

# **High level Meeting Report: The Need for a Humanitarian Policy Refresh**

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## Summary report

On 15 June 2023, a high-level meeting focused on “The Need for a Humanitarian Policy Refresh” was convened by USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and the CALP Network. This report provides highlights of points made by speakers and participants, along with next steps. Abridged versions of the speakers’ interventions are annexed.

The meeting brought together over 130 senior leaders from more than 100 organisations worldwide, including national and international NGOs, UN agencies, government authorities, donors, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, the World Bank, the private sector, and think tanks, to address the pressing issues surrounding cash and voucher assistance (CVA) in humanitarian response.

With senior leadership commitments made, the meeting launched a collaborative process to develop a collective vision to refresh and renew CVA policy commitments to ensure better assistance for crisis-affected populations globally. The collaborative process intends to drive forward the development of CVA as a key means of achieving more people-centred and effective aid.

### The evidence

The [evidence](#), presented by Karen Peachey, Director of the CALP Network, shows that:

1. Most people, in most contexts, prefer cash to other forms of humanitarian assistance and shows that cash is an effective means of humanitarian assistance.
2. There has been good progress against some of the cash policy commitments developed around the time of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Many of those commitments are coming to an end.
3. Cash currently accounts for 19% of international humanitarian assistance. Research shows it could reach 30–50% of international humanitarian assistance, if used when and where appropriate.
4. While the use of cash assistance is increasing in volume terms, it is starting to plateau as a percentage of overall assistance even though we are far from where we could be (19% currently compared to potentially 30–50%).
5. There are clear opportunities but the humanitarian system itself is limiting progress. Multiple changes are needed to move towards more people centred, more locally led, more efficient aid.

### The perspectives of speakers

Innocent Tshilombo, who has spent 10 years in Kakuma refugee camp on the receiving end of CVA, put things into context speaking of the “need for effective conversations, reforms and policies for cash voucher assistance to meet the long-term aspirations of people in camps just like me who have waited longer for their situations to change .... millions of people much like me are stuck in the cycle of receiving aid. I want to see changes because I want to see good policy enacted without too much delay. It’s about people, it’s about listening and engaging people. You need to listen; you need to go faster – it’s people’s lives.”

Sarah Charles, Assistant to the Administrator of USAID’s BHA, reflected on how CVA plays a critical role in helping people prepare for, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stressors. She cautioned that while we much has been achieved ‘under our Grand Bargain commitments, we have more work to do for cash to catalyse these needed changes in the broader humanitarian landscape.’ Important questions to be tackled, including how ‘we ensure that moving toward more cash programming helps shift power towards local actors rather than further elevating the largest players? .... how can we deliver cash faster – immediately after, or even before, a shock? ... how do we improve accountability to affected populations and truly put affected people at the centre?’

She drew attention to the fact that ‘USAID is also a climate agency; and with climate-related shocks becoming the new norm, we must deliver cash faster, including scaling up disaster risk financing systems to enable anticipatory cash assistance.’ and the ‘need to invest in the evidence base on anticipatory cash, including measuring trade-offs between speed and accuracy.’ She underscored, as a co-convenor of the meeting and the process, the importance of making new commitments and making the changes needed to deliver better, faster and more efficiently.

Smruti Patel, Director of the Global Mentoring Initiative and Co-Chair of the Global CVA and Locally Led Working Group, highlighted that progress is being made in some places but it's far from enough and there won't be much change until local actors receive more funding. In some case, local actors are accessing pooled funds directly and 'when that happens, they're able to work effectively with communities and achieve better results. So, if we want to put people in crisis in the centre of our thinking and action, this is the best way of doing it – with local actors doing more'. She also stressed the 'need to be coherent so that people who are receiving cash don't have to go to different actors for different things. If we want to put people first, we need to stop this fragmentation between actors and look at what roles local and international can organisations play to take all this forward in a much scalable way.'

