



Philanthropy Isn't Indifferent, It's Uncertain: Understanding Philanthropic Funding in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies

Barriers, Motivations, and Opportunities for Engagement
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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a mixed-method data collection approach with philanthropic funders, networks, advisors, humanitarian experts, and community-based organizations. The study sought to understand motivations and barriers for philanthropic funding for complex humanitarian emergencies (CHEs), why funding remains limited despite escalating global needs, and what could unlock new or expanded engagement.

Simply put, the study found that funders care deeply about human suffering and express genuine interest in supporting communities affected by conflict, protracted displacement, and disaster. However, most funders feel wildly unprepared to navigate crisis settings, especially the political exposure brought on by the dynamics of conflict, and they are unsure how to engage meaningfully without reputational or operational risk. Despite these challenges, the research also reveals a strong underlying desire among funders to support local actors, strengthen resilience, and protect development gains in fragile settings. Many expressed openness to deeper engagement if supported by trusted intermediaries who can provide clarity, proximity, and safe pathways for action. The central insight is clear: Philanthropy is not indifferent to complex crises. Philanthropy is uncertain.

The report outlines funders' motivations, identifies the key barriers that prevent higher philanthropic participation, and provides high-level recommendations for funders, intermediaries, and the wider humanitarian ecosystem.

1. Introduction

Complex humanitarian emergencies (CHEs), including armed conflict, protracted displacement, political crises, and slow- or sudden-onset disasters layered onto fragility, are increasing in severity and duration. Yet [philanthropic engagement](#) in these contexts remains minimal compared to development funding for global health, education, climate resilience, or economic opportunity. Interviews across a diverse array of philanthropic actors point to a shared paradox: philanthropic funders - private, corporate, family foundations and donor-advised funds - care about communities affected by crises and monitor them closely, but they remain uncertain about how to engage in these contexts in clear, safe, or mission-aligned ways.

Many funders described a desire to help, paired with confusion about where to begin. They described CHEs as overwhelming, overly technical, politically sensitive, and reputationally risky. Some expressed discomfort with humanitarian jargon or difficulty identifying credible local partners. Others felt the humanitarian system did not value or understand philanthropic approaches.

Across these conversations, one insight is consistent and unavoidable: aid cuts did not trigger a macro-level philanthropic expansion into CHEs. Instead, they intensified loyalty to existing partners in CHEs and deepened caution among already hesitant funders. Philanthropy did not interpret government withdrawal as a moral mandate to “fill the gap,” but rather as confirmation that gap-filling is not its role.

Funders operating in humanitarian contexts frame their identity as catalytic, relational, and discretionary, not compensatory. Their decisions are driven by visceral motivators like proximity and peer influence, media salience, legacy and impact, rather than by systemic or normative humanitarian logics. They avoid contexts that feel opaque, politically entangled, reputationally risky, or too big for a single funder to feel impactful or meaningful within.

Yet, importantly, the research also reveals what motivates funders to engage: proximity, trusted relationships, emotional resonance, mission alignment, peer influence, and opportunities to support courageous local leaders. Despite the above constraints, philanthropy funds CHEs more than might be broadly understood. The pattern is not “avoidance,” but selective engagement through trusted intermediaries, curated entry points, finite “crisis-within-crisis” packages, and hyperlocal intermediaries that mitigate many political and operational risks.

Accordingly, increasing philanthropic engagement in CHEs will not come from attempts to correct or “educate” donors; a framing nearly universally rejected throughout this study. It will come from reframing CHE participation in the language of philanthropic motivation: agency over charity; survivor leadership over victimhood; finite, catalytic pathways over diffuse systemic gaps; and legitimacy conferred through peer endorsement and proximity.

The report outlines practical solutions for bridging the visibility and reputational risks that keep many funders at the margins of CHE responses and organizes insights by the study’s guiding questions:

1. To what extent are funders currently supporting CHE contexts?
2. Which sectors do they support, why, and who receives this funding?
3. What motivates funders to engage?
4. What prevents new or expanded CHE funding?
5. What solutions exist to overcome these barriers?
6. What networks or communities of practice should be engaged?

1.1 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design combining evidence synthesis, quantitative trend analysis, and qualitative investigation into philanthropic decision-making for complex humanitarian emergencies (CHEs).

Some limitations that emerge include the fact that philanthropy is a uniquely heterogeneous space and generalizations are tricky. The sample is weighted toward funders with some CHE engagement; funders who completely avoid CHEs were harder to recruit. The sample includes primarily Global North funders; Global South philanthropic perspectives are included but underrepresented. Research was conducted during a period of significant humanitarian funding crisis following major bilateral donor cuts, which likely influenced funder perspectives.

Literature and secondary data review

We conducted a brief review of academic and grey literature on humanitarian financing, philanthropic giving patterns, and shifts in global aid architecture. This included donor reporting platforms, some funding analyses, and a quick review of prior studies on philanthropy's engagement in crisis contexts. The review served as an initial mapping of existing knowledge and identification of gaps in understanding related to philanthropic behavior in CHEs.

Multi-stakeholder survey

A targeted online survey was distributed to philanthropic funders and intermediaries between September and November 2025. The survey was distributed through personal networks, established funder groups, partner organization newsletters and snowball sampling. Of 200+ potential respondents, 76 completed the survey (38% response rate). The survey explored motivations, barriers, risk perceptions, due diligence practices, decision-making timelines and levels of engagement across crisis types.

