

Policy Brief

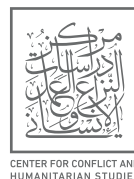
South–South Cooperation in Diplomatic and Humanitarian Responses to Conflict and Displacement

By Ghassan Elkahlout & Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

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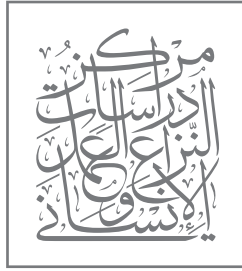


This policy brief outlines key findings and actionable recommendations arising from a closed expert workshop on South-South cooperation in humanitarian and diplomatic responses, co-convened in Doha in February 2025. Drawing on empirical research and practitioner insight, the paper identifies strategic gaps in the global humanitarian system, highlights diverse Southern-led initiatives, and proposes concrete steps to reconfigure global response mechanisms. The findings underscore that actors from the Global South are not auxiliary players but critical to shaping, funding, and delivering responses to contemporary crises of conflict and displacement.



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1. Context and Rationale

The existing international humanitarian system is under significant strain. Funding deficits, political conditionalities, and institutional fatigue have undermined its effectiveness and legitimacy at a critical moment in its history considering the rising number of conflicts and crises requiring urgent attention such as Gaza and Sudan. What is partly plaguing the system as we know it, is the consistent and incessant marginalisation of Southern states and non-state actors—including regional bodies, diaspora groups, religious networks, and refugee-led organisations—despite their historical and present central role to both diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives. These actors are often mischaracterised as «non-traditional» donors or auxiliary responders, disregarding a long track record of engagement grounded in cross-cultural and historical shared experiences between peoples in the Global South.

This reality calls for a fundamental reframing of how humanitarian leadership and legitimacy are understood. As the SOURCED project and 2025 workshop demonstrated, the term ‘international system’ is often a misnomer—presupposing a coherent, primarily Western-led order that fails to reflect the multiplicity of

response systems currently active on the ground. In contexts such as Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Türkiye, Southern-led and refugee-led responses are often the first and most sustained forms of assistance received, embedded in culturally proximate and trust-based relationships. As one Syrian refugee in Lebanon described, “We were embraced by [locals] who provided us with housing, food and drink... no activity was recorded for international associations or institutions” (SOURCED interviews, 2024).

Challenging the reductive binaries of «traditional vs. non-traditional» donors, the workshop highlighted that such categories obscure both historical contributions and operational realities of the Global South actors. It is often forgotten that Kuwait, for instance, established its humanitarian fund before USAID; Cuba has trained Global South medical professionals for decades; and Malaysia and Indonesia consistently support refugee-serving NGOs in places like Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza with notable impact. Such examples not only call into question the hegemony of Northern aid models but also demonstrate that Southern actors often engage in humanitarian action through frameworks of solidarity, reciprocity, and non-conditionality, rather than donor-recipient logic.

The 2025 workshop and the broader SOURCED project thus offer a direct retort to the conceptual and operational boundaries of the current so-called «international system», illustrating the extent to which Southern-led initiatives have shaped global humanitarian responses and practice. Indeed, the workshop concludes that Global South actors are not merely responders to humanitarian crises—they are shapers of global norms and leaders in diplomacy in their own right.

2. Core Insights

Southern humanitarianism is not monolithic; it spans material aid, education, legal advocacy, and international diplomacy. Gulf donors, for instance, combine institutional giving with public religious philanthropy, while Southeast Asian countries deploy faith-based and state-aligned initiatives. Latin American states have invested in symbolic and legal solidarity, with countries like Colombia and Mexico supporting legal actions at the ICJ and ICC.

Research conducted under the SOURCED project shows that displaced populations often view Southern and refugee-led interventions as more accessible and relevant to their predicaments than traditional international approaches. It is no surprise, after all, in finding

people experiencing a crisis are more comforted by assistance from those who are socially and culturally proximate to them. If assistance is to be context relevant, it is of significance for it to be given by those who understand the norms and needs of those receiving it. That is what will ensure trust and continuity for those in crisis through assistance beyond the just material goods donated.

This view of a more holistic understanding of aid is not simply theoretical assertion. What emerges from our research is the value placed by refugees on forms of aid that go beyond money or material goods. Scholarships and medical training, for instance, were seen not just as support but as dignifying forms of solidarity. The legacy of Cuba's education programmes, for example, still lives on in refugee camps, where doctors trained in Havana serve their communities. Likewise, refugees recounted support received from organisations based in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Gulf—many of which they viewed as acting out of shared ethical or religious commitments rather than political interest. Unfortunately, these efforts remain underreported, underappreciated, and marginalised within global metrics, policy frameworks, and funding mechanisms.