Joanna Darmanin, Head of Unit for Humanitarian Aid Thematic Policies underscored DG ECHO's commitment to the process as they believe that cash assistance is far from achieving its potential. She noted that 'we prioritise cash programmes that put people at the centre, and that seek, share and act upon recipient feedback' and further 'in line with our cash policy and the need for people-centred aid, we have made a commitment to increase the use of multi-purpose cash assistance and reduce the use of vouchers.' She drew attention to the importance of continuing to scale cash and bridge the humanitarian-development divide', also emphasising the need to support the role of local actors. She drew links to 'other DG ECHO priorities, including climate change and data and digitalisation. We believe cash has a role in greening humanitarian assistance, given its low environmental impact and benefits in supporting local production. We also promote cash responses that build on technological advances and innovations if they use technology in ways that strengthen interoperability and link to longer-term solutions.'

Nabeh Allaham, a young leader working with IFRC, delivered closed the meeting with a compelling call for action. "Leadership is not about maintaining the status quo; it is about having the courage to challenge, recognising the urgency of change, and taking bold, decisive action to meet the voice of the communities that will build trust and transparency. I hope you will lead the way."

### Some perspectives from participants

- Some challenged humanitarian actors to think differently about how and who they work with, for example, with one national NGO discussing the opportunity to work with local co-operatives.
- Bureaucratic challenges were highlighted e.g., to transfer donor funding, particularly for national actors, which may not have the funds to start implementation before donor funds arrive in the bank.
- One organisation highlighted the need to ensure that vulnerable populations do not slip through the cracks, particularly in large cash programmes.
- Several participants encouraged collaboration with banks, microfinance institutions and the private sector to delivery cash more effectively, as well as strengthen financial inclusion for vulnerable populations.
- One participant urged a re-framing the concept of scale and the role of local organisations to make programming design decisions and enable scale-up.
- Actors from national and international NGOs have highlighted the ongoing lack of resources for local actors and the need for concrete and practical action from major donors to invest and commit to the organisational development directly or through consortium of local actors. BHA colleagues shared the recent [USAID statement on progress on localisation](#) and expressed a desire to discuss how the agency can strengthen localisation in humanitarian CVA.
- Private sector organisations (including the mobile industry) are keen to work closely with humanitarian actors to further innovate cash.
- There was an appreciation for the diversity of the audience and the quality of the discussion.
- Large and smaller organisations noted that the increase in the use of cash and has brought about positive changes.
- The opportunity to put affected communities at the centre in programme design using group cash transfers was noted, as [documented](#) in Ukraine and elsewhere.

- Some participants raised that blockages resulting from competition for funding among humanitarian actors, as well as agency-specific cash programming, and the need to look at new business models.
  - Compliance challenges were reported as a cause of significant delays, including the need to balance risk mitigation and timeliness.
  - One network called for renewed advocacy, particularly in contexts where governments remain cash sceptical.
  - A representative reported the need for clarity in what we're trying to achieve regarding better cash, rather than more cash.
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### Next steps

Kate Hart, CALP's Head of Policy, Evidence and Learning, outlined the draft process noting that the collaborative process will involve a variety of events, including webinars, Chatham House-style discussions, and workshops to follow. Newsletters and events webpage will provide updates and information on how to engage. She flagged that “we anticipate the process will be defined by the whole community – national and international – after this launch. There may also be opportunities to link with other processes. Different stakeholders have offered to lead different elements. It has already been recommended from amongst the community that a ‘technical engine room’ is established to support the process. CALP – and others – are on standby to support too.”

### Commitments made

Dozens of leaders, from national and international NGOs, donors, UN agencies and more, immediately committed their organisations to participate in the process. Organisations are welcome to sign up to the engage in the process and can e-mail: [kate.hart@calpnetwork.org](mailto:kate.hart@calpnetwork.org) or [lynn.yoshikawa@calpnetwork.org](mailto:lynn.yoshikawa@calpnetwork.org).

## Annex: Abridged Interventions from Speakers

An overview of the evidence: Karen Peachey, Director, CALP Network

Five key points were presented:

Firstly. There is strong evidence that most people, in most contexts, prefer cash to other forms of humanitarian assistance. So, if a people-centred approach to aid is about listening to preferences – that should be a strong driver for change.

