

The Reporting Paradox

Why humanitarian agencies still need to report — even after losing the people who used to do it

By Mark Bonyo · Founder, 5W.AI · 15+ years in humanitarian reporting & monitoring systems · May 2026

About the author. Mark Bonyo has spent more than fifteen years designing and operating reporting and monitoring systems for the humanitarian and development sector. His career spans multiple inter-agency coordination roles supporting Clusters, UN agencies, and NGOs across diverse global contexts. He brings deep expertise in building data models and business intelligence analytics that drive evidence-based decision-making, and is the founder of 5W.AI.

Executive Summary

Between January 2025 and early 2026, humanitarian funding suffered the sharpest contraction on record. U.S. humanitarian aid alone dropped from **approximately \$14 billion in 2024 to \$3.7 billion in 2025**¹ — a 74% collapse — while other traditional donors followed with their own reductions. By May 2025, **at least 233,818 jobs had been lost across 159 humanitarian agencies**², and 54% of NGOs operating across 150 countries reported staff layoffs.³

And yet, donor reporting requirements have not gone away. If anything, the surviving funding is **more conditional, more compliance-heavy, and more closely scrutinised** than ever. The agencies running today's response are doing it with half the people, the same 5W matrices, the same logframes, the same cluster submissions, and the same audit trails — only now with no margin for error.

The problem. The humanitarian sector has lost the people who do its reporting — but not the reporting itself.

Information management, monitoring & evaluation, and reporting staff have been disproportionately cut as restricted funding has collapsed, yet donor compliance, cluster 5W submissions, and audit requirements remain fully in force. The result is a sector working in structural overcommitment: capacity is down, demands are up, and the gap is being absorbed — silently and unsustainably — by the staff who remain. Without intervention, data quality will erode, donor compliance will slip, and the evidence base for what works in humanitarian response will quietly disappear.

1. The funding collapse, in numbers

The aid recession of 2025 is the single largest contraction in humanitarian funding since OCHA began consolidating global appeals. The Council on Foreign Relations called 2025 "the worst humanitarian year on record."⁴ Total funding fell to 2016 levels even as needs held flat. Refugees International reports that, by year-end, responders were short more than \$3 billion against already hyper-prioritised plans.⁵

¹Refugees International, *A Generational Collapse: Tracking the Toll of Trump's Humanitarian Aid Cuts* (Feb 2026). U.S. humanitarian funding fell from approximately \$14.0B (FY2024) to \$3.7B (FY2025). refugeesinternational.org

²DevelopmentAid, *Tracking the Humanitarian Layoff Surge — USAID Stop-Work Tracker* (Oct 2025). Cumulative figure across 159 agencies tracked. developmentaid.org

³ICVA, *NGO Pulse Survey on the Humanitarian Funding Crisis* (May 2025): 54% of NGOs across 150 countries reported staff layoffs. See also *ICVA Humanitarian Financing Pocket Guide* (April 2025). icvanetwork.org

⁴Council on Foreign Relations, *The Great Aid Recession: 2025's Humanitarian Crash in Nine Charts* (Dec 2025). cfr.org

⁵Refugees International (Feb 2026), op. cit. The 2025 funding shortfall against hyper-prioritised plans exceeded \$3 billion.

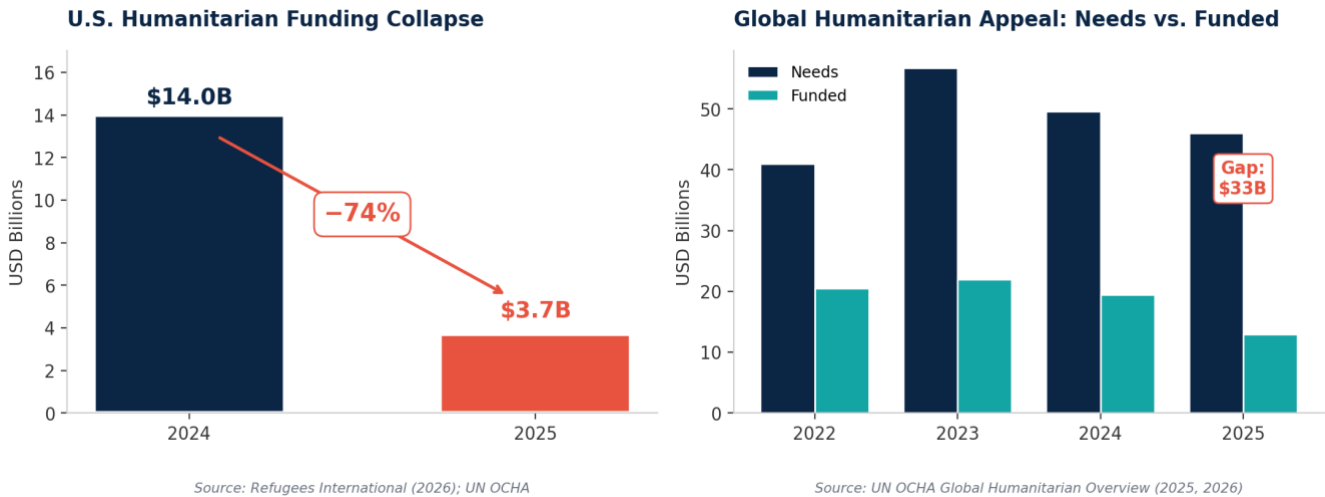


Figure 1. The U.S. humanitarian funding collapse and the widening global appeal gap.

