

# The Big Humanitarian Rethink 2

Conducted for the Advisory Panel on the Future of Humanitarian Action  
January-February 2026



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Making Sense of Crisis  
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## Introduction

### Methodology and approach

The digital consultation was one of four workstreams for the research, the others being a literature review, focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Each provided a different perspective on the research question of legitimacy and humanitarian action.

We used an open-source digital platform, [pol.is](https://pol.is), to surface views and priorities from practitioners in, and observers of, relief and humanitarian work. The platform encouraged open-ended and anonymous participation with a simple prompt: ***What makes humanitarian action legitimate in today's world - and who gets to decide?***

Participants could put forward their own ideas, and vote for or against the statements of others. This allowed for the surfacing of a wide range of viewpoints, without pre-determining options or topics. Over time, [pol.is](https://pol.is) automatically groups participants into voting blocs who vote similarly to help identify shared areas of agreement and divergence.

From 14 January up to 23 February 2026, 267 people took part, 316 statements were submitted, and 14,961 votes cast. The full dataset may be downloaded here: <https://poliscommunity.crown-shy.com/report/r38ffhxp4webusrdr8fj>

Rather than a conventional opinion survey, [pol.is](https://pol.is) “helps identify the different ways a large group of people think about a divisive or complicated topic.” It is one of a set of civic technology approaches and tools that foster deliberative decision-making and citizen engagement. As well as outlining differences of opinion, it can identify areas of consensus.

The consultation was promoted largely on LinkedIn, and circulated through formal and informal professional networks, including those of ODI Global and NEAR. It was not

intended for the public. Its aim was to surface and explore opinion among those occupied in the conventional development and humanitarian sector, or those adjacent to it. The consultation and the circulation of it was conducted in English.

A word of caution in interpreting the findings: this is not a regular survey. Participants are not required to vote on everything, so each comment has a variable number of responses. Readers should not expect a clean and comparable dataset as you might with a structured survey.

### QUICK QUIZ

We selected ten statements key to differentiating the groups.

You can quickly vote on these and see where you would land.

You will be assigned to the A or B bloc (or in some cases, neither).

**Click here:** <https://form.typeform.com/to/V2yetx2g>

We have used it as an opinion mapping exercise which highlights and segments different views about the future of humanitarian action and the sources of its legitimacy. While it is qualitative in its findings, it uses statistics to determine opinion groups. This hybrid has been called a [quali-quantitative](#) approach.

Linking anonymous profiles to statements and votes is an innovation used in this consultation to enrich the data and combine deliberative and survey approaches. To achieve this, we customised a link between survey platform Typeform and an instance of pol.is hosted by policy advisory group [CrownShy](#).

## Who took part?

Respondents were asked four multiple-choice questions: gender, years of professional experience, the country where they are based, and the type of employer (if any).

The data collected allows us to have a basic profile of respondents.

Entry to the consultation required these four questions to be answered. No personally identifiable information was collected. If the respondents later returned to the pol.is consultation, they were not asked again, as an anonymous browser cookie identified them as a returning user.

### Gender

Female Male Other

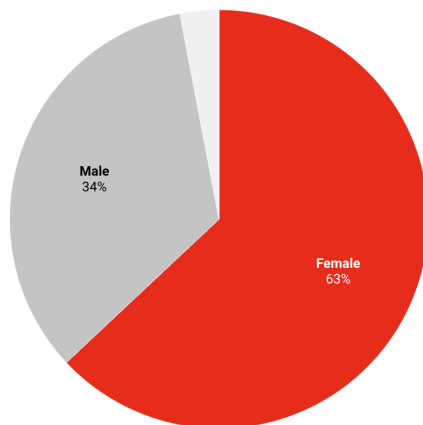


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### Years of work experience

years of professional experience

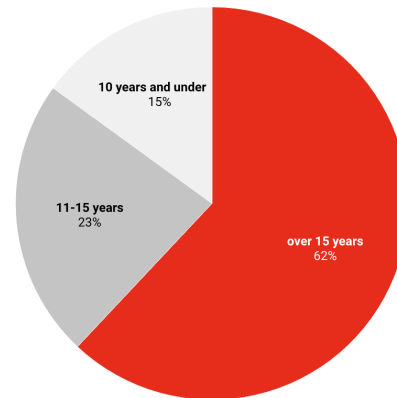
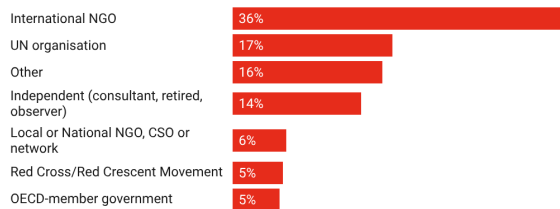


