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Governing inequality: Kenya's state, aid politics and perpetual humanitarian crisis

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Contents

Acknowledgements / 3

List of boxes, tables and figures / 6

Acronyms / 7

Executive summary / 8

1 Research background and methodology / 10

2 Kenya's perpetual humanitarian and inequality crises / 11

2.1 Two parallel humanitarian systems / 12

3 Arid and semi-arid lands: where governance, marginalisation and humanitarian issues collide / 14

3.1 Devolution: an unfinished project in sub-national disaster governance / 16

3.2 Devolution challenges: cash and coordination / 18

3.3 Inclusion remains elusive amid devolution / 19

3.4 Refugees: further neglect and aid politics / 20

4 Financing impediments to state-led response / 22

4.1 Humanitarian funding by donor type / 22

4.2 Humanitarian funding compared with other revenue sources / 23

4.3 Recipients of international funding / 24

4.4 Humanitarian funding by sector / 25

4.5 State compared with World Food Programme funding / 26

4.6 Humanitarian funding compared with illicit financial flows / 26

4.7 A case of middle-income malaise? / 27

4.8 Geopolitical leverage perpetuating aid dependence? / 28

4.9 Aid cuts: calamitous reckoning or pushing reform? / 29

5 Political impediments to state-led crisis response / 31

5.1 Lack of political will, abundant political manipulation / 31

5.2 Persistent governance challenges / 32

5.3 Distrust of the state, reliance on the Kenya Red Cross / 33

5.4 Politicised aid and uncritical media narratives / 34

6 Civil society: an under-realised conduit for change? / 35

6.1 Evolving and contested state–civil society dynamics / 35

6.2 'NGOisation' and depoliticisation of Kenyan civil society / 36

6.3 Civil society at multiple crossroads / 37

7 Social protection: a model for systemic change? / 39
7.1 HSNP: A tale of transition from international aid to state-led response / 39

8 Conclusions / 42

9 Recommendations / 44
Kenyan national and county authorities / 44
Kenyan civil society actors / 44
UN agencies and INGOs / 45
Donors and diplomats / 45

References / 46

List of boxes, tables and figures

Boxes

Box 1 The ASAL Humanitarian Network / 18

Tables

Table 1 Value of illicit financial flows in 2024 / 26

Figures

Figure 1 Map of the arid and semi-arid land counties in Kenya / 14
Figure 2 Structure and key stakeholders in drought coordination and resilience planning / 17
Figure 3 Humanitarian assistance to Kenya by donor type, 2010–2024 / 22
Figure 4 Revenue sources for government aid, 2010–2024 / 23
Figure 5 Humanitarian assistance to Kenya by recipient type, 2010–2024 / 24
Figure 6 Humanitarian assistance by recipient sector in 2024 / 25
Figure 7 WFP resources compared with expenditure and NDMA funding in 2024 / 26
Figure 8 Evolution of the Humanitarian Safety Net Programme / 40

Acronyms

AHN	ASAL Humanitarian Network
ASAL	arid and semi-arid land
CSO	civil society organisation
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (European Union)
GDP	gross domestic product
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
HSNP	Hunger Safety Net Programme
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
KRC	Kenya Red Cross
LGBT+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans plus
NDMA	National Drought Management Authority
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)
ODA	official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
US	United States (of America)
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive summary

Is the aid industry helping to perpetuate historical and geographic inequalities in Kenya and posing a barrier to state-led crisis response? Why have other middle-income countries taken leadership of humanitarian responses, yet Kenya remains heavily reliant on international assistance? What can be done to galvanise change amid major aid cuts and calamity?

This paper examines the prospects for expanding and improving state-led crisis response in Kenya, a country grappling with recurrent climatic shocks and persistently high humanitarian needs. Forming part of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)'s work on state-led crisis response, the study emphasises that humanitarian needs in Kenya must be understood and approached through a focus on deeply entrenched inequality and problematic governance dynamics. While there is significant evidence of improving state-led response in the country, further progress faces an array of structural barriers, including an inconducive political economy of aid.

Focused on the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), where the vast bulk of humanitarian need exists in Kenya, this paper explores the historical dimensions that shape contemporary inequalities, before examining impediments and progress towards improving state-led response. This includes a significant focus on the problematic and politicised aid economy, civil society dynamics and, ultimately, the state's disinclination to sufficiently address corruption and systemic inequalities that exacerbate humanitarian vulnerabilities and constrain state-led response potential. Women's marginalisation in humanitarian decision-making cuts across many of the issues at hand.

This study's overarching contention is that the Kenyan government should be leading crisis response as a core state function and responsibility, yet a lack of accountability and ineffective governance continue to impede such leadership. An enabling environment for enhancing state-led crisis response does not currently exist, and external aid and political actors need to rethink and recalibrate their engagement with the country. Problematic incentive structures and a lack of 'thinking and engaging politically' undermine external actors' efforts to improve governance and crisis response in Kenya. Conversely, a sudden withdrawal of support will likely exacerbate entrenched inequalities and marginalisation, leading to preventable deaths, while also fuelling insecurity. A degree of malaise has become entrenched, yet any form of donor 'shock therapy' will be devastating for millions of people already living precariously. Ultimately, this paper calls on all external aid and political actors to thoughtfully reinvigorate action to direct a transition towards nationally led crisis response, in which the state leads, but is held accountable through respecting civic space and activity, and is complemented by Kenyan civil society humanitarian response.

More specifically, the following is a summary of conclusions from the study:

- Despite significant improvements over the past two decades, the Kenyan state demonstrates a lack of willingness to further lead crisis response, despite having the capacities. Geopolitics and the aid political economy continue to be counterproductive, as they ameliorate the inadequacies of state-led crisis response, minimising political will to change the status quo.
- Crisis response in Kenya is primarily a governance issue that cannot continue to be addressed through repetitive, short-term (yet never-ending) aid-funded humanitarian action that continues to be dominated by international actors.
- Devolution has significantly improved Kenya's state-led crisis response capacity and reach, but its full potential remains unrealised due to persistent structural weaknesses such as fragmented coordination, institutional capacity gaps, corruption, and underfunding of disaster preparedness.
- The state's fiscal constraints are considerable, yet insufficient effort is paid to addressing illicit financial flows, redistributive tax, and other areas that could ensure significantly more resources are available for crisis response.
- There are significant positive examples that offer guidance on improving state-led response, particularly the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) and the work of the ASAL Humanitarian Network (AHN) in governance, and instances where international aid actors have strategically and proactively reduced their footprint and pivoted towards a greater focus on state- and civil society-led efforts.
- Civil society is relatively bifurcated in Kenya between dynamic activity in urban centres, particularly youth-led mobilisation, and comparatively depoliticised civil society focused on service delivery, including humanitarian response. Government threats to civic activity and space are acute, and pose a major threat to improving the state's accountability and transparency.

The following are key illuminating statistics that are illustrative of the issues examined throughout this paper around humanitarian governance:

- In 2024, corruption and illicit financial flows were approximately four times (US$1.5 billion–1.8 billion) the volume of international humanitarian aid (US$400 million) to Kenya (African Development Bank, 2025; National Taxpayers Association, 2025).
- In 2024, the World Food Programme's expenses (US$174 million) were nearly six times that of the Kenyan government's HSNP (US$30 million) (WFP, 2024; NDMA, 2025a).
- From 2010 to 2024, on average approximately 92% of international humanitarian aid went to United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in Kenya, with local and national NGOs never receiving more than 3% directly in any given year (see Financial Tracking Service data for 2010–2024; OCHA, 2025).

1 Research background and methodology

This study forms part of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)'s research agenda on state-led crisis response, with parallel studies in Indonesia (Bryant and Kamal, 2025), Myanmar (Naw et al., 2025), the Philippines (Baguios, 2025) and Somalia (forthcoming), plus regional comparative analyses focused on Southeast Asia (Bryant et al., 2025) and East Africa (forthcoming). Although each study is adapted to the context, they all broadly focus on the following key themes:

1. The state's institutional strength, resources and commitment, and how this impacts its ability to lead and deliver crisis response.
2. The financing and incentive structures of the humanitarian system, and how they intersect with state-led responses and related governance dynamics.
3. The state's role in addressing and/or perpetuating systemic disadvantages; how it relates to inclusion, women's empowerment and those most acutely affected by crises; and the implications for humanitarian actors, including the relational dynamic between the state and civil society actors writ large.

For this study, over 30 key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Nairobi, the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) and globally. This included local and national authorities, civil society actors, international aid agencies, multilateral actors and donors. In-person data collection took place in Nairobi and Wajir, while the research also drew upon the authors' operational experience in the ASALs, with local authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A validation workshop was also held in Nairobi involving multi-mandate local and international civil society actors, including women-led organisations.

2 Kenya's perpetual humanitarian and inequality crises

In spite of its strong economic growth and its reputation in the region as a driver of technological innovation, Kenya still faces recurrent and long-lasting humanitarian crises across much of its territory, heavily shaped by climatic shocks, and compounded by systemic inequalities. Approximately 80–90% of the country's geography is classified as ASALs and is home to approximately 30% of the population, circa 16 million people (IUCN, 2026). Communities in these areas are heavily reliant on rain-fed agriculture and pastoralism for their livelihoods and nutrition; services and infrastructure are also lacking compared with more fertile and populated areas of the country. Consequently, the ASALs are highly vulnerable to droughts, which affect an estimated 2–5 million people each year (ICPAC, 2024); between 2020 and 2023, Kenya experienced its most prolonged drought in over four decades. Droughts cause widespread crop failure, huge livestock losses, and deepen pre-existing food insecurity, all exacerbated by periodic locust plagues. The 2020–2023 drought alone resulted in the loss of over 2.5 million livestock in Kenya, severely disrupting livelihoods in the ASAL regions (OCHA, 2023).

Kenya's droughts are increasingly punctuated by large-scale flooding that causes considerable damage and further undermines food security. Major river basins are affected, but also increasingly urban areas, where informal settlements face acute risks due to poor drainage and infrastructure. Intense rainfall in late 2023 and early 2024 caused severe flooding that damaged infrastructure, displaced over 293,000 people and resulted in the deaths of more than 300 people (Mbiyozo and Owino, 2024; Kimeu, 2024). The scale of destruction highlighted long-standing challenges in disaster preparedness, and public frustration grew when government responses were seen as delayed or inadequate (Inganga, 2023; Hochet-Bodin, 2024). Continually rising water levels in Lake Victoria and the Rift Valley lakes are also leading to the displacement of lakeside communities.

The increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters underpins humanitarian needs across Kenya. Between 2010 and 2020, climate-related shocks were estimated to have caused losses equivalent to between 3% and 5% of Kenya's gross domestic product (GDP) annually (IFPRI, 2023). In the past two decades, the country has experienced a steady rise in disaster events, from an average of 0.5 per year before 2000 to 2.8 per year since (ICPAC, 2024). Flooding and droughts have also triggered secondary crises such as landslides, disease outbreaks and internal displacement. The 2023–2024 floods, for instance, led to the displacement of over 23,000 refugees from camps in Dadaab and Kakuma,[1] further straining humanitarian operations (Mbiyozo and Owino, 2024).

1 Dadaab and Kakuma are decades-old refugee camps near the Somalia border and northwest Kenya, respectively. Dadaab's population is over 400,000, predominantly Somali refugees, while Kakuma hosts over 300,000 refugees from across the region (UNHCR, n.d.).

Kenya's chronic humanitarian needs must also be understood against a backdrop of systemic inequality and governance concerns. The country has experienced relatively steady economic growth in recent years, with GDP per capita increasing from US$403 in 2002 to US$2,206 in 2024, achieving lower-middle income status in 2014 (World Bank, n.d.a). The distribution of increased wealth, however, has been extremely unequal; less than 0.1% of the population has more wealth than the remaining 99.9%, while the richest 10% earn, on average, 23 times more than the poorest 10% (Oxfam, 2025). Compounding the problem, nearly US$190 million in government revenue is estimated to be lost every year from global tax abuse in Kenya (Tax Justice Network, 2025),[2] while corruption is calculated to cause US$1.5 billion to be lost annually (Agambila, 2025). Such dynamics negatively impact everyone in Kenya, but it is particularly acute for people living across ASALs; they face state neglect and underinvestment that exacerbate their vulnerability, while a select few accrue great wealth. Consequently, governance and inequality are central issues for understanding how state-led crisis response can be expanded and improved in Kenya.

