

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINES

Messages for the Next UN Secretary General



Introduction

'If you could speak to anyone in the world about the challenges facing your community today, who would you speak to?' Across nine contexts facing humanitarian conflicts and crises, fourteen civil society leaders were nearly unanimous in their response, citing global leaders, the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the UN Secretary General.

This paper centres the voices of civil society leaders living and working on the frontlines of conflict. These individuals are frequently excluded from the institutions and negotiations that shape their lives – not because they lack expertise or solutions, but because power remains concentrated in the hands of actors who are rarely held accountable to the people most affected by their decisions. Civil society representatives live with the consequences of actions taken by governments, occupying powers, armed groups, donors and multilateral institutions. While these individuals bear the weight of the crises as both service providers and civilians, they are not helpless victims. They are leaders in their field, delivering civilian protection, advocacy and humanitarian response efforts across their communities.

Ahead of the appointment of the next UN Secretary General on 1 January 2027, Oxfam is renewing its calls for reform. In 2024, in its report *Vetoing Humanity*,¹ Oxfam implored the UNSC to become more equal and inclusive. Drawing on 23 case studies of protracted conflicts, the report examined the UNSC's failure to prevent and resolve crises, its lack of representation and the disproportionate power of its five permanent members (the 'P5') – the US, China, France, Russia and the UK. That year, the UNSC passed only 41 resolutions – the fewest since 1991 – while casting 7 vetoes, the most since 1986. This peak in gridlock coincided with – the deadliest year on record for aid workers – with 383 killed worldwide – underscoring a growing gap between the UNSC's mandate of providing peace and security and its ability to do so.² In 2025, Oxfam released another paper, *A (More) Feminist Approach to Principled Humanitarian Aid*,³ calling on the humanitarian system to commit to localization and gender inclusivity by transferring power to less represented constituencies, including women-led and refugee-led organizations.

More than a year after the publication of these reports, civilians around the world still feel that global leaders and the UN system have failed them. Crises have multiplied. States and non-state armed groups have initiated or prolonged conflicts. Some have committed war crimes. The uptick in violence around the world is not occurring in a vacuum. Powerful nations within and beyond the P5 exercise disproportionate power in the form of vetoes, selective application of international humanitarian law (IHL), arms transfers, diplomatic leverage and aid resourcing decisions that have privileged national interests at the expense of the safety of civilians on the ground. The inability of UN leadership to deter aggression and respond effectively to these challenges is not only a failure to deliver on the UN's mandate. For civilians, the inaction has also entrenched a crisis of justice and a culture of impunity.

Despite its shortcomings, the UN system remains critical for responding to the needs of civilian populations, and the next UN Secretary General will have an important role to play. As the UN's chief administrative officer and principal spokesperson, the UN Secretary General exercises influence across the Secretariat and engages with the

wider UN system, including its agencies, funds and programmes, as well as Member States and intergovernmental bodies such as the UNSC and UN General Assembly. To rebuild trust with communities around the world, the UN Secretary General must leverage the full weight of the office to bridge the gap between powerful Member States and the global populations most affected by their decisions. This will require political courage to stand up to powerful stakeholders, elevate underrepresented perspectives, ensure the consistent application of international law and prioritize accountability to civilians. The new UN Secretary General may not be able to change the system overnight, but paying attention to the voices of the individuals featured in this paper would make a great start.

Less aid, more impunity

Different world but the same power imbalance

The world has changed significantly since the UN's creation in 1945, but the UN today still reflects the same power hierarchy between states and civilian populations. Following the decades-long fight for independence by many countries, the number of Member States has nearly quadrupled since the UN's founding, from 51 to 193. Powerful regional blocs and actors within and beyond the P5 – including the Group of Seven (G7), European Union (EU), African Union (AU), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – have emerged as centres of geopolitical influence. Yet within the UNSC, the P5 states have continued to hold veto power, giving them disproportionate influence over the fate of people living in crises.

Civilians view these power players – both new and old – as presiders over conflict outcomes today because they control vetoes, arms transfers, financing, high-level convenings and aid decisions, among others. And while some civilians see occupying powers as directly responsible for the outbreak and continuation of conflict in places like Gaza and Ukraine, others accuse the most powerful states of inaction and neglect by withdrawing foreign assistance or turning a blind eye to injustice elsewhere in the world, in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Yemen, Colombia, South Sudan and beyond. Across the board, Oxfam's civil society partners perceive states and international institutions as either enablers of or bystanders to their suffering.

Record levels of violence

Civilians are experiencing record levels of violence at a time when the institutions intended to protect them are themselves being attacked or rendered ineffective.