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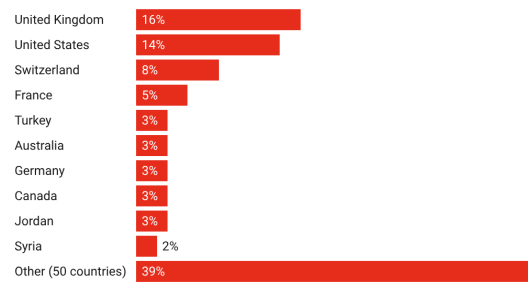
### Employer type



\*Other\* includes: Other governments, Academic/Advocacy, Private Sector, Human rights, Media, Philanthropy, IFI, EU, None

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### Country of residence



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Overall, the respondents are likely to be employed in the mainstream aid sector, to be based in the Global North (or Global Minority) countries, to be mid-career or higher in seniority and to be women.

In more detail, two thirds (66%) were based in Europe or North America. A similar proportion, 62%, reported 15 years or more of professional experience. Thirty-six percent worked for an international NGO, 17% for a UN organisation and 5% for the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. In sum, 58% worked for one of these three categories. Finally, 63% of respondents were female.

Senior professionals in the humanitarian and development sector in the Global North therefore make up most of the participants.

## Characterisation of voting blocs

The pol.is algorithm segments respondents into voting blocs, grouping those who vote similarly. In this instance, two distinct blocs emerged, with 240 of the 267 respondents assigned to either group A (62 respondents; 24% of those grouped) or the much larger,

group B (178 respondents; 76% of those grouped). Analysis of how blocs A and B voted, and particularly where they diverged, allows us to characterise the blocs.

The demographic and professional characteristics of the two groups are as follows:

**Gender:** Men were more likely to be placed in the A group: About 28% of men were placed in the A group, against 18% of women.

**Countries/Regions:** Among respondents in Africa, about 44% were categorised as A. Other regions were less likely to be A. Only 15% of participants from the Middle East and Asia were marked as A.

**Experience:** About one-third of those with over 15 years of experience were classified as A. But only 8% of those with fewer years were found in the A bloc.

**Type of employer:** Local NGO staff were all in the B bloc, and 82% of international NGO workers were also categorised as B. The A bloc was a little more common for private sector and OECD government respondents, at 38%. UN and Red Cross/Crescent staff were 28% A and 33% A respectively.

### **Bloc A: The cautious incrementalists**

**“Cautious incrementalists”** Bloc A is smaller, more cautious, and often uncertain, with high pass rates on politically loaded or conceptual questions (e.g. Western exceptionalism, cultural humility, relational approaches, sovereignty shifts). They are protective of core humanitarian principles - especially neutrality and impartiality - and resistant to reframing legitimacy around solidarity or colonial critique. They are hesitant about redistributing decision-making power to grassroots actors or recasting Global North roles as primarily facilitative and are wary of activist approaches. They value metrics, procedural competence, and specific impact definitions, and are more willing to accept pragmatic compromises (including conditional funding) to save lives. In diagnosing system threats, they are more likely to see critiques such as decolonisation as damaging, less likely to view populism as a primary risk, and less convinced the current system is wholly self-serving or in need of dismantling.

Men were more likely to be in the A group than women. Those with 15 or more years of experience were more likely to be A than their juniors. Private sector and donor respondents were more likely to be A than NGO or UN staff. And those working in Africa were more likely to be As than those working in the rest of the world.

The As demonstrate strong views in some areas, but in others they are much less certain. Often, they are split in their views or exhibit high pass rates indicating they are perhaps not sure what to think, unfamiliar with terms or concepts. For example, they demonstrated high levels of uncertainty around statement 74: “Western exceptionalism cannot stand” (52% of As “passed”; compared with 93% of Bs who agreed with this

statement). They were also unsure what to think about a statement about ‘cultural humility’ (32% disagreed, 57% passed; compared with 66% of Bs who agreed) and a call to be relational rather than procedural (41); and shift towards population-based sovereignty rather than state-based sovereignty (45).

## Areas of uncertainty

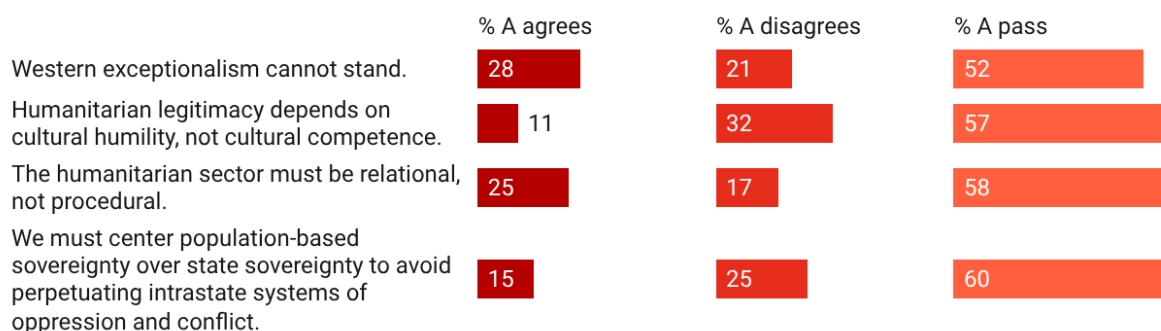


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One area where the As do have strong views, is around a mooted shift in power. The As disagree strongly that the role of Global North actors should be to facilitate local organisations with fundraising and support. They also disagree that grassroots organisations should determine aid priorities. Surprisingly perhaps, given contemporary public discourse in the relief sector, they also expressed a high level of uncertainty about whether mutual should be the primary mode of aid in the future.