A critical finding emerged: 55% of respondents (n=42) indicated they do not fund complex humanitarian emergencies because CHE engagement falls outside their organizational mandates or strategic priorities. This finding is significant in itself, confirming that barriers to CHE funding are often structural rather than simply operational. The survey served three functions: identifying patterns through descriptive statistical analysis of closed-ended questions, surfacing themes from open-ended responses through thematic coding, and recruiting interviewees. More than 45% of survey respondents (n=34+) participated in subsequent key informant interviews, allowing for triangulation and deeper exploration of survey findings. Given this substantial overlap and the richer, more nuanced data generated through interviews, this report prioritizes interview findings while noting the 55% non-engagement finding as important context for understanding the addressable market for CHE philanthropy engagement efforts.

In-depth semi-structured interviews

Researchers conducted 54 interviews with senior-level participants across:

1. Philanthropic funders (corporate, family, private, and community foundations; donor-advised funds) - 41

2. Humanitarian agencies, INGOs and think tanks - 4
3. Philanthropy experts, funder networks and collaborative platforms - 9

The interviewees were located in multiple geographies, from the United States, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, ensuring geographic and contextual diversity. Participants ranged from senior decision-makers, including CEOs, strategy directors, and board members, to operational leads with direct crisis-funding experience.

Interviews were conducted confidentially, occasionally, recorded with consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis. No attribution has been assigned in this report or elsewhere without explicit permission.

The analysis was conducted through coding, theming, and data interpretation using a qualitative research analysis software to streamline the process and reduce researchers' bias.

1.2 Literature Review

Global financing for humanitarian response is under strain as traditional aid budgets shrink and crises escalate. The [2025 Global Humanitarian Assistance Report](#) from the international aid research group, ALNAP, shows that donor governments have scaled back spending even as more people are living in protracted emergencies. The report warns that humanitarian needs have outpaced resources every year for the past decade.

Analysts say the expectation that philanthropy will fill those gaps is overstated. The Wellcome Trust told [STAT News](#) that private giving cannot replace bilateral government support for global health programs. [Reuters](#) reported that major global health funds are lobbying for more private sector contributions, acknowledging that government financing is retreating but warning against unrealistic assumptions.

Philanthropy, however, remains active in crisis response, but largely on its own terms. The Center for Disaster Philanthropy's (CDP) State of Disaster Philanthropy 2025 found that in 2023, response and relief received the highest proportion of funding from philanthropy (48.5%) while the share of funding for CHEs was 10.1%. The [Associated Press](#) reported that new online giving platforms can rapidly mobilize individual donations for sudden disasters, yet this surge rarely translates into sustained funding once media attention fades. Some coverage highlights a trend toward more sophisticated financing tools. The [Financial Times](#) reported that the Gates Foundation is scaling up blended finance approaches to draw in private capital as public budgets contract. Analysts at the [International Institute for Management Development](#) argue that instruments such as social bonds, guarantees and equity-like investments are beginning to reshape how humanitarian aid is financed.



Regional approaches also look different than global narratives suggest. At a [2024 UNDP roundtable](#) in Bangkok, governments and philanthropic leaders in Asia emphasized using climate financing to support regional crises as reliance on Western donors declines. Caribbean funders, showcased by the [Caribbean Philanthropy Alliance](#), are increasingly channeling money into local disaster resilience, as seen with Jamaica strengthening early-warning systems, supporting community-run shelters and restoring vulnerable coastlines. But news and expert analysis from the Middle East and North Africa show that philanthropy remains closely tied to politics. While the region is generous to local disasters and to “safe,” highly visible sectors such as education and health, institutional support for crises like Sudan and Gaza has been limited because donors operate under government influence and reputational risk.

Efforts to overhaul humanitarian aid continue to spark debate. Refugees International says the humanitarian “reset” requires structural transformation, including shifting power and money to local responders. Experts interviewed by [The New Humanitarian](#) express concern that current reforms may simply “repeat” existing systems with new branding. [Local to Global Protection](#) and [Proximate Press](#) both argue that crisis response should be led by community-based organizations, which they describe as infrastructure, not intermediaries. Research also points to longstanding economic barriers that prevent local actors from accessing funds. A [study](#) found that international systems push risk downward while keeping control and compliance at the top — a dynamic described by some analysts as “coloniality in practice.” The [INFORM](#) project's decade review notes that protracted crises are increasingly driven by governance failures, conflict and climate shocks, requiring financing strategies that address these deeper drivers rather than only acute impacts.

Meanwhile, collaboration is emerging as a preferred entry point for private donors. The [Legatum Foundation](#) announced more than \$30 million in early commitments to a pooled crisis relief fund. CDP's own Strengthening Local Humanitarian Leadership Collaborative drew vocal endorsements from multiple philanthropic funders. The [World Economic Forum](#) reports that private sector actors are expanding partnerships that combine logistics, capital and technology in emergency settings. [OECD](#) announcements indicate that philanthropic institutions are becoming more visible in global financing discussions, including at major UN convenings.

The literature suggests a rapidly evolving landscape: Philanthropy is stepping further into humanitarian settings, but not to replace shrinking aid budgets. Rather, private giving is flowing selectively toward visible, clearly defined, trust-based and less politically risky spaces. [Long-term complex emergencies remain one of the least funded categories](#), though not because philanthropy is absent, but because philanthropic decision-making is driven by emotion, relationships, visibility and reputational safety, while humanitarian need is driven by severity, scale and systemic risk.

2. Insights about Current Philanthropic Funding in CHE Contexts

While a broader snapshot of philanthropic funding trends in CHE is available in this year's [State of Disaster Philanthropy](#) report by CDP, the interviews also revealed a nuanced picture of philanthropic engagement in complex humanitarian emergencies (CHEs). While some funders maintain consistent, long-term commitments in fragile settings, the majority contribute indirectly, episodically, or through pre-existing thematic portfolios rather than through a dedicated crisis lens.