Conflict is not only more frequent but also more lethal. Both interstate and intrastate wars have hit record highs – in 2025, the world saw 65 active state-based conflicts and 8 interstate conflicts, both the highest totals recorded since 1946.⁴ Conflict is deadlier for civilians today because violence is increasingly fought in cities, where explosive weapons cause devastating harm – 61,353 civilians were killed or injured by explosive weapons in 2024 alone, an increase of 67% over the previous year, with 85% of those harmed in populated areas being civilians. This toll is compounded by the rapid spread of drones for strikes, surveillance technologies for tracking and targeting, and AI-enabled systems that increasingly guide targeting decisions, now reaching both state and non-state armed groups, including over 65 non-state armed groups already known to possess drones.⁵ Although prohibited under international law, conflict actors are attacking civilian infrastructure and frontline responders, including humanitarian aid workers, medical personnel, journalists and human rights advocates. By doing so, they are not only seizing control of territory and populations, but also dismantling the very emergency systems that humans depend on to survive.



A meeting organised by Oxfam and AVSD in DRC. Photo credit: Action des Volontaires pour la Solidarité et le Développement (AVSD), DRC.

Conflict actors are also constraining humanitarian access. Despite the UNSC's 2018 adoption of Resolution 2417, which condemned the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and the unlawful denial of humanitarian access, parties to various conflicts are deploying starvation as a war tactic without facing proportionate consequences. Many have cut off access to aid in denial of their obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention, which includes the provision of food and medical supplies to the population, maintenance of medical and hospital services, and facilitation of relief schemes where the population is inadequately supplied, regardless of concurrent hostilities.

In protracted crises around the world, devastating conditions have become 'the new normal' for civilians over time. Breakdowns in social services, repeated forced displacement, dysfunctional economies, deep social mistrust and normalized violence are just few of the features of everyday life to which civilians have become habituated. With conflicts lasting longer, social and community protection mechanisms become even more essential, but those mechanisms have also collapsed.

A crisis in the international aid system

For many, 2025 represented a profound rupture in the modern international aid system. Humanitarian action continues, but with gutted capacity and disproportionate pressure on local responders. The precipitous cuts to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – followed by the dismantling of the agency and the transfer of remaining staff to the U.S. Department of State – marked the largest single shock in a multi-year trend of donor retreat, dealing a massive blow to an already under-supported and underfunded humanitarian system. The shock reflected a broader retreat in global support for conflict-affected populations, in which governments are shifting budget resources away from international aid and development to other interests. In the case

of USAID, programmes benefitting people internationally already accounted for less than 1% of the federal budget of the richest country on earth.

The pre-existing aid architecture admittedly warranted reform. For example, while the US government fell short of contributing its fair share to UN humanitarian appeals, it was also often the largest and majority donor, creating an imbalanced and unsustainable donor portfolio. A future system should move away from an oligarchic arrangement in which a few powerful actors dominate assistance, towards one in which more countries step up to support other nations' rights to self-reliance and self-determination.

Since the changes, international actors have transferred delivery and security risks to local actors without transferring commensurate resources or decision-making power, reinforcing a longstanding power imbalance. As Oxfam has highlighted in prior reports, crisis impacts are not gender neutral – they do not impact women and men equally. Local civil society organizations, especially those led by women and refugees, continue to face the greatest exposure to violence while often receiving the least flexible funding or institutional support. Across the board, partners underscored how the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls has been compounded by the withdrawal of foreign assistance. Many cited increases in gender-based violence, including child marriage, sexual harassment and trafficking. These harms reflect and intensify a longstanding gender inequality – that while women and girls remain underrepresented in decision-making, they are often both the first victims of and first responders in a crisis.

Voices from the frontlines

A world without protection

'Who do you think should be responsible for protecting your community from harm?' In response to this question, nearly every civil society leader consulted for this paper viewed states, parties to conflict, or the occupying power as being responsible for the protection of civilians, but they all cited one of two reasons why duty bearers are falling short of their obligations. While some participants described states as unable to support their populations due to a lack of central governance or capacity to scale services, others identified governments, occupying powers or armed groups as those responsible for perpetrating or enabling harm. For example, in areas with disputed territories, the civilian protections that apply in one part of the country may not apply in others. Some participants also highlighted the role of local communities, including traditional leaders, in protecting communities, mediating disputes, maintaining social cohesion and facilitating access to essential services. Across the board, many interviewees believed that the UN system and other powerful states have an obligation to act when actors with primary obligations to protect civilians have failed or have themselves committed violations.

Méschac: 'Communities face parallel governance systems' (DRC)

'The Congolese state is struggling to fully assume the responsibility [to sufficiently protect civilians] because of multiple security threats, institutional challenges, bad governance, selfishness and precarious economic challenges. [For example], in areas occupied by the M23 de facto government in North Kivu and South Kivu, communities face parallel governance systems, [high costs of living] as well as multiple restrictions that aggravate their vulnerability and limit their livelihoods.'