## Power shift

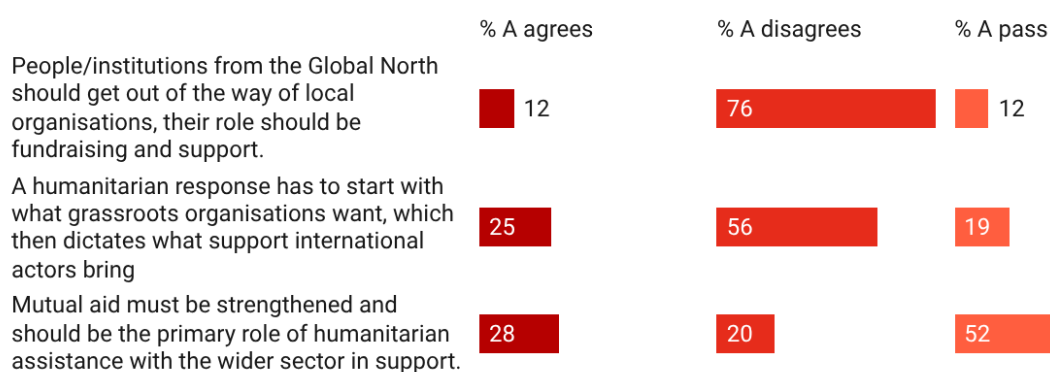


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Another area of certainty for the As is the need to defend humanitarian principles, notably neutrality and impartiality. The As are protective of the principles, and less sure that they require a rethink, expansion, or replacement with different animating principles such as solidarity.

## Humanitarian principles

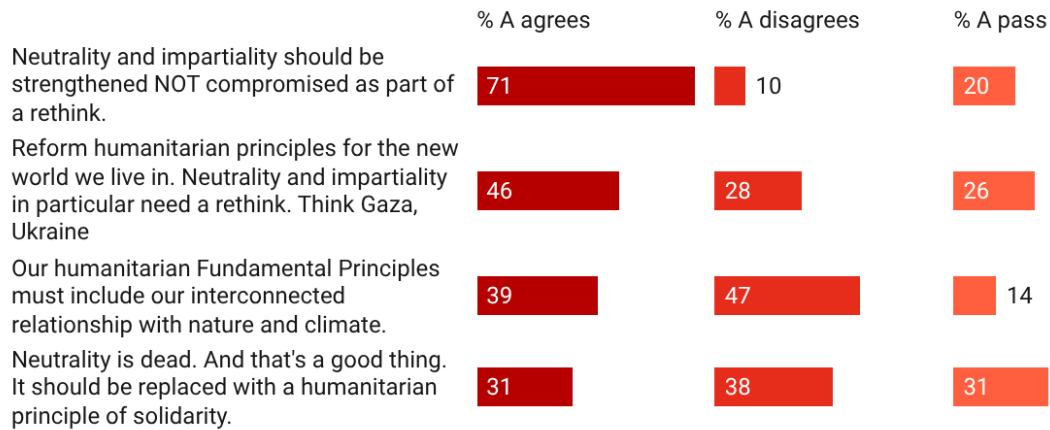


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The As are split on whether protecting neutrality would require a more politically engaged approach. And they are wary of activist approaches to humanitarianism.

## Advocacy and activism

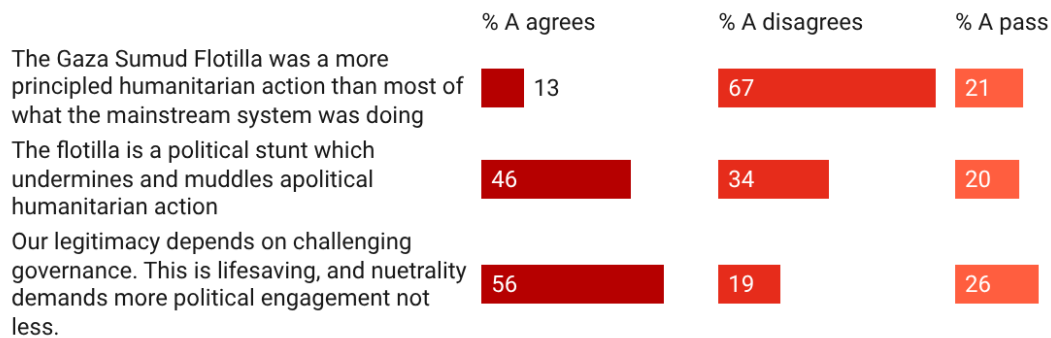


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Views are mixed, but the As are considerably more comfortable with accepting compromises that come with conditional aid in order to save lives.

