

# The time is now: Resetting the Humanitarian system & the role of cash assistance

## 16th May 2025

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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#### Cash is a driver of reform - not just an add-on

Cash should be the starting point, not an add-on. If it's not the default now, when? Everyone agrees, but real institutional change is still dragging.

#### The reset is happening – are we in or out?

A humanitarian reset is coming, one way or another. Are we shaping it with cash at the centre, or letting others decide what comes next?

#### Local actors are leading – now we need to back them

Syria, Ukraine, Turkiye show local actors can deliver at scale and drive innovation. But are we funding them properly, or just expecting more for less?

#### Cash readiness means system change

Finance, IT, logistics, PMEAL – still not built for cash. Everyone wants change but no one wants to change their own organisation.

#### Digital is power – but not perfect

Digital tools are a big enabler, but they're not enough. They need to work offline, comply with local laws, and avoid excluding people.

#### Cash vs in-kind – it's not either/or, but default matters

In-kind aid still has a place. But cash should come first – used where and when people want it, not where systems find it easiest.

#### We need to tell the story better – and to new audiences

We talk about reach and scale, but what sticks is impact. People remember the Homs story more than the billion-dollar figure. Advocacy needs to connect with the unconvinced.

#### It's not about tools anymore – it's about political will

The systems exist. The evidence is clear. What's missing is leadership willingness to have courage to shift power.

#### The case for cash is strong – but momentum is slipping

Cash funding is falling – down to 17% of humanitarian aid. Multipurpose cash is especially a risk, fragmented by mandates and coordination structures.

#### Now's the time to simplify, partner differently and advocate smarter

Streamline tools and language. Work with new partners. Show how cash delivers not just assistance – but dignity, wellbeing, resilience and local economic impact.

# Cash and the Humanitarian Reset: reflections from the panel discussions

## Panel 1: Leading a Humanitarian Reset

Caroline Holt (IFRC), Alper Küçük (Turkish Red Crescent),  
Beatrice Butsana-Sita (British Red Cross)

This opening panel explored whether the current moment is a genuine humanitarian reset or merely a push to do more with less. All speakers positioned CVA as a core enabler of a more accountable, efficient, and people-centred aid system. Beatrice described cash as a powerful and ready tool - already reaching over 10 million people across 80 countries in 2023, with 95% delivered digitally and 92% unrestricted. Caroline warned against the assumption that CVA is 'done', citing persistent barriers like outdated internal systems, output-focused metrics, and weak advocacy narratives. Alper shared how TRC scaled CVA to reach over a million people monthly and €400m annually, highlighting reduced costs, improved autonomy, and positive spillover effects such as fewer clinic visits in camps.

The panel stressed that while the Movement is well-positioned to lead, bold internal change is needed. Advocacy must go beyond volume and focus on impact, systems change, and local empowerment. Cash should be embedded into response models, not added on, and principled collaboration with governments is essential for scale and legitimacy.

## Panel 2: Transforming Aid through Cash Assistance

Praxedes Merchan (British Red Cross, Syria), Marga Ledo (CashCap, Ukraine),  
Meircan Han (Turkish Red Crescent)

This session demonstrated how local actors are not just delivering cash but redefining what humanitarian leadership looks like. Prax described how SARC's cash-for-livelihoods programme revitalised a bombed-out neighbourhood in Homs by supporting over 300 businesses. Since 2020, SARC has grown into Syria's leading CVA actor, reaching 1.8 million people annually, enabled by strong local systems and leadership. Marga spoke to URCS's rapid transformation in Ukraine, delivering cash to 100,000 households per month by aligning with government systems. She stressed the importance of cash coordination and the challenges of retaining national talent given INGO competition.

Meircan outlined TRC's journey from small-scale CVA to integration within Turkey's national social protection systems, now delivering €25 million monthly. Their systems are adaptive, digital, and locally rooted, even operable from remote villages. Across the panel, cash was presented not just as a modality but as a vehicle for localisation, innovation and legitimacy. All warned that unless local actors are resourced and trusted, not just included, the promise of transformation risks becoming symbolic.

### Panel 3: Join the dialogue: Perspectives and feedback

Rurik Marsden (FCDO), Cate Turton (CALP Network), Anna Kondakhchyan (CashCap/NORCAP)

The final panel zoomed out to consider what the wider system must do to make cash central to humanitarian reform. Rurik outlined five key design principles for a reformed aid architecture: centre affected people and local actors, prioritise sustainable solutions like cash and mutual aid, bring planning and funding closer to communities, invest in IHL and conflict prevention, and link with development and climate actors. He called cash a proven driver of people-centred, efficient, and accountable programming.

Cate presented data showing a sharp decline in CVA, falling to just 17% of humanitarian funding in 2024. Multipurpose cash has been particularly vulnerable to cuts. She emphasised the need to reframe the case for cash beyond efficiency, to safety, inclusion and impact. Anna echoed this, urging the sector to move from “cash as a tool” to “cash as reform,” with examples from Guatemala and Iraq where CVA aligned with government-led solutions.

The discussion acknowledged the deepening risks of fragmentation, rigid systems and tokenistic localisation. Barriers today are largely political, not technical. National Societies remain underfunded despite being critical first responders. Local actors often lack access to tech, data systems, and negotiating power. The path forward includes preserving what works - interagency coordination, cash working groups, shared delivery models - and letting go of short-termism, sector silos, and duplicative systems.

The panels concluded with consensus: cash must not be treated as a side modality but positioned at the centre of the humanitarian reset. Doing so requires bold leadership, simplified systems, and direct investment in local actors. The humanitarian community must step beyond the cash echo chamber, rethink narratives, and advocate harder with sceptical leadership, donors, and governments. The future of cash hinges not on new tools but on political courage, institutional change, and a shared willingness to start from the perspectives of affected people.