2.1 Two parallel humanitarian systems

Kenya has two parallel humanitarian systems: one focused on addressing domestic crises, particularly recurrent climatic shocks, and the other on refugee hosting. The former, a nationally led system, is overseen by the Kenyan government, primarily through institutions such as the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA) and the Ministry of Interior and National Administration. This structure, supported by local and international NGOs, the Kenya Red Cross (KRC), and private sector contributors, is focused on coordinated disaster response, early-warning systems, drought mitigation, and support for internally displaced populations. Many operations have shifted towards a nexus focus, including governance, resilience-building and local leadership. This system is financed through a blend of government allocations, public–private partnerships, and international support. This system is the focus of this paper, as it examines state-led crisis response in Kenya.

The parallel system is centred on support for refugees, with United Nations (UN) agencies and international NGOs (INGOs) playing a much more significant role. This system is heavily reliant on international donors and is concentrated in Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, in effect operating quite separately from the humanitarian system focusing on domestic crises (even if occurring in the same geographies). The refugee aid system forms part of the broader political economy of aid in Kenya, which is a central theme throughout this paper. For example, the Kenyan state has, for decades, used the threat of closing the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps as leverage for international aid (Halakhe and Omondi, 2024).

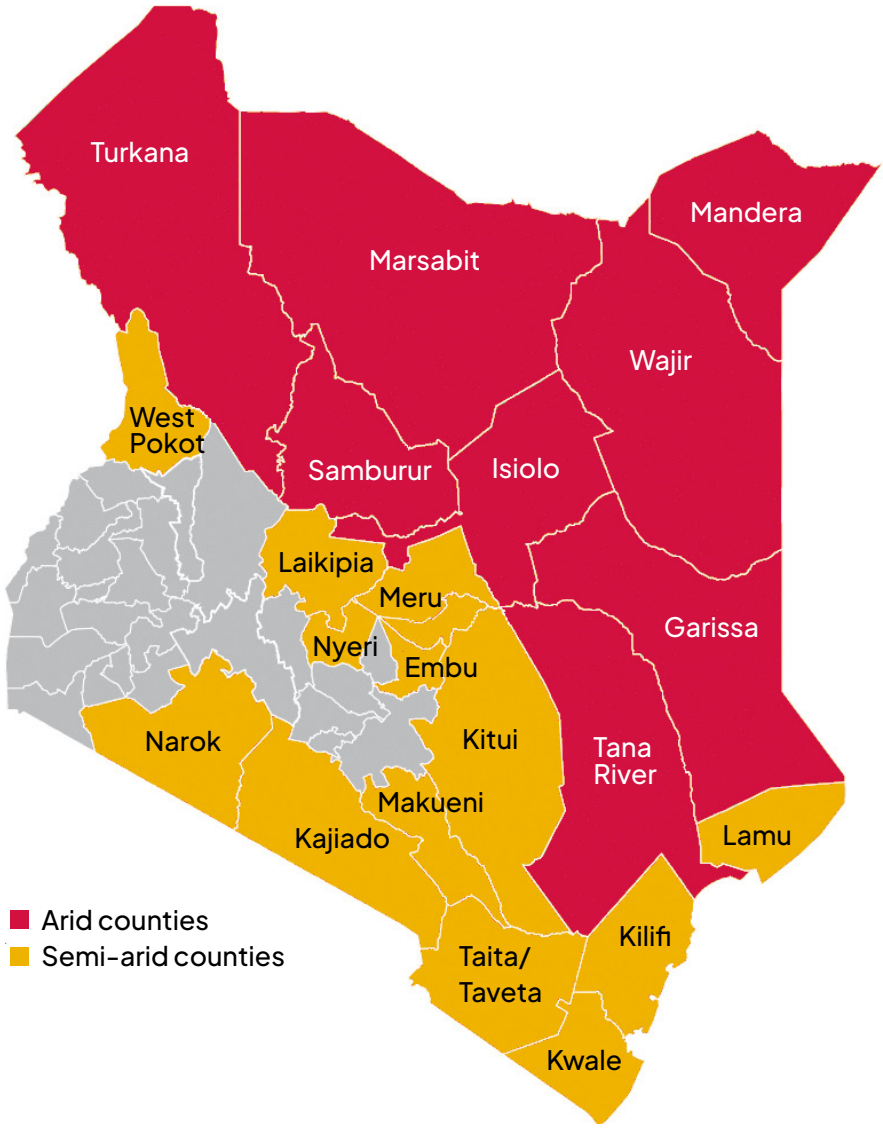
2 Tax abuse refers to various forms of tax evasion, such as profit shifting and not declaring income.

Despite the major influence of Dadaab and Kakuma on the political economy of aid in Kenya, the rest of this study focuses primarily on the recurrent climatic shocks driving humanitarian needs across the ASALs. This is where governance, inequalities and other issues coalesce, bringing to light the opportunities and challenges for improving state-led crisis response in the country. This begins with examining the sub-national dynamics in Kenya that are illustrative of the wide-ranging structural inequalities underpinning humanitarian need across the country. While the operations in Dadaab and Kakuma are not the primary focus of this report, it is critical to keep them in mind given that they represent a significant proportion of humanitarian budgets in the country and involve many of the same organisations.

3 Arid and semi-arid lands: where governance, marginalisation and humanitarian issues collide

Before examining the dynamics and challenges related to state-led crisis response in Kenya, such analysis must be contextually and historically embedded, particularly in relation to the ASALs, home to most of the humanitarian need in the country (see Figure 1). There are an estimated 3–3.5 million people in need in 2026 (FEWS NET, 2025), with drought driving food insecurity, punctuated by floods that hamper recovery. The ASALs reflect the structural inequalities in the country, as the region has faced long-standing neglect and marginalisation, which in turn, increase vulnerability to crises.

Figure 1 Map of the arid and semi-arid land counties in Kenya



People in the ASALs suffer from deeply ingrained economic and political marginalisation (Nyanjom, 2014). This neglect can be traced back to colonial administrative practices, which designated much of the ASALs as 'closed districts', limiting movement and state investment. Post-independence, marginalisation was institutionalised in Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965, which explicitly prioritised development investment in 'economically productive' regions with favourable climatic and infrastructural conditions (Ochiel, 2013). This policy entrenched disparities by diverting resources away from areas such as North Eastern Kenya, the North Rift, and parts of the coast, on the basis that they could not yield immediate economic returns, despite their significant livestock and natural resource potential (although in recent years, these areas are attracting growing interest). The Shifta War in the north-east, a secessionist conflict driven by pan-Somali sentiments, only deepened government mistrust and military repression, further isolating the region and depriving it of investment and state support (ibid.).

The ASALs are also deeply interconnected with the political economy and conflict dynamics of neighbouring countries. There is a long history of informal population movements across borders, alongside forced displacement owing to violence and insecurity – particularly refugees arriving from Somalia and South Sudan, plus intercommunal conflict within Kenya. The aid response, while providing critical assistance to affected populations, has also become a major part of the ASALs' political economy, where competition for and control over aid resources are major issues. This connects with tensions between refugee and host populations, and there are various efforts to address security and governance challenges that emerge from aid practices (see RUSI, n.d.). Against such dynamics, donor and aid decisions are inherently political, emphasising the need to 'think and work politically'.

The sociopolitical marginalisation of ASAL communities has manifested in under-representation in national politics, limited access to essential services, and an undervaluation of pastoralist livelihoods. The historical repression, coupled with a national narrative that dismissed the ASAL region as unproductive and volatile due to security threats such as Al-Shabaab, has left residents feeling alienated. One interviewee from the north-east expressed this sentiment starkly: 'Before devolution, no one here felt Kenyan'. Despite improvements, the feeling of the north being neglected and excluded remains widespread. As other interviewees noted, many people living in the north still do not feel Kenyan, but they do now have greater access to Nairobi and political influence.

Political dynamics in Kenya, deeply tied to ethnicity, have further compounded this exclusion, as national resources have historically been allocated through patronage networks that favour dominant ethnic communities. Attempts at inclusion, such as the District Focus for Rural Development policy of the 1980s and 1990s, were often donor-driven, lacked sufficient coordination and failed to reverse decades of neglect (Brass, 2012). This institutionalised marginalisation spurred ASAL leaders' and communities' political mobilisation, as they sought greater inclusion and representation in state structures and policy-making. However, there are significant nuances to these dynamics: communities from or connected to the ASALs, such as ethnic Somalis, have been economically successful in Nairobi. While this runs counter to ethnic-based economic deprivation, the concentration of wealth and resources in Nairobi reinforces the geographic dimensions of inequality, as the ASALs continue to struggle with perpetual humanitarian challenges.

Recognising the historical injustices faced by marginalised regions, the 2010 constitution decentralised governance and service delivery, granting county governments greater authority and resources to address local priorities (Republic of Kenya, 2010). The constitution was also intended to address intercommunal violence around the 2007 election, which related to pronounced ethnic tensions across many parts of the country. Subsequently, the adoption of Sessional Paper No. 8 of 2012, the National Policy for the Sustainable Development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands, further articulated a framework to tackle the unique challenges of the ASALs, emphasising resilience-building, inclusive governance and equitable development (Ochiel, 2013). While devolution has facilitated some improvements, including localised disaster response, infrastructure development and increased community participation (Oduol et al., 2020), its impact has been uneven. Counties such as Turkana, Wajir and Marsabit have developed early-warning systems and localised drought responses, but capacity gaps, weak coordination and political interference persist (Kinoti, 2021).

Elite capture and ethnic competition at the county level also risk reproducing the same exclusions that devolution sought to remedy (Cheeseman et, al. 2020). In many instances, county governments have become battlegrounds for political and clan interests, where resource allocation is guided more by patronage and the infamous 'it's our turn to eat' mentality than by equitable development planning. Across the ASALs, many counties are nearly entirely dependent on the national budget, where the resulting county tenders for public goods and services are deeply politicised. There is also growing concern that the aid cuts are leading to increased political interference over remaining resources at the county level.

Political dynamics at both the local and national levels continue to influence service delivery, including humanitarian assistance. Political representation in the ASALs has historically lacked the influence needed to effectively advocate for integration into national programmes. This has further limited the capacity of local leadership to negotiate meaningful partnerships with national and international actors.

3.1 Devolution: an unfinished project in sub-national disaster governance

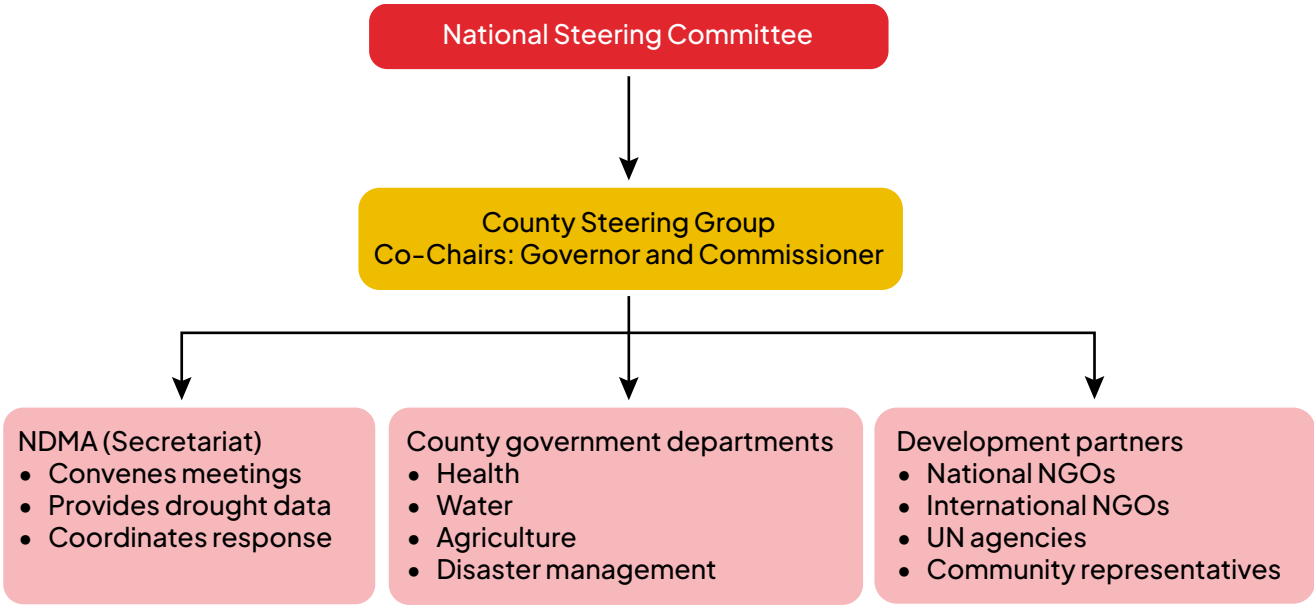
Faced with extensive, recurrent humanitarian needs across the ASALs, Kenya has undertaken significant reforms intended to address governance challenges and geographic inequalities. The 2010 constitution marked a critical juncture, followed by the implementation of devolution since 2013. Prior to devolution, humanitarian response was relatively centralised in Nairobi, and typically led by international agencies, according to interviewees. Coordination mechanisms were weak, and the state's role in disaster response was limited and reactive. Government decision-making was distant from the communities affected by disasters, and localised preparedness mechanisms were largely absent. INGOs and UN agencies dominated the humanitarian space, with limited integration of national or community-level actors. As one government official reflected during an interview, 'all coordination used to happen in Gigiri (at the UN office)', referring to the dominance of international actors.