## Conditional aid

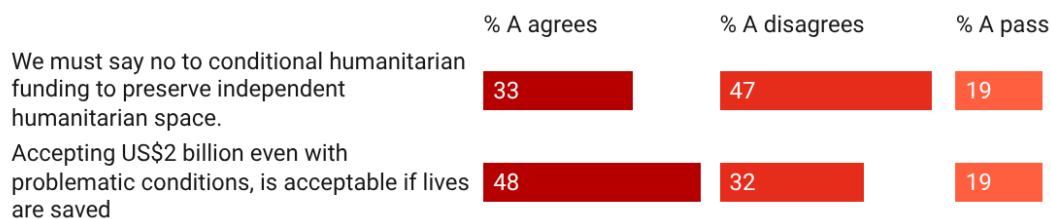


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The As' analysis of the root causes of threats to the current system identifies critiques of the system, including decolonisation, as having caused real harm. They are less likely to agree that the rise of populism is a major threat.

## Threats to the system

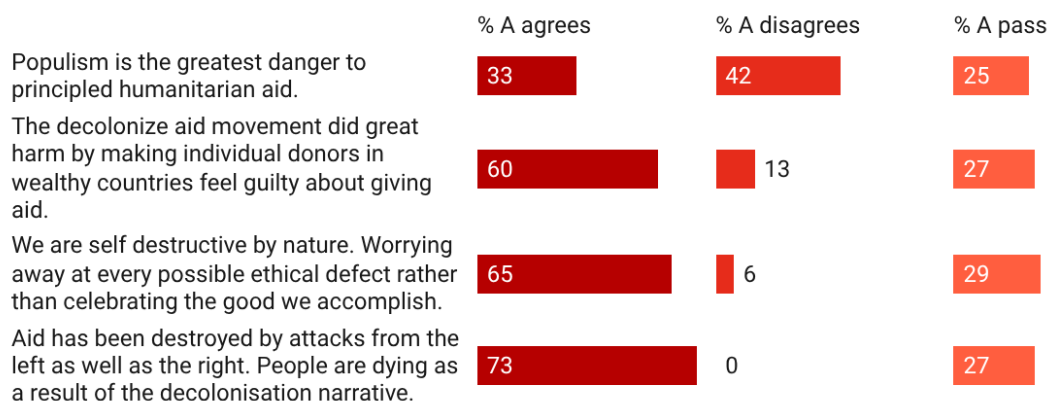


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The As are less certain about need to dismantle the system. They lament the loss of jobs in the sector and would like to restore the system with funding from new donors. They are less likely to see the system as self-serving and a 'boys club' unwilling to change.

## System pathologies

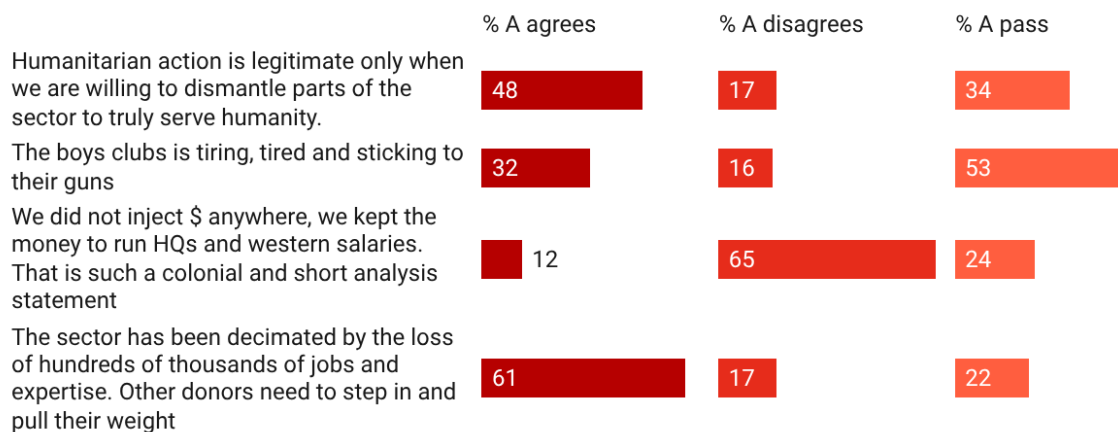


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## Bloc B: The new radicals

**“New radicals”** Bloc B is larger, more cohesive, and more ideologically confident, applying a political economy lens to both crises and the legitimacy crisis in humanitarianism. They foreground power, structural injustice, and colonial legacies, strongly support subsidiarity and local civil society leadership, and argue that crisis-

affected people should determine priorities. They are open to rethinking or replacing neutrality with solidarity, support more politically informed advocacy, and are more comfortable with activist framings of humanitarianism as advancing rights. They are acutely aware of harms caused by donor governments and humanitarian actors themselves, are less willing to accept conditional or compromised aid. They see populism and extractive systems as major threats to principled action. Their vision of humanitarianism is expansive - embracing climate, nature, dignity, and longer-term transformation - placing greater weight on human vitality and justice than on technical metrics alone.

