A more unkind and unsafe world

by Richard Brennan

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A humanitarian worker assists displaced families who fled armed violence in Sudan's Aj Jazirah State

Photo Credit: OCHA/Yao Chen

Over 305 million people need humanitarian assistance globally today — a staggering number that has almost quadrupled over the past decade. Tragically, as these needs increase across fragile states such as Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere, foreign aid is declining rapidly with devastating local consequences and heightened global risks.

For over 30 years, I have worked in dozens of major emergencies across five continents. It is difficult to convey the complexities of working in insecure settings such as Afghanistan or Syria, where tens of millions of people depend on aid for life-saving services. Despite the enormous challenges, humanitarians — most of them from the local communities — have consistently achieved tremendous outcomes when given sufficient resources and access to those in need. I have seen first-hand how coordinated action led to sharp drops in child mortality in Liberia and how skilled nutritionists restored emaciated children to good health in Yemen.

This progress is now at risk due to major cuts in foreign aid. Most dramatically, the Trump administration has reduced its aid budget by perhaps 90% and dismantled the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Many European countries have already reduced aid funding in favour of defence spending. Consequently, the 2025 global humanitarian appeal, through which aid agencies mobilise life-saving resources, is currently funded at only 10%. At least seven countries will now be dropped from this year's appeal due to the funding cuts.

What are the implications? Quite simply, innocent people will die unnecessarily — especially in the protracted crises in Africa and the Middle East — and unforeseen perils may land on the shores of other countries.

The international system's collective capacities to support the national response to acute crises — epidemics, pandemics, conflicts, natural disasters, climate events and nuclear catastrophes — will be curtailed, as seen with the recent earthquake in Myanmar. If a major sudden-onset disaster were to occur tomorrow in a low-income

country, the global humanitarian system will not have the resources to respond at scale leading to deaths that otherwise would have been averted.

Despite the lessons of COVID, the cuts will erode our capacities to detect new epidemics and pandemics efficiently due to disruptions to early warning systems. The US has recently stopped funding global disease surveillance activities and sharing influenza data with FluNet, a global virus database. This threatens our ability to identify flu and other epidemics early and the potentially the efficacy of future flu vaccines, putting us all at risk.

Years of development gains also risk being rolled back, especially in health. Hard-fought progress on child and maternal mortality will likely be reversed, as is already happening in Afghanistan.

HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria programs raise special concerns. UNAIDS estimates that there will be 4 million additional AIDS-related deaths by 2029 due to funding cuts. Similarly, TB-related deaths and risks of drug-resistant TB will rise as patients lose access to life-saving drugs. Those drug-resistant organisms are likely to find their way to foreign shores.

Reduced funding is already leading to economic pressures among communities due to job losses, including among aid workers. Discontinuation of income-generating programs will blunt local entrepreneurship and self-reliance. Levels of desperation will increase, forcing people to pursue coping mechanisms such as migration — including to the west.

Increasing poverty often leads to communal and civil conflict. Extremist groups are always ready to exploit desperation and chaos, often finding ready recruits among disaffected youth. Many of these groups continue to seek means to export terrorist ideologies and violence.

What does it say about our collective values when aid is cut at a time of massive need? And what are the implications for Australia?

Arguments in support of foreign assistance usually highlight moral obligation and enlightened self-interest. Astonishingly, the US administration has determined that most aid does not align with its national interests. But the spirit of humanitarianism is also driven by a more transcendent ethic — that much will be expected from those to whom much has been given. When the privileged turn away from the most vulnerable, it cannot be good for the national soul or the human family. And the increased risks of disease spread, migration, regional instability and extremism cannot be ignored.

Unlike other areas of endeavour Australia does not punch above its weight with foreign assistance. In 2024, we ranked 28th among 32 OECD countries as an international donor. Fortunately, the Albanese government has not reduced its aid commitments for the near term and is already moving to cover some gaps left by the US in the Pacific.

As with all crises, the funding cuts also present opportunities. Many recipient countries are exploring how to reduce their own dependence on foreign assistance, especially those with more stable governments and economies. Aid professionals are pursuing reforms of a complex system that must be more efficient, localised and adapted to evolving realities. The UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator is leading the Humanitarian Reset, while the United Nations system is embarking on a broader reform entitled UN80.

These are necessary but insufficient steps. The sobering truth is that across many fragile states humanitarian needs continue to increase and that the most vulnerable continue to suffer disproportionately with fewer resources available to assist them. Moreover, with their unkind and short-sighted cuts to foreign aid, donor countries are opening themselves to underappreciated risks to both their own security and to our collective soul.

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