Devolution marked a fundamental shift in Kenya by establishing 47 county governments with mandates over critical service delivery sectors such as health, water and infrastructure, areas vital to effective disaster preparedness and response. According to multiple interviewees, counties are increasingly at the forefront of managing local crises, with growing institutional strength, including localised early-warning systems and context-specific interventions. County authorities, however, remain severely resource-constrained and are reliant on complementary crisis-response systems established by civil society actors and networks, and international aid actors. This has contributed to a fraught political economy, as one interviewee explained:

> Devolution is politically contentious. There are positives, such as improved roads and electricity access, but ASAL economies are highly dependent on county budgets. There are then many disputes as actors vie for county government tenders.

On a technical level, there has been a steady shift away from internationally led service delivery to strengthening county authorities' ability to deliver. Various international partners have supported legislative processes, disaster risk profiling and coordination mechanisms. For example, 15 counties received targeted support to develop disaster risk reduction frameworks and strengthen intergovernmental coordination through the Joint Devolution Programme (Robertson and Nyagah, 2023). This has enhanced county-level readiness for emergencies, including floods and disease outbreaks. Counties have also made gains in institutional planning, budgeting and monitoring through tools such as the National and County Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation Systems, enabling more evidence-based decision-making (UNDP and MED, 2020; see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Structure and key stakeholders in drought coordination and resilience planning



Note: NDMA, National Drought Management Authority; NGO, non-governmental organisation.

Alongside the devolution process, civil society humanitarian coordination has also evolved across the ASALs (Box 1).

Box 1 The ASAL Humanitarian Network

At the forefront of the civil society coordination of humanitarian action is the ASAL Humanitarian Network (AHN), a 'coalition of over 30 local organisations working across Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands', serving as a coordination and advocacy platform to strengthen locally led action (AHN, 2026). It has emerged with significant support from Oxfam and other international partners. Although still implementing service delivery, AHN also acts as an advocacy force for influencing county and national authorities, plus the broader international aid system. See Section 6.3 for more on the AHN.

3.2 Devolution challenges: cash and coordination

The devolution of responsibilities has also meant the proliferation of systemic weaknesses, most notably, corruption. Multiple interviewees described the post-devolution context as having 'devolved corruption', with inefficiencies and lack of accountability undermining humanitarian response effectiveness. Collectively, county authorities are vastly under-resourced for both disaster risk reduction and emergency response, while Kenya is estimated to be losing more than US$4 million per day to corruption (Agambila, 2025). Tackling endemic corruption is essential to ensuring greater resourcing for county authorities to enhance state-led crisis response.

Coordination also remains a significant challenge to effective state-led crisis response in Kenya. Although the constitution designates disaster management as a 'shared function' between national and county governments, this has often resulted in fragmented interventions, overlapping responsibilities and a lack of clarity over jurisdictional authority. For example, multiple interviewees reported that, during the locust plague in 2020, county authorities argued that it was a national disaster requiring Ministry of Agriculture involvement and funding, while the national government declared it a county-level issue. This led to an impasse in the allocation of resources and delayed response. Ultimately, slow government action exacerbated the devastating impacts of the locust plague (Okadia, 2020).

Such dynamics echo findings on state-led crisis response in other countries, such as the Philippines (see Baguios, 2025). Rather than promoting collaboration, the shared mandate has led to instances where agencies work in silos, undermining efficiency and delaying timely responses. As an INGO interviewee noted, 'It would be easier if the left hand knew what the right hand was doing', highlighting the persistent confusion surrounding institutional roles and responsibilities. On this, there was agreement from a national government interviewee.

These coordination issues are further compounded by constrained budget allocations. While the Public Finance Management Act requires counties to allocate between 1% and 2% of their annual budgets to disaster preparedness, compliance is inconsistent. For example, County Integrated Development Plans often lack budget for humanitarian action, further constraining the potential for county-level responses. When budget is allocated, the bulk of resources are often directed towards emergency response rather than proactive planning or risk reduction. Preparedness activities, such as early-warning systems, institutional strengthening and stockpiling, remain underfunded and deprioritised. As an INGO interviewee put it, 'Money is allocated for response, not for preparedness', reflecting a reactive rather than preventative approach that leaves communities vulnerable to recurring crises.

Further complicating matters is the inadequacy of national frameworks intended to guide disaster risk governance. The National Disaster Risk Management Strategy (2025–2030) aims to institutionalise a proactive, multi-hazard approach across national and county levels. However, it must overcome persistent implementation gaps, including poor coordination among institutions, insufficient forecasting and scenario planning, and a lack of technical expertise at the county level (Nyandiko, 2020). Moreover, the legal and institutional frameworks remain incomplete. Although the strategy calls for an enabling legislative environment, comprehensive disaster legislation is still pending. Counties, especially those in remote and arid areas, continue to struggle with limited financial and human resources, resulting in patchy and uneven preparedness nationwide. The absence of robust risk profiling and anticipatory budgeting leaves Kenya vulnerable to both slow-onset and sudden disasters, an issue that was raised by several interviewees.

3.3 Inclusion remains elusive amid devolution

Devolution in Kenya was intended to bring state decision-making closer to the people, thus enhancing the inclusivity of governance, yet the results are mixed. In many respects, devolution has reconfigured the architecture of disaster management by transferring key responsibilities to the 47 county governments. This has allowed for more localised planning and response in counties frequently affected by crises, such as those in the ASALs. Some counties have made tangible progress in tailoring interventions to specific regional vulnerabilities by leveraging devolved disaster management committees and integrating community perspectives (Dolan and Shoham, 2017). Counties such as Wajir and Baringo, for example, were praised by interviewees for their use of participatory vulnerability assessments and improved inter-county collaboration. However, there are persistent disparities in county-level capacity, especially in poorer or politically marginalised regions, which hinder the consistent delivery of inclusive and equitable humanitarian assistance. Women also remain systematically marginalised in the ASALs.

Despite improvements, there was a consensus among interviewees that state-led humanitarian responses remain insufficiently inclusive, especially when addressing gender inequality and vulnerabilities. Gender mainstreaming efforts were viewed as often tokenistic and heavily shaped by donor requirements rather than intrinsic government priorities. Interviewees described how initiatives such as gender desks at police stations or programming for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans plus

(LGBT+) refugees were created during periods of robust donor engagement, only to dissolve once external funding ended. This suggests that without embedded political commitment and sufficient domestic financing, many interventions are unsustainable. More broadly, community and particularly women's participation in county decision-making remains inadequate (PPG and DLCI, 2018). Women and marginalised groups continue to be assigned peripheral roles in disaster planning processes, with limited access to decision-making spaces or budgetary influence. The tendency to view inclusion as a tick-box exercise has meant that deeply entrenched cultural and structural barriers remain largely unchallenged within state response systems.

Some actors have sought to counter this trend by generating stronger evidence and pushing for data-informed inclusion at the county level. One organisation described an initiative to analyse county budget allocations in three counties. The as-yet unpublished findings highlight a striking lack of disaggregated data on gender, disability and other vulnerabilities, which in turn undermines efforts to allocate resources equitably. This gap in data reflects broader systemic shortcomings in how vulnerability is understood and operationalised within humanitarian policy and practice. While a few counties have developed strategies to address systemic inequalities, these remain underfunded and poorly implemented. In other words, 'inequality is the real crisis' (Maji na Ufanisi, 2026). As several interviewees observed, humanitarian funding structures still incentivise top-down, donor-driven responses rather than supporting sustainable local inclusion.

Ultimately, although devolution has opened new spaces for local innovation, its transformative potential will only be realised if matched with stronger political accountability, sustained funding for inclusive policies, and more meaningful engagement with affected communities (Cheeseman et al., 2020). Resource sharing is fundamental, yet is an annual point of friction and division in parliament.

3.4 Refugees: further neglect and aid politics

Although this study focuses primarily on state-led crisis response, Kenya's role as a regional hub for hosting refugees considerably impacts governance dynamics. Kenya hosts over 800,000 refugees, most of whom are confined to Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps, reflecting a microcosm of aid geopolitics. Denied rights to work and freedom of movement, refugees remain stuck, often for decades, while refugee-led accountability efforts, such as the Kakuma News Reflector (or Kanere), face suppression. The aid–industrial complex that exists, in which UN agencies and INGOs prop up the camps, is now facing acute pressure from recent aid cuts. In 2025, assistance was cut by at least 60% for many refugees in Kakuma, exacerbating existing hardship (Al Jazeera, 2025). The World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) have also divided refugees into contentious socioeconomic categories (Kidi, 2025) in order to determine assistance levels.

As protests grow in the face of the aid cuts, the situation for refugees in these camps appears unsustainable. This has contributed to increasing demands for the Kenyan state to provide greater freedom of movement and other rights to refugees. Providing a more just existence for refugees than indefinite encampment has been part of the aid discourse in the country for decades. Kenya's 2021

Refugee Act offers some hope in this direction (see Halakhe and Omondi, 2024), providing further impetus for Kenya to shift away from aid reliance towards greater state-led response. State (and international) resources used for refugee encampment could instead be reoriented towards addressing humanitarian needs across the ASALs. The Shirika Plan,[3] announced in 2024, is intended to provide a framework for this process, but there is great uncertainty over its translation into concrete change.

At the heart of the challenge is resources. It is unclear how much the state spends on refugee support, as it is integrated across budgets, and disagreements between national and county governments around roles and responsibilities are rife, while international aid still provides the majority of financing. The slow progress on implementation of the Shirika Plan, which a number of interviewees described as 'disappointing' (see also Okata, 2025), is partly driven by a lack of consensus over the right balance between national and international resources. Interviewees indicated concern around the prospect of the situation inflaming refuge–host community tensions and even driving armed conflict, of particular concern near the Somali border. Additionally, any 'integration' of refugee and host communities will not directly reduce the broader humanitarian needs in these areas.

3 Designed by the government of Kenya, the Shirika Plan seeks to improve the socioeconomic conditions for refugees and asylum seekers by turning refugee camps into settlements, alongside improving rights to work and freedom of movement, which have long been heavily constrained (see Department of Refugee Services, 2025).

