

Takeaways from the IC Forum 2026

The IC Forum 2026 helped us gain the following insights into how to weather the current international maelstrom of crises and budget cuts impacting humanitarian aid:

Upholding the established international framework

Humanitarian aid should actively promote adherence to international humanitarian law and the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

Strengthening International Geneva as a global humanitarian hub

International Geneva embodies Switzerland's humanitarian tradition. It is a bastion of multilateralism and international humanitarian law, and provides a space for dialogue between nations. Geneva should be strengthened as the global epicentre for principled humanitarian aid, well-coordinated disaster relief and humanitarian diplomacy, as well as a hub for humanitarian innovation and prevention.

Focusing humanitarian work on population groups severely affected by crises

Humanitarian aid must prioritise saving lives, providing protection and alleviating the suffering of people in need affected by global crises, wars and disasters. In doing so, it should also work with partners from the public and private sectors, civil society and academia to lay the groundwork for sustainable development.

Spurring on the localisation of humanitarian aid and the reform of the humanitarian sector

The process of devolving funding and decision-making powers from international organisations to local, national and regional actors lies at the heart of the Humanitarian Reset launched by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator in spring 2025. The Reset is designed to better align humanitarian aid with local needs by empowering the actors closest to the crises. Switzerland's targeted support for reform initiatives and investment in the capacities of local actors are essential in this regard.

Humanitarian aid is part of security policy

Switzerland helps reduce security risks through international cooperation. Security also begins where emergency relief is provided and crises are averted before they escalate. That is why humanitarian aid is an integral part of effective security policy.

Fostering humanitarian diplomacy as a link between humanitarian aid and conflict resolution processes

Humanitarian diplomacy must support both humanitarian access and the protection of civilians at the micro level, as well as conflict resolution at the macro level, in order to facilitate humanitarian aid and pave pathways for resolving armed conflicts.

Establishing targeted partnerships with the private sector

The private sector is a key partner in addressing growing humanitarian needs amidst funding cuts. Public funds can mobilise private investment and ensure measurable impact. Furthermore, local innovators and SMEs are key players in driving innovation forward. Without replacing state responsibility, the private sector can play a significant role in prevention and in building economic stability for populations affected by crises. Private sector initiatives can only succeed if they are guided by humanitarian principles and international standards, incorporate conflict-sensitive planning, and adapt their business models to the local economies.

Promoting global partnerships for innovation and embedding innovation locally

Partnerships between research institutions, as well as between academia, industry and SMEs in the Global North and South, hold great potential that must be harnessed more fully in the future. Artificial intelligence does not replace human thought and action. It can bring added value to humanitarian diplomacy and peace if it is used in a way that is accessible to all. Transformative research and innovation have an impact when solutions are adapted to local perspectives, needs and cultural contexts, and are underpinned by local ownership and good governance.

Key Take Aways from SESSION 01

Tending the fragile garden: upholding IHL in uncertain times

What is important?	What are the key factors for change?	What is needed for the future?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IHL violations are enduring, as is conflict-related human suffering. Respect for IHL is in the interest of all, including conflict parties. • IHL is as relevant as ever; the legal framework does not need to be developed, but it must be implemented. • IHL is the best tool to protect civilians, including children, and other victims of war; it secures humanitarian access and enables trust; respect for IHL saves lives. • Humanitarian access impediments, including attacks on humanitarian workers, are on the rise: respect for IHL is essential for humanitarian organizations to access all people in need, as well as to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers. • Lack of accountability or related selectivity weakens trust in the law and nourishes the cycle of impunity, while normalizing violations. Accountability for violations is essential, it is an obligation, and the victims have the right to seek justice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger political engagement by States is essential to respect and ensure respect for IHL in a coherent manner. • Education and training of armed forces is necessary to operationalize IHL rules, whereby honor, humanity and responsibility are key and commanders must act as moral compasses. • Engaging with non-State armed groups is necessary to strengthen respect for IHL on the ground (i.e. deed of commitments). To this end, inclusive engagement is needed, based on local norms, as well as cultural and social dynamics and realities, including with the communities. • When humanitarian actors respect humanitarian principles, it enables trust, both with parties to the conflict and affected communities, enhancing humanitarian access and safety. • Accountability mechanisms must be established, strengthened and/or used to make sure that violations have consequences, bearing in mind that accountability measures may have an impact on political or humanitarian processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened respect for IHL (violations are not the new normal): All conflict parties, and all States, recognize the protective nature of IHL and strengthen their respect for IHL, including its implementation at the national level; conflict parties understand that respect for IHL is in our common interest. • Reinforced credibility of IHL through coherence, including good faith interpretation of IHL rules, and avoidance of double standards. Violations are consequently condemned by States, and all parties called upon to respect IHL, in all circumstances. • Responsibility-based education and training: armed forces are trained with an emphasis on honor and moral responsibility, as well as on the responsibility of the military commanders to ensure respect of IHL on the ground. • Engagement with all actors on the ground: engagement with non-State armed groups is strengthened, together with local communities and civil society. • Ensuring rapid, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to all populations in need, enabling humanitarian actors to operate in line with humanitarian principles, and a better protection of their personnel. • Ensuring accountability for international crimes and other violations of IHL, at the international and national level, to avoid selectivity and reduce impunity.