Overall, philanthropic funding in CHEs is shaped by three prevailing realities:

1. Engagement is uneven and highly context-dependent.
2. Most support flows through existing thematic priorities.
3. A minority of funders drive most of the sustained, long-term portfolio-level engagement.

Below is a synthesis of the most common patterns seen across interviews.

2.1 Findings about the Extent of Philanthropic Funding in CHEs

Funders' engagement with complex humanitarian emergencies varies dramatically, from complete avoidance to strategic prioritization. The research reveals significant diversity in both funding levels and approaches. Most funders do not maintain a dedicated complex humanitarian emergency portfolio. Instead, funding reaches crisis-affected areas through existing sectoral programs, support for long-standing partners now working in crisis zones, regional investments that overlap with fragile contexts, and occasional crisis-specific donations triggered by major events.

This ad-hoc approach dominates across funder types. When crises emerge, individual funders particularly respond reactively rather than through sustained strategies. One described the pattern: "When another emergency comes up around the world, I will usually fund through a trusted INGO. When they say we can't raise money for Yemen or Gaza, I'll send 10,000 [US dollars]." Another funder characterized their institution's approach more bluntly: "Our crisis funding is reactive. If something catastrophic happens, we mobilize quickly — then return to our core themes."

Variation by Funder Type

The extent and nature of CHE engagement varies significantly based on philanthropic structure and governance.

Individual funders using donor-advised funds operate with total discretion.

Decision-making proceeds without bureaucracy or trustee approval, as one explained: "They just decide, and they put a grant into the system. As long as it's not going to an

organization that's on the terrorist list, it flies." Most do not conduct due diligence beyond ensuring recipients hold 501(c)(3) status or equivalent.

This stands in sharp contrast to **institutional foundations**, where program officers are accountable to the board. Staff must justify CHE interventions to risk-averse trustees: "They're accountable to their trustees. They've got to make cases for why they should intervene in this tumultuous area or fragile state, and it's hard to make those cases when there are so many other places and issues you could give to around the world."

Corporate foundations face different constraints entirely: statutory geographic mandates are often tied to business operations. One explained: "We will only support emergencies or projects where our company has operations. Those countries within our company operations. It's really there in our statutes." This creates structural limitations distinct from strategic choices.

Budget Inflexibility Dynamics

Counterintuitively, one recommended best-practice - provision of multi-year funding - can create a hidden barrier to CHE funding. Though laudable at its core, multi-year grants can also create budget inflexibility that limits CHE engagement. Funders practicing multi-year, unrestricted funding reported that existing commitments make it difficult to add crisis funding without defunding long-standing partners. "Once you've got that focus, once you have a strategy, once you've set your budget around certain priorities, it's really hard to shift them without defunding somebody else that you've been a partner of for a long time," one foundation staff member said.

This helps explain in part why many foundations did not significantly increase CHE allocations following major government aid cuts, instead adding flexibility to existing grants rather than creating new budget lines.

Emerging Entry Points

A small subset of funders — often family foundations, faith-based donors, diaspora networks and community philanthropy organizations — support CHEs consistently, sometimes for decades. Personal connection to affected regions emerged as the strongest predictor of sustained engagement. One funder described how earthquake response in Haiti through an existing Partners in Health relationship evolved into supporting 25 grantees over 15 years.

Climate-focused foundations represent an emerging entry point. Multiple climate funders reported adding humanitarian portfolios as they recognized climate impacts manifesting as crises. "The last two years, our CEO has really been the lead in our strategy shifting to accommodate for resilience," one explained.

This climate-humanitarian nexus represents a significant market opportunity, though it warrants questions about alignment of climate-motivated funding with community-identified needs vs. donor-identified climate priorities.

In summary, philanthropic CHE funding generally flows in alignment with the following:

- Existing thematic sector-focused programs (education, gender, climate, health)
- Support for long-standing partners now working in crisis
- Regional or country-based areas of corporate significance that overlap with fragile contexts
- Occasional crisis-specific donations triggered by major events.

As one interviewee focusing on a specific sector explained: "We don't have a humanitarian program. But we fund in places that happen to be fragile or conflict-affected."

2.2 Funding Flows Through Familiar Sectors

Funders most commonly support sectors they understand well, even in crisis settings. CHE funding is dominated by thematic continuity, not humanitarian specialization.

Health and water-sanitation programs lead philanthropic engagement. One foundation described its portfolio: "Early childhood care and education, a health portfolio that is adolescent wellbeing — mental health, sexual health and rights — and water and sanitation." Funders gravitate toward what they call "tangible" sectors where outcomes feel measurable and relatable.

Education represents another common entry point. As one interviewee explained: "Education is our door into crisis work. It's where our board is most comfortable." School reconstruction, teacher support and safe spaces for children appeal to funders seeking mission-aligned work in fragile environments.

Climate-focused foundations increasingly frame crisis engagement through resilience and disaster risk reduction. Early warning systems, community resilience and climate adaptation allow these funders to support crisis contexts while maintaining thematic focus. Crises become climate impact multipliers rather than standalone humanitarian events.

Gender-focused donors often support women's protection and economic empowerment programs. "Women's protection is the least controversial entry point for our crisis funding," one shared. Gender-based violence response and women-led community organizations attract funders seeking both impact and narrative clarity.

Economic opportunity and livelihoods programs — cash assistance, small business recovery, agriculture — appeal to funders who value trackable outcomes. However, sectors perceived as politically complex receive far less attention. Peacebuilding, conflict mediation, protection for men and boys, and humanitarian coordination face what one participant called "almost no philanthropic interest in the unglamorous but essential parts of crisis response."