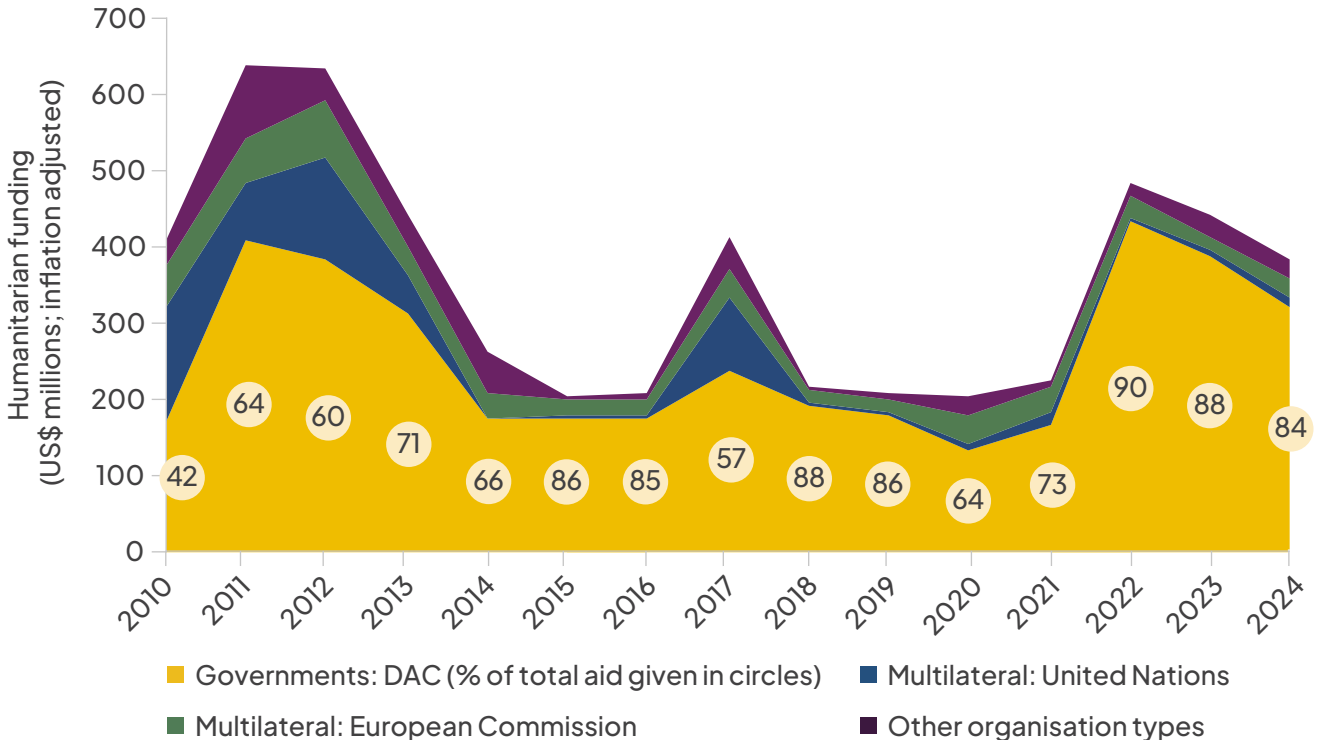
4 Financing impediments to state-led response

Although the devolution process has been critical to improving state-led crisis response across Kenya, the lack of adequate and timely state resourcing remains a key impediment to further progress. As noted earlier, the country faces major fiscal challenges owing to low (but increasing) tax revenue and endemic corruption that limits funding for county authorities, whether for humanitarian needs or other state services. This chapter places tax and corruption challenges within the broader context of the political economy of aid and humanitarian financing, both of which can serve to perpetuate the status quo rather than positively contribute towards enhanced state-led crisis response. It begins with an overview of key, illuminating financing dynamics, illustrated through graphs, before examining the implications for state-led crisis response.

4.1 Humanitarian funding by donor type

Humanitarian funding to Kenya has a floor of around US$200 million per year, with spikes in response to major drought crises (2011–2012, 2017 and 2022–2024; Figure 3). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors continue to provide the bulk of humanitarian financing to Kenya, followed by UN sources and the European Commission.

Figure 3 Humanitarian assistance to Kenya by donor type, 2010–2024



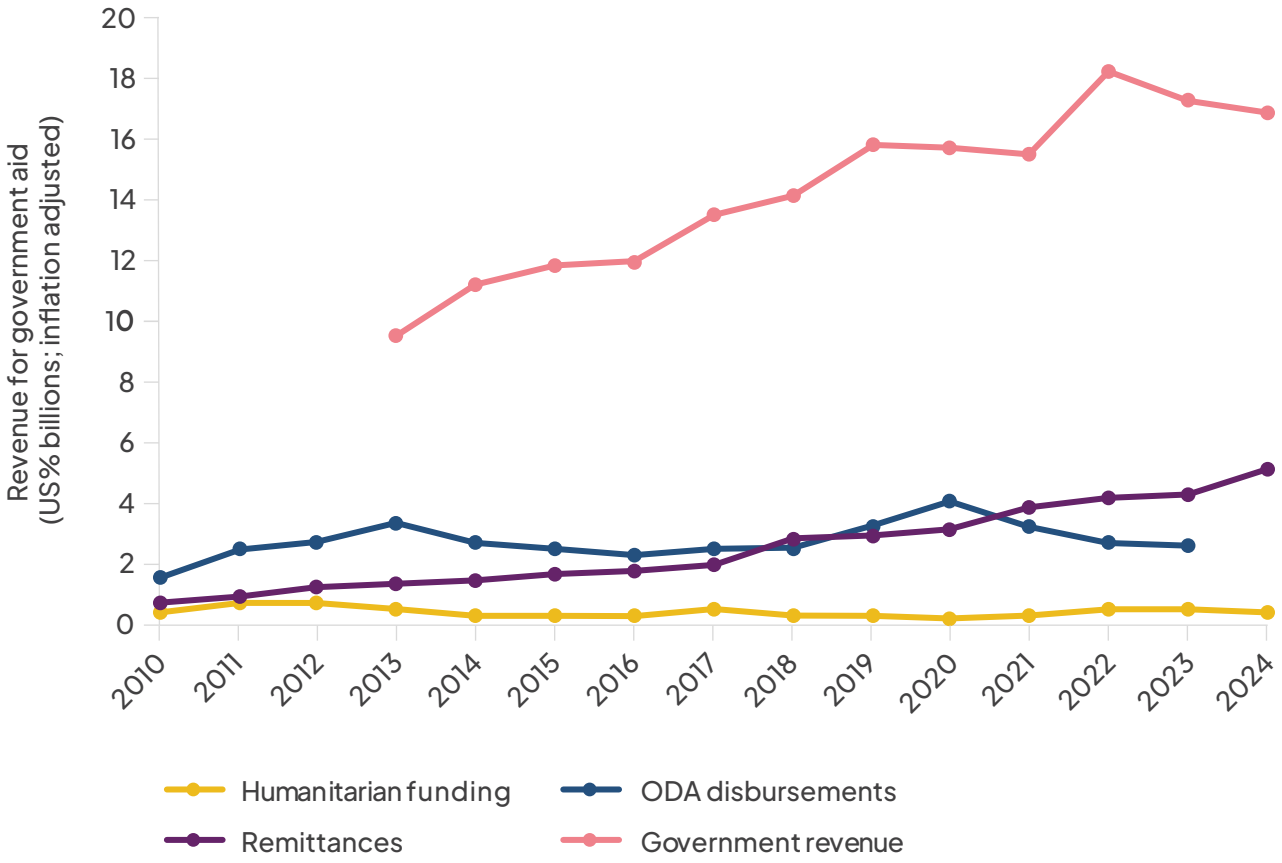
Source: OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS; OCHA, 2025).

It is important to note that funding for ongoing refugee support is included in overall humanitarian funding, meaning the financing for domestic crisis response is less than indicated in the graph. For example, across 2021 to 2024, UNHCR's annual budget for Kenya was approximately US$150 million (UNHCR, n.d.), representing a proxy for refugee support. Refugee funding thus represents a significant amount of the baseline funding.

4.2 Humanitarian funding compared with other revenue sources

Humanitarian funding has remained largely stagnant, constituting 8–21% of overall aid to Kenya, while remittances and government revenue have grown substantially (Figure 4). Despite revenue growth, the Kenyan state continues to rely on international humanitarian funding.

Figure 4 Revenue sources for government aid, 2010–2024

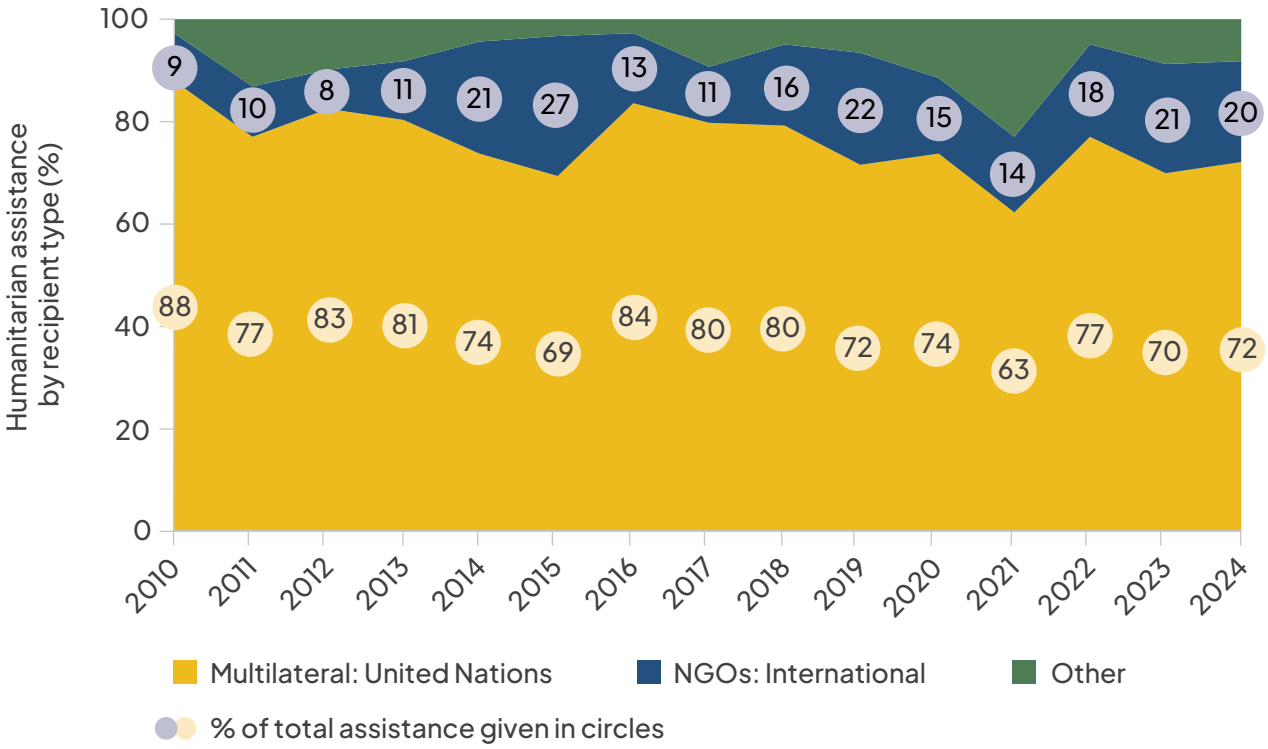


Notes: Fiscal years differ from calendar years; for clarity, each year on the graph reflects the fiscal year ending in that calendar year. Exchange rate conversion used for Kenyan government revenues (historical exchange rates were based on the yearly average exchange rate for any given year).
Sources: Humanitarian funding and official development assistance (ODA) data from OCHA's FTS (OCHA, 2025) and OECD DAC (OECD, 2024). Government revenue data from the Kenya Revenue Authority annual reports (Kenya Revenue Authority, n.d). Remittances data from the World Bank (World Bank, n.d.b).

4.3 Recipients of international funding

The dominance of UN agencies and INGOs as recipients of international humanitarian funding is clear (Figure 5). Local and national NGOs have only received a maximum of 3% directly in any year between 2010 to 2024.