Key Take Aways from SESSION 02

Shaping International Geneva: visions and pathways ahead

What is important?	What are the key factors for change?	What is needed for the future?
<p>(1) The narrative battle around Geneva (and multilateralism) is central.</p> <p>(2) Geneva is a unique but fragile global governance hub.</p> <p>(3) From reactive to anticipatory: governance must get ahead of crises. A major theme was shifting from crisis response to anticipation – especially in science and technology (e.g., in quantum computing and AI governance).</p> <p>(4) Inclusion, ownership, and power-rebalancing are critical. There were strong focuses on: engaging cities and regional hubs; strengthening youth participation; avoiding self-satisfaction; ensuring that tech and AI governance serves the public good; and reinforcing a broader sense of ownership – potentially through technology.</p>	<p>(1) International Geneva operates in a challenging information environment where algorithms reward outrage and misinformation. UN content is often demoted, while criticism of multilateralism is amplified. The core challenge is no longer just doing the work – it is explaining why it matters.</p> <p>(2) Geneva remains one of the two headquarters of the UN system and exhibits extraordinary density: 186 member states, NGOs, academia, business, and humanitarian leadership. It serves not only resident institutions but the global public good. Yet it faces UN funding cuts and reform pressures (UN80, efficiency drives), the risk of fragmentation through delocalisation, perceptions of being a 'bubble', and structural constraints (size, visas, cost, and infrastructure).</p> <p>(3) Geneva should: build partnerships before breakthroughs occur; use its 'safe space' model to convene diverse voices early on; reduce uncertainty to enable earlier action; and lead in anticipatory science diplomacy (thinking on a 20 to 25-year horizon).</p> <p>(4) Things to be considered: is Geneva an echo chamber? Are Global South, youth, and local actors sufficiently included? Is corporate power outpacing governance?</p>	<p>(1) Geneva must regain control of its narrative, make normative work tangible, and communicate impact in ways that resonate beyond institutional audiences.</p> <p>(2) The window between discovery and disruption is shrinking. Governance must move upstream.</p> <p>(3) Legitimacy will depend on widening participation and addressing power imbalances, especially concerning big tech.</p> <p>(4) Geneva's future depends less on defending its legacy and more on proving its capacity to innovate, anticipate, and collaborate at scale.</p>

(5) Collective action is the only path forward.

(5) Despite institutional strain, the panel closed on shared responsibility: Geneva as a laboratory for global cooperation; cross-sector collaboration (UN, governments, science, business, NGOs); breaking silos across institutions; protecting humanitarian and normative functions; reinforcing Geneva's identity as a place where solutions are shaped, not just debated.

(5) Geneva's strategic role remains strong, but it must adapt quickly and demonstrate relevance beyond its ecosystem.

