. To change this, we must deconstruct the systemic and structural power imbalances and coloniality that has shaped the humanitarian system and seek to repair the harm it has caused. We must centre accountability, the advancement of decolonisation, the deconstruction of patriarchal systems, and the promotion of locally-led, feminist responses which enable a more equitable and inclusive humanitarian system.¹⁷ To this end, Oxfam takes a four pillared humanitarian approach:

Feminist principles: We take a feminist approach underpinned by our eleven feminist principles.¹⁸ We seek to build a system that works with people and communities in crises, challenges exclusion, discrimination and inequality, contributes to dismantling systems of oppression and is informed by and responsive to those most affected by insecurity, conflict, and displacement. We do this by:

- sharing and shifting power between actors, genders, and those historically marginalised and denied access to power, influence and resources;
- centring feminist leadership, with the voices of those most affected central to decision-making and resource allocation;
- meaningfully engaging with the communities affected by crises;
- acting without discrimination and actively contributing to inclusive gender transformative change;
- advancing human rights for all;
- taking a triple nexus approach to address the drivers and root causes of instability, conflict, climate disasters and displacement;
- complementing the work of others and supporting local to global movements; and
- focusing on care and solidarity, as well as activism when needed.

Local humanitarian leadership: We aim to enable, support, and facilitate the work of local actors and their networks to shape disaster management programmes, advocate for change, and shift into roles of greater power and responsibility.

Community engagement: Communities in crisis are the central actors in their own survival and need to lead their own recovery. We work to help them address the inequalities that create and increase the risk of conflict and disaster and build on their knowledge and capacities.

Safe programming: We analyse the existing and potential risks people may face throughout our humanitarian responses. This includes preventing or reducing the risks of gender-based violence, prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, and upholding humanitarian principles.

These pillars shape the steps we outline to strengthen Scotland's humanitarian response.

4. STEPS TOWARDS A MORE FEMINIST AND DECOLONIAL HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Fast-track the promised 25% increase in the International Development Fund and substantially boost the Humanitarian Emergency Fund

Increasing humanitarian funding would be a small but important demonstration of leadership, particularly in the face of a global funding crisis and substantial levels of unmet need. The baseline value of Scotland's humanitarian funding has been stagnant for nearly a decade, remaining at £1 million since 2017. This represents a cumulative real terms cut of more than 37%.¹⁹ While we welcome the additional ad hoc funds the Scottish Government has committed in recent years above the annually committed £1 million, predictability and transparency would be substantially improved by increasing the baseline allocation.

The Scottish Government should therefore fast-track the SNP's manifesto²⁰ commitment to increase the International Development Fund (IDF) by at least 25% from £16 million to £20 million by the end of the Parliament and should bring forward this increase in the first year.²¹ The HEF should also be substantially increased. Doing so would make an important contribution towards transformative systems change within the humanitarian sector. Similarly, the increasing severity and regularity of climate disasters, the promised "growth"²² of the Climate Justice Fund should be delivered quickly.

Respond rapidly to humanitarian crises, including neglected crises, while issuing all funding through transparent and competitive processes

It is essential that any humanitarian funding model is fit for purpose and improves on practice to date. Until now, the disbursement of the HEF has been guided and supported by a Panel of eight leading humanitarian organisations.²³ However, the Scottish Government disbanded the Panel in March 2026, stating it will explore "alternative options for a model of delivery".²⁴ While this is a significant change in the humanitarian funding delivery model, it creates an opportunity for progress.

The Panel was created in 2017 to provide humanitarian advice to Scottish ministers amid proliferating global crises. Through peer scrutiny, Panel members assessed project applications in line with the Scottish Government's overarching objectives and provided advice on which projects to fund. We are proud to have been a member of the Panel and to have worked collaboratively with fellow members to allocate and distribute more than £16 million across 90 humanitarian projects. Through this model, Oxfam has received a series of grants to support our humanitarian response across multiple countries. For example, in 2024 we received £125,000 to support South Sudanese refugees in Gambella in Ethiopia.²⁵

Throughout its lifespan, the Panel – working closely with the Scottish Government – has iteratively developed and improved its processes in line with evolving best practice. This included taking an increasingly decolonial approach by seeking to shift power, resources and decision-making from the Global North to the Global South and centring local partners and organisations in both the design and delivery of projects. This shift reflects the ongoing efforts of Oxfam and other HEF Panel members to embed local humanitarian leadership.