– Méschac Nakanyenge, Executive Director, Union pour la Promotion/Protection, la Défense des Droits Humains et de l'Environnement (UPPDHE)

Pedro: 'We suffer from triple effects of the humanitarian crisis' (Colombia)

'We suffer from triple effects in terms of the humanitarian crisis. Because we are on the border with Venezuela, there are communities affected by the armed conflict and migration flows. We also experience climate crisis events, particularly floods. All of this means that communities in their daily lives also have to face confinement, forced recruitment of young people by armed groups, and very high rates of gender-based violence.'

It's the communities, social leaders, local organizations, including those led by women, [who are providing civilian protection]. This is because of the slow response and the absence of the state – above all in rural communities, [and especially in] communities that are far away from the centre of the country.'

– Pedro Niño Sequera, Executive Director, Apoyar

Hakim: 'Our community has a right to protection' (South Sudan)

'According to our constitution, the community has a right to be protected by the government, but since the war broke out in 2013, [and then in] 2018, it has been the [supposed] role of the UN and international agencies. We expect the protection of civilians should be in the hands of international agencies and the UN, and then backed up by the civil society.'

– Hakim Cipuounyuc Awur, Executive Director, Disabled Agency for Rehabilitation and Development (DARD)

Sarah: 'Protection is not optional' (Lebanon)

'What we're seeing is really not occurring in a vacuum. The attacks documented in Lebanon, they reflect patterns that human rights organizations, humanitarian bodies and international experts have raised concerns about for years in different contexts, and sometimes not even just in Lebanon. It's just the same repeated attacks: attacks on civilians, civilian infrastructure, medical personnel, ambulances, hospitals. These are protected persons and objects under the Geneva Conventions and IHL. Their protection is not optional, so I don't know why we're acting like it is. This is a fundamental legal obligation binding on all parties [in] the conflict, yet despite the scale of the destruction and the devastation we are seeing, I think both the local and international responses have fallen short of what is required in the face of entire towns and villages in Lebanon that have been totally destroyed.'

– Sarah Nasrallah, Senior Communications and Advocacy Officer, Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)

Amal: 'Protected on paper' (Occupied Palestinian Territory)

'The responsibility [for protection] even falls on the occupying power. As long as we are under occupation, the occupying power is supposed to protect us. The occupying power shouldn't be acting this way towards the Palestinians. It's forbidden to wage war. It's forbidden to commit aggression, and so on, because we are still a state under occupation. The UN, as a body, should be involved. International and global bodies are supposed to fight to protect the Palestinians, but even if they do fight, the question is – on what scale? Did they achieve what was required? No.'

– Amal Syam, General Director, Women's Affairs Center (WAC)



A session part of the project Legal and Psychological Support for Women Affected by War in Gaza. Photo credit: Women's Affairs Center (WAC), Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Caught in the crossfire

Most of the civil society leaders interviewed referenced being caught in the crossfire between armed groups and state actors vying for control of territories and populations. All underscored the lack of safety and access to basic services – as both humanitarian providers seeking access to populations under stress, and as citizens seeking access to services themselves. Many identified parties that attacked civilians and restricted humanitarian space, including through limitations on physical movement, alleged affiliations with other conflict parties, increased bureaucratic and regulatory procedures, and arbitrary detentions and abductions of personnel.

Zahraa: 'I'm displaced. I've lost my house.' (Lebanon)

'I'm displaced. I lost my house in south Lebanon. I was displaced in 2024, and then again in 2025 and 2026. Now, I don't know what comes next. I don't have a plan because even when there is a ceasefire, south Lebanon continues to be bombed. The war never really stopped. I've left Lebanon and I'm working remotely now, but at the same time I keep thinking: What am I going to do when I come back? What will I return to? This uncertainty affects every part of my life: my daily life, my mental health, my work and my economic stability.'

– Zahraa Berjawi, Communications and Digital Media Coordinator, FEMALE

Amal: 'For three years, we've been slaughtered in front of television screens' (Occupied Palestinian Territory)

'For three years, we've been slaughtered in front of television screens and no one, no one, has been able to stop this massacre, this slaughter, this genocide. The world hasn't heard us when we say "Enough of the occupation!" to this day. Enough of the settlers wreaking havoc in the villages and cities of the West Bank.

Even now, [the] Palestinian [people] in Gaza are living in tents. We are still searching for [basic goods like] food, gas, clothing – all the things that were considered "essential" before the war. [As a result of the siege imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip and the closure of the border crossings], people are unable to leave the Gaza Strip, even for medical treatment. What enters are mostly soft drinks, chocolate and other secondary items. Medical equipment and supplies are not allowed in.'