Secondly. There is a lot to celebrate. There is strong evidence supporting the use of cash - the case for cash has been made. What's more, the use of cash has increased in recent years and now accounts for 19% of international humanitarian assistance alongside huge amounts of cash assistance used in national responses that is not tracked globally.

There has been good progress against some of the cash policy commitments – many of which were made around the time of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. The evidence shows collective commitments played an important role in advancing change. Evidence also shows that cash has been one of the most significant changes in the humanitarian system in recent years and has often sparked positive change in other areas of the system.

Thirdly. There are big opportunities. The evidence shows the volume of cash could reach 30-50% of international humanitarian assistance, if used when and where appropriate. That benchmark is based on how the system works now, potentially it could be more. There is also a lot to be done to improve the quality and effectiveness of cash assistance – to make it more people centred, more local, more efficient, and to drive positive change in other areas.

Fourthly. There are some signs that momentum may be slowing. While the use of cash assistance continues to increase in volume terms, given the growth in humanitarian funding, it is starting to plateau as a percentage of overall assistance – even though we are from the 30-50% figure that is possible. This is happening at a time when many collective policy commitments are coming to an end – meaning we're a bit rudderless in terms of collective direction.

Fifthly. The evidence shows that there are great opportunities before us, the humanitarian system itself is limiting progress. For example

- a. The decisions made by implementing agencies are a major factor e.g., in some agencies the investments in prepositioning NFIs are more than the amount delivered in cash transfers. Inevitably, this creates a pressure to use those stocks even if the preference is for cash.
- b. Some modality decisions are made by donors at the point of giving e.g., donor use of food aid could be converted to cash, giving people choice about what they buy and resulting in benefits to the local market and traders.

The evidence provides examples of many other things that can be changed to help us move towards more people centred, more locally led, more efficient aid. But there's no silver bullet. To reach the potential offered by cash assistance, multiple changes are needed across the humanitarian system.

Joanna Darmanin, Head of Unit for Humanitarian Aid Thematic Policies, DG ECHO

We thank CALP for their convening role and ability to bring together a wide range of voices. As DG ECHO we support this initiative and will actively engage in any dialogue that will help advance important aspects of cash assistance.

We appreciate the US for its co-leadership of this initiative which is in line with the efforts of many donors in this area. We believe that donors have an important role in driving increased scale and coherence of cash in

different contexts. For example, DG ECHO is playing a strategic leadership role in countries such as Somalia, Ukraine, Mozambique, Yemen, and Lebanon to name a handful. We continue to be fully committed to this going forward.

DG ECHO is a lead donor on multi-purpose cash and our policy encourages partners to systematically consider the use of multi-purpose cash as a basis for meeting a range of basic needs. Of course, cash can be complemented by other modalities where relevant to meet specific sectoral outcomes, but it should be the default approach.

DG ECHO has been a consistent advocate for cash assistance. Progress has been made but we believe there is still a long way to go, and that the quantity and quality of cash delivered to people affected by crisis is far from achieving its potential.

We share concerns of a possible stall on advancements in this direction. As reflected in the CALP report “Where Next? The Evolving Landscape of Cash and Voucher Policies”, we face many stumbling blocks including: the end of the Grand Bargain, deeply entrenched systematic issues, data interoperability and management, and localisation. All these things require ongoing focus and active efforts to put people affected by crisis first, empowering them and the actors closer to them to make the choices needed for aid that can make a difference.

As DG ECHO, we prioritise cash programmes that put people at the centre, and that seek, share and act upon recipient feedback. Cash programmes need to have safe and accessible mechanisms in place to support the participation and feedback of people receiving aid to improve programming.

Further, in line with our cash policy and the need for people-centred aid, we have made a commitment to increase the use of multi-purpose cash assistance and reduce the use of vouchers. We also believe it is important to continue scaling the use of cash and to bridge the humanitarian/development divide in line with the commitments expressed in the Humanitarian Aid Communication to increase the use of cash-based safety nets.

DG ECHO policy priorities also include equitable partnerships with local actors, as developed in the guidance note on ["Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders in Humanitarian Settings"](#). We must support the role of local actors in cash coordination and give equitable access to overhead costs for local and national actors when they implement cash programmes.

