

How to safeguard, through national commitments and engagement, humanitarian action in times of crisis, especially in view of the economic and political constraints brought about by the current crisis of multilateralism

Dear colleagues,

The numbers are real: in 2025, *over 300 million people* are in need of urgent humanitarian aid due to escalating crises — a sharp increase from 167 million in 2019. Humanitarian needs today are not only driven by wars and conflicts, but also by climate disasters, health crises, and forced displacement. At the same time, the resources to respond are shrinking, and the political will is under pressure. Citizens expect their governments to manage scarce resources responsibly, and rightly so.

The discussion about safeguarding humanitarian action cannot remain at the level of abstract declarations. It must become **concrete, realistic, and feasible**.

All too often we speak about humanitarian action as if it were the exclusive domain of international organizations. But national and regional governments also carry a big responsibility. **They are the first responders**. They initiate requests for international assistance, they coordinate relief efforts, and they set the legal and regulatory framework for operations within their borders. They must lead and oversee the entire response — from **disaster preparedness to recovery**. Governments are the closest to the citizens, they control the budgets, and they have the democratic mandate to decide on priorities.

They also serve as crucial facilitators to work with local actors to provide assistance to ensure protection and to integrate external aid into existing national systems. Without this anchoring, humanitarian responses risk being fragmented or ineffective.

We see this in Belgium as well. Our country has a dedicated humanitarian budget within its development cooperation policy. We support emergency aid through our local organizations such as Red Cross, Caritas, Doctors Without Borders, and our emergency response team: B-FAST.

Humanitarian commitments must be rooted in what national and regional parliaments can realistically endorse and finance.

Furthermore, humanitarian principles are universal, but **resources are not unlimited**. We need to be honest about this. The temptation is always to promise more than one can deliver. But that leads to disillusion and mistrust — both among our citizens at home and among partners abroad.

In Belgium we know this reality all too well. Our parliaments debate every euro spent. When we release humanitarian funds, we have to explain clearly to our citizens why we

are releasing them, how we will do it, and what impact we are expecting. This kind of transparency is essential.

In my opinion, safeguarding humanitarian aid also means resisting **the idea that “more multilateralism” is always the answer**. Coordination is important, yes. But coordination without responsibility and finances is meaningless.

Colleagues, we know that multilateral cooperation has its place. The Geneva Conventions remain the cornerstone of humanitarian law, and rightly so. But today, the **system is under strain**. Geopolitical rivalries, mistrust, and bureaucracy too often slow down urgent action.

That is why many regions prefer to work through reliable partners on the ground which they know. When humanitarian projects are funded, it is important **to demand traceability and results**. **Subsidiarity** — act where you are closest to the citizens and cooperate only where added value is proven — makes aid credible.

So, what can we do?

From a parliamentary perspective, I see three concrete tasks:

1. **First, realism:** Parliaments must hold governments accountable for their commitments.
2. **Second, targeting the most vulnerable:** Humanitarian aid should focus first on those who cannot protect themselves. Parliaments have a crucial role here: they can set clear priorities through budget allocations, shape legislative frameworks that define who should be reached first and demand transparency from the aid programs.
3. **And third, protecting humanitarian space:** Even in times of crisis and political polarization, we must ensure that humanitarian actors — medical staff, relief workers, volunteers — can do their work safely and independently. Parliaments can uphold this space through laws and resolutions that guarantee respect for international humanitarian law and protect access for aid organizations.

Colleagues,

The real strength of humanitarian action does not lie in grand declarations, but in practical national and regional commitments that/which are feasible and funded and for which there is accountability. International cooperation only has value when it is built on this foundation.

The question is not whether we need multilateralism, but how to make it work. The answer lies in subsidiarity: strong, responsible action by national and regional governments, supported — not replaced — by international frameworks.

Thank you for your attention!