

Why Child Protection Must Be Non-Negotiable in Humanitarian Response

Blog by: Hani Mansourian, Director of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action

Over the three-days of the Annual Meeting for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, I had the privilege of joining over 800 colleagues from across the world—each one committed to protecting children in the most difficult circumstances. The conversations have been frank, urgent, and deeply inspiring. I have been inspired by the moving contributions of so many of our dedicated practitioners on how they are providing life sustaining services to the most vulnerable children across the world. But as we wrapped up, I found myself preoccupied by a question that’s hard to shake: *“How is it that we are still trying to prove the worth of child protection services in the current debates around the future of the humanitarian sector?”*

In between the Annual Meeting sessions, I have been reading and watching the latest news from Gaza, in horror. I couldn’t help but ask myself: how can the humanitarian leadership watch this unfolding disaster, and still suggest that saving lives is the only business of humanitarians— Isn’t upholding the dignity and protecting the rights of these children and families equally important?

A child’s last remaining asset in crisis—**hope**—can be destroyed long before food or water run out. Shouldn’t that loss of hope be treated as an emergency too? As aptly put by one of our youth speakers, Hanadi, hope sustains children’s mental health.

All of this reminded me of a powerful moment in our meeting when a young advocate, Janada, said: *“We need to ensure the rights of children are respected and protected.”* She’s right. And no matter how persuasive some may be about focusing only on basic survival, I’m convinced: **humanitarian aid is and must continue going beyond keeping people alive – towards dignified survival, which inherently includes protection.** Child Protection is not a luxury. It is not secondary. It is an essential and non-negotiable element of principled humanitarian action—right alongside food, water, shelter, health, and other basic elements of survival.

As part of the closing, I asked the participants to help us honour the life, resilience, and struggle of millions of children in Gaza, Sudan, South Sudan, Myanmar, Yemen, Colombia, Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, and all crises around the world where not only children’s survival is in danger, by observing a moment of silence.

What We Heard—and What We Must Carry Forward

As the event unfolded, a few themes emerged that deserve to stay with us—not just as talking points, but as imperatives.



1. Localisation is not a future aspiration—it is a present necessity—and it is long overdue.

We often say local actors are the first to respond and the last to leave—but our systems rarely treat them accordingly. Whether in Haiti, Myanmar, or Mali, local caseworkers, local organisations, and community leaders and members are holding the line—not out of obligation, but out of agency. They don't need charity; they need space, trust, and decision-making power.

There's an uncomfortable truth here. When we hear about "building local capacity," it often sounds like local actors have to adapt to the international systems in order to qualify for funding. But maybe it should be the other way around. Maybe donors, policy makers, and other international actors need to reflect on how to adapt our funding mechanisms, partnership models, and decision-making processes to fit *local and national* realities. How can international actors enable, facilitate, and open up space, rather than merely employing LNAs as implementing partners?

2. The funding crisis is real—and it is reshaping the sector.

We heard story after story of child protection programmes shutting down, of frontline workers being overstretched and under-resourced. Once again, child protection is being pushed to the margins. But let's be clear: this is not because we lack ideas or evidence. It's because of a lack of political will. It is because some in positions of power are suggesting that we should go back to the era where merely staying alive was seen as distinct from and superior to development and self-actualisation. We now know that those linear distinctions are not supported by evidence and science. Dignified survival requires more than just food, shelter, and medicine.

We cannot allow children's protection to be treated as a luxury, or as something we can do if there is money left over. It's as critical to survival as food or water. And if we allow the reach of child protection services to shrink now, we will be reckoning with the consequences for generations to come.

3. Solidarity is our strength.

In a humanitarian landscape that often feels fractured, we are reminded that what we build together matters more than ever. Solidarity is not just about statements or slogans—it's about how we act. How we share resources. How we make space. How we speak with, not for, those on the frontlines. It is about refusing to let one child protection worker, one local partner, one community face this alone. As the child protection sector, solidarity and compassion towards each other is the only thing that can sustain us through this crisis. And I have no doubt that we will get through this, if we stick together as a community.

So, as we close, let's remember: children do not experience crises in silos, and they cannot afford for us to respond in silos either. Our unity—across sectors, agencies, languages, and lived experiences—is what makes protection possible.

We regroup. We adapt. We continue—together.

Because children are still here. And they are watching not only what we say, but what we choose to do next.