DG ECHO also puts protection at the heart of humanitarian action by ensuring that it is systematically integrated into humanitarian response and by reinforcing cooperation between different actors. In line with the Donor Cash Forum priorities, we believe there is need for cash programmes to mainstreaming protection and gender concerns and ensure they include referral systems to other services. Cash has a strong role in programmes designed to achieve protection outcomes for people affected by crisis, something that DG ECHO's thematic policy clearly highlights.

The discussions today also link with other DG ECHO priorities, including climate change and data/digitalisation. We believe cash has a role in greening humanitarian assistance, given its low environmental impact and benefits in supporting local production. We also promote cash responses that build on technological advances and innovations if they use technology in ways that strengthen interoperability and link to longer-term solutions.

DG ECHO supports this call to action and believes there is need to create a common understanding around key issues. This is necessary to maintain progress and move towards new commitments. We believe in the value of collective action and saw the benefits achieved by working together in the Grand Bargain cash workstream.

I commend CALP's role in generating momentum on key cash policy issues. This is the start of a process that we all need to engage in – which we believe will be pragmatic and inclusive – the range of voices in this room today give us confidence we can make this happen.

## Innocent Tshilombo

Over ten years ago, I came to Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya from Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kakuma is a typical refugee camp where people depend on aid for survival. In my experience, this approach was effective during my first days on the move. However, over the months, years and even decades that followed, there was a need for reforms and to go beyond the basic needs for a sustainable and empowering solution to get me out of a dead-end precarious situation.

When vouchers were introduced in the Kakuma refugee camp, they created a new socio-economic dynamic. They provided me with purchasing power, created more business opportunities and brought harmony among the people. But because vouchers were very restricted, their benefits were also restricted, limiting the flexibility of choice and creating new challenges such as the depreciation of their cash value.

A question I always ask myself is why cash was converted into vouchers; if we knew people needed cash at a point, they would pay the price to convert their vouchers back to cash. This question and many other questions we may ask ourselves about cash voucher assistance remind us of the need for effective conversations, reforms, and policies for cash voucher assistance to meet the long-term aspirations of people in camps, just like me, who have to wait longer for their situation to change.

As we gather here today, millions of people, much like me, are stuck in the cycle of receiving aid at Kakuma camp in Kenya, Nakivale refugee camp in Uganda, Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh or elsewhere in the world. We want to see cash assistance that supports our livelihoods to help us get out of the cycle of dependency. We can't wait to start rebuilding our communities and making choices about what's best for us in all aspects of life. However, in my decade-long experience of receiving aid, these aspects are still absent or far from being achieved in cash programs.

The dignity of people is paramount; cash and voucher assistance should empower people to break the cycle of dependency. My potential should not be limited by CVA restrictions or conditions. Cash transfers' true value is when they help a person in the Kakuma refugee camp move through the cycle of vulnerability and give them more choices about their needs and future for lasting impact in their communities.

I would like to see cash and voucher assistance disrupt humanitarian response. It takes time to develop and implement policies. Policies should be seen as the basis for dialogue with the people rather than a one-size-fits-all. People should be engaged by seeking their input into designing a response to know what is best for them. Millions of lives, like mine, depend on implementing the recommendations and policies already available to us.

I am here today because I want to see changes. Because I want to see good policy enacted without too much delay. It's about people. It's about listening and engaging people. You need to listen; you need to go faster. It's people's lives. Cash and voucher assistance should be considered a basic need.

We want to see more cash assistance packaged and delivered to meet our needs with flexibility, convenience, and dignity.

## Smruti Patel, Director, Global Mentoring Initiative and co-lead of the Global Locally Led Response and CVA Working Group

It was great to hear the remarks from Joanna and Innocent, especially around work on accountability and about the importance recipients living in dignity. I want to pick up on thinking about increasing the potential of cash, especially around locally led response. There have been great policies: with work by ECHO and many other donors, which is positive. We also see the cash coordination discussion in the Grand Bargain

process making progress. However, many levels of barriers remain for local actors, especially around being able to access and receive funds. Unless these things are addressed, things will not change hugely especially when we start talking about cash at scale. We still see it's the UN agencies and INGOs receiving most of the funds - even for cash assistance. How do we make sure that we level the playing field? I believe that this one of the things that is stopping us from achieving the potential of cash.