Figure 5 Humanitarian assistance to Kenya by recipient type, 2010–2024

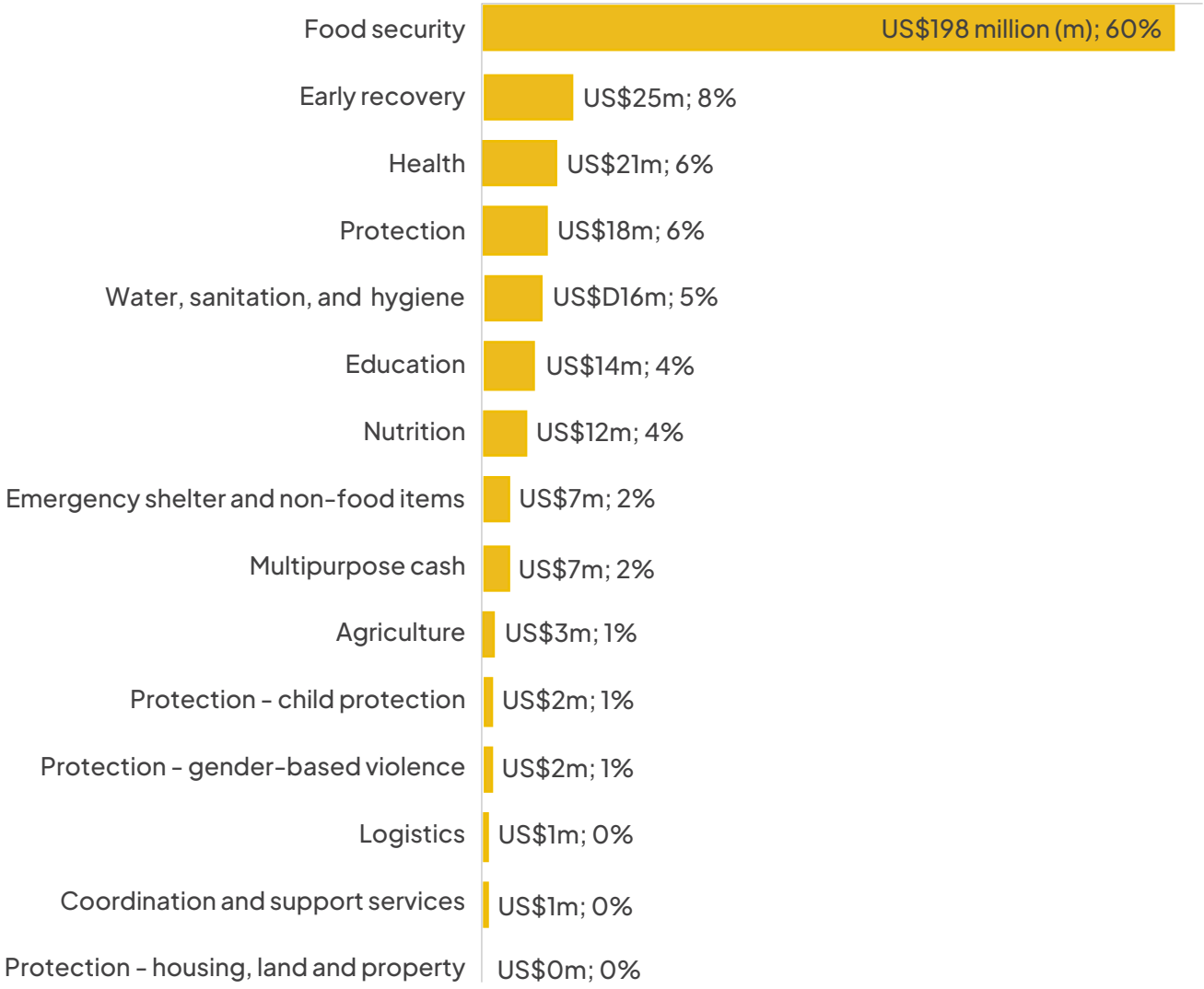


Source: OCHA's FTS (OCHA, 2025).

4.4 Humanitarian funding by sector

Food security funding dominates humanitarian assistance, with the United States (US) consistently the largest donor (pre-2025) and the WFP in Kenya receiving, on average, 44% of all humanitarian funding to Kenya over the past 10 years, and 90% of all food security funding in 2024 (Figure 6).

Figure 6 Humanitarian assistance by recipient sector in 2024

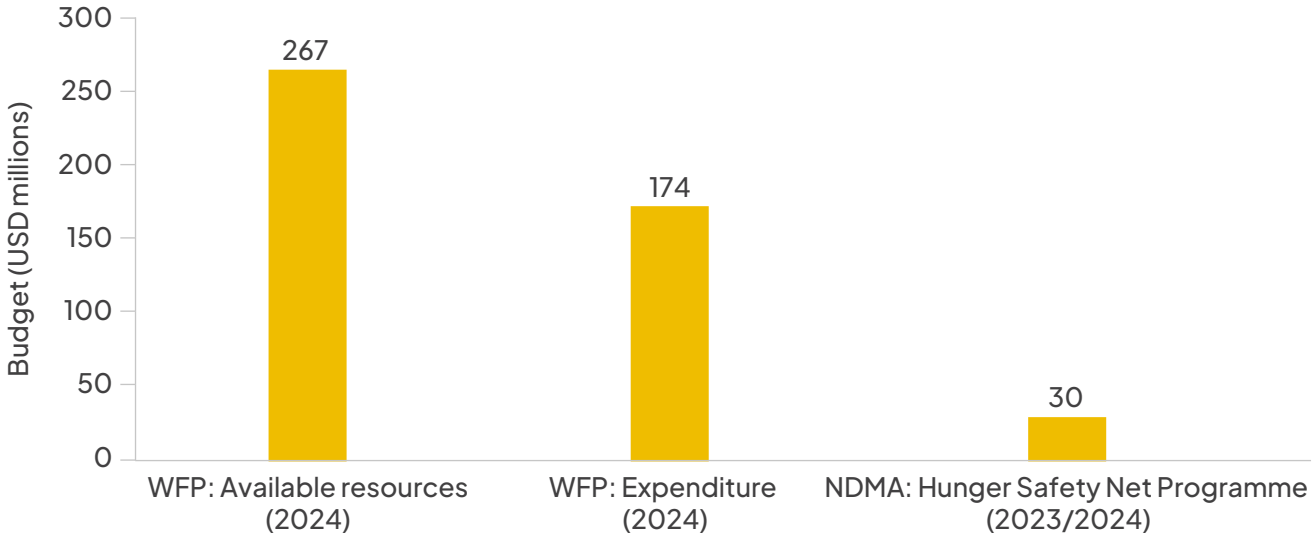


Note: Where multiple clusters were listed, estimates were calculated based on flow size and number of clusters. Percentages are based on only funding flows tagged to a specific sector (as some funding flows are not allocated to a specific sector).
Source: Data from OCHA's FTS (OCHA, 2025).

4.5 State compared with World Food Programme funding

The WFP in Kenya receives vastly more resources (9×) than the Kenyan state itself spends on its flagship Hunger Safety Net Programme (Figure 7). Figures vary year-to-year, but demonstrate the need and challenges to expanding state-led response. Broader data on the state's funding for humanitarian response is difficult to disaggregate, as it is integrated across departmental budgets.

Figure 7 WFP resources compared with expenditure and NDMA funding in 2024



Sources: Data from WFP Kenya Annual Country Report 2024 (WFP, 2024) and NDMA (2025a).

4.6 Humanitarian funding compared with illicit financial flows

Illicit financial flows, which include corruption, tax evasion and similar illegal activity, are a major issue in Kenya that denies the state major sources of revenue. While humanitarian actors largely focus on delivering their immediate response, addressing illicit financial flows could more than compensate for existing international humanitarian funding and ensure a more sustainable, state-led system (see Table 1).

Table 1 Value of illicit financial flows in 2024

Variable	Source	Value (US$ billion)	Multiple of humanitarian aid
Humanitarian aid	OECD	0.4	
Illicit financial flows (such as corruption, tax evasion and similar illegal activity)	African Development Bank	1.5	3.8x
	National Taxpayers Association and Oxfam	1.8	4.5x

Sources: OECD (2024); African Development Bank (2025); National Taxpayers Association (2025).

4.7 A case of middle-income malaise?

Since 2014, the World Bank's classification of Kenya as a lower-middle-income country (LMIC) has significantly influenced the structure and priorities of international aid to the country. Moving on from low-income status often leads to the perception that Kenya has sufficient national capacities to manage humanitarian needs, prompting many donors to reorient their support away from emergency response towards long-term development programming. As a result, humanitarian funding has increasingly shifted towards development-focused investments such as infrastructure, education, climate adaptation and agricultural productivity, alongside less tangible activities, such as convening and workshops that have struggled to achieve substantive impact. Institutions such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank now prioritise resilience-building, with the expectation that the government will take on greater responsibility for disaster preparedness and response. Although official development assistance (ODA) had grown significantly from US$523 million in 2003 to US$3.3 billion by 2013, it has largely plateaued at around US$2.5 billion per year since Kenya's LMIC classification, albeit with spikes during major droughts (World Bank, n.d.a).

As ODA to Kenya has stagnated, many donors have been implementing 'graduation' strategies, in which they phase out direct humanitarian assistance to instead invest in national systems and institutional strengthening. However, this transition risks creating gaps if domestic structures are not fully prepared to absorb additional responsibilities. In Kenya's case, recurrent and severe climatic shocks, high levels of inequality and endemic corruption mean that humanitarian needs are wide-ranging and persistent. Consequently, while the state has taken up far more responsibility for addressing the country's humanitarian needs, further progress is elusive; humanitarian needs remain high year-on-year and international assistance continues to play a significant role. There is also a variety of insurance initiatives being trialled and expanded across Kenya, which, although not a panacea, are beneficial in evening out crisis impacts. For example, the Kenya Livestock Insurance Program has proven effective, but requires scaling up to meet the vast need across the ASALs (Kyuma, 2024).

Kenya's situation illustrates a central dynamic to this study; middle-income status has not substantially reduced humanitarian needs as the state is not sufficiently addressing vulnerability drivers, yet donors want to shift priorities. While the donor turn towards development is tangible, Kenya has consistently received around $US200 million per year in humanitarian funding over the past decade, increasing by approximately 70–240% in major drought years, specifically 2017 and across 2022–2024 (OCHA, 2025). Despite shifting donor approaches, why is it that Kenya remains heavily dependent on external funding for humanitarian response?[4]

4 Kenya suffers disproportionately from the climate crisis, which is intensifying droughts, floods and other disasters. This occurs despite the country's low historical and current emissions, raising important questions about climate justice and financing. This paper acknowledges such tensions and the need for climate justice, including loss and damage funds, yet underlying drivers of vulnerability, such as rampant inequality and corruption, must be addressed regardless.

4.8 Geopolitical leverage perpetuating aid dependence?

Kenya's humanitarian funding landscape is heavily shaped by its strategic position in East Africa and its role as a regional host for international institutions. While it is classified as an LMIC and has relatively stronger governance structures than its conflict-affected neighbours, it continues to receive disproportionate levels of international aid. This is not primarily based on domestic humanitarian need but is linked to practical arrangements and geopolitical considerations. Several interviewees noted that Kenya's position as a regional hub for UN agencies, INGOs and donor offices has led to relatively robust levels of aid. An INGO interviewee remarked that 'if you were to do a strictly needs-based assessment, Kenya wouldn't receive the level of international aid it does' (considering widespread unmet needs globally). In return, the Kenyan government has made strategic concessions, such as easing tax regulations and providing visa waivers for humanitarian personnel, reinforcing Nairobi's status as the humanitarian capital of the region.

European and US donor agencies have channelled substantial resources into Kenya, not purely for developmental gains but also as part of broader refugee containment and security stabilisation agendas. For instance, European investments often prioritise efforts to curb irregular migration towards Europe, effectively using Kenya as a buffer state (Anderson, 2024). One INGO interviewee described Kenya as 'a place to contain people', noting that the Kenyan government is acutely aware of this positioning and 'uses it as a bargaining chip' in negotiations, as evident in regular threats to close Kakuma and Dadaab. This geopolitical leverage has allowed Nairobi to secure favourable terms in aid deals while maintaining autonomy over sensitive internal affairs. Similarly, US funding, particularly through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), has been shaped less by humanitarian need and more by strategic imperatives. The same interviewee observed that, 'Humanitarian funding to Kenya was mostly funded by USAID. This is not just for benevolence'. This underlines the instrumentalisation of aid as a soft power tool.

Kenya's designation as a 'major non-NATO ally' of the US in 2024 has further deepened these dynamics (although the status is being reviewed by the Trump administration). The US supports Kenya through a blend of development, military and humanitarian assistance aimed at promoting regional stability, counterterrorism and ensuring Kenya's alignment with Western security interests. Aid programmes targeting education, health and livelihoods are thus dual-purpose, supporting domestic resilience while also acting as preventative mechanisms against conflict and extremism, particularly in northern Kenya and along the Somali border (USAID, 2021). The partnership is especially important to US foreign policy as Kenya offers a counterweight to Chinese infrastructure investments in the region. One indicator of Kenya's unique status is that it was included as one of the 17 priority countries in the US's funding agreement with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (Mishra, 2025), although the Trump administration's foreign policy is unpredictable.

These geopolitical calculations have significant implications for how humanitarian aid is conceptualised and delivered in Kenya. While these considerations provide the Kenyan state with leverage and material benefits, they also raise concerns about donor motivations. The risk is that funding may prioritise

donor security or migration goals over community-led needs or equity. Aid dependence, particularly for meeting humanitarian needs, is also perpetuated, thus undermining shifts towards greater state-led crisis response. This aid-infused, geopolitical co-dependency offers a markedly different dynamic to those explored in HPG studies focused on Indonesia (Bryant and Kamal, 2025) and the Philippines (Baguios, 2025), where state-led crisis response was underpinned by both countries wanting to assert sovereignty by reducing aid reliance and international influence. Thus far, the Kenyan state has not proactively sought such a direction, but the widespread aid cuts of 2025 might still be a trigger. There is also growing animosity between the current Kenyan government and international donors.

The Kenyan state is not, however, a passive recipient of geopolitical influence. It asserts agency in leveraging its refugee-hosting status to secure ongoing aid resources, which ameliorates the need to sustainably address deeper political economy issues within the country. Consequently, broader accountability and governance concerns remain insufficiently addressed, with the aid economy entrenched in the ASALs.