2.3 Who Receives Funding?

The majority of [philanthropic resources](#) still flow to international NGOs, U.N. agencies and large established organizations due to risk concerns and compliance requirements. Almost 70% of survey respondents that do support CHEs, noted that all of their CHE funding goes to INGOs and UN. Yet nearly every funder expressed a desire to support local actors more directly. "Local organizations are closest to the crisis. We want to fund them, but we need help navigating the risks," one explained. Where local actors do receive funding, it typically comes through three channels: large INGOs acting as pass-throughs, pooled funds or intermediaries, and established networks or community foundations. Interviewees and survey respondents acknowledged that direct local funding remains rare. Although a subset of funders argued that this sentiment is a "tired trope" and that "direct local funding is easy if you commit to it."

Funders distinguish sharply between intermediary types. "Mostly very much technical or proximal intermediaries" receive preference over what funders call "international players" — traditional large INGOs that fall into the less-favored category.

Pooled funds solve the scale and due diligence problem for small foundation teams. Multiple funders reported supporting Start Network, Resilio Fund and Amplify Change: "We funded the Resilio Fund, maybe not proximate, but directly dispersed into that space. We can't fund directly on our own, of course, by sending out thousands of grants a year. We have a very small team."

Decentralized decision-making models draw particular praise. One funder cited Proximity to Humanity's work in Sudan, where "the local coordination council takes that decision, the ERRs then receive the money directly. There is no decision-making on the side of the funder or the intermediary." Such mechanisms avoid what the funder called "long conversations about governance and structure."

Large INGOs retain one critical role: rapid response. For an immediate crisis, funders still work with "the Red Cross, Save the Children, DRC, UNHCR, Doctors Without Borders" because speed and established systems matter: "We just need a small agreement. It's quite quick, and we have just a few partners."

Diaspora networks operate through a different logic entirely. Diaspora giving uses "social networks to track it down," one explained. "The level of trust is a much higher



threshold. Because for the community, the threshold for accountability is much higher."

2.4 Why These Sectors? Why These Actors?

Funders choose sectors based on pre-existing expertise, perceived low-risk straightforward engagement, likelihood of creating impact or leaving a lasting legacy and their storytelling potential. Boards and staff feel more comfortable with areas they already understand. Education, health and livelihoods feel less politically sensitive than peacebuilding or governance.

Relationships shape choices more than needs assessments. Funders prefer to "do what we do, but in crisis contexts" rather than adopt new mandates. Or "do what we are good at - at the corporate level - in emergencies."

2.5 Gaps in Philanthropic Engagement

Several areas receive limited investment despite clear need: flexible rapid response funding, protection (especially for men and boys), peacebuilding and conflict mediation, humanitarian coordination, core funding for local organizations, long-term recovery, disability inclusion and cash programming.

These gaps do not reflect a lack of compassion - rather, a lack of clarity, proximity and trusted pathways.

The interviews revealed the hesitation with which philanthropic funders approached the recent earthquake response in Myanmar. It was also visible in their reflections about supporting Yemen and CHEs in Latin America (particularly the Venezuelan forced displacement crisis).

3. Motivations for Funding in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies

The data makes one point unequivocally clear: Philanthropic engagement in CHEs is driven far more by emotion, identity and human connection than by strategy documents or logframes.

Most funders do not wake up and decide to "prioritize complex humanitarian emergencies." Instead, they engage because something — or someone — pulls them in. Across the interviews, motivations fell into two broad categories: visceral and relational drivers, and strategic and legacy drivers. The patterns were strikingly consistent across geographies, sectors and types of philanthropic actors.



3.1 Visceral and Relational Motivations

The data for this research project suggests the below are the most powerful motivators — human, emotional and deeply tied to a sense of identity or connection.

Proximity and identity emerged as the single strongest predictor of crisis funding. Diaspora ties, faith identity, heritage and family roots, corporate or employee presence in affected regions, and longstanding community relationships determine which crises attract attention. "It's proximity. Diaspora, faith, heritage — those things matter more than any strategy document," one interviewee explained. Another added bluntly: "You help your own first. That's how philanthropy works, whether people admit it or not." This helps explain why some crises attract philanthropic attention while others remain invisible despite severe needs.

Trusted relationships provide the essential entry point. Funders enter crises when someone they trust opens the door — a local partner asking for help, a respected humanitarian advisor recommending action, another funder leading the way, or a long-term grantee affected by conflict or disaster. "I gave because a person I trusted asked me to. It's that simple," one summarized. But peer influence operates at a deeper level than simple trust. As one advisor stated: "The most important influence on a grantmaker is other grantmakers. It's not conferences, actually, right? It's not studies, it's other grantmakers." This was the single most consistent finding across interviews. If one trusted funder goes in, suddenly it's safe for everyone else.

Emotional trigger moments — a story, a photo, a conversation — catalyze action. Many funders described distressing images in the media, hearing directly from crisis-affected women or youth, or a colleague urging them to help. "Sometimes the heart moves faster than the head. A moment hits you and you just have to do something," one participant said. Shared humanity motivates these spontaneous responses. "If you're just recognizing your shared humanity, a lot of spontaneous giving by individuals to emergencies is based on that sense of shared humanity," another explained. These emotional triggers often drive one-off or initial engagement. Whether they evolve into sustained support depends on subsequent experience. Funders who had successful CHE funding experiences expressed willingness to continue, while negative experiences create lasting hesitation.

3.2 Strategic and Legacy Motivations

While emotion often drives the initial decision, strategy and legacy considerations shape how and where funders engage.