Overall, more people were categorised as B than A. Typically, the Bs were more likely to be female, and have fewer years of work experience. International NGO staff were overwhelmingly B (82%) and local NGOs were all Bs. Respondents in West Asia/Middle East were 86% in the B bloc but participants in Asia and North America were also above 80%. Private sector and donor respondents were less likely to be B than NGO or UN staff.

The Bs have strong opinions, they are often very aligned and certain about what they agree and disagree with. They analyse the root causes of crises, and of the crisis in humanitarianism with a political economy lens and an acute focus on power, and they are comfortable to critique the system.

They have strong views about how power should be redistributed and who should make the decisions. In short, they believe in a shift towards subsidiarity, with decisions being taken by those closest to crisis, most notably, by crisis affected people themselves.

## "People at the centre"

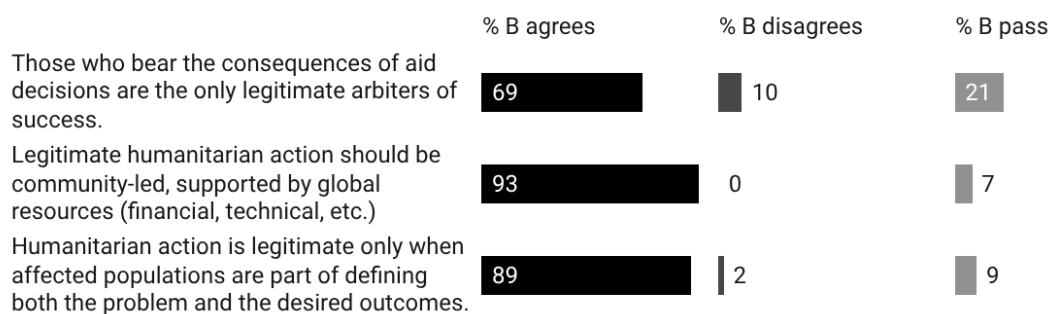


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They believe that responses should be led by local civil society with internationals playing a supportive role and that humanitarian action should support local structures.

## Power shift: Subsidiarity

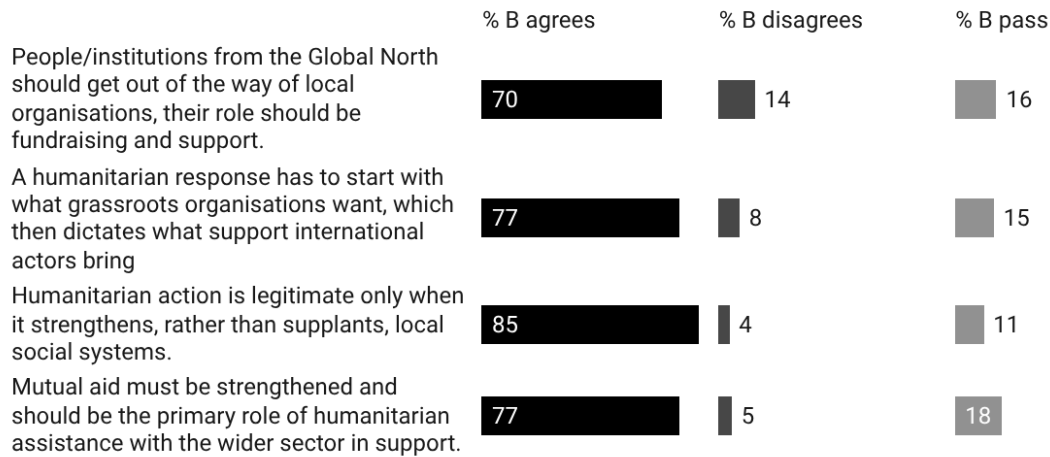


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The Bs have a less clear-cut view on the need to protect the humanitarian principle of neutrality. They are clear however that achieving neutrality requires more politically informed advocacy and they are also open to rethinking neutrality.