2. Who lost their jobs — and which jobs went first

The DevelopmentAid USAID Stop-Work Tracker has documented job losses across 159 agencies.⁶ Some of the steepest cuts have hit the operational backbone of humanitarian response — UN agencies, large international NGOs, and the contractors and research outfits that monitor and evaluate aid effectiveness:

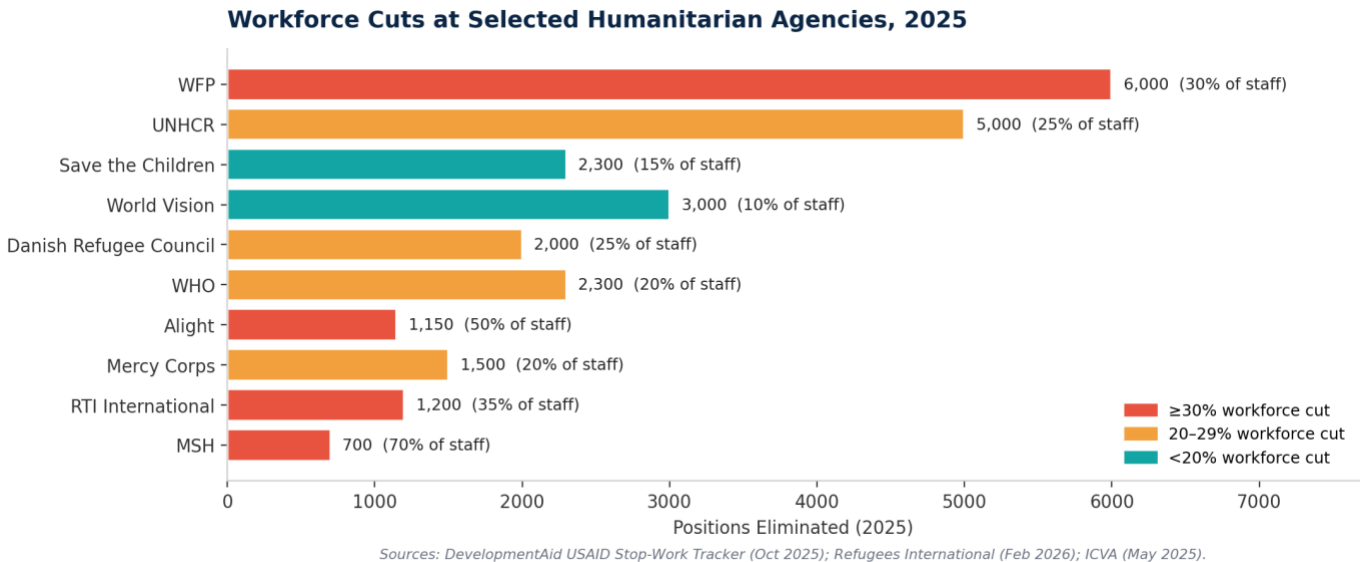


Figure 2. A sample of organisational workforce reductions announced in 2025.

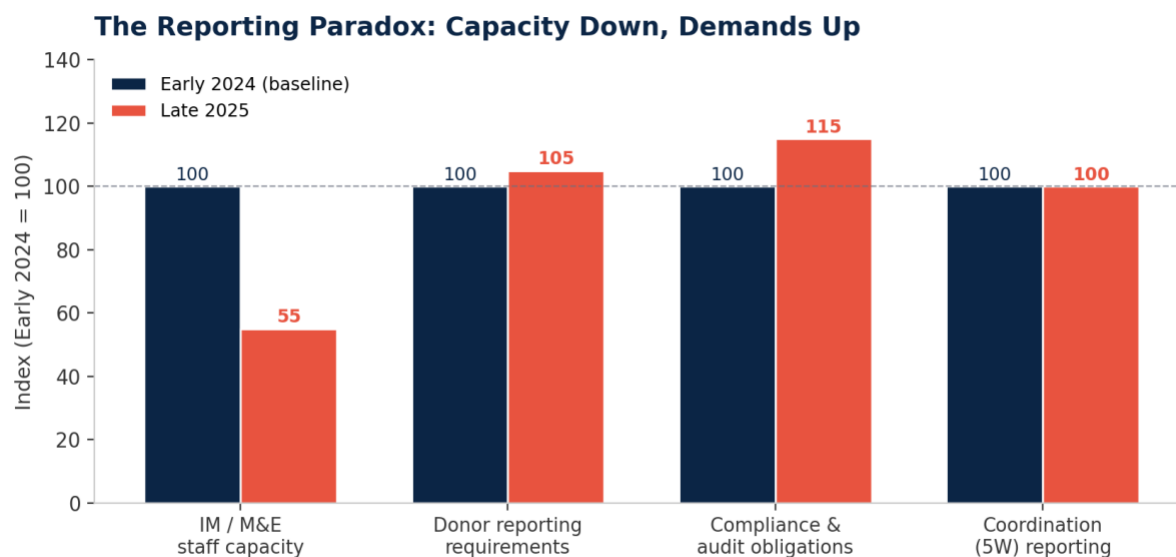
Within these reductions, **information management (IM), monitoring & evaluation (M&E), and reporting roles have been disproportionately affected.** They are typically grant-funded support functions — the first to be defunded when restricted funding evaporates, even though the reporting they produce is what donors require to release the next tranche. The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) programme, U.S. funding for WHO health-cluster IM, and dozens of in-country M&E units have been wound down or eliminated. As Refugees International concluded in February 2026: "As USAID