– Amal Syam, General Director, WAC

Anzhelika: 'You're scared to go outside... people are sleeping in the metro' (Ukraine)

'As a Ukrainian living here every day, you're scared to go outside. We do not know when there will be the second massive attack or when you will be evacuated from the train, [for example] when you're travelling for your business trip to the eastern part of Ukraine. It is a very dangerous situation and still it is more than four years of the war... We do not have so many shelters. In Kyiv, for example, people are sleeping in the metro. It is exhausting to be in this psychological and emotional state.'

– Anzhelika Bielova, President, Voice of Romni

A staggering representation gap

By nearly all accounts, civil society leaders did not feel they were sufficiently represented in decision-making processes. Interviewees felt their communities were repeatedly omitted or, at best, invited to testify after agendas had already been decided. In response to the question, 'Do you believe your community has national representation and if so, do you believe it is heard in global decision-making spaces?', civil society leaders felt they lacked representation – either because they didn't have a real seat at the table, or because the people at the table did not truly represent their interests.

Sara: 'Representation is more than being invited to the meeting' (Syria)

'I remember attending a Brussels conference about the future of Syria, and the panel did not have a single Syrian represented. That was very, very sad. I thought, what a pity, to not have anybody from Syria, but everyone is discussing Syria. Meaningful participation is about more than being invited to a meeting. It's about having real influence over decisions. Sometimes you attend meetings and sometimes we feel it's just for the sake of attending that they invite people, just to have a number and different voices. But then decisions sometimes come and it's not really what everyone has been discussing in the meetings. It doesn't really reflect people's voices.'

– Sara Savva, Deputy Director-General, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East – Dept. of Ecumenical Relations and Development (GOPA-DERD)



A project meeting in Al-Mayadin, Deir ez-Zour, Syria. Photo credit: Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East (GOPA-DERD), Syria.

Mesud: 'Are they really serving people or serving leaders?' (Ethiopia)

'Who is representing us? We have different regional blocs, like the EU, the AU, [but] are they really serving people or serving leaders? None of these institutions are genuine spaces for citizens' voices because there is no genuine connection between the problems on the ground and the decision-making processes. So these big institutions are serving those who have money [and] those who have power more than those who [deserve] equal rights. And that's why I say there is no equity. There is no fairness in the UN system. And the UN system, the AU system, the European system are blind to people's concerns. Had they been genuine, we wouldn't have seen people in Gaza suffering day and night, people in Al-Fashir [in Sudan] or Ukraine. Wherever you go, it is those who have the power whose voice is heard.

Many of the local community voices [and] community-based organizations have no access, [and] even if they have access, they don't know how to talk with these people. Because they tell you when you go to Geneva, they tell you, "Finish your speech in two minutes." Even I can't start my speech because [everything we've seen] is traumatizing. All we see is a terrible experience that we get from the field. And we don't have the capacity. We don't have the capacity to explore opportunities to influence these decision-makers.'

– Mesud Gebeyehu, Executive Director, Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO)

Amal: 'We can't even raise our voices' (Occupied Palestinian Territory)

'Look, we can't deny that there are components of the Palestinian National Authority [acting as representatives]. There [are] ministries and state institutions. They exist in Ramallah. [But for people] from Gaza, what about us? We represent ourselves online and sometimes we can't even raise our voices. Because of the lack of internet access and because we were under siege, especially in the early years of the war, we couldn't leave. Since 7 October 2023, no one has left except for those who [died] and those who left for medical treatment. It's important for the world to understand that our voice has only been heard [indirectly].

The [Board of Peace] – is there no Palestinian representation there? Who established the technocratic committee? Who? Who said the war would stop? Who made all these decisions unilaterally? Just America, Israel and their supporters? We don't want to say there aren't any efforts. There are official efforts, but all the official efforts, at some point, make us feel like, "No, we are a state under occupation – powerless and helpless."

– Amal Syam, General Director, WAC



A meeting organised by the Women's Affairs Center. Photo credit: Women's Affairs Center (WAC), Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Broken promises and a lack of accountability

Partners described not only an implementation gap but also a system in which powerful states enforce international law selectively, shield allies and prioritize political interests to determine whether violations prompt binding action outlined in international law. Civil society leaders cited a litany of broken promises they heard from the international community – commitments to the implementation of ceasefires, respect for territorial integrity and consequences for illegal invasions, the protection of human rights, and transition to local humanitarian leadership, among others.