The Panel also adopted an increasingly gender sensitive approach, recognising that men and boys and women and girls experience and are impacted differently by disasters. The Panel also supported innovation, including through the delivery of a themed-funding round focused on projects to address losses and damages caused by the climate crisis.²⁶

While the Panel made a substantially positive contribution and enabled relatively quick disbursement of funds, we agree that the model created disproportionate administrative workload, primarily for Panel members. It is time for the HEF to take the next step in its evolution and we support the Review’s aspiration for a “simplified fund” which is “less transaction heavy for all actors”.²⁷ However, the need for transparent and fair funding processes remains essential.

The Scottish Government has rejected the Review’s recommendation of a new “HEF 2.0” delivered by a third-party, citing concerns that this would require a similar level of administration and resource.²⁸ While uncertainty remains over the new funding mechanism, we welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to a “transparent, predictable and impactful” approach which seeks to “equalise power”.²⁹

However, if a third-party delivery model is revisited, any appointment should be made through an open and competitive process rather than being awarded directly to an existing partner, as the Review suggests as an option. Regardless of the model adopted, all humanitarian funding should be allocated through open and competitive mechanisms and the proportion of funding reaching local actors should be transparently tracked and reported in line with the International Aid Transparency Index Standard.³⁰

A Neglected Crisis: Democratic Republic of Congo

The DRC is experiencing one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. More than 21 million people are in need of aid and over 7 million people are displaced because of conflict. Climate change is making an awful situation unbearable and now the World Health Organization has declared an [Ebola outbreak](#).

In late January 2025, fighting escalated in the east of the country forcing families to flee. The Scottish Government [provided £125,000 to Oxfam](#) and our local partner Solidarité pour la Promotion Sociale et la Paix (SOPROP) to deliver urgent support to around 3,000 people. The cash support provided was flexible, enabling people to make their own choices about what they needed most. This helped families pay for essentials such as food, fuel, shelter, hygiene items, and to access urgent medical care.

In partnership with SOPROP, we also worked to make communities safer, especially for women and girls, and supported 200 survivors of sexual violence to access medical and trauma services. This included providing up to \$100 to cover urgent transport costs to get to a clinic, pay for safe housing, or visit a doctor.

Claudine, a member of the Women’s Forum in Humule, has become a strong voice for women’s rights and a leader in her community. She [told us](#): “Before, we spoke without being heard. Now, we speak with knowledge — with facts, with confidence. And people listen differently.”

The HEF has supported people facing crises that receive little, if any, public attention. Scotland should redouble its commitment to ‘neglected crises’, which are systematically under reported in the media and therefore result in limited public awareness and humanitarian support, such as crises unfolding in Sudan, East Africa, Southern Africa, Yemen and DRC.³¹ The new funding model must fully protect this approach, ensuring that funds are committed based on need.

Meaningfully shift power to the Global South by moving more money, decision-making, and influence to local communities and organisations

Shifting power to the Global South is one of Oxfam’s core values, as set out in our Decolonial Partnerships Strategy.³² We seek to rebalance power by changing how we see and act in the world by moving more money, decision-making, and influence to communities and organisations in the Global South. Donors, like the Scottish Government, must support this transformation. Building on progress, a decolonial, locally-led approach should be embedded within the revamped HEF and throughout the IDF and the CJF.

The new humanitarian funding model should be co-designed in collaboration with former HEF panel members and other humanitarian actors, particularly those in the Global South and technical experts. The inclusion of women’s rights and women-led organisations is essential, recognising their role as critical actors on the frontline of crises and emergencies, and as leaders in shaping and driving change and contributing to peace and security. Children and young people should also be included in the co-design process, reflecting their role in driving transformative systems change in societies across the globe, and ensuring that those who experience the longest-term impacts of decisions are actively involved in how these are made.

As reflected in Oxfam’s humanitarian approach, and the below Women’s Rights Fund case study, the Scottish Government’s new humanitarian funding model should take a locally-led approach, ensuring that feminist and decolonial principles which actively deconstruct systemic power imbalances and coloniality are fully embedded. Equitable partnerships built on trust and flexible funding are at the heart of this approach. We strongly support the Review’s recommendation to target a percentage of humanitarian funds to activities which support women’s rights and feminist organisations, as well as other marginalised groups, including indigenous, disabled, LGBTQIA+ and refugee and displaced people. These groups should be supported to identify and invest in their own priorities and to use their knowledge, community relationships and experience to enact change.³³ This would complement the Women and Girls Fund in the IDF’s Equalities programme.