4.9 Aid cuts: calamitous reckoning or pushing reform?

The dramatic 2025 aid cuts to humanitarian funding in Kenya, particularly from the US, have had far-reaching and immediate impacts on the country's health systems, refugee response and broader humanitarian infrastructure. The withdrawal of funds has resulted in abrupt service disruptions, most notably in HIV/AIDS programming, which supported over 70% of Kenyans receiving antiretroviral treatment (Otieno, 2025). In refugee-hosting areas such as Kakuma and Dadaab, WFP halted all cash assistance and reduced food rations to under 40% of the minimum food basket, prompting protests and civil unrest among displaced communities (WFP, 2025; Halakhe and Miller, 2025). Humanitarian actors have raised the alarm over growing malnutrition and an increased risk of preventable disease outbreaks, particularly among children and other vulnerable groups (Joint NGO Policy Brief, 2025). There are also significant security concerns, as the appeal of joining armed groups increases as a means to mitigate acute financial hardship.

While these impacts have been devastating, the funding cuts are also viewed by some actors as a potential inflection point. One INGO interviewee noted, 'I am hoping shocks from USAID cuts will push us in the right direction', reflecting a cautious optimism that the current crisis could spur reforms. According to some interviewees, the Kenyan government has begun to reconfigure its disaster management priorities, initiating organisational restructuring to eliminate inefficiencies. This includes moves to streamline national response systems and reconsider non-essential spending.

In parallel, there is growing interest in innovative financing approaches, including blended finance, social impact bonds and Islamic financing, to fill critical gaps and promote sustainability. The potential is significant; impact investing, for example, reached US$1.6 trillion being managed globally in 2024 (Hand et al., 2024), more than seven times global ODA (OECD, 2024). Innovative financing is also hoped to better align priorities and improve accountability. Yet, while such innovative financing shows

promise, it remains nascent and insufficient to compensate for the scale of international funding withdrawals. For example, the Kenya Livestock Insurance Program only reached 100,000 people over six years (Kyuma, 2024).

Some civil society organisations (CSOs) have also interpreted the cuts as an opportunity for greater agency in shaping Kenya's humanitarian, development and security agenda. One INGO interviewee remarked that 'local NGOs can use this moment to shape county-level budget planning', highlighting a potential shift in power dynamics if domestic actors can influence how resources are allocated at the county level. The need to better integrate peacebuilding with humanitarian and development programming was also emphasised, particularly considering Kenya's ongoing challenges with intercommunal conflict and violent extremism, which are too often treated through a security lens. However, the ability of these actors to capitalise on this moment is constrained by limited access to decision-making spaces and ongoing state reluctance to share power or cede budgetary control. Another civil society interviewee noted that 'this is the time to rethink the role of the state', suggesting that the cuts should prompt a re-evaluation of the state's responsibilities in service delivery and disaster governance.

Despite a desire for change, the transition away from aid dependency is far from guaranteed. Many organisations expressed mixed sentiments, ranging from cautious optimism to anger and frustration at the suddenness and severity of the cuts. The speed at which aid has been withdrawn has left limited time for adaptation, while a lack of political will and insufficient civil society pressure threaten to stall meaningful reform. As another civil society interviewee put it, 'funding cuts are an opportunity to hold this state to account', but doing so requires a more robust and coordinated push from both civil society and parliamentarians. Without this, the cuts risk reinforcing existing inequities and weakening already fragile systems, especially in marginalised and refugee-hosting regions.

5 Political impediments to state-led crisis response

The severity of aid cuts in 2025 demands a rethink in humanitarian response for Kenya and state-led action, yet this demand is not new. Stalled devolution progress and long-standing aid dependency, compounded by endemic corruption and acute inequalities, are key reasons for why state-led response remains insufficient. Yet, there are other key, intersecting barriers to state-led crisis response in Kenya, which will be examined in this chapter.

5.1 Lack of political will, abundant political manipulation

Amid the unfinished nature of devolution, a lack of political will at national and county levels was widely seen as a primary barrier to further enhancing state-led crisis response across the country. Despite Kenya's vulnerability to recurrent and relatively predictable disasters, humanitarian decision-making is frequently driven by political considerations rather than actual need (Rono-Bett, 2018). Local leaders often dictate how and where resources are allocated, leading to skewed responses that favour politically strategic geographies. Donor priorities, such as the US prioritising support for WFP, also distorts aid allocations and programming. This sentiment was reiterated across interviews with multiple government interviewees saying that 'response is not according to need' and that most 'responses are because of political noise'. Furthermore, although Kenya has substantial financial capacity for preparedness, these resources are often not mobilised, due to a lack of commitment from politicians. According to one INGO interviewee, 'It is not a question of money. Money is there. It is about political will', capturing the misalignment between resource availability and action. It is important to note that the current national government has made significant overtures to populations in the ASALs that have been well received. However, scepticism remains whether this will translate to sustained, increased investment, or is simply electorally driven (see Somali Stream, 2025).

The political economy of disaster governance in Kenya also reveals the approach as typically reactive and event-driven, shaped more by the desire to gain political capital, rather than by a proactive commitment to public safety. Early-warning systems and scientific forecasts are underutilised because leaders prefer to rely on informal networks or politically trusted sources, according to interviewees. A lack of political will and insufficient county budgets also hamper response. This contributes to weak coordination and missed opportunities for timely intervention. Additionally, across interviews, it was noted that political incentives tend to reward response rather than prevention as political leaders are more likely to receive public recognition for visible relief efforts than for investments in preparedness that may not yield immediate, nor particularly visible, results.

The political economy of disaster management is also entangled with broader institutional dynamics. Resistance to reform is sometimes deliberate, particularly where existing arrangements enable rent-seeking or sustain 'clientelistic politics' (World Bank, 2020). While Kenya's devolution framework

was intended to decentralise authority and consequently enhance local-level disaster governance, its implementation has been inconsistent. One civil society interviewee commented that 'the people who implemented devolution were not the ones who wanted devolution', referring to the irony that both the former and current presidents had opposed devolution during the constitutional referendum. As a result, the effectiveness of county-level disaster management still largely depends on the personal initiative and political will of individual leaders, rather than broader institutional commitment. Without a genuine shift in political priorities towards proactive and inclusive disaster risk reduction, efforts at both the national and county levels are likely to remain fragmented and insufficient. This challenge is compounded by fraught electoral processes at county levels that encourage quick wins rather than pursuing a long-term, inclusive vision.

5.2 Persistent governance challenges

While the ASAL counties have made considerable progress in improving state-led response, they remain marginalised from the power and resources that are concentrated with the national government in Nairobi. The national–county relationship is typically antagonistic, leading to some donors bypassing the state altogether. In turn, civil society actors, such as the ASAL Humanitarian Network (AHN) and its members (who remain dependent on international funding), essentially plug the gaps in meeting the needs of crisis-affected populations. However, expanding such modalities undermines the focus on addressing the underlying governance issues. While parliament has approved a National Disaster Risk Management Bill that would allocate increased resources to crisis response, it is yet to achieve presidential assent. Meanwhile, many international aid actors remain incentivised to deliver assistance to remain relevant, rather than address the structural governance issues. As one INGO interviewee lamented:

> The UN agencies are competing with each other. Governance work is siloed from humanitarian [...] Some INGOs are only doing predatory localisation [sub-contracting and extractive modalities]. We need to push back against these practices.

Alongside corruption and related issues highlighted earlier, governance challenges also extend more broadly. The NDMA has a contingency fund, but rather than utilise early-warning systems, an emergency is not typically declared until people are dying. Meanwhile, an equalisation fund exists to reduce historical disparities between counties, yet receives only 0.5% of government revenue collection (Equalization Fund, 2026). The lack of government revenue severely hampers the fund's effectiveness. Another stark example was multiple donors, such as the World Bank and others, offering co-contributions of US$30 million to crisis response, if the state also provided funding. Even at a ratio of more than one donor dollar to every state dollar, the government failed to mobilise resources, according to interviewees. The status quo continues.

5.3 Distrust of the state, reliance on the Kenya Red Cross

Distrust of the Kenyan government has significantly impacted the public's perception of and willingness to support state-led crisis response. This scepticism stems from a long history of political opacity, corruption and perceived neglect of marginalised communities. As a government interviewee put it, 'If the government says no one died of hunger, no one believes them. If the Kenya Red Cross says it, people believe them.' Such sentiments underscore the critical trust deficit between the state and the population, especially in times of crisis. During droughts and food insecurity emergencies, for instance, many Kenyans are more inclined to believe reports from NGOs or international agencies than from government spokespeople. Studies have found that this mistrust affects the uptake of government services and undermines the legitimacy of state-coordinated emergency interventions (IFRC and UNICEF, 2020). Humanitarian actors have at times had to navigate this distrust by operating through non-state partners or ensuring visible distancing from politicised state institutions to maintain credibility with affected populations (Maxwell and Majid, 2016).

This fragile trust environment has direct implications for humanitarian coordination and delivery in Kenya. The government's efforts to centralise response mechanisms under the NDMA or integrate humanitarian funding through Treasury-controlled channels are often viewed with suspicion. Concerns over mismanagement and delays have led donors and humanitarian agencies to seek parallel delivery structures, sometimes at the expense of national ownership or long-term institutional strengthening. Furthermore, during the 2022 and 2023 drought responses, several civil society groups questioned the transparency of food distribution lists, and the criteria used to determine people reached, fearing elite capture and patronage politics. The result is a fragmented aid ecosystem in which coordination suffers due to the erosion of public trust in state institutions.

The role of the KRC offers an interesting contrast and potential conundrum for further advancing and improving state-led crisis response. Operating as an independent auxiliary to the state, the KRC is widely trusted across Kenya, according to multiple interviewees, and plays a critical role in crisis response with over 270,000 volunteers across the country (KRC, 2025). The KRC has been instrumental in linking communities with state systems and is widely recognised as one of the first responders in many emergencies. It receives 100 million Kenyan shillings a year (approximately US$775,000) from the government (and significantly more from other sources) and operates collaboratively with county authorities, ensuring humanitarian action is both locally rooted and institutionally supported (KRC, 2022). Although the KRC is heavily relied upon for crisis response, its collaborative efforts with county authorities were viewed as expanding the state's reach into underserved areas and thus reinforcing the state's legitimacy. In these regards, the KRC is making a concerted effort to facilitate and improve state-led response, yet public trust in the KRC as a preferred crisis responder can inadvertently impede the state taking a more prominent role. However, it is up to the state to address the trust deficit, which requires genuinely addressing endemic corruption and deep, systemic inequalities.

5.4 Politicised aid and uncritical media narratives

The politicisation of aid in Kenya is another major impediment to effective state-led crisis response, with political agendas frequently overriding technical needs in resource allocation. Humanitarian crises are often interpreted through a political lens, especially by the state, which seeks to tightly manage public perception. The 2008 post-election violence and the 2010–2012 drought are illustrative examples, in which government response was shaped more by political considerations than humanitarian urgency (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Harmer and Seris, 2012). According to some interviewees, internally displaced people, for instance, are perceived as political inconveniences rather than people in need of protection and assistance. By contrast, refugee populations are generally framed as an humanitarian issue, which suggests a selective politicisation driven by domestic political interests rather than consistent humanitarian principles (Buchanan-Smith and Jaspars, 2007).

The media can play a central role in challenging these political framings, but in Kenya, it often mirrors state narratives. A study on media coverage of pastoral conflicts in Turkana and Baringo counties found that media reports overwhelmingly relied on government sources and security-based narratives, sidelining root causes such as environmental degradation, climate change, or historical marginalisation (Wamalwa, 2024). This reliance promotes a public understanding of crises as security or political threats, encouraging short-term, militarised responses rather than long-term developmental or humanitarian solutions. As a result, public discourse is skewed towards blame and enforcement, rather than empathy or demands for structural reform. The lack of diverse sourcing and critical journalism limits accountability and leaves little room for marginalised communities to be heard.

The media's susceptibility to influence also compromises its watchdog role. Multiple interviewees noted that 'the media can be bought' and that 'you can suppress stories', which leads to underreporting or complete erasure of certain humanitarian crises. One INGO interviewee pointed out that at the height of a drought affecting one-tenth of the population, media coverage was so muted that 'if you read the news, you wouldn't have known'. This selective silence enables political actors to make performative statements without follow-through, knowing there is minimal scrutiny. The lack of sustained media attention contributes to the erosion of public pressure and limits demand for state-led response, allowing the state to frame humanitarian issues through politically convenient narratives while avoiding substantive policy responses.