Even after the UN or powerful nations had brokered official accords, partners commented on the lack of follow-through over decades, citing, for example, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances concerning Ukraine, the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, the 2022 Pretoria Agreement for a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities in Tigray (Ethiopia), the 2022 UN-mediated truce in Yemen and the 2025 Gaza ceasefire.⁶

Hakim: 'We were promised a stable South Sudan' (South Sudan)

'We were promised for years that we would have a stable and democratic South Sudan. Especially in [diplomatic talks in] Rome, there were a lot of delegations received in 2016, 2018 and 2022. [Big powers] promised they would make sure the peace agreement is fully implemented, protected and ensure South Sudan is a peaceful state. But unfortunately, you see them after two to three years, every six months... the same people come for the same purpose. Even with the UN, there's no pressure that can pressure the leadership to have the political will to actually oversee a transition in the country.'

– Hakim Cipuounyuc Awur, Executive Director, DARD

Radhya: 'It's very difficult to catch a criminal but very easy to commit a crime' (Yemen)

'In war zones, it's very difficult to catch a criminal but it's very easy to commit a crime. What protects us from crimes [usually]? It's the justice system, the police station, the courts. So when there is a crime locally in our normal life, all these tools are working very effectively. Why [is this different when it comes to] war crimes? Why is it difficult, with all the international tools, to catch [war criminals] or to hold them accountable?

There is a real problem and a gap in the international system when it comes to accountability regarding war criminals. This should be solved, especially when local non-government organizations (NGOs) like us have already done the work. We did all the work from our side in order to make most people accountable. We have documented, we have published, we have done advocacy, so we did all the work we can do. So what else can be done from the other side of the world to help us to get accountability?'

– Radhya Almutawakel, Chairperson, Mwatana for Human Rights

Emmanuella: The actors who contribute to instability are often known' (DRC)

'The actors who contribute to the instability are often known. Sometimes there are accusations, there is even evidence. They are known. We talk about this case, this country, this situation. But the communities need to feel that the principles of justice, protection of civilians and respect for international law apply at all levels... Too many lives have already been lost in eastern DRC. The population of eastern DRC needs not only emergency humanitarian assistance but also concrete actions to end the violence and protect civilians.'

– Emmanuella Vasikya, Executive Director, Action des Volontaires pour la Solidarité et le Développement (AVSD)



Emmanuella Vasikya, Executive Director of AVSD, speaking at a meeting held on the occasion of the International Women's Rights Day. Photo credit: Action des Volontaires pour la Solidarité et le Développement (AVSD), DRC.

Mesud: 'People and institutions are not living up to their words' (Ethiopia)

'The EU and the US make a lot of statements... I don't know what they are concerned with and what it means while they keep "being concerned", but they don't take actions. Why do you keep saying you are concerned but you don't take action? About the humanitarian situation, about human rights protection, about attacks on civilians or attacks on protection workers or whatever. If the AU makes a one-pager statement about the situation in Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan or South Sudan, we say this is lip service. The very problem is that people and institutions are not [living up] to their words. And that this has eroded the credibility of the institutions. And that's why nobody is taking care of this mess happening everywhere. These multinational institutions have lost public trust.'

– Mesud Gebeyehu, Executive Director, CEHRO

Amal: 'The situation is unchanged because there's a decision not to change it' (Occupied Palestinian Territory)

'They didn't keep their word. At the beginning of the year [2026], all the promises made were [saying] we will pressure, we will bring in goods, we will convey your voice, but someone who [actually] understands [the situation will know that] Israel controls the crossings and the siege. So where does the power lie, ultimately? There are so many things that even the Europeans couldn't do. Not even the UN, nor the resolutions issued by the UNSC and the International Criminal Court – nothing at all. The situation remains unchanged because there's a decision not to change [it].'

– Amal Syam, General Director, WAC

Messages to the next UN Secretary General

While civil society leaders across the board underscored numerous challenges, lack of representation and continued disappointment with the international community, they hold onto aspirations for a more just world. As one partner put it, 'The whole world is designed as if to enhance impunity when it comes to war crimes, and this should be changed... it is not a destiny. This is a situation that can be changed.'⁷

Below are five messages from partners for the next UN Secretary General to prioritize at the start of their tenure. Notwithstanding the limitations and parameters of the office itself, our partners' hope is that the UN Secretary General will leverage their position in conflict prevention, diplomacy and crisis response across multiple constituencies to elevate their voices.

1. Give communities real representation and decision-making power

Shadya: 'About me without me, there is nothing for me' (Ethiopia)

'When the [UN] came to Ethiopia and did a high-level meeting at the Sheraton [hotel], they invited all the embassies, international NGOs, government ministers, etc. The panellists were many ministers and representatives from embassies. There were not any women, not any refugees. During the question and answer session, I asked them, "You're supposed to have a meeting about refugees. But where are the refugees? How do you discuss and make decisions without asking refugees?"

About me without me, [there] is nothing for me. We have to be at the tables where there are issues and discussions about us. I know it is not that easy, but thanks to technology I don't need to travel New York or Geneva or wherever. I can be connected [like I am talking with you right now on a virtual platform].'