As per the Review’s recommendations, we support expanding and diversifying the organisations able to bid for Scottish Government funds, with a focus on directly funding national and local actors where possible. This reflects the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) humanitarian reset and ambition that 70% of OCHA-managed pooled funds are issued directly to local actors, including women-led organisations.³⁴

In driving localisation forward, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are often rooted within communities, staffed locally, and work in deep partnership with national and local actors. For example, we have partnered with the ASAL Humanitarian Network (AHN), which was established in Kenya in 2019.³⁵ Its development has enabled Oxfam in Kenya to reduce the number of staff working directly on emergency responses, instead partnering with AHN to support substantially more people. Similarly, through the Women’s Rights Fund we have partnered with national and local organisations to support them to reach more people, raise additional funds, increase organisational resilience, and amplify their voices.

Oxfam America’s [Locally Led Emergency Response Fund](#) in Bangladesh, Puerto Rico and Uganda offers another innovative example.³⁶ The Fund provided flexible, standby funds in advance of

emergencies to credible networks of local and national-level NGOs and actors, with local counterparts leading in specific geographies. The funds were designed to be nimble, with light-touch procedures at the time of emergencies to enable responses to be launched just before an emergency or immediately after (within 72 hours) to meet urgent needs and have the greatest impact. As well as being locally led and managed, the Fund was designed with a spirit of innovation and experimentation and came with a learning and influencing component. This pilot helped to shift decision-making power to local actors throughout the humanitarian response, enabled quick responses, and elevated women's leadership. It also encountered challenges, such as the limited organisational resources of local consortia members. This offers important insights for all those seeking to support the shift to local humanitarian leadership.

Case Study: Learnings from Oxfam's Women's Rights Fund

As part of [Oxfam's strategy](#) to change the way we work and become a better partner we launched the [Women's Rights Fund](#) (WRF) in 2020. It provides £60,000 over three years to community-based women's rights organisations (WROs) to flexibly invest. We trust our partners to decide how best to use the funds, including responding quickly and dynamically to changing and emerging challenges without bureaucracy, and supporting locally developed and owned interventions.

Through the WRF we are partnering with 25 grassroots WROs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Kenya, Lebanon and Nepal. We will soon expand to Myanmar. Together these organisations support tens of thousands of people each year. We also support partners to develop sustainability plans and identify relevant training to enable them to grow, such as in fundraising, strategy development and campaigning. In the first three years the WRF supported partners to increase their reach, trebling the number of people receiving support; raise an additional \$2.1 million for 10 partners; invest in sustainable futures by strengthening organisational processes; and amplify partner voice and global visibility by supporting the development of communications strategies and local and national media outreach.

The WRF has made an important contribution to reimagining how INGOs fund local communities, as recognised at the 2025 UK Charity Awards, where the WRF won the overall [Award for Excellence](#) and the [International Aid and Development Award](#). Based on this learning, Oxfam is urging donors to reimagine their approach to humanitarian funding by:

- **Deconstructing traditional grant making practices:** adopt multi-year, core, flexible funding with few restrictions which allows organisations to prioritise their needs and operate in a truly feminist and locally-led manner.
- **Deconstructing power imbalances and colonial legacies:** by building equitable partnerships which value "Southern" knowledge and expertise, provide direct access to resources, and take a collaborative approach to decision-making.
- **Building genuine partnership:** engage in ongoing dialogue and actively listen to those most affected in order to deconstruct imbalanced transactional power relations and build trust, respect and mutual learning.
- **Survivor and prevention led approaches:** providing dedicated and flexible funding to anticipate prevention and survivor support across all types of programming – not just gender-based violence programming.

Broaden investment in pooled funds through a test-and-learn approach and meaningfully contribute to humanitarian system transformation

The Scottish Government says a “significant amount” of its humanitarian funding will be delivered through pooled funds.³⁷ Since its inception, the HEF has automatically activated in response to humanitarian appeals launched by the Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC). The DEC provides an important shared platform for public fundraising and through its support the Scottish Government has helped to increase awareness of these appeals amongst the Scottish public. As a member of the DEC, we highly value and support its work in rapidly mobilising and distributing funding for large-scale emergencies. We strongly welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to continue supporting this important platform through a dedicated budget.³⁸ As per the current practice, we welcome the commitment that any Scottish Government funds which are not distributed through DEC appeals will not be reabsorbed as savings and will be issued through wider delivery models and partners.