Mission alignment provides essential justification, particularly for institutional funders. Education funders support learning in displacement, climate funders support resilience in fragile settings, gender funders support women's protection, health funders support primary care in conflict. "If you show me how crisis work advances

our mission, I'll listen. If not, I won't," one stated. Climate-humanitarian connections particularly motivate climate funders. "Climate emergencies happen everywhere. We will only support emergencies or projects that are climate-driven," one explained, though this framing is expanding to recognize complexity beyond environmental triggers. As funders acknowledged that communities' exposure to conflict often results in displacement and loss of livelihoods, it increases their vulnerability to the changing climate.

Corporate foundations find mission alignment through business presence. "The business works across a lot of energy spaces. Sudan is one of the countries that we had a lot of business relations with. So our board doesn't see these places as risky because they do business," one foundation representative explained.

Faith-based motivations provide another form of mission continuity. For religiously motivated funders, engagement stems from "their concept of everyone's my neighbor, or their shared humanity."

Long-term impact and legacy appeal to funders seeking transformational change rather than relief. "They're more interested in changing the world, saving the world, impact stories, than they are in band-aiding humanitarian emergencies," an intermediary noted. "How can I really have an impact, not just on saving lives, but actually fundamentally making the world a better place — transformational." Some funders see crises as pivotal moments where philanthropy can have disproportionate influence. "In a crisis, every dollar matters more. This is where history is being shaped," one noted. For these funders, CHE engagement aligns with ambitions for structural change, systems resilience, protection of past investments and multi-decade social impact. Consequently, corporate funders were inclined to see locally-led work in CHEs as "efficient" and offering the best value for money.

Media attention is another strong motivator and shapes funding decisions, particularly for corporate funders managing reputational and visibility considerations. At least a dozen interviewees identified sustained media coverage as a key motivator, with some describing it as an explicit decision-making criterion. Crises that capture headlines attract resources, while equally severe situations without media visibility struggle to generate support. A number of funders said that responding to the war in Ukraine was their first experience of CHE engagement - exactly because the media coverage made it "impossible not to". Many said the same about the Israel-Gaza crisis.

A smaller group of funders views crises as spaces where innovation can flourish — cash assistance, local leadership models, clean energy access, digital identity, youth-led organizations. "We go where the biggest barriers are. Crisis settings force innovation," one put it.



4. Barriers to Philanthropic Funding in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies

Despite heartfelt interest in supporting crisis-affected communities, funders described significant barriers that prevent deeper or more consistent engagement in CHEs. These barriers are not only financial — they are emotional, structural, political and relational. They stem from uncertainty, risk perception, internal governance and distance, both literal and psychological, from crisis contexts.

Across the 45 interviews, the obstacles were remarkably consistent. They fall into seven core categories: the knowledge gap and complexity barrier, perceptions of the humanitarian system, complexity and political sensitivity, impact and attribution challenges, organizational constraints, reputational risk, and political risk.

4.1 The Knowledge Gap and Complexity Barrier

"We don't know how to do it" emerged as the fundamental barrier — more common even than risk aversion or resource constraints. One funder explained: "A lot of individual donors don't get involved in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies because it's too much work to figure out what the context is and whether you will be doing harm." Conflict contexts trigger heightened fear. "Something about conflict just makes people scared much more. They don't understand it. So they're scared of like, oh, forgive this group. There is a lot of distrust," one interviewee said.

The complexity creates decision paralysis. One funder explained why conflicts deter giving: "Don't ask me to explain why the conflict has been happening in Yemen or Somalia or Sudan. I don't know. It's just way outside the realm of knowledge and competence of most American donors." This complexity is compounded by the perception of these crises as remote and set in inaccessible, dangerous environments that make it harder for funders to want to travel there to establish a sense of proximity.

This knowledge gap, combined with limited staff capacity, creates a challenge. Foundations reported teams of "3-7 people" managing global portfolios. As a result, funders who want to help feel overwhelmed by what they don't know.

4.2 Perceptions of the Humanitarian System

Many funders feel alienated from the humanitarian ecosystem. Common descriptors included "opaque," "bureaucratic," "unresponsive," "hard to influence" and "not designed for private philanthropy." "I don't know where the money goes. The system looks like a black box," one explained. Another added: "We're told to trust the system, but the system doesn't trust or respect us." Many funders reflected that they are not treated as "thinking partners" and their convening and connecting ability is often overlooked in favor of fundraising pitches aimed to meet short-term funding goals.

A strong sentiment has emerged among some funders. "There's a rebellious feeling against the status quo of the UN OCHA system. We're not going to engage in the very heavy old-fashioned legacy issues of the UN and even the INGOs," one stated. This perception deters funders who prefer proximity, visibility and relational accountability. Concerns included slow response times, lack of tailored engagement with private philanthropy, overreliance on large INGOs instead of local actors, and reporting and funding pitches that feel generic and uninspiring. The aid cuts of early 2025 intensified this distance. "Funders were bombarded after the financial crisis of January, February. A lot of walls went up very quickly," one interviewee observed.

4.3 Political Sensitivity and the Fear of "Taking Sides"

CHEs are often entangled in geopolitics, contested narratives and shifting alliances. Funders fear that supporting a crisis response could imply political alignment. "Conflict is messy. You move one inch and someone accuses you of taking sides," one shared. Another said: "We don't have the analysis to know what's safe. So we stay out."

Political sensitivity is especially acute for corporate foundations, funders with global brands, funders with stakeholders across conflict-affected regions, and organizations with conservative boards. Many expressed concern about being drawn into public debates or criticism — even when their intentions are strictly humanitarian.

Legal and compliance barriers compound these fears. Terrorism designations, sanctions and compliance requirements create real barriers, not just perceived ones. These are concrete constraints that limit where and how funders can operate.