## Questioning neutrality

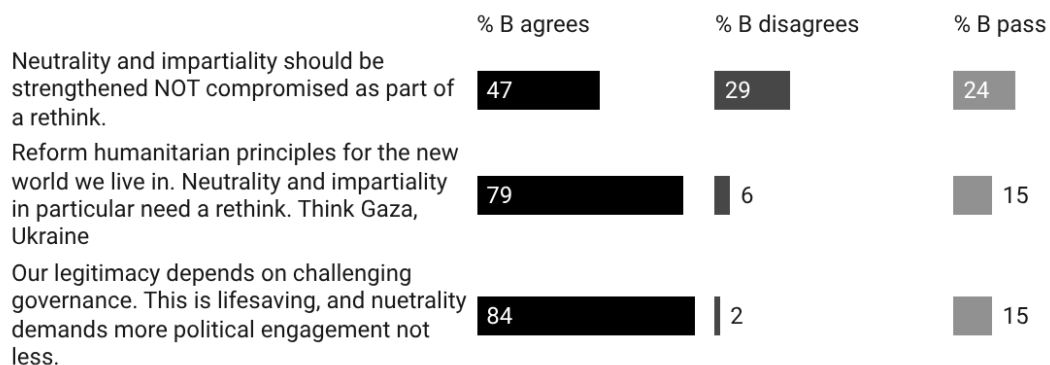


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The Bs are more supportive of activism, open to replacing humanitarian principles with solidarity as an animating principle, and to frame humanitarian legitimacy in terms of supporting communities to achieve fundamental rights.

## Alternative principles and approaches

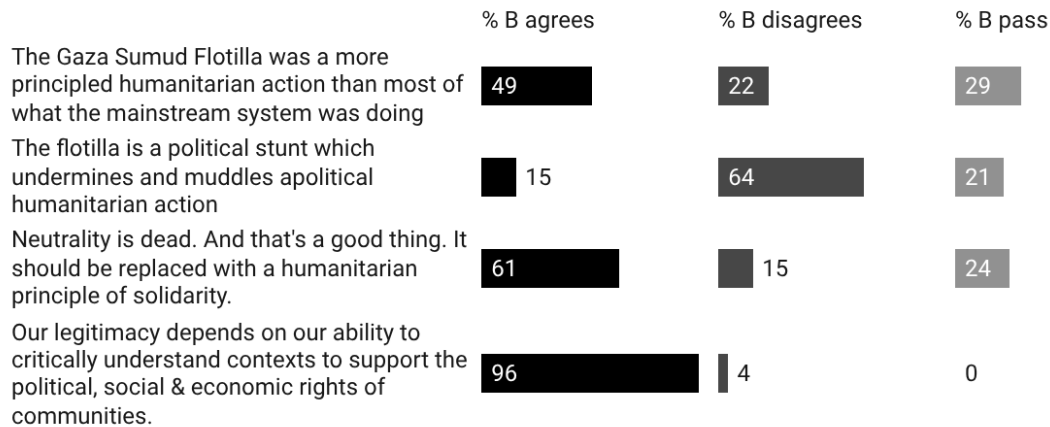


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The Bs have a strong awareness of the risks of humanitarians themselves doing harm and of the harms potentially caused by humanitarian donor governments. They are much less comfortable with the idea of accepting aid with problematic conditions.

## Caution around risks of doing harm

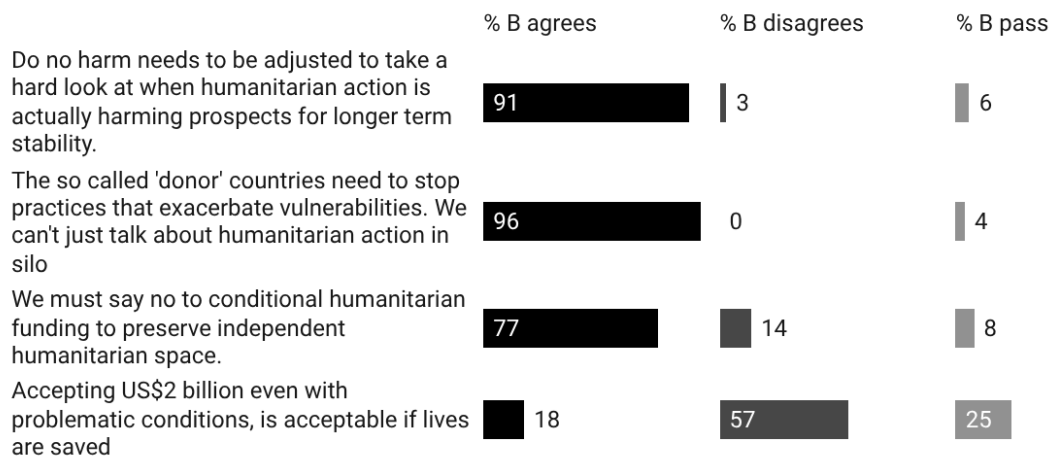


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The Bs apply a political lens to their analysis of legitimacy challenges and identify a need to separate humanitarianism from exploitative extractive systems and identify populism as major risk to principled humanitarian aid. The Bs are very strong advocates for decolonisation.