We also support the Review’s recommendation to expand support for pooled funds, including consideration of the Start Network. The Review suggests that the Network’s model could help shift power south. Oxfam is one of the Network’s 134 members working across six continents. As part of its evaluation to determine which pooled funds best achieve its objectives and principles, the Scottish Government contributed an “initial” £200,000 in March 2026 to the Global Start Fund.³⁹ Organisations must be a member of the Network to be eligible to receive funds and applications are currently only open to specific countries. The Scottish Government may wish to explore how it can support more national and local actors to join the Network and be eligible for funding. Both START and the DEC serve important functions and offer unique services. We believe both could play a strong role in realising the Scottish Government’s humanitarian ambitions. While Oxfam GB has not engaged with the NEAR Change Fund, we support its vision of local leadership and ownership.⁴⁰

We therefore support the Review’s recommendation for the Scottish Government to “explore and invest in a pooled fund which is predominantly managed by (non-UN) actors in the Global South”.⁴¹ They can provide a fast and efficient delivery model and we agree that, alongside competitive direct funding models, pooled funds could play a strong role in realising the Scottish Government’s humanitarian ambitions. With the latest allocation of \$1.8 billion from the US Government to UN pooled funds⁴², too often there is excessive focus on compliance and delivery by INGOs and large NGOs, undermining efforts to shift towards localisation. The Scottish Government can play a valuable role by championing localised pooled funding mechanisms that supporting humanitarian actors that are closest to communities facing crisis. This includes advocating for intermediaries to be local and national humanitarian actors or INGOs that are fully dedicated to local humanitarian leadership.

One such example which the Scottish Government could fund and champion is Oxfam’s Women Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF).⁴³ The WHLF piloted a simple but transformative idea: trust WROs to decide how humanitarian resources are best spent to support affected communities.⁴⁴ The Fund provides flexible funding to WROs to enable them to act quickly and with autonomy to humanitarian needs, adapt to shifting realities and strengthen their organisations. The WHLF offers a more equitable way of partnering: simplifying due diligence, reducing reporting burdens, and shifting decision-making power to local feminist actors. Leadership of this Fund will transition in August 2026, with national WROs taking the lead and Oxfam reverting to a support role.

By supporting and championing such shifts, coupled with enhanced focus on anticipatory action, Scotland can support important transformations in how the global humanitarian system operates.

Ensure Scotland’s humanitarian response is informed and guided by independent humanitarian experts, including those from crisis-impacted communities in the Global South

The HEF Panel was a unique model. Its disbanding has already resulted in the loss of an established group of independent expert organisations and risks the Scottish Government losing access to evidence, insight and advice on humanitarian crises and programming. Given this, we support the Review’s recommendation to create an independent Humanitarian Advisory Board. The Scottish Government says it supports the principle of independent and expert advice but has only committed to “consider the options”. These should be considered at pace.

An independent Humanitarian Advisory Board, or similar advisory body, made up of humanitarian experts and practitioners, could provide valuable advice to Scottish ministers on the strategic development of the new humanitarian funding model, humanitarian policy, horizon scanning, wider developments within the humanitarian sector in the context of declining ODA, and act as a ‘critical friend’. While the Advisory Board should be provided with secretariat support by the Scottish Government, as is routine for such boards, it should be independent. To ensure transparency, accountability and to support implementation of advice and recommendations, the Advisory Board’s papers and minutes should be published on the Scottish Government website no later than 3 months after each meeting.

Consideration will also need to be given to the interaction between any new Advisory Board and the existing Global South Panel.⁴⁵ The Panel does not appear to have met for three years and its role and remit is currently under review by the Scottish Government – meaning it is in effect not in operation.⁴⁶ We strongly supported the creation of the Global South Panel and agree that its purpose and remit should be reconsidered, particularly in relation to the Scottish Government’s cross-cutting humanitarian, development and climate justice response. It should reflect that, while the IDF is narrowly focused on the Scottish Government’s partner countries – Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Pakistan – the HEF has a global remit. Some allocations made via the Climate Justice Fund, such as those to address climate-induced losses and damages, also extend beyond the partner countries. The geographic scope, remit and membership of a reinvigorated Panel must be fully considered to ensure it is fit for purpose.