⁶Workforce reductions compiled from DevelopmentAid (Oct 2025); Refugees International (Feb 2026); ICVA (May 2025). Includes WFP (~6,000 positions, ~30% of workforce), UNHCR (~5,000, ~25%), Save the Children (~2,300, ~15%), World Vision (~3,000, ~10%), Danish Refugee Council (~2,000, ~25%), WHO (~2,300, ~20%), Mercy Corps (~1,500, ~20%), and the wind-down of major U.S.-funded research and M&E contractors including RTI International and Management Sciences for Health.

programs have disappeared, so have their reporting requirements designed to track improvements to beneficiaries' wellbeing."⁷ The capability to know what worked is being lost at the same time as the capability to deliver.

3. The paradox: capacity down, demands up

Donors that remain in the field have not relaxed their requirements - they still require — at minimum — **logframe reporting, indicator tables, financial reconciliation against budget lines, beneficiary disaggregation, partner sub-reporting, and cluster 5W submissions**. The UN Joint Inspection Unit has long flagged that donor reporting is layered *on top of* each agency's own corporate reporting; ICVA calls reporting requirements "diverse, complex, and burdensome."⁸



Indicative model. Capacity figure based on ICVA (2025) — 54% of agencies laid off staff. Reporting/compliance figures: NRC (2021); UN JIU/REP/2017/7; ICVA Pocket Guide (2025).

Figure 3. Indicative model of the reporting paradox now confronting humanitarian organisations.

The result is a sector working in a state of **structural overcommitment**: one IM officer now covers what three used to; one M&E lead is consolidating data across portfolios that previously had dedicated leads; and Country Directors are personally reviewing 5W submissions because the matrix coordinator role no longer exists. Inconsistencies, duplication, late reporting, and quiet underperformance against indicators all become the natural — and dangerous — consequence.

4. The case for an AI assistant — and the case for 5W.AI

This is precisely the gap **5W.AI** was designed to close. It is built around the humanitarian sector's standard 5W activity-reporting framework — Who is doing What, Where, When, for Whom — and it operates as a **co-pilot for the IM, M&E and grant management staff who remain**, not a replacement for them.

- **Automated 5W consolidation.** Partner reports in any format are mapped to a 116-field harmonised activity standard, deduplicated, and turned into cluster-ready 5W matrices in minutes — not weeks.

⁷Refugees International (Feb 2026), op. cit. Original framing on the simultaneous loss of programmes and their associated reporting infrastructure.

⁸UN Joint Inspection Unit, *Review of Donor Reporting Requirements Across the United Nations System* (JIU/REP/2017/7); ICVA (April 2025), op. cit. — characterising donor reporting as "diverse, complex, and burdensome." unjiu.org

- **Grant expenditure monitoring with AI inconsistency detection.** The financial module flags risk patterns like a grant at 91% spent and 22% achieved before the donor sees it. Built-in alert rules also catch anomalous reach rates, beneficiary arithmetic mismatches, and missing donor IDs automatically.
- **Donor- and partner-aware dashboards, plus an immutable audit trail.** Donors see only the partners they fund; partners see the donors they report to. Every change, override and submission is timestamped and traceable.

The MVP is live at 5-w-ai.vercel.app, validated on South Sudan Q2 2024 cluster data — 723 activity rows, 12 clusters, 10 partners. Pricing is freemium for individual IM Officers, with a 50% humanitarian discount for national NGOs in low-income countries — a deliberate adoption lever for a sector that cannot afford additional procurement burden.

If your team has lost IM, M&E or reporting capacity in the past 12 months and the donor reporting calendar has not adjusted, you are already inside the reporting paradox. 5W.AI is currently onboarding pilot organisations — cluster coordinators, INGOs, national NGOs, and donors. Request a demo at mark@5ws.io or 5ws.io.

Further reading

Refugees International (Feb 2026), [A Generational Collapse](#) · DevelopmentAid (Oct 2025), [USAID Stop-Work Tracker](#) · CFR (Dec 2025), [The Great Aid Recession](#) · ICVA (April 2025), [Humanitarian Financing Pocket Guide](#) · UN Joint Inspection Unit, [Donor Reporting Requirements \(JIU/REP/2017/7\)](#).