4.4 Difficulty Demonstrating Impact, Attribution and Visibility

Funders want to know their support made a difference. CHEs make this extremely challenging. "You can give \$1 million and still not know if it made a dent," one said. Another shared: "Our board wants before and after. In a crisis, the after may be worse than the before."

Concerns centered on attribution ("Did our support matter?"), visibility ("How do we tell the story without oversimplifying?"), measurement ("How do you measure progress in chaos?") and volatility ("Things get worse even when programs succeed").

One funder summarised it as such: "Those [CHE] contexts seem so hopeless and dire that any amount of funding feels like a drop in the bucket." This challenge is not about impact itself but about demonstrating it in a way that aligns with philanthropy's need for meaning, narrative and legitimacy.



4.5 Organizational Constraints and Internal Limitations

Many philanthropic organizations lack the internal structures needed to work in CHEs: no staff with crisis expertise, rigid thematic portfolios, limited ability to vet partners in fragile states, lack of legal guidance on sanctions, boards uncomfortable with risk, pre-existing grant cycles that don't accommodate crises, and strategic frameworks that exclude emergency funding.

"We'd need a different operating model to work in crises. We're not built for that," one participant summarized. Another said: "We have a five-year strategy. Emergencies blow up the strategy." "They are a distraction," said another funder.

Some funders also worry about perpetuating harm. Concerns about "white savior" dynamics and whether support perpetuates colonial systems might create hesitation even among willing funders. This structural rigidity creates inertia — even when emotional motivation exists.

4.6 Reputational Risk: The Dominant Fear

Reputational concerns emerged as the single strongest deterrent. Funders fear criticism for perceived political bias, negative media attention, funding a group later accused of wrongdoing, backlash from staff or stakeholders, social media amplification of missteps, and supporting partners who become embroiled in controversy.

Most philanthropic funders appear to be far more comfortable with financial risks, it is the reputational ones that make them hesitate. "If anything goes wrong, we get punished in the media — even if we did everything right," one said. Another added: "The reputational risk is disproportionate. A small mistake can undo years of brand building."

4.7 The Humanitarian-Philanthropy Communication Gap

Funders described a pervasive gap between humanitarian and philanthropic communication. Humanitarians use the language of appeals, needs assessments, severity ranking and operational plans. Philanthropy responds to people, stories, values, relationships and legacy.

"Humanitarians talk in bureaucracy. We talk in people," one explained. "We don't have a shared language and talk past each other."

This communication gap seemed to widen following the bilateral aid cuts in early 2025. Many funders expressed concerns that they were being approached by the humanitarian sector "as ATMs" and not invited to be "thinking partners at

decision-making tables.” Some noted that “Big Tech” has managed to get a seat at that table but philanthropy is still largely missing from these fora.

5. Solutions and Opportunities for Philanthropic Engagement in CHEs

Despite the barriers described in the previous section, nearly every interview surfaced clear ideas for unlocking greater philanthropic participation in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies. Funders overwhelmingly expressed a desire to help if they are guided, supported, and given a clear way in.

The opportunities below reflect pathways that funders repeatedly described as feasible, motivating, and aligned with their values and constraints.

5.1 Build Proximity Through Narrative

CHEs are often communicated by governments and humanitarian agencies as vast, abstract crises marked by statistics and severity rankings that do not resonate with philanthropic institutions. Funders respond far more strongly to human stories, local leadership, and evidence of resilience. This is a marked contrast to the development sector’s propensity for quantitative data to influence funding decisions. The study revealed that funders want to feel connected, not overwhelmed. One interviewee explained the strongest predictor of engagement, saying: “You need to make it human. Numbers don’t move people. People move people.”

With this in mind, the recommendation is to deploy more narrative-based engagement approaches that highlight stories of local actors driving change and show how communities, as first responders in any crisis, can lead their own responses. With local partners, stories can be collected to serve as examples of community capacity and make donors feel more connected to the outcomes.

5.2 Strengthen Trusted Intermediary Roles

Many funders want to support communities living through CHEs but hesitate because the entry points are unclear or seemingly high risk. A trusted intermediary can help donors navigate unfamiliar terrain by vetting local partners, managing operational and reputational risks, translating political complexity into accessible insight, and providing reporting that speaks the language of philanthropy. They also design pooled or structured mechanisms that let funders contribute meaningfully without having to build new systems from scratch.

As one interviewee put it, “We want to fund locally, but we need someone who understands the terrain and can de-risk it.” In this way, intermediaries provide both the

technical scaffolding and the psychological safety that enable funders to show up where they are deeply needed.

5.3 Align CHE Engagement With Funders' Existing Priorities

Funders are far more willing to engage if CHE work aligns with their mission. Instead of presenting crisis funding as a separate domain, framing should focus on how CHEs intersect with education, health, gender equity, climate resilience, economic empowerment or local leadership and systems strengthening. One participant put it simply: "If you show me how crisis work fits my mission, you're halfway there."

This approach reduces board resistance and makes crisis engagement feel purposeful rather than reactive.

5.4 Promote Collaborative Funding Models With Optional Attribution

Collaboration is one of the most powerful confidence-builders for philanthropy in complex crises. When funders move together through pooled funds, co-funding platforms or collective giving arrangements, individual reputational risks, both real and perceived, diminish while the sense of shared purpose grows. Donors consistently emphasized that being "one among many" makes it easier to enter CHEs, particularly when attribution is flexible and the spotlight is shared rather than singular.

These mechanisms also streamline due diligence, reduce transaction costs and enable larger, more coherent interventions than any single donor could deliver alone. At their best, collaborative models create a permission space for philanthropy to act boldly, replacing hesitation with momentum and transforming isolated interest into sustained engagement. As one interviewee said: "If we do it together, it feels safer. No one wants to be out on a limb in a conflict zone."