Our research sees the potential for a different, more democratic humanitarian system is there in today's world. As can be seen through the case of Gaza, the political power of South-South diplomacy is real. South Africa's genocide case against Israel, supported by states such as Malaysia, Bolivia, and Namibia, reveals the potential for coordinated legal and political advocacy from the Global South. Yet this momentum remains fragile and often lacks institutional continuity. To translate any victories into sustained impact, these efforts must be anchored in long-term strategies, institution building, and coordinated endeavors across the Global South. Without dedicated infrastructure and consistent engagement, the transformative potential of South-South diplomacy risks being reduced to episodic gestures rather than sustained action.

3. Systemic Constraints

Despite their impact, Southern actors face multiple systemic barriers:

- Their contributions are excluded or undervalued in international data systems.
- Humanitarian strategies are often informal, lacking institutionalisation.
- Engagement is frequently discretionary and contingent on elite networks or personal relationships.

- Regional cooperation is uneven and susceptible to political rifts.

Moreover, the discursive framing of 'non-traditional' donors masks the historical role of states like Kuwait, Libya, and Cuba in refugee assistance and norm-setting. These frames reinforce donor hierarchies and weaken the claim of Southern actors to normative leadership.

4. Strategic Recommendations

a. Anchor South-South Humanitarianism in National Policy Frameworks

States in the Global South must move beyond ad hoc humanitarian engagement. National humanitarian strategies should be codified, budgeted, and institutionalised to ensure predictability, coordination, and strategic alignment.

b. Expand and Redefine Global Metrics of Aid and Response

International tracking systems must be updated to reflect legal, educational, in-kind, and refugee-led support. Religious giving, informal aid, and symbolic contributions must be recognised as valid and impactful forms of humanitarianism.

c. Institutionalise Southern Legal and Normative Leadership

Building on the ICJ case led by South Africa, Southern coalitions should be resourced to engage in legal diplomacy, norm defence, and human rights litigation as core components of humanitarian engagement.

d. Establish Independent South-Led Financing Mechanisms

New instruments such as zakat-based funds and pooled regional development banks should be developed and governed transparently, enabling Southern states to finance responses aligned with their ethical and political frameworks.

e. Elevate Southern Civil Society and Refugee-led Initiatives

These actors must be brought into core governance structures, receiving direct funding and regulatory support to participate as full stakeholders in humanitarian coordination and policy-making.

f. Institutionalise South-South Knowledge and Practice Exchange

Peer learning between Southern regions—ASEAN, AU, OIC, GCC—should be formalised through joint assessments, policy dialogues, and coordinated programming.

g. Recalibrate North-South Partnerships Toward Co-Governance

Humanitarian partnerships must be based on equal authorship. Co-designing interventions, co-producing research, and co-managing funds are essential to equitable collaboration.

h. Strengthen Regional Bodies as Operational Humanitarian Actors

Regional organisations should be resourced to manage emergency responses, protect displaced populations, and coordinate multi-state interventions. Their mandates should reflect the realities of forced displacement and protracted crises.

i. Legitimate Non-Monetary and Symbolic Forms of Contribution

Legal solidarity, educational exchange, and diplomatic advocacy are not auxiliary—they are core. The system must reflect and support diverse modes of engagement beyond financial transfers.

j. Expand Southern-led Research and Agenda-setting

Southern scholars and institutions should drive research on conflict and displacement. Refugee perspectives must shape the design, evaluation, and reform of humanitarian responses.

5. Conclusion

The future of humanitarian and diplomatic response cannot rest on a fatigued, donor-centric system built around a narrow definition of expertise and value. The Global South is already leading in multiple dimensions—politically, operationally, and normatively. Recognising this leadership is not a rhetorical move; it is an operational necessity. If the global system is to remain relevant, it must be reconfigured to reflect the plural, decentralised, and multi-actor reality of global response today.

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For correspondence:

Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh:

elena.fiddian-qasmiyeh@ucl.ac.uk

Dr. Ghassan Elkahlout:

ghassan.elkahlout@chs-doha.org

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CENTER FOR CONFLICT AND
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Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies
Al Tarfa Street, Al Daayan-Wadi Al Banaat
Doha, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha
Tel: +974 4035 6943
Email: chs@chs-doha.org

www.chs-doha.org

Cover image: A mural on the outskirts of Baddawi refugee camp, Lebanon

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