– Shadya Abduljabbar, Founder, Ethio Friends Foundation for Refugees and African Refugee Women Led Network (ARWNET)

Sara: 'The people closest to the challenges are often closest to the solutions' (Syria)

'What most Syrians want is really simple: not to have decisions made for them, but with them, and to be justly and properly represented in this new transitional phase. The people closest to the challenges are often closest to the solutions, and any sustainable future for Syria must be built with their voices, with their experiences and of course, their aspirations. What communities need today in Syria is not only humanitarian assistance but also investment in their day-to-day lives. They need to be listened to, not just spoken about on mainstream media every now and then.'

– Sara Savva, Deputy Director-General, GOPA-DERD

Méschac: 'Strengthening the participation and representation of affected communities is essential' (DRC)

'Affected communities have an in-depth knowledge of their realities and needs. Yet their perspectives are often not taken into account in the spaces where humanitarian policies and strategies are developed. Strengthening their participation and representation is, in my opinion, an essential condition for developing more effective, sustainable and responsive responses.'

– Méschac Nakanywenge, Executive Director, UPPDHE



A project visit led by UPPDHE. Photo credit : Union pour la Promotion/Protection, la Défense des Droits Humains et de l'Environnement (UPPDHE), (DRC).

2. Intervene to stop aggressors and hold violators accountable

Riing: 'Statements are not enough' (South Sudan)

'The UNSC is the global decision-maker in terms of dictating security measures in contexts experiencing persistent chronic conflict. We need the UN and UNSC to actually impose peace. The UN contributed to the interventions of South Sudan, but now they just condemn, they just talk, without actually doing anything. Statements are not enough. You need to bend the will of the party violating peace... Peace violators are roaming without risk of any harm.'

– Riing Garwech Kuol, Founder and National Director, Child's Destiny and Development Organization (CHIDDO)



A meeting, co-organised by CHIDDO, Oxfam and other organisations, on Empowering Locally Led Leadership for Efficient Humanitarian Response. Photo credit: Child's Destiny and Development Organization (CHIDDO), South Sudan.

Sarah: 'All the actors are legally bound to distinguish between civilians and combatants' (Lebanon)

'The primary responsibility to protect civilians lies with all the parties in the armed conflict. Under IHL, all the actors are legally bound to distinguish between civilians and combatants and to take all feasible precautions to avoid harm to civilians. There is also a shared responsibility within the international community – states, international organizations and mechanisms – to play a role in ensuring that these obligations are respected. They cannot turn a blind eye to violations, but in reality, what we see on the ground is that protection is fragmented and insufficient.

We have local organizations, local civil defence teams, medical personnel, civil society groups. We're the first responders. We are trying to save lives, document incidents, fill the gaps left by the absence or limitations of stronger protection mechanisms, and at the same time I know that diplomatic efforts and international actors do play a role in monitoring and advocacy, but unfortunately this has not always translated into effective protection, prevention or accountability.'

– Sarah Nasrallah, Senior Communications and Advocacy Officer, CLDH

3. Address the political and economic root causes of conflict

Emmanuella: 'Take all necessary measures to end everything that fuels conflict' (DRC)

'Take all necessary measures to end the direct or indirect support that fuels conflict, including the circulation of weapons and the illegal exploitation of our natural resources. Because we see our natural resources, [the weapons that are] circulating [and the] weapons that are killing us. The wealth of the DRC should contribute to the development and wellbeing of the population, and not be a source of suffering and instability.'

– Emmanuella Vasikya, Executive Director, AVSD

Méschac: 'Stress the importance of responsible and transparent management of the country's resources' (DRC)

'I would also address international actors and major powers that exert political, economic and diplomatic influence in the Great Lakes region. I would ask them to adopt policies that genuinely promote the restoration of state authority over the national territory [and support] peace, stability and sustainable development in the DRC. I would stress the importance of responsible and transparent management of the country's natural resources so that they benefit the Congolese people as a priority rather than [those with] special interests.'

– Méschac Nakanywenge, Executive Director, UPPDHE

4. Support flexible financing for civil society and humanitarian organizations

Pedro: 'If we had multi-year flexible financing, we could be closer to communities' (Colombia)

'If we had multi-year flexible financing, that would cover an advocacy person in our team, and we could be closer to communities, we could collect this information and that would allow us to transform public policy and the system in general. But local organizations don't have advocacy officers. At Apoyar, we have 10 staff members but the person responsible for advocacy is myself. And I'm the director, I have to be project coordinator at times, I have other roles as well. If we had a longer-term project, we could finance a staff member exclusively dedicated to advocacy.'