6 Civil society: an under-realised conduit for change?

Across HPG's research agenda on state-led crisis response in Southeast Asia, the importance of civic space and activity was highlighted. In particular for improving the state's transparency and accountability, and delivering complementary crisis response (see Bryant et al., 2025). Other HPG research has also illustrated the problems occurring when civil society actors prioritise service delivery, rather than addressing broader human rights and social justice concerns (see Moallin et al., 2025). For this study, similar dynamics and concerns were evident in Kenya, where civil society actors play a critical influencing role, yet in many instances, have become relatively depoliticised. This reduces demands for government accountability and thus incentive to lead crisis response. This chapter examines key related issues.

6.1 Evolving and contested state–civil society dynamics

The relationship between the Kenyan government and civil society has long been fluid, oscillating between cooperation, suspicion and overt antagonism. While Kenya is often praised for its relatively vibrant civic space compared with that of neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Ethiopia, this freedom has been uneven and politically contingent. A telling example is the term 'evil society', first used by government officials in 2013 to describe CSOs critical of state practices, especially those focused on governance, accountability and human rights. This framing reflects a historical tension, where CSOs have often been viewed as foreign-funded actors undermining national sovereignty (Cheeseman et al., 2020). The suspicion has been backed by restrictive legislation, including proposed amendments to the Public Benefits Organizations Act and sporadic crackdowns on groups seen as politically threatening. Despite these constraints, Kenya's civil society remains one of the most vocal and influential in East Africa, actively shaping debates, such as on public finance, gender equity and justice.

Nevertheless, this potentially antagonistic dynamic is not monolithic. Several interviewees noted a more cooperative tone in certain sectors, such as health or climate programming, where the state views CSOs as useful implementing partners rather than adversaries. This instrumentalising approach has been especially evident in donor-funded programmes, where both the government and CSOs rely on international aid to deliver services. However, this cooperation often depends on the political salience of the issue at hand: while CSOs working in service delivery may enjoy more freedom, those engaged in governance and accountability frequently face harassment or bureaucratic delays. Recent years have also seen the rise of youth-led, grassroots movements that reject traditional donor models and instead build solidarity through digital platforms, mutual aid and protest. These emergent networks often sit outside formalised civil society structures yet are crucial in redefining the space of political contestation in Kenya.

This dynamic was recently illustrated in June 2025, when a youth organiser was arrested for helping Kenyans email their Members of Parliament in protest against the proposed Finance Bill (Tunguru, 2025). The 2025 campaign, which quickly gained momentum online, reflected growing frustration with rising living costs, endemic corruption and shrinking democratic space; unrest that had been growing in recent years, catalysed by youth-led activism. The organiser's arrest, widely condemned by civil society, highlighted the state's increasingly punitive approach to dissent, especially when it emanates from digital or decentralised activism. Despite such repression, the rapid mobilisation around the protests underscores the resilience and evolving strategies of Kenya's civic actors in holding authorities to account. Street protests have also attracted major political condemnation such as the Kenyan president alleging, without evidence, that the Ford Foundation instigated the resistance, a position that the president later abandoned (Musaddique, 2024).

6.2 'NGOisation' and depoliticisation of Kenyan civil society

Within this context, there is a bifurcation in civil society between the dynamic rights- and justice-focused actors/movements, and the far more service- and humanitarian-oriented civil society actors that are comparatively depoliticised. Consequently, the significant degrees of 'NGOisation'[5] of Kenya's civil society must be understood as a product of the humanitarian funding structures that shape organisational behaviour. As one interviewee noted, competition for funding among Kenyan NGOs is intense and impedes cooperation and state engagement. Rather than simply reflecting a shift in civil society priorities, NGOisation in Kenya is increasingly driven by externally defined funding logics that favour short-term, technical interventions over long-term political engagement. Donor frameworks that privilege measurable outputs, risk aversion and rapid delivery structurally reward organisations that align with humanitarian and development themes, often at the cost of work focused on governance, civic rights, or systemic reform. As one INGO interviewee remarked, 'He who pays the piper, decides the tune', underscoring the extent to which financial imperatives shape strategic direction.

Many CSOs that once mobilised around democratic reform or human rights have recalibrated towards thematic areas such as climate adaptation, public health, and water, sanitation and hygiene, not because of diminished need elsewhere, but because these areas are where funding is most readily accessible. These shifts reflect a broader trend in the global aid system, where funding instruments increasingly depoliticise local actors and constrain the range of legitimate civic engagement (Pallas and Sidel, 2020; Moallin et al., 2025).

In Kenya, this trend has meant that access to humanitarian funding has redefined the operational scope of civil society actors. Interviewees noted that organisations that once worked on rule of law and accountability now focus on delivering humanitarian assistance, simply to remain financially viable. The result is a strategic drift shaped by external funding cycles rather than grassroots needs.

5 'NGOisation' refers to grassroots and civil society networks turning into NGOs, typically becoming less politically and advocacy oriented (see Al-Karib, 2018).

This donor-driven evolution is compounded by the lack of core or flexible funding, which forces organisations to chase project-specific grants that often come with strict thematic and geographic conditions (see Hassanien, 2025). Even when organisations maintain a commitment to political reform, the bureaucratisation of CSOs makes it difficult to sustain such work, particularly in contexts where advocacy may be viewed as confrontational or politically risky by both donors and host governments.

The humanitarian funding model also reinforces what some describe as a 'managerial logic', where technical expertise, logframes and quantifiable indicators take precedence over transformative politics (Duffield, 2007). In Kenya, this has generated an NGO–state–donor ecosystem where humanitarian actors are key service providers, often supplementing or substituting for state responsibilities in fragile regions, particularly in the ASALs. While this may enhance short-term service delivery, it also risks entrenching the very inequalities and governance gaps that civil society once sought to address. As another INGO interviewee put it, 'The money coming in [from international donors] has kept this system going', sustaining a cycle in which CSOs become institutionalised within the aid–industrial complex rather than autonomous actors for change.

The broader implications of this are significant. While international humanitarian funding has allowed many Kenyan CSOs to survive and even expand, it has inadvertently dissuaded longer-term political engagement and dissent. Such prioritisation of stability and service delivery aligns closely with donor geopolitical interests. This geopolitical positioning means humanitarian funding is rarely neutral – it reinforces particular forms of governance while marginalising others (see Moallin et al., 2025). Consequently, Kenya's civil society sector remains vibrant but constrained, operationally active yet politically muted in humanitarian contexts, while by contrast, youth-led activism continues to be dynamic and to flourish, albeit largely in Nairobi. Considering the need to address politically contentious corruption and inequality issues, the significant NGOisation of civil society, exacerbated by aid funding flows, poses an impediment to advancing and improving state-led crisis response.

6.3 Civil society at multiple crossroads

Civil society space and activity is critical to expanding and sustaining state-led crisis response in Kenya, yet it remains highly unpredictable. At the national level, 2024 saw a resurgence in street protests calling for improved state accountability and transparency. These protests were triggered by plans for increased taxes amid widespread frustrations with the economy and governance. The grassroots, confrontational protest movement defied the perceived NGOisation in Kenya, as outlined earlier. Instead, the predominantly youth-led protests reflected growing opposition to the status quo and proved effective in getting the government to withdraw plans for certain tax increases. It was a turbulent process, as there were numerous instances of violent state suppression of protestors (see Gangji and Musambi, 2025) and the situation remains tense.

The ongoing tensions reflect a conundrum for further advancing state-led response; the public's lack of trust in the state makes it very difficult to raise taxes, which in turn, makes it difficult to improve crisis response. Conversely, unless corruption, inequality and other issues are sufficiently addressed, the

population will be opposed to increased taxes; the deadlock and tensions will remain. The protests were not specific to humanitarian action and nor were they related to the needs of systemically neglected populations in the ASALs, but they remain illustrative of the demand for change.

In contrast to the predominantly urban protests, the ever-expanding AHN has been making incremental progress in advancing state-led crisis response across much of the country. Bringing together a wide array of humanitarian actors, AHN has been strategically supported by Oxfam, the EU European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and others, to become an influential network, both responding to crises and influencing county authorities to improve state-led response. The long-term and strategic international support has been critical for success, while AHN's local embeddedness makes it effective at pushing for improved state-led response. As an example, according to interviewees, if a county is proactive and initiates a response, AHN will prioritise responding in collaboration with that county, thus encouraging state-led action. Concurrently, policy and advocacy efforts are also underway on the National Disaster Risk Management Bill, social protection, contingency planning and other initiatives. As one interviewee reflected:

> We [a few INGOs] agreed that a big presence was not necessary and it was crowding out civil society, distorting the market and creating unproductive power dynamics [...] The question then arose about how to better engage authorities. Local civil society is much more vocal about problems with local authorities. They will say what internationals won't.

7 Social protection: a model for systemic change?

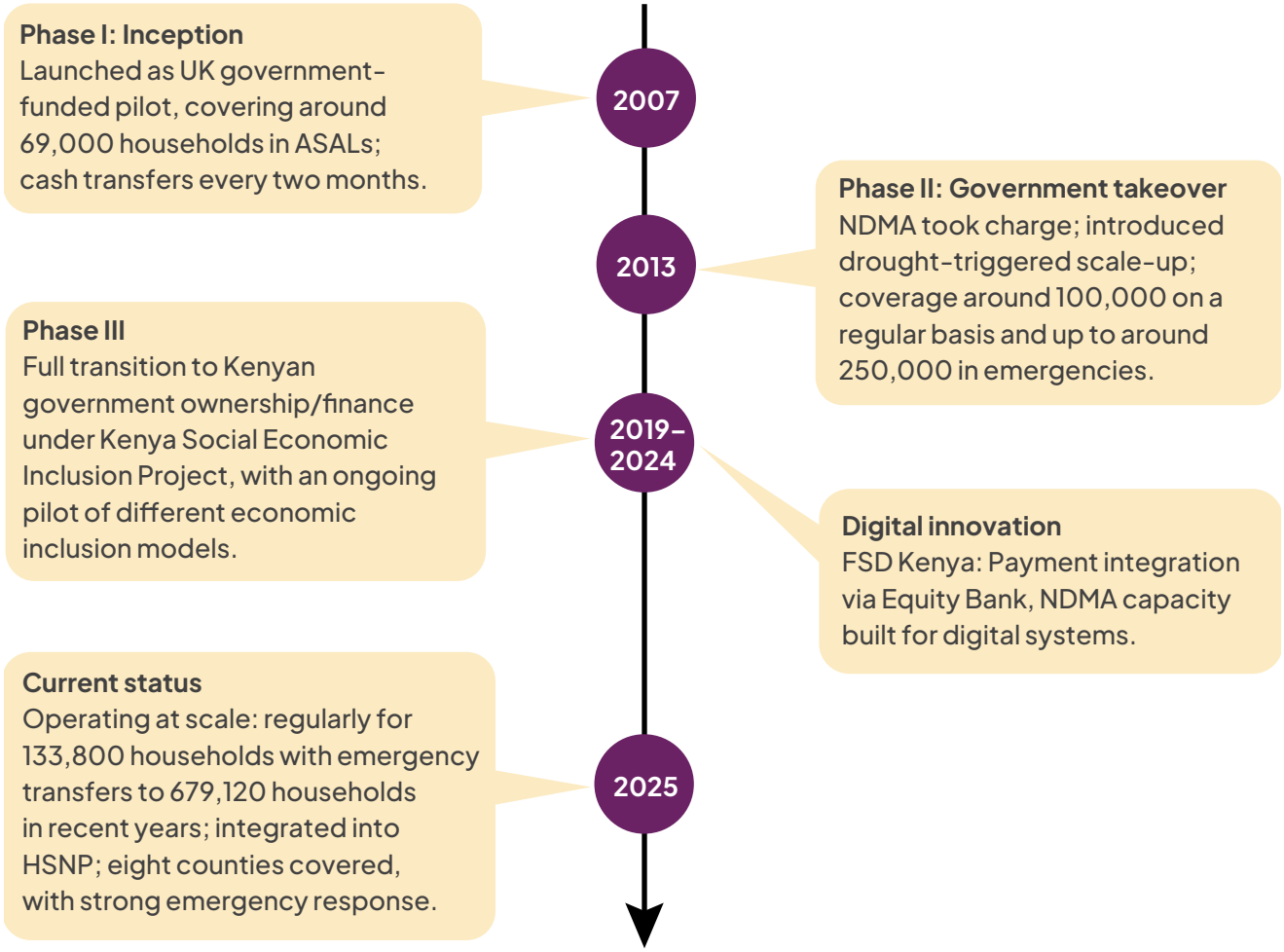
In recent years, Kenya has faced a stalemate to further improving and expanding state-led response that must be addressed. However, the evolution of Kenya's Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) tells a different story, with significant lessons for how state-led response can be cultivated and sustained. This chapter examines the HSNP and how it provides a model for strengthening state-led response, but one where complacency has impeded its potential to achieve broader impact.

