

# TALLINN HUMANITARIAN CONFERENCE

## *Shaping the Next Humanitarian Era*

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November 6, 2025  
Fotografiska, **Tallinn**

The third edition of Estonian Refugee Council's Tallinn Humanitarian Conference took place on November 6, 2025, focusing on three urgent themes shaping humanitarian action today: institutional reform and funding crisis, digital transformation, and access to crisis-affected communities.

### Opening words

Eero Janson, Director of Estonian Refugee Council

- It has been a very rough year for humanity and for humanitarians, with more than 300 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and over 123 million displaced, while global funding shrinks and wealthy countries redirect resources towards weapons instead of the most vulnerable.
- The world is not short of money but short of fairness and solidarity; responding to current needs would cost \$45 billion – less than half the annual profits of a single tech giant.
- The humanitarian sector is at a crossroads once again, pushed into another reset and reform cycle as needs rise, funding drops, and existing systems prove too rigid to respond.
- We keep talking about change, yet too often we end up discussing what to cut rather than what to transform; paradigm shifts are hard, and systems are deeply invested in maintaining the status quo.
- The shortcomings of the sector are well documented and the pledges for reform go back decades, but progress has been slow and uneven. Old systems can persist for years even when no longer fit for purpose.
- The moment calls for more than new buzzwords; it calls for a humanitarian system that is genuinely leaner, more transparent, more efficient and better suited to today's political, financial and technological realities.

### Opening remarks

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

- The humanitarian situation has gone from bad to worse in just one year, and the sector is now facing an even more severe perfect storm of underfunding, overstretch and rising global pressures.

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- Political polarisation, climate change and ongoing conflicts are driving needs to unprecedented levels, creating a “doom loop” that we must break.
- The humanitarian reset is a monumental but necessary reform effort, and donors are calling for bold action to build a lighter, more efficient and people-centred system.
- Six priorities guide this effort: simplifying the system, ending agency competition, strengthening local leadership, increasing pooled funding for local actors, expanding shared services, and integrating humanitarian, development and peace approaches.
- Estonia is contributing through flexible funding, investments in digital innovation and a continued focus on Ukraine, where over half of the humanitarian budget is directed.

## Panel 1

### **Ctrl+Alt+Del. Rebooting Humanitarian Action**

The session featured panellists **Hans Das**, Deputy-Director General of DG ECHO; **Mervat Shelbaya**, Head of the IASC Secretariat; and **Reshma Adatia**, Director of Engagement at ICVA. The panel was moderated by **Eero Janson**, Director of ERC

- The Humanitarian Reset must go beyond simply restarting a flawed system; it requires a fundamental redesign centered on better serving and protecting crisis-affected communities.
- The current crisis is not only financial but also one of principles and values, characterised by an overstretched and under-resourced system facing rising needs, reduced funding, erosion of multilateralism, disregard for International Humanitarian Law, and growing constraints on access.
- Any meaningful reset must centre crisis-affected communities, shifting decision-making and resources towards them and responding to their expressed priorities rather than organisational assumptions.
- A more collaborative and integrated system is required, moving away from fragmented approaches and towards shared services, joint assessments, and intentional complementarity between local, national, and international actors.

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- Hyper-prioritisation has forced extremely difficult trade-offs, with millions left without support despite needs remaining unchanged; the sector now operates in a space where ethical dilemmas are unavoidable.
- Cash assistance should be the default modality wherever feasible, given its efficiency, dignity, and support for local economies; reversing the global decline in cash programming is essential for a more effective system.
- Local leadership requires predictable multi-year funding, proportionate compliance requirements, and shared risk management – shifting from nominal localisation to genuine power transfer.
- Incremental improvements are no longer adequate; the sector must embrace structural shifts if it is to remain principled, relevant, and capable of meeting the scale of contemporary crises.

## Panel 2

### Hack to the Future. Navigating Digital Humanitarianism

The session featured panellists **Danna Ingleton**, Executive Director of HURIDOCS; **Patrick Vinck**, Research Director at Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, KoBo; and **Rory Crew**, Data and Digitalisation Technical Advisor at CaLP. The panel was moderated by **Tobias Koch**, Director Consulting Expert, Public Sector and Digital Government at CGI.

- Technology remains the easiest part of the digital transformation; the harder work lies in designing systems that remain people-centred, ethically sound and grounded in real needs rather than donor or organisational convenience.
- A major challenge is viewing technology merely as a solution for 'efficiency', as this can drive adoption without clear relevance to context and may transfer risk to recipients.
- Cash assistance stands out as a proven, dignified and efficient modality, yet volumes are declining despite strong demand from crisis-affected people.
- Interoperability is the core underpinning of many sectoral challenges, and its success in the public sector (like Estonia's X-Road) has largely been driven by government and regulator mandates which are currently absent in the humanitarian space.

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- The current siloed nature of the sector means efforts are often focused on "deduplication" as a donor/equity concern rather than a recipient-driven benefit, leading to missed opportunities like streamlined referrals and reduced repeated registrations.
- The concept of a "compounded digital divide" is growing, with a huge gap between those who have and know how to use digital tools and those who do not; digitisation efforts must aim to lessen this divide by building tech based on actual needs, not existing technology.
- For technology to truly serve justice, there must be an organisational commitment to the democratisation of data, recognising that data belongs to the people it is about.
- For open-source tools to succeed, the focus must be on accessibility, which includes financial accessibility, ease of use, clear documentation, and dedicated support, rather than a simple 'open versus closed' debate.

## Panel 3

### Access Denied?

#### Navigating Aid Delivery in Hard-to-Access Areas

The session featured panellists **Tristan Ferraro**, Senior Legal Adviser at ICRC; **Hani Almadhoun**, Director of Gaza Soup Kitchen; and **Christopher Ghaiath Almajdoub**, Global Cash Advisor at ERC. The panel was moderated by **Michael Riepl**, Lawyer & Senior Researcher at the Academy for European Human Rights Protection.

- Humanitarian actors are operating in conflicts where norms are eroding, political interference is increasing, and access constraints are becoming both more complex and more deliberate.
- Bureaucratic impediments such as visas, movement restrictions and registration delays are being used as tools of control, slowing or blocking assistance and placing staff at heightened risk.
- There is a dangerous public misconception that humanitarian aid is a simple logistics exercise. This lack of public understanding fundamentally undermines the complexity of access.

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- The primary obstacle to effective aid delivery is the acute politicisation of modern conflicts, where humanitarian access is weaponised against populations in need.
- Access negotiations require deeper contextual analysis and stronger protection lenses, as the lines between civilian and combatant spaces blur and the safety of both communities and aid workers becomes increasingly precarious.
- Stronger collective positioning, including shared red lines, coordinated advocacy and unified messaging, can reduce fragmentation and protect operational space in highly politicised contexts.
- Disaggregated, trusted data on access incidents and denials is critical to building evidence for advocacy, improving risk management and countering narratives that delegitimise humanitarian work.
- Achieving meaningful access in today's conflicts demands a shift from reactive negotiation towards proactive, context-driven strategies that integrate political analysis, community engagement and principled but pragmatic diplomacy.