– Pedro Niño Sequera, Executive Director, Apoyar

Anzhelika: 'It is exhausting when you are trying to give sustainability to your organization' (Ukraine)

'It is very challenging to survive these [funding] cuts and also protect my team and the people we serve. There are a lot of challenges and not a lot of long-term projects, [instead] mostly short-term projects. We are in a very difficult position when we are talking about the financial support and funding of the organizations who are supporting humanitarian response and people in really vulnerable positions. As the leader of an NGO, it is very exhausting when you are trying to give sustainability to your organization and to the activities we are implementing to give hope and stability to the people we are supporting through our projects. This is one of the biggest challenges as a Ukrainian.'

– Anzhelika Bielova, President, Voice of Romni



Anzhelika Bielova (on the right), President of Voice of Romni, meeting with programme participants. Photo credit: Voice of Romni, Ukraine.

Amal: 'Civil society is not just another voice. It should play a role in recovery, reconstruction and support' (Occupied Palestinian Territory)

'Funding must be flexible, and sufficient to enable institutions to make a positive change for the benefit of the people. This is essential for institutions to [be able to] strengthen their existing teams through capacity building and sharing experiences with other institutions. Civil society is not just [another] voice. This [elevation and funding of civil society] should play a role in the ongoing recovery, reconstruction and support for the people. Civil society must be a genuine participant in all national and programmatic plans that are to be implemented in the Gaza Strip.'

– Amal Syam, General Director, WAC

5. Facilitate justice and accountability

Radhya: 'They know what to do against Putin, but in our region we have dozens of Putins' (Yemen)

'When we talk about justice, it has to be clear that war never brings justice. Another war, another attack, another airstrike will never bring justice. This just makes more criminals more powerful because this is their game, and they are more powerful when they are in the middle of a war. When we talk about justice and accountability, I'm talking about [using] international tools – like the International Criminal Court and sanctions. They know what to do against Putin, but in our region we have dozens of Putins.'

– Radhya Almutawakel, Chairperson, Mwatana for Human Rights⁸

Sarah: 'They are sending a very dangerous message that you can continue to do this without consequences' (Lebanon)

'When violations aren't investigated, perpetrators aren't held accountable, they can just do that time and time again. They are sending a very dangerous message that you can continue to do this without consequences. This creates the conditions for further violations, which is what we're seeing. I think that accountability, and especially [in terms of] what we're seeing in Lebanon, it's not simply about addressing what happened in 2020 with the port explosion and what's happening with Israel. It's also about preventing future violations from happening. So without credible investigations, effective legal mechanisms and a genuine commitment to uphold IHL, I think the cycle of violence will continue, be it in Lebanon or [across] the region.'

– Sarah Nasrallah, Senior Communications and Advocacy Officer, CLDH

Anzhelika: 'Justice in this war is one of the main issues' (Ukraine)

'I'm trying to understand who can support us and who can influence this war to be stopped and in a very just way. Because justice in this war is one of the main issues. We cannot just stop this war and give our territories to Russia. This is about Ukrainians and their country – their culture, their heritage and history – and right not to be Russified. We want to be independent. We want to live with democracy.'

– Anzhelika Bielova, President, Voice of Romni

Conclusion

Fourteen civil society leaders in nine countries gave one answer to a single question: when asked who they would most like to speak to about the challenges facing their community right now, all focused on global leaders, the UNSC and the UN Secretary General. Not because these leaders and representatives have necessarily delivered on their promises in the past, but because they can improve circumstances on the ground. Most notably, the individuals whose voices feature in this paper have not given up on the idea that a different kind of leadership is possible.

The next UN Secretary General inherits a system at a genuine inflection point characterized by increased levels of violence, record levels of donor retreat and a UNSC in which gridlock has become the defining feature. But inheriting a broken system is not the same as being bound to preserve it. The five recommendations in this paper – representation, intervention, root-cause action, flexible financing and accountability – are not abstractions. They come from the people who have spent years watching the promises made in New York, Geneva, Rome and Brussels go unfulfilled in Goma, Sana'a, Gaza and Juba.

While they represent just a small sample of voices and experiences of citizens around the world, the individuals in this paper typify people who best know the realities of conflict and what is needed in response. In the words of one of our partners: 'The people closest to the challenges are often the closest to the solutions.' Whoever takes up the mantle as the next UN Secretary General must centre these voices if they wish to be effective.

Methodology and list of partners

This paper is based on semi-structured interviews with fourteen civil society leaders working in nine conflict contexts – Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen. Oxfam contracted a field research coordinator to conduct interviews with partners based on nominations from an internal steering committee within Oxfam’s Rights in Crisis Campaign. Partners were selected based on their availability between May and July 2026, relevance to the project, and consultation with country teams. The participating civil society organizations included refugee-led organizations and women’s rights organizations.