## Political and economic threats

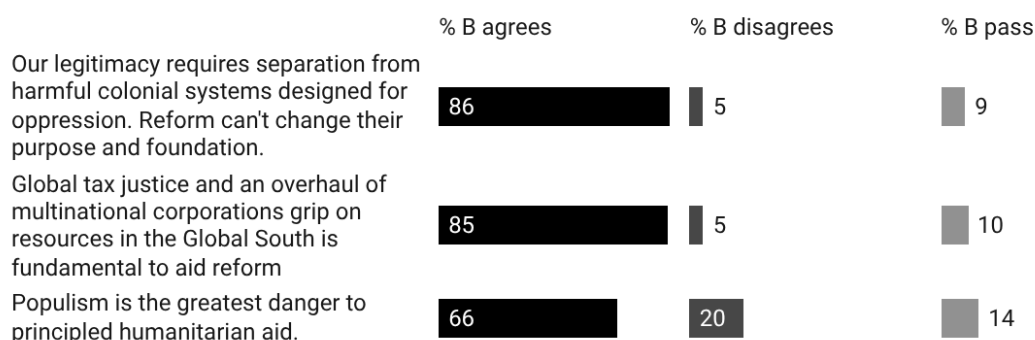


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The Bs have an expansive view of the scope of ambition and challenges humanitarianism should address, including nature and climate, ‘vitality’ over survival, and longer-term approaches. They have a much wider view of what impacts matter and consider human dignity more important than data.

## Scope of humanitarianism

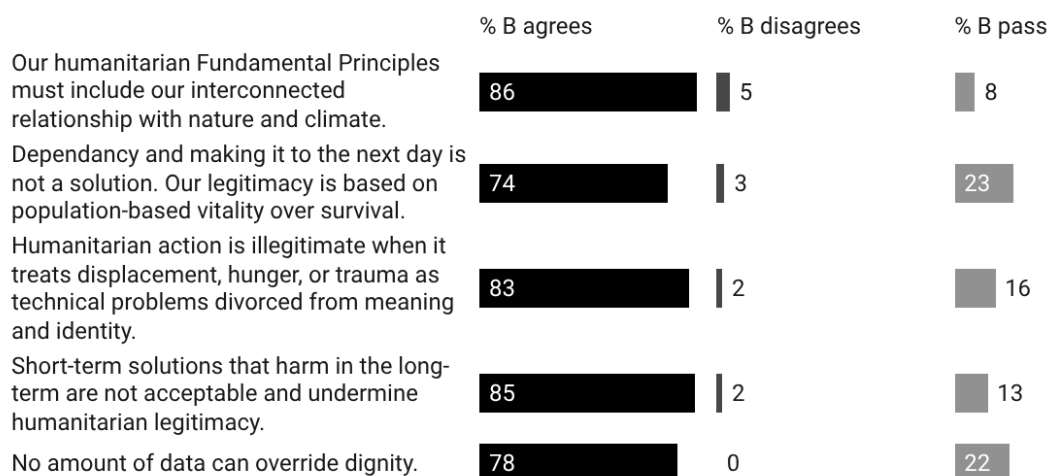


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## Emerging themes and areas of agreement

### Adapting to the changing geopolitical environment

We have so far examined the differences between As and Bs. Now we examine areas of convergence.

There is agreement that the world has changed and humanitarians need to accept reality and adapt. There was not much support for the contention that principled humanitarian action is unrealistic in the current “might is right” geopolitical landscape. There was, however, widespread acknowledgement that the political actions of major government donors are a real threat to neutrality, though there is some disagreement on whether aid is in fact a political tool of these powers. There is some potential support for proposals to shift the donor-recipient aid dynamic along the lines proposed by the Global Public Investment model, whereby decision-making is democratised on the basis that ‘all contribute, all decide’.<sup>1</sup>