Key Take Aways from SESSION 03

Navigating aid, power and politics: the role of humanitarian diplomacy

What is important?	What are the key factors for change?	What is needed for the future?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian diplomacy as a bridge: It connects political engagement and humanitarian action to enable access and protection in highly contested environments. • Humanitarian space under pressure: Access constraints, funding reductions and geopolitical fragmentation are threatening principled humanitarian action. • Local actors at the forefront: National and local organisations play a critical role due to their proximity and contextual knowledge, as well as their communities' trust in them. • Legitimacy and trust as core assets: Credibility, consistency and alignment between values and action are central for effective humanitarian diplomacy. • Neutrality in practice: While neutrality is challenged in politicised contexts, principled engagement, including neutrality and impartiality, remain essential as operational anchors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger political engagement: Humanitarian diplomacy requires sustained dialogue with political actors at both macro (peace processes) and micro (local community) levels. • Better alignment of frameworks: Improved coherence between IHL, regional/legal protection frameworks and operational modalities to reduce fragmentation. • Investment in leadership and skills: Humanitarian diplomacy demands specific capacities, including negotiation, contextual analysis and political literacy. • Fairer risk-sharing and localisation: Direct funding, meaningful participation and equitable partnerships with local actors are critical. • Consensus-building in divided contexts: Identifying common ground between opposing political stakeholders is key to advancing humanitarian outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewed commitment to principles in action: Moving beyond declaratory support to consistent application of humanitarian norms in practice. • Strengthening local capacity: Supporting national actors to engage safely and effectively in humanitarian diplomacy. • Responsible use of new technologies: Exploring how digital tools can support access and coordination without undermining trust or principles. • Broader coalition-building: Engaging non-traditional actors and diverse stakeholders to preserve humanitarian space. • Sustained dialogue despite fragmentation: Even in a divided international system, humanitarian diplomacy must continue to maintain a space for dialogue where political consensus is absent.

Key Take Aways from SESSION 04

Engaging the private sector in humanitarian contexts

What is important?	What are the key factors for change?	What is needed for the future?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanitarian funding models are under pressure. Unmet humanitarian needs and declining co-operation budgets call for the incorporation of the strengths of all actors, including the private sector. Today, the private sector is not just a donor, but a logistics partner, technology provider, innovator, and a local economic actor whose presence often endures beyond emergency response. Engaging the private sector complements, rather than replaces, state responsibility for funding and delivering humanitarian services. Engagement must respect humanitarian principles, international standards and 'do no harm'. Business activities in fragile contexts are never neutral and can unintentionally exacerbate conflict if risks are not carefully managed. Local private-sector actors and especially SMEs are critical, as they are embedded in and understand markets, supply chains, and communities, and are essential for stabilisation and recovery. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standards for responsible business conduct and strong due diligence (e.g., UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, OECD guidelines) must guide partnerships to avoid fuelling conflict or human rights abuses. Better alignment between financing tools and humanitarian needs, including improved impact measurement and context-adapted ESG and risk frameworks. Innovative financing mechanisms such as blended finance, impact-linked loans, and de-risking instruments to mobilise private capital where risk currently discourages investment. A shift toward locally anchored approaches, supporting local enterprises, strengthening governance systems, and enabling refugee and host community economic participation. Improved regulatory environments and incentives (right to work, access to finance, stable institutions) to allow private actors to operate and invest in fragile contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More and better finance: increasing funding while ensuring it is responsible, conflict-sensitive, and aligned with humanitarian principles. New partnership models between public, private, and multilateral actors, with clearer risk-sharing mechanisms and stronger collaboration. Greater mobilisation of private capital and philanthropy, including from foundations and impact investors that can complement public resources. Investment in preparedness frameworks before crises occur, so financing tools, monitoring systems, and partnerships are ready when emergencies arise. A long-term resilience perspective, where private sector engagement supports economic recovery, job creation, and sustainable access to basic services for affected communities.