Country teams were invited to nominate two partners from each country. In some cases, only one partner was available for interview, while in other contexts two partners were available. Partners participated in a virtual interview in the language in which they were most comfortable speaking and were asked to provide consent for their names and testimony to be included. The quotes in this paper are direct representations of the partners’ voices and answers, with editing for length and clarity where necessary and without changing their meaning. This is a select, qualitative sample of voices and not representative of every affected community across the nine contexts.

Table 1: Civil society leaders interviewed for this paper

Country	Partner	Name and role
Colombia	Apoyar	Pedro Niño Sequera (Executive Director)
DRC	Union pour la Promotion/Protection, la Défense des Droits Humains et de l’Environnement (UPPDHE)	Méschac Nakanywenge (Executive Director)
DRC	Action des Volontaires pour la Solidarité et le Développement (AVSD)	Emmanuella Vasikya (Executive Director)
Ethiopia	Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO)	Mesud Gebeyehu (Executive Director)
Ethiopia	Ethio Friends Foundation for Refugees and African Refugee Women Led Network (ARWNET)	Shadya Abduljabbar (Founder and Chairperson)
Lebanon	FEMALE	Mariam Khodari (Partnerships Coordinator)
Lebanon	FEMALE	Zahraa Berjwai (Communications and Digital Media Coordinator)
Lebanon	Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)	Sarah Nasrallah (Senior Communications and Advocacy Officer)
Occupied Palestinian Territory	Women’s Affairs Center (WAC)	Amal Syam (General Director)

Country	Partner	Name and role
South Sudan	Disabled Agency for Rehabilitation and Development (DARD)	Hakim Cipuounyuc Awur (Executive Director)
South Sudan	Child's Destiny and Development Organization (CHIDDO)	Riing Garwech Kuol (Founder and National Director)
Syria	Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East – Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (GOPA-DERD)	Sara Savva (Deputy Director-General)
Ukraine	Voice of Romni (VoR)	Anzhelika Bielova (President)
Yemen	Mwatana for Human Rights	Radhya Almutawakel (Chairperson)

Notes

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- ¹ Oxfam. (2024). *Vetoing Humanity: How a few powerful nations hijacked global peace and why reform is needed at the UN Security Council*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/vetoing-humanity-how-a-few-powerful-nations-hijacked-global-peace-and-why-refor-621621/>
- ² M. Breckenridge, A. Stoddard and M. Duque-Díez. (2025). *Aid Workers Security Report, Figures at a Glance 2025*. Humanitarian Outcomes. <https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/publications/figures-glance-2025>
- ³ Oxfam. (2025). *A (More) Feminist Approach to Principled Humanitarian Aid*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/a-more-feminist-approach-to-principled-humanitarian-aid-621691/>
- ⁴ S. Rustad. (2025). *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024*. Peace Research Institute Oslo. <https://www.prio.org/publications/14453>
- ⁵ Action on Armed Violence (AOAV). *Global civilian casualties from explosive weapons surge in 2024 by 67%, hitting record highs*. <https://aoav.org.uk/2025/global-civilian-casualties-from-explosive-weapons-surge-in-2024-by-67-hitting-record-highs/>
- M. Clausen. (2024). *Non-state armed groups in the sky: Global regulation fails to address the security risks posed by civilian drones*. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Policy Brief. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/non-state-armed-groups-in-the-sky>
- ⁶ These were the accords specifically cited by partners and do not represent all relevant accords linked to the conflicts discussed in this paper
- ⁷ Radhya Almutawakel, Chairperson, Mwatana for Human Rights
- ⁸ Radhya Almutawakel, Chairperson, Mwatana for Human Rights

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The field research coordinator of the paper was Yasmin Faruki. The partners whose voices are featured in the paper are, in alphabetical order, Amal Syam, Anzhelika Bielova, Emmanuella Kavugho, Hakim Cipuounyuc Awur, Mariam Khodari, Méschac Nakanywenge, Mesud Gebeyehu, Pedro Niño Sequera, Radhya Almutawakel, Riing Garwech Kuol, Sara Savva, Sarah Nasrallah, Shadya Abduljabbar and Zahraa Berjwai. Various Oxfam contacts helped coordinate interviews, including Bievenu Zaneza, Sarah Redd, Hannah Cooper, Nour Shawaf, Abbas Kigozi, Marwan Issa, Gabriel Cutrim Naumann, Mandela Nelson and Rosalie Ataya. Influencing leads and heads of office, including Pauline Chetcuti, Bushra Khalidi, Amy Croome, Brenda Mofya and Ben Drolet, contributed to paper development and editing. This product is part of a series of papers to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the interviewed participants and do not necessarily reflect the views, policies or positions of the field research coordinator.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper, please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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