5.5 Create Clear Pathways to Local Actors

Across interviews, funders were clear: they want to resource local organizations but they lack clarity and confidence on how to do so responsibly within CHEs. Rather than reluctance, their hesitation reflects an operational gap: they do not know which local organizations to trust, how to vet them efficiently, or how to structure grants that manage risks without crushing them in bureaucracy.

Funders consistently asked for support in five areas:

1. Curated and vetted pipelines of trusted local and national CSOs
2. Due diligence support
3. Light and meaningful reporting
4. Intermediary-backed risk management
5. Leadership development pathways that strengthen local institutions over time

As one interviewee put it: “Local actors understand the context better than any big NGO. We just need help getting money to them safely.” Importantly, for funders, the motivation is not only moral. Localization has become a practical on-ramp for philanthropy into CHEs as it offers proximity, emotional resonance, and visible impact while sharing risk through proximate leadership.

Interviews with local and national philanthropic actors in the Majority World revealed an untapped potential for global and local philanthropies to work together to “de-risk” local grantees, tackle politically sensitive areas of work and create a multiplier effect for the causes and places they care about.

5.6 Provide Simple, Honest Risk Guidance

Funders repeatedly asked for plain-language guidance on:

1. Real risks vs. perceived risks
2. How to avoid political entanglement
3. How to navigate sanctions
4. What “neutrality” looks like in philanthropy
5. What due diligence is essential vs. optional
6. What types of interventions are low vs. high risk

As one interviewee captured clearly, “It’s not risk that scares us, it’s uncertainty.” Funders fully expect risk when working in humanitarian settings; many come from industries where risk is a routine part of innovation. What undermines confidence is ambiguity; not knowing who to trust, how to engage, or whether support will translate into tangible outcomes.

CHEs can feel like very murky waters when funders have to balance perceived reputational risks in cases of opposing ideas on neutrality or which side is in the wrong, and real risks of engaging in or near territories associated with groups with Foreign Terrorist Organization labels or sanctions. When funders lack clear pathways and visibility into such contexts, even modest involvement can feel precarious. But when uncertainty is reduced, through credible intermediaries, transparent information, and shared accountability, their risk tolerance expands significantly.

5.7 Build Peer Learning and Safe Dialogue Spaces

Peer influence emerged as one of the strongest motivators in philanthropic decision-making. Funders consistently described a desire to learn from one another, but in small, trusted, and confidential spaces where candid conversation is possible. They pointed to the need for private roundtables, thematic crisis-learning cohorts, regional philanthropy circles, peer-led case studies, and even joint field exposure opportunities that demystify complex environments together.

These spaces would allow for more authentic exchanges where funders feel comfortable asking “naïve” questions about CHEs, unlike in panel discussions, conferences and humanitarian events. As one funder put it, “Philanthropy is a herd. When a few move, the rest follow.”

By creating structured spaces for peers to explore crises collectively, the sector can normalize engagement in complex humanitarian emergencies, reduce perceived isolation, and unlock more confident, coordinated action.

6. Spaces, Networks, and Communities of Practice for Engagement

Data analysis highlighted several existing spaces: formal networks, informal communities, philanthropy collaboratives and regional movements — where funders already gather to learn, shape agendas and coordinate action. These spaces offer opportunities for strengthening philanthropic engagement in complex humanitarian emergencies.

Across interviews, funders emphasized the importance of joining conversations where trust already exists, values align, risk tolerance is shared, and learning happens in a psychologically safe environment. “If you want funders to engage in crises, go where they already gather and feel safe,” one explained. The most frequently cited spaces are grouped below.

6.1 Global Philanthropy Networks

These networks offer broad reach, cross-regional membership and influence across multiple thematic areas: Philanthropy Europe Association (Philea), WINGS (Worldwide Initiatives for Grantmaker Support), Council on Foundations, Global Philanthropy Forum, Asian Venture Philanthropy Network (AVPN), Arab Foundations Forum (AFF), Africa Philanthropy Network (APN), Latimpacto, Africa Impact Investing Network and Caribbean Philanthropy Network.

The Network of Engaged International Donors (NEID) exemplifies this model with 400+ participants, including grantmaking staff, individual donors, impact investors and advisors. However, one member noted that “humanitarian needs are at the bottom” of member interests, suggesting these broad networks require deliberate effort to elevate CHE engagement rather than assuming automatic alignment. Interviewees noted these networks are trusted convening spaces where donors feel comfortable discussing emerging areas.

6.2 Regional and Cultural Philanthropy Spaces

Several funders emphasized the importance of localized, culturally grounded networks, especially in regions where CHE impacts are concentrated.

- North Africa and West Asia: Arab Foundations Forum (AFF), Islamic philanthropy networks (like Muslim Philanthropy Network and Zakat Foundations), Gulf donor networks (like Gulf Cooperation Council).
- Africa: Africa Philanthropy Network (APN), community foundations networks.
- Latin America: Latimacto, local community foundations.
- Caribbean: diaspora communities, Caribbean Philanthropy Network, Caribbean Philanthropic Alliance
- South and Southeast Asia: Asian Venture Philanthropy Network (AVPN), family office convenings, diaspora groups working with diaspora philanthropy.

These spaces often mobilize faster, stay longer and work more closely with local actors. They represent particularly high-value engagement opportunities given the proximity factor's demonstrated influence on funding decisions.

6.3 Donor Collaboratives and Thematic Alliances

Funders repeatedly cited collaboratives as places of learning, confidence-building, and co-funding, including Education Cannot Wait, the Global Refugee Forum networks, the Girls First Fund, climate and philanthropy collaboratives, gender-based violence funds and networks, and The Hilton Foundation's networks on displacement.