In some case, local actors are accessing pooled funds directly. When that happens, they're able to work effectively with communities and achieve better results. So, if we want to put people in crisis in the centre of our thinking and action, this is the best way of doing it – with local actors doing more.

There is a long way to go, even around the Equitable Partnership that Joanna mentioned earlier. Local actors need to be proactively working with international actors on this, so we can go further and see what local actors can bring into this space. Currently, too much discussion focuses on “lack capacity”, but there has been a lot of training – the problem is there has been little chance to put that into practice since local actors can't access programme funding.

We need to work harder to make best use of the capabilities that exist instead of looking through a deficit lens. As mentioned, there are some positive steps such as the progress with the cash coordination model where localisation is the second principle. But it's not yet clear how local actors will be resourced to play meaningful roles; we need to make that investment so local actors can take their rightful place in cash coordination.

When we undertook consultations before the Cash Caucus there was a very clear message from local organisations, who highlighted that we need to make sure we work in the right way, and we need to work through the social safety nets and other mechanisms. We need to be coherent so that people who are receiving cash don't have to go to different actors for different things. If we want to put people first, we need to stop this fragmentation between actors and look at what roles local and international organisations can play to take all this forward in a much scalable way.

Talking about scale there are many instances in different environments where local actors are there and doing a lot, but it's simply not captured in reporting systems. We need to make sure that we're documenting the capabilities of local actors who are leading some of these processes where international actors are not even present. Let's really acknowledge the capabilities of local actors and let's resource them, then they can play their role and really put people at the centre of cash programmes.

[Sarah Charles, Assistant to the Administrator, Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance](#)

I appreciate CALP's leadership and collaboration in organising this event, and the thought-provoking speakers we've heard so far.

As the gap between rising needs and limited humanitarian budgets widens, the humanitarian system is being put to the test. At this critical juncture, our systems must evolve to meet the needs of our time. Cash and voucher assistance plays a critical role in helping people prepare for, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stressors. Cash can reach people quickly, potentially even before a forecasted shock. Cash also supports personal agency and people's own assessments of their needs. We see this around the world. Additionally, cash can link humanitarian and national social protection systems.

But cash doesn't always deliver on these goals. While we have achieved much under our Grand Bargain commitments, we have more work to do for cash to catalyse these needed changes in the broader humanitarian landscape.

We have a tremendous opportunity before us. From 2015 to 2021, cash grew from an estimated 8 percent of overall humanitarian assistance to 19 percent. Over the same time span, USAID's humanitarian cash

portfolio grew from 474 million dollars to over 1.9 billion dollars. In just a few short years, cash has changed the way many organisations operate - and with the right support, it can continue to spur change.

As we look at other major efforts happening in the humanitarian system, we must think critically and conceptually about cash and how it can complement or stymie our work in other areas.

Specifically, we must grapple with three questions.

- First, how do we ensure that moving toward more cash programming helps shift power towards local actors rather than further elevating the largest players?
- Second, how do we deliver cash faster – immediately after, or even before, a shock?
- And finally, how do we improve accountability to affected populations and truly put affected people at the centre?

When USAID talks about a people-centred response, we are looking beyond the idea of “cash in hand” to a fundamental shift in the balance of power. The most vulnerable and marginalised deserve the head seat at the table. But could cash actually cut them out?

While much last-mile cash programming is done by local organisations, the difficult truth is that currently, the nature of delivering cash at scale lends itself to large organisations or consortia. We work with some stunningly efficient local organisations, but most do not currently have the capacity to reach the large numbers of people in need, so they are cut out from overseeing major cash programs. If we are going to reach our localisation goals, we need to acknowledge this trade off, and search for potential solutions.