7.1 HSNP: A tale of transition from international aid to state-led response

Kenya's HSNP offers unique insights into how international aid systems and actors can develop innovative crisis-response systems and strategically shift them to the state. The HSNP is a social protection programme centred on providing regular cash transfers to vulnerable populations across much of the ASALs (see NDMA, 2025b). It began with a pilot project from 2008, supported by Oxfam, the United Kingdom (UK) and others, across Turkana, Marsabit, Mandera and Wajir counties, all ASALs that face recurrent crises and high levels of food insecurity. The design included a major focus on women's leadership and empowerment, such as through decision-making and targeting. Rather than responding to crisis, Phase I one of the HSNP was designed to provide ongoing assistance to improve community resilience to shocks, with a longer-term vision for scaling up (Beesley, n.d.). The pilot project was successful, leading to a major injection of UK funding and a multi-phase approach to expand the scale and shift from an internationally managed approach to state-led implementation.

The design and scaling of the HSNP were strongly influenced by donor collaboration, particularly with the UK's Department for International Development (now supplanted by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), which provided substantial financial and technical support. Phases I and II, from 2008 to 2018, were predominantly donor-funded, but by Phase III, the Government of Kenya had assumed full financial responsibility (see Figure 8). This phased approach was in-built from the outset, with Oxfam and other actors collaborating closely with the government to ensure the institutional architecture and financing capacity were established. The multiplicity of involved actors has not only strengthened accountability but also facilitated innovation, such as the use of biometric verification and agency banking in areas with limited infrastructure (Barca and Chirchir, 2014). The HSNP was eventually institutionalised under the NDMA. 'The HSNP is the most lauded and well-known programme because of [the] involvement of multiple actors', explained an INGO interviewee, as she outlined the effective cooperation between donors, government and humanitarian agencies.

Figure 8 Evolution of the Humanitarian Safety Net Programme



Note: ASAL, arid and semi-arid lands; FSD, Financial Sector Deepening; HSNP, Humanitarian Safety Net Programme; NDMA, National Disaster Management Authority.

Source: Beesley, n.d.; OPM, 2025

As of 2026, the HSNP remains a cornerstone of Kenya's national social protection system. Currently reaching over 137,000 households regularly, with some ability to scale during emergencies, the programme is an important tool for strengthening resilience in the ASALs. The HSNP now operates in eight counties, although primarily focused on the initial four counties, and provides regular and emergency cash transfers to vulnerable households. One INGO interviewee highlighted the exceptional continuity of the programme, noting that 'there are a lot of projects piloted by international organisations and handed over to government with nothing to show for it, but HSNP has endured so we should give credit'. The durability of HSNP is frequently cited as an example of successful localisation and institutionalisation of externally designed interventions. This comes amid a growing push for climate-responsive social protection globally (see McCord et al., 2025).

The HSNP has not been without challenges. One of the enduring issues is the reliability of targeting mechanisms. Although community-based validation has been implemented to ensure inclusion and fairness, studies have shown that social pressures and local politics can influence targeting outcomes. In some cases, in-need households may be excluded due to limited documentation or mobility, while others may be included through elite capture. The NDMA and implementing partners have made efforts to improve the accuracy of targeting through geospatial data and proxy means testing, but challenges persist, particularly in pastoralist communities with fluid household compositions. One of the most significant challenges is ensuring accurate registration details, with updates often irregular. Interviewees also suggested that the HSNP is effective at delivering consistent support, but is not particularly shock responsive, despite being designed to be adaptable. This limits the HSNP's role in crisis response, despite donors' willingness to support it. For example, the World Bank and other donors have, in recent years, reportedly offered US$30 million for the HSNP to address humanitarian needs, if the government also contributed US$10 million, but it has not been forthcoming.

In terms of operational delivery, HSNP has made important strides in payment systems, transitioning from prepaid smart cards to fully functional bank accounts. The use of agency banking, pioneered with support from a Kenyan non-profit organisation, has improved access to financial services and contributed to increased financial inclusion in ASALs. Financial inclusion in HSNP counties rose from 8% in 2009 to 67% in 2019 (although not entirely attributable to HSNP). However, access to mobile and banking infrastructure remains uneven. Remote locations frequently suffer from poor network coverage, lack of electricity and decrepit roads, which delay payment cycles and hinder timely delivery during emergencies (Beazley et al., 2021). A consequence is that humanitarian actors continue delivering cash transfers in parallel to the HSNP. If trust in and coverage of the HSNP could be improved, the parallel non-state humanitarian system could be reduced.

As the Kenyan state continues funding and implementing the HSNP, there are important lessons for the broader aid-funded humanitarian system. Most notably:

- A long-term vision and sustained, strategic commitment to collaborating with the state and supporting its leadership are essential, including institutional strengthening and nurturing the state–population social contract.
- International aid actors must be willing to step back from their roles, whether as donors or implementers, while also not simply being replaced by local civil society actors. However, civil society networks could provide the foundations for achieving more dynamic, up-to-date registration for the HSNP.
- Community participation and involvement in decision-making, particularly of women, enhances the legitimacy and long-term sustainability of such transitions.

8 Conclusions

Kenya offers many insights into the importance of and potential for state-led crisis response, with relevance for many other countries and the global aid sector. This is particularly the case considering the major aid cuts across 2025 and the likely continued decline in aid availability. The cuts have heightened long-standing humanitarian and governance issues in Kenya and galvanised the need for change. This study also offers an interesting contrast to similar HPG studies in Indonesia and the Philippines, where both countries exemplify relatively successful efforts by those countries to shift from internationally crowded to effective nationally led responses, backed by coherent state institutions, effective policies and domestic resources. For both countries, the state-led crisis response was a matter of asserting sovereignty and reining in the influence of international actors (Bryant and Kamal, 2025; Baguios, 2025). Although both Indonesia and the Philippines have higher income levels than Kenya, the vision and sustained efforts to expand state-led response began when both countries were low income. Although Kenya faces its own unique circumstances, the need to accelerate and expand state-led response across the country is pressing.

Central to improving state-led crisis response in Kenya is addressing deeply embedded inequalities and systemic marginalisation, which goes hand-in-hand with the need to address governance issues, including illicit financial flows and corruption. This requires an enabling environment that promotes accountability and transparency, yet much of the aid economy and international engagement with Kenya is antithetical to realising such an environment. The political economy of aid is rife with vested interests that, in many ways, have been accentuated by the 2025 aid cuts, as competition for remaining funding undermines cooperation and strategic, long-term approaches. Any further aid cut 'shock therapy' will be hugely detrimental, but the status quo must change. There must be renewed efforts to think and act politically, with a clear vision and actionable plan to accelerate and expand state-led crisis response, complemented by civil society actors, to ensure a robust **nationally led** crisis response system.

The following are consolidated, overarching conclusions.

- Crisis response in Kenya is primarily a governance issue that cannot continue to be addressed through repetitive, short-term, aid-funded humanitarian action that lacks long-term vision and has created dependency. Investments in anticipatory action and risk reduction can yield benefits, yet are lacking, while humanitarian action continues to be dominated by international actors.
- Despite significant improvements over the past two decades, the Kenyan state demonstrates a lack of willingness to further lead crisis response, although it has significant capacities to do so (even in the face of fiscal challenges). Geopolitics and the aid political economy continue to be counterproductive, as they cover up the inadequacies of state-led crisis response.

- Financing is a critical issue, where addressing corruption and structural inequalities is paramount to reducing persistent and recurrent humanitarian need across Kenya, particularly in the ASALs. The state must stem illicit financial flows and increase funding to county-level authorities for crisis response and resilience-building.
- Civic space and activity are essential to improving the state's transparency and accountability, with flow-on benefits for crisis response, yet insufficient attention is paid to civil society. The continued depoliticisation and bureaucratisation of civil society must be addressed; recent protests are illustrative of the potential for renewed civil society dynamism.
- Devolution has significantly improved Kenya's state-led crisis response capacity, but its full potential remains unrealised due to persistent structural weaknesses such as fragmented coordination, institutional capacity gaps, corruption and underfunding of disaster preparedness.

There are significant positive examples that offer guidance on improving state-led response, particularly the HSNP and its evolution, the AHN's engagement with county authorities, and instances where international aid actors have strategically and proactively reduced their footprint and pivoted towards a greater focus on state- and civil society-led efforts.

9 Recommendations

This paper highlights the urgent need for all actors to reinvigorate efforts to accelerate, broaden and improve state-led crisis response, particularly in the light of widespread aid cuts. The authors recognise that many of the issues and challenges in this study are long-standing and intersect with myriad geopolitical and domestic political economy realities that are not easy to shift. Consequently, the following recommendations seek to be realistic, yet ambitious, while also recognising the diversity of different groups of actors.

Kenyan national and county authorities

- **Corruption**: Develop and implement comprehensive plans to address corruption, as it poses the most significant impediment to enhancing state-led response. This must be addressed at both national and county levels, while strengthening the ability of the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission to not just improve transparency, but also hold authorities accountable.
- **Inequality**: Greater effort must be made to reduce structural inequalities, including women's marginalisation, which contribute to humanitarian vulnerability across the ASALs, such as increasing county budgets, alongside major socioeconomic infrastructure investments and strengthening women's influence in decision-making. It also requires tackling extreme and growing concentrations of wealth.
- **Institutions**: Build on significant progress in strengthening county-level response capacities, including better support for anticipatory action and broader efforts to strengthen the state–population social contract – this includes ensuring assistance is needs-based rather than politically driven. This must be matched with improved coordination between different governance levels.
- **Civic space**: Civic space must be respected not suppressed, with civic activity providing critical inputs into ensuring more inclusive and responsive governance. This includes acknowledging and working to address specific grievances, such as from encamped refugees and marginalised populations across the ASALs.

Kenyan civil society actors

- **Increase assertiveness**: Grounded in local legitimacy and relationships with affected populations and state actors, demand that international aid actors align with civil society strategies and priorities, and adopt genuinely equitable partnership approaches. Ill-suited international approaches, including avoidance of the state, should be opposed and international actors held accountable.
- **Collaboration**: Building on the AHN's success, seek to broaden civil society alliances to demand improved state-led crisis response that includes addressing corruption, inequality and the overly politicised nature of responses. This extends beyond the humanitarian sector, to ensure connectivity with actors working on tax justice and other systemic challenges. It also requires mitigating acute competition among CSOs.

- **Service delivery**: This should be a last resort and not without clear plans to hand over responsibilities to authorities. Instead, integrate governance and advocacy approaches to demand inclusive and accountable state-led response.
- **Kenya Red Cross**: The KRC must leverage its unique auxiliary position with authorities and strong public trust to systematically push for expanded state-led crisis response, ensuring the KRC enhances and supports rather than replaces the state.

UN agencies and INGOs

- **Governance** must be a primary focus for crisis response, rather than the continual provision of service delivery. This includes pushing for county authorities to take leadership with enhanced national-level support and funding.
- **Civil society should be supported** in its efforts to enhance state-led crisis response. This means shifting away from sub-contracting and service-delivery-centric models towards locally led humanitarian and governance approaches.
- **Step back from perpetuating the problematic aspects** of the aid economy that undermine state responsibilities, such as internationally led service delivery, depoliticising Kenyan civil society and avoiding important issues, such as corruption and inequality, which underpin humanitarian vulnerability.

Donors and diplomats

- **Break the cycle of aid injections** that perpetuate a detrimental aid economy and instead push the state to more comprehensively address corruption and inequality issues. Where humanitarian funding remains, it must ensure a strong governance orientation with clear plans for state-led response, including funding for advocacy and policy initiatives. Similarly, climate financing, including loss and damage funds, must not exacerbate the aid economy, but instead contribute to inclusive, accountable governance.
- **Pursue a dual-track approach**: Recognising that acutely vulnerable populations must continue to be supported or face death, efforts to achieve macro-level reforms must be complemented by further enabling locally led response to meet immediate and transitional needs.
- **Thoughtful reorientation in aid funding** should be pursued to align with state-led action, rather than unpredictable and substantive cuts that undermine progress. This should include prioritisation for actors demonstrably working towards state-led response, particularly local civil society actors, including refugee-led and ASALs-based organisations.
- **The HSNP should be replicated** as an approach to strategically expanding state-led crisis response, in which the long-term vision must ensure more shock-responsive systems that inclusively address wide-ranging needs in the ASALs.

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