Climate philanthropy networks represent a major untapped opportunity. "Climate emergencies happen everywhere," one noted, and these funders have significant resources with growing recognition of humanitarian dimensions. This represents the single largest potential market expansion for CHE engagement. These spaces are attractive because they provide shared due diligence, mission alignment and low reputational risk.

6.4 Community Philanthropy and Localization Networks

Many interviewees emphasized the importance of local, community-rooted networks; spaces where global donors can learn from grounded actors: Global Fund for Community Foundations, national community foundation networks, place-based philanthropy platforms, diaspora-led giving circles, women-led local funds and coalitions, youth impact networks in fragile contexts.

These networks emphasize agency, proximity and locally driven solutions, values that strongly resonate with philanthropic funders.

6.6 Informal or Ad Hoc Safe Spaces

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of small, confidential, informal groups for sensitive crises or themes. Small groups of aligned funders "influence each other" through regular interaction.

These quieter, less visible spaces often have the most influence over donor attitudes and behavior change.

Many funders said they were already part of informal WhatsApp groups with other funders and that a cluster of highly engaged and influential staff in funding institutions has emerged and has a significant influence on their peers within other organizations and their own Boards. These individuals seem to comfortably straddle the philanthropy vs. humanitarian divide and wield significant influence in the philanthropic space.

Conclusion

This research shows a clear and coherent pattern: funders care deeply about the human toll of crises, but they encounter a landscape that feels politically sensitive, operationally opaque, emotionally distant and difficult to navigate without trusted guidance. "We want to do the right thing. We just don't want to do the wrong thing by accident," one explained.

At the same time, the study reveals a powerful truth: funders who do engage in CHEs often do so with courage, trust and long-term commitment, particularly local and regional philanthropy. These actors demonstrate that meaningful, sustained crisis engagement is possible, even when conditions are challenging.

The gap is not a lack of compassion or funding but a lack of clear pathways, relatable narratives, trusted intermediaries and peer reinforcement.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Three themes emerged consistently across all research questions, with profound implications for engagement strategy.

1. The Peer Influence Dynamic

The finding that "other grantmakers" are the most important influence on funding decisions fundamentally reshapes how crisis engagement should be approached. Funders consistently reported looking to peers rather than research, conferences or expert recommendations.



2. The local first implementation gap

Every funder interviewed expressed commitment to "local first" approaches. Yet operational barriers are significant: limited staff capacity, due diligence challenges, difficulty identifying trusted partners, compliance concerns, and lack of internal expertise in fragile contexts. This has profound implications for what "localization" means in practice.

3. Skepticism about traditional humanitarian infrastructure

Funders repeatedly described legacy humanitarian systems as "extractive, colonial and inefficient." Many funders are actively seeking alternatives that bypass traditional intermediaries. This creates both opportunity and challenge for organizations positioning themselves in the CHE philanthropy space. Funders want local first, but through mechanisms they trust, and increasingly, traditional humanitarian infrastructure is not that mechanism.

What Philanthropy Brings

These findings reinforce the widely held belief that philanthropy's greatest strengths are flexibility, relational trust, long-term view and ability to take risks, which are precisely what crisis-affected communities need. Unlocking these strengths requires reframing CHEs not as chaotic or unmanageable landscapes but as critical moments where philanthropic action can protect gains, enable recovery and support local leaders.

"Crises are where humanity is tested. Philanthropy should show up there," one captured.

Recommendations

1. Make CHEs more human and relatable

Use real stories and examples of local leadership to build proximity and connection. Numbers don't move people. People do. Frame crises through resilience and agency rather than hopelessness.

2. Prioritize peer learning

Since peer behavior is the primary influence on decisions, create small curated peer circles where funders share experiences with each other. Make visible what peer funders are doing. Enable honest conversation about challenges and failures. Large

conferences and expert briefings have far less influence than funder-to-funder exchange.

3. Align CHE engagement with funders' existing priorities

Frame crisis funding as essential to protecting education, health, climate, gender and economic gains. Don't ask funders to create new budget lines or adopt new mandates. Meet them where their mission already is.

4. Create clear pathways to local actors

Develop vetted lists of local organizations, provide due diligence support, offer flexible reporting models and enable decentralized decision-making where local actors control allocation decisions. The desire for local funding is consistently stated, but the challenge is the operational pathway.

5. Deliver simple, clear risk guidance

Help funders understand what risks are real versus perceived, what is manageable, and how crisis work can be done responsibly. Reduce ambiguity through plain-language guidance on political sensitivities, compliance requirements and reputational considerations.

6. Build on proximity and identity

Diaspora ties, faith identity, heritage, regional presence and personal connections are the strongest predictors of engagement. Support diaspora networks, regional philanthropy associations and identity-based giving circles that already have proximity to crisis contexts.

7. Create psychologically safe spaces for sensitive contexts

Small, confidential, informal groups have more influence over donor attitudes than large public events. Enable funders to ask questions, explore options and learn from peers without fear of judgment or reputational exposure.

8. Promote the role of philanthropy as that of a thinking partner

Philanthropy wants to be recognised for its contributions beyond funding, i.e. - in convening, innovation, policy development and learning. If philanthropy is expected to be active in CHE contexts, it will need to have a seat at the global humanitarian decision-making tables.



Final Reflection

This research began with a question about barriers and motivations. It concludes with recognition of opportunity.

The philanthropic resources, relational capital and risk appetite needed to support crisis-affected communities exist. What's missing is trusted guidance, clear pathways, peer reinforcement and narrative connection.

The humanitarian sector can either meet philanthropy where it is, with its distinct language, motivations, governance structures and decision-making patterns, or continue operating in parallel systems that rarely connect.



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