In addition, further consideration is needed to ensure the Scottish Government re-establishes meaningful and consistent engagement platforms with Scotland’s humanitarian and international development sectors. Scotland’s International Development Alliance (SIDA) could play an important role in facilitating this engagement, including supporting regular dialogue with the new Minister for International Development.

Invest in anticipatory approaches to support crisis prevention, peacebuilding, and promote long-term resilience

The Review recommends against broadening humanitarian funding to include anticipatory action and/or longer-term resilience and recovery. While the Scottish Government has agreed with this recommendation, it has stated that other funding streams could be used in conjunction with the HEF to support longer-term, strategic responses.⁴⁷ However, it is not clear how this will work in practice, given that the HEF responds to crises globally whereas other Scottish Government funding streams are generally focused on its four partner countries.

While we recognise the constraints created by limited funding, we believe that anticipatory action and longer-term resilience and recovery are vital. There is a growing need to focus more systematically on the underlying drivers of risks, shocks, and uncertainty, particularly in

contexts affected by entrenched conflict and recurrent or cyclical climate-linked crises. Together with partners, we actively support this work through a humanitarian-development-peacebuilding triple nexus approach. This recognises that humanitarian relief, development programmes and peacebuilding are not independent processes, but must operate in parallel to tackle the systemic inequalities that trap people in poverty and expose them to risk.⁴⁸

One example is the joint project Oxfam delivered in northern Kenya from December 2023 to March 2024 in partnership with the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands Humanitarian Network, Strategies for Northern Development and Merti Integrated Development.⁴⁹ This project was funded by the Scottish Government via a HEF funding round focused on addressing losses and damages flowing from the climate crisis. The project funded critical repairs to damaged water infrastructure and a range of other restorative projects identified by community members, such as rebuilding a school damaged during a flood. It also sought to address and prevent growing conflicts between communities as a result of increased competition over access to eroded pastures and water resources caused by repeated droughts and flooding.

We believe the Scottish Government should engage with actors working across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus to explore how these approaches can be coordinated and to inform the level of funding allocated to each of these critical areas.

Develop a comprehensive public engagement strategy to inform and mobilise the people of Scotland on humanitarian issues and wider global justice

Given the Scottish Government's relatively small-scale funding for its humanitarian response, supporting and harnessing wider public support remains vital. To date, bodies funded by the HEF have been required to raise awareness of the specific humanitarian crisis they are responding to and demonstrate the impact of the funding they have received. Oxfam has produced high-quality communications for public and political audiences, highlighting projects delivered in partnership with local organisations. We have often collaborated with other recipients of HEF funding and the Panel's communications lead, hosted by the DEC. Recent Oxfam outputs include those produced for the launch of our Scottish Government funded flood response project in Nairobi⁵⁰, as well as content capturing the project's impact.⁵¹ Similarly, Oxfam produced and shared video, written stories and images documenting a Scottish Government funded project to address climate-induced losses and damage in northern Kenya.⁵²

However, securing coverage of humanitarian crises, particularly those which are 'neglected' by the media, remains highly challenging. We therefore support the Review's recommendation for the creation of a "realistic communications framework for all of Scottish Government investment in ODA". As the Review notes, to date, "very little funding" has been committed to communications requirements. To ensure communications are strategically effective, the Scottish Government, or any third-party administrator, must take the lead on:

- Defining target audiences (e.g. the Scottish public, policymakers, media, civic groups).
- Setting an overall communications strategy, including required outputs, format and design, as well as purpose and use.
- Coordinating dissemination, ensuring content reaches intended audiences through HEF campaigns, Scottish Government channels, and partner networks.

At a time of growing social division and tensions, the Scottish Government must also do more to foster meaningful, evidenced-based public discussions on critical international agendas. This includes conflicts, respect for the rule of law, climate change, migration, and racial, tax and debt justice. Investment in Global Citizenship Education (GCE) can strengthen public

understanding, build support for Scottish Government interventions, and empower individuals and groups to take informed action. To support this, Oxfam provides small-scale funding to support the dissemination of resources by Scotland's Development Education Centres (DECs) and we strongly endorse the SIDA's calls for further investment in the DECs.⁵³ The Scottish Government should also continue to invest in SIDA to enable and strengthen collaboration and shared learning across the sector.⁵⁴

Consistently use the Scottish Government's devolved powers and voice to champion systems change, grounded in a new International Development Strategy and Feminist Approach to International Relations Action Plan

To meaningfully contribute to the transformation of the humanitarian and wider international development systems, the Scottish Government must establish strong mutual learning processes. As recommended by the Review, Oxfam supports the Scottish Government championing, signing or becoming a member of progressive global movements or organisations, such as the Grand Bargain, Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, Regions4, Under 2 coalition, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP), and the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations.