USAID is also a climate agency; and with climate-related shocks becoming the new norm, we must deliver cash faster, including scaling up disaster risk financing systems to enable anticipatory cash assistance. Right now, most cash is delivered weeks or months after a shock. We need to get better - delivering just hours or days later; and where possible, providing assistance even before a disaster strikes. To move more quickly, we must ensure that countries have reliable, trusted early warning systems, and that implementing agencies can access comprehensive and impartial registries of those likely to be in need.

We also need to invest in the evidence base on anticipatory cash, including measuring trade-offs between speed and accuracy. Cash actors can help lead on clear definitions for tracking and counting investments in anticipatory cash.

Lastly, every decision we make and innovation we put forward should seek to improve accountability to those who suffer most from these shocks. Given the expanding delta between needs and available resources, we and the entire humanitarian community must be more efficient and effective with our resources in the coming years.

It is past time for us to more fully share power and accountability with affected people and local civil society. Our responses should be data-driven, nimble, led by local voices, and evaluated for effectiveness and integrity. We are not there yet, and it will take significant investment for us to get there. Yet I believe that eventually this will pay dividends.

It is these difficult, unanswered questions that make me believe that cash assistance must still be front and centre in our conversations about humanitarian assistance. As the cash community, you have done an excellent job in leading a sea change in thinking. Now, we’re excited to dig more deeply into these topics and see what new commitments we can identify to use cash as a lever to unlock change. I hope the local actors and affected communities represented here today will hold us accountable, because we owe it to crisis-affected people everywhere.

Kate Hart, Head of Policy, Evidence and Learning, CALP

There are myriad of important issues that need to be addressed, which have been identified by recent research and consultations from mid-2022 onwards. There is general agreement that the policy dialogue needs to be focused and through discussions two areas have been identified as initial priorities for the dialogue – namely people centred response and locally led response. Both these areas have been very challenging to move forward in recent years.

There are exciting agency and inter-agency initiatives that have been developed or are being developed in these two areas. There is an opportunity to share and learn from these and to potentially identify areas of new collective policy interest.

The need for this policy process came from the cash community. Many people have already expressed an interest in leading parts of the process, and many have expressed interest in engaging in it.

We anticipate the process will be defined by the whole community – national and international - after this launch. There may also be opportunities to link with other processes. It has already been recommended from amongst the community that a ‘technical engine room’ is established to support the process. CALP – and others – are on standby to support too.

As the process progresses, we anticipate that other areas may be identified by the community which may also need to new or refreshed collective policy commitments.

Nabeh Allaham, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

I am honored and grateful to be a part of this important event and have the opportunity to speak in front of the senior management from so many humanitarian organisations from around the world.

I am a young humanitarian. I believe I can make a difference and I believe it is my right to push for change when I know we can do better as a humanitarian community. Today, I find myself speaking to leaders who were once in my position.

You have massive experience in humanitarian response and policy and have taken the responsibility on your shoulders to support and improve humanitarian interventions – doing so with the intent of respecting the dignity and capacities of vulnerable communities.

You are in a position with the knowledge and power to lead and steer the energy of the young generation to unlock the potential for transformative change in the way we address crises and alleviate human suffering with a robust and flexible humanitarian approach.

Around the world, the number of people in crisis is rising, the humanitarian system needs to change to meet those needs – it really must do better.

There are challenges to overcome, but as this meeting has shown there are big opportunities in front of us. I believe that if we take a truly people-centred approach to aid, listening to people’s needs and preferences, listening to their hopes and fears, then we can and will do better. To make this happen will require all of us to change.

There is need for leadership from everyone present, to make the system more locally led - empowering local communities, organisations, and national capacities to lead humanitarian response, delivering flexible and timely assistance to the affected people.

Most people in crisis prefer to receive cash, and the research shows it works and has many positive impacts. So why aren’t we doing more of it? The meeting has shown we are falling short in terms of what is possible – both in terms of volume and quality. It’s also true that cash has catalysed other positive changes in the

humanitarian system and can continue to do so. We need change, we need it now – the question is whether we are willing to work together to make that happen.

Leadership is not about maintaining the status quo; it is about having the courage to challenge, recognising the urgency of change, and taking bold, decisive action to meet the voice of the communities that will build trust and transparency. I hope you will lead the way.

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