Humanitarian Aid under Pressure

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Humanitarian Aid under Pressure: Conference Report on the Humanitarian Symposium Munich 2026

The 11th Humanitarian Symposium Munich was devoted to the topic "Humanitarian aid in the light of the current geopolitical situation". Accordingly, the agenda was filled with a series of experts from the field, which allowed us to draw conclusions about the recent geopolitical impacts on humanitarian aid worldwide. From shrinking resources to increasing political instrumentalization, the sector is under pressure. A recurring theme throughout the symposium was the challenges posed by large-scale funding

cuts in humanitarian aid, not only by the US but also by Europe. The discussion revolved around structural shifts and how geopolitics have moved from being a contextual factor to becoming a direct determinant. The conference brought together students and professionals from the medical field as well as representatives of international NGOs, United Nations humanitarian aid organizations and the academic field. This created the perfect atmosphere to discuss institutional strategy through field experience.

Principled action under pressure

Questions of international donor volatility and mandate interpretation framed many exchanges. Key to navigate new standards under uncertain circumstances are values of principled aid: Neutrality, independence and impartiality being the most important ones. Along these guidelines, it was very interesting to see how different the approaches of the speakers were. Several speakers, with decades of experience in humanitarian aid, highlighted how attacks on health infrastructure, reduced respect for international humanitarian law and heightened scrutiny of humanitarian organizations have become part of the operational reality.

Reconfiguration of humanitarian principles

Principled aid in a fragmented international order requires a conscious reaffirmation of neutrality and independence. Humanitarian organizations are frequently pressured to align their principles of aid with the country in which they are operating or to justify their presence in explicitly political terms. The current challenge of humanitarian aid organizations is safeguarding operational access while avoiding political instrumentalization. Also UNICEF and Médecins Sans Frontières gave insights on the operational consequences of a collapsing humanitarian landscape. In several conflict settings, medical actors face not only physical insecurity but also deliberate obstruction or reputational attacks.

Case Studies: Nepal, Venezuela, Senegal and Afghanistan

The symposium explored different case studies, based on hands-on experiences of the speakers in Nepal, Venezuela, Senegal and Afghanistan, which grounded the geopolitical debate in a specific national context. For example, Nepal has faced successive shocks in recent years, including the 2015 earthquake, the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing political instability. These crises have exposed structural weaknesses in humanitarian aid governance. In Venezuela, international sanctions, economic collapse and contested legitimacy of state institutions shape the humanitarian architecture. Shifts in donor priorities, mainly by the US, have directly affected the presence of international organizations. Humanitarian actors must constantly adjust their strategies in response to changes that originate far

beyond the immediate crisis context. Through that, the ideal of apolitical assistance becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

The Symposium itself

The event was organized by the Centre for International Health. Through that, it was embedded in an academic environment at the university clinic in Munich. Medical exhibitors and institutional partners integrated humanitarian practice with research and education. Discussions with other participants and speakers frequently returned to the question of how future professionals can navigate ethical dilemmas, funding volatility and geopolitical fragmentation. This was because the audience of about 40 participants mainly consisted of students in the medical field. Therefore, the exchanges were marked by a shared recognition that the humanitarian system is undergoing structural transformation.

The new reality of Humanitarian Work

Overall, the 11th Humanitarian Symposium in Munich provided important insights into the current humanitarian system, drawing directly from the experiences of those working on the ground. It served as a reminder that geopolitical fragmentation and financial uncertainty are reshaping the daily operations of humanitarian actors. At the same time, the speakers demonstrated a strong commitment to principled action and showed willingness to adapt the the sector's overall approach. One key take away emerging from the symposium is that humanitarian work today requires not only technical expertise but more political awareness. In today's world, compassion itself becomes politicized. Therefore, safeguarding the core principles of humanitarianism demands confrontation with uncomfortable trade-offs. The symposium provided a forum for this kind of reflection, contributing to ongoing debates about the future of humanitarian action.