The Scottish Government should take a leadership role in advocating for – and where possible within devolved powers – enacting gender transformative and decolonial systems change. However, passive membership of such platforms is tokenistic and would not deliver on Scotland's ambition to have "a disproportionate international impact" as a small subnational state and contribute to addressing global challenges.⁵⁵ The Scottish Government must also consistently use its voice – without fear or favour – to speak out and challenge oppressive systems and actors. Silence contributes to a permissive and enabling environment for bad actors.

To help drive progress and accountability, the Scottish Government should consult on and publish an ambitious new International Development Strategy, ensuring that this explicitly commits to an intersectional feminist development policy focused on the interconnected challenges of inequality, conflict, climate and gender justice.⁵⁶ It should support growing global calls to reframe aid as a part of a broader reparatory justice framework for the damages inflicted by conflicts and the ensuing impunity, as well as climate impacts, and the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism. The new Strategy should be coherent across the IDF, CJF and HEF.

Recognising that ODA alone is insufficient, the Scottish Government should also publish a Feminist Approach to International Relations (FAIR) Action Plan which implements the FAIR 2023 policy paper⁵⁷ across all government portfolios. The Action Plan should set out specific and time-bound actions the Scottish Government will take to help address the root drivers of crisis, including wealth inequality, the climate crisis, food and water insecurity, exploitation and extraction of natural resources, corruption, and more. In line with stated commitments⁵⁸, the Scottish Government should also explore ways to play a more active and prominent role in recognising the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls, including through implementing the UK's National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security in Scotland.⁵⁹

Scotland's actions at home have a direct impact globally and the two cannot be disconnected. The FAIR Action Plan must therefore set out the domestic policy interventions intended to reduce climate emissions, defund arms companies, and support debt cancellation and tax justice, with the intention of supporting global justice.

5. CONCLUSION

The world has changed substantially in the decade since Oxfam first campaigned for a dedicated Scottish Government humanitarian fund in 2016. Conflicts are becoming more regular and protracted, the climate crisis is making life significantly harder for communities, international law is crumbling with red lines not only being crossed, but completely disregarded, aid is vanishing, wealth inequality is becoming yet more extreme, and strong man politics is dominating international systems and institutions. Throughout this, Scotland has stood strong in its principles and values and maintained its small but impactful humanitarian response.

As reiterated throughout this discussion paper, we agree with the Scottish Government “that smaller nations can have a disproportionate international impact”.⁶⁰ Oxfam has always stood steadfast in support of the role that Scotland can – and does – play in delivering an effective humanitarian response. However, in the current globally regressive context, Scotland must continue to choose a different path. It should demonstrate global humanitarian leadership through a well-funded, decolonial and locally-led humanitarian response. By consistently seeking to test, learn and evolve, it can be a credible and powerful champion for wider transformation.

This discussion paper sets out clear recommendations and seeks to support the Scottish Government as it develops a new humanitarian funding model. We stand ready to continue our longstanding collaborative engagement in service of a more feminist, safe, anti-racist and decolonial humanitarian system.

This discussion paper was written by Katherine May with input from Jamie Livingstone.

For more information, or to comment on this paper, email scotland@oxfam.org.uk.

NOTES

Front Page Image: Adugk, 35, fled the conflict in South Sudan to find refuge in Gambella. With the help of Oxfam, she can more easily access and collect water. This project was supported by £125,000 funding from the Scottish Government's Humanitarian Emergency Fund in 2024.

¹ United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (June 2025) Human Rights Count.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b12adf1ee3a840b7a23d089050c3bd80>

² UNOCHA. (2025) Global Humanitarian Overview 2025.

<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfres>

³ Oxfam GB. (2026) DRC Crisis Appeal. <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam-in-action/current-emergencies/democratic-republic-congo/>

⁴ OECD. (9 April 2026) A historic decline in foreign aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA data.

<https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/data-explainers/2026/04/a-historic-decline-in-foreign-aid-preliminary-2025-oda-data.html>

⁵ United Nations. (08 December 2025) Humanitarians launch \$33 billion appeal for 2026.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/12/1166526#:~:text=8%20December%202025%20Humanitarian%20Aid,Mr>

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