Key Take Aways from SESSION 05

Academic innovation meets international cooperation

What is important?	What are the key factors for change?	What is needed for the future?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context-sensitive innovation: Cultural dynamics, including contextual taboos, and power structures must be understood before creating incentives and designing relevant innovation. • Local ownership and governance: Innovation succeeds only when local actors (communities, ministries, etc.) define priorities, drive implementation, and maintain solutions. • Human-centred approach: Technological innovation alone will not reach the target audience; new solutions must go hand in hand with behavioural change, system integration, and everyday usability. All of this, together, determines real-world impact. • Bridging labs and field realities: Solutions must be grounded in on-the-ground constraints, not ideal lab conditions. • Equitable partnerships: Co-creation processes, diverse consortia including the wide range of stakeholders, and fair resource distribution – considering gender balance – are prerequisites for sustainable impact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifting mindsets from invention to problem-driven innovation: Starting with genuine community needs (pull) rather than technology push. • Agile and iterative approaches: Moving away from linear approaches and allowing iterations while fostering continuous learning, adaptation, and rapid feedback loops. • Allow innovations to fail: Apply clear and transparent criteria for the evolution of projects in a staged approach (de-risking funnel). • Stronger science-policy-practice interface: Researchers must translate academic findings into actionable solutions allowing policymakers to base their decisions on evidence. • Bridging humanitarian and research timelines: Balancing scientific rigor with the speed and flexibility required in crises. • Recognising system-level constraints: Addressing governance, supply chains, infrastructure, and institutional incentives that enable or block adoption and scaling and adapt accordingly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locally led, locally produced and locally owned innovation: Building local capacity for design, manufacturing, implementation, and long-term maintenance of innovative solutions. • Scaling pathways beyond pilots: Allow a stronger focus on implementation science, effectiveness (not only efficacy), and conditions required for scale-up. This means daring to move beyond academic proof of concept towards market-oriented solutions. • Stronger global and equitable partnerships: More systematic co-creation of projects between Global North and South institutions, academia, humanitarian and development actors, and governments. • Anticipate or prevent – preparedness for crises: Investing in research and knowledge now to be ready with deployable, context-adapted solutions when emergencies strike. • Long-term, patient capital: Search for stable, flexible funding that allows for experimentation, system change, and the growth of transformative partnerships.

Key Take Aways from SESSION 6

Tackling the causes of crises, not the symptoms

What is important?	What are the key factors for change?	What is needed for the future?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local ownership and leadership are critical enablers and central to any process of change. Strengthening them requires a deliberate shift of power to local actors. Too often, humanitarian needs are viewed in terms of material or physical assistance, while their social dimensions (social cohesion, inclusion of marginalised voices) are overlooked. • It is not possible to do more with less, but we can do better with what we have. There is a need to tackle the underlying drivers of crises, including the individual, political, economic, financial, and regional interests that fuel them. • It is a matter of balancing the need to address symptoms with the need to tackle root causes. Too often, and especially in fragile contexts, aid flows focus on alleviating symptoms rather than resolving the underlying causes of crises. • The concentration of power in the hands of a few raises the question of accountability and oversight. It also highlights the essential role of civil society – key for recovery in any context. In a world where oligarchy, authoritarianism, war, and the climate crisis are increasingly interconnected, addressing root causes is essential. • The humanitarian–development–peace Nexus works to reduce vulnerabilities and risks. When mandates and agendas, especially the humanitarian principles, are clear and respected, it generates mutually reinforcing benefits. However, challenges arise when humanitarian actors, particularly in contexts where the state is weak or absent, go beyond 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first priority must be to achieve a political solution to silence the guns and create the conditions for a future that does not require humanitarian responses. We must think about reducing humanitarian needs, not only responding to them. • When humanitarian aid is done well and places people at the centre, it serves as a first step toward trust and stability and creates entry points for longer-term recovery. • It is important to integrate the security sector right away when crises start and to understand security holistically, as it provides the conditions that allow humanitarian aid to be delivered effectively. • When the security sector is transparent, accountable, and serves the people, it helps prevent abuse and reduces the risk of recurring violence. Conversely, when the security sector is politized, corrupt, not inclusive and fuels injustice, it leads to the erosion of public trust. • Prevention makes strong economic sense: it is far less costly than responding to crises. However, prevention often does not translate into clearly visible or immediate results, which makes its benefits harder to perceive and measure in the short term. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To lay the groundwork for sustainable development, humanitarian aid must enable societies to lead and contribute to rebuilding their own communities, rather than remain dependent on external support. • Humanitarian, development and peace actors must therefore listen to and strengthen local initiatives, support women's leadership and foster social cohesion. • It is often overlooked that poor governance of the security sector is a root cause of violence and therefore holds significant potential for prevention. When the security sector is accountable, upholds the rule of law and human rights and serves the people, it helps reduce violence and strengthen the social contract.

their mandate and substitute the state, which should be at the centre.