## Geopolitical realities

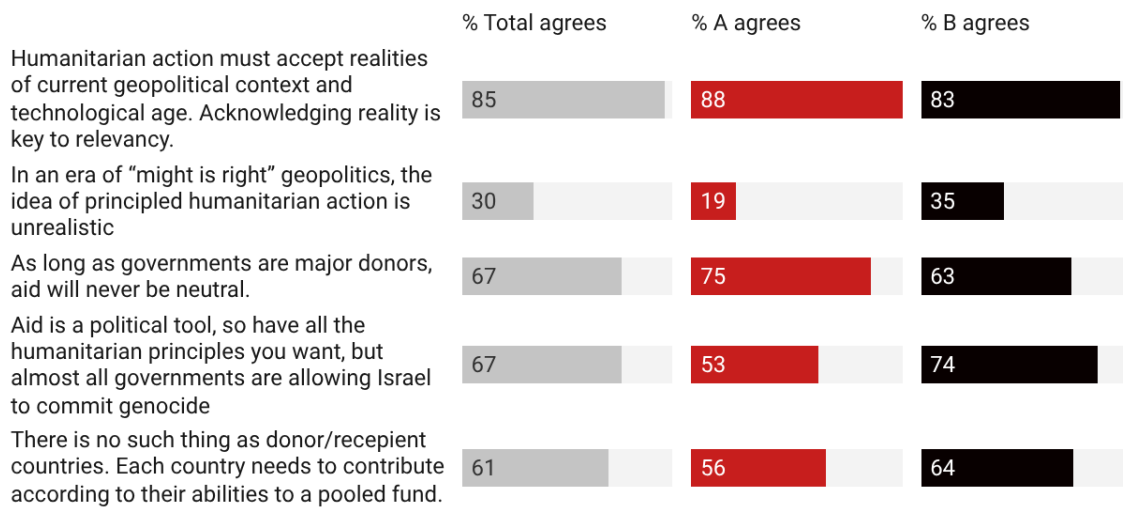


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<sup>1</sup> See: Reid-Henry, S. & Benn, C. (2023) Global Public Investment for Global Challenges. G20, T20 Taskforce 6, Accelerating SDGs: Exploring New Pathways to the 2030 Agenda.

## Hiding behind neutrality in the face of genocide

Strength of opinion varies somewhat between the As and Bs, but overall there is widespread agreement that the unwillingness to speak out in the midst of crimes against humanity and genocide, and appearing to hide behind the principle of neutrality, is a major threat to legitimacy. There is also agreement that advocacy and the courage to speak out are fundamental humanitarian duties.

### Neutrality as silence

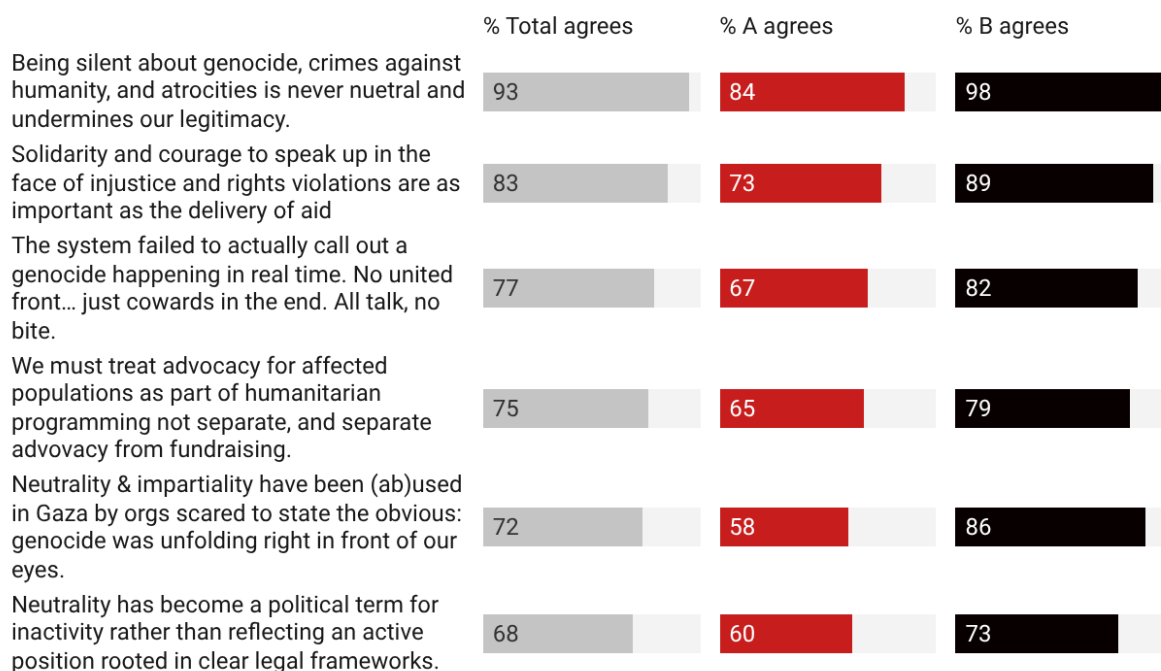


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Linked to the failures to live up to humanitarian principles in the face of geopolitical realities, opinions are mixed with no clear emergent consensus on what would be needed to achieve principled humanitarian action. There is broad agreement that principled humanitarian action is needed, but much less clarity on which principles.

The As are of the view that neutrality and impartiality should be strengthened. The Bs are less sure. They are open to a rethink of neutrality and impartiality and question whether the differences between them are understood in practice.

The Bs are supportive of the principle of solidarity as a replacement for neutrality. The As are much less convinced. While there is still some distance between their positions, there is overall support for the view that legitimacy could be restored to the principle of humanity by centring justice and equity.

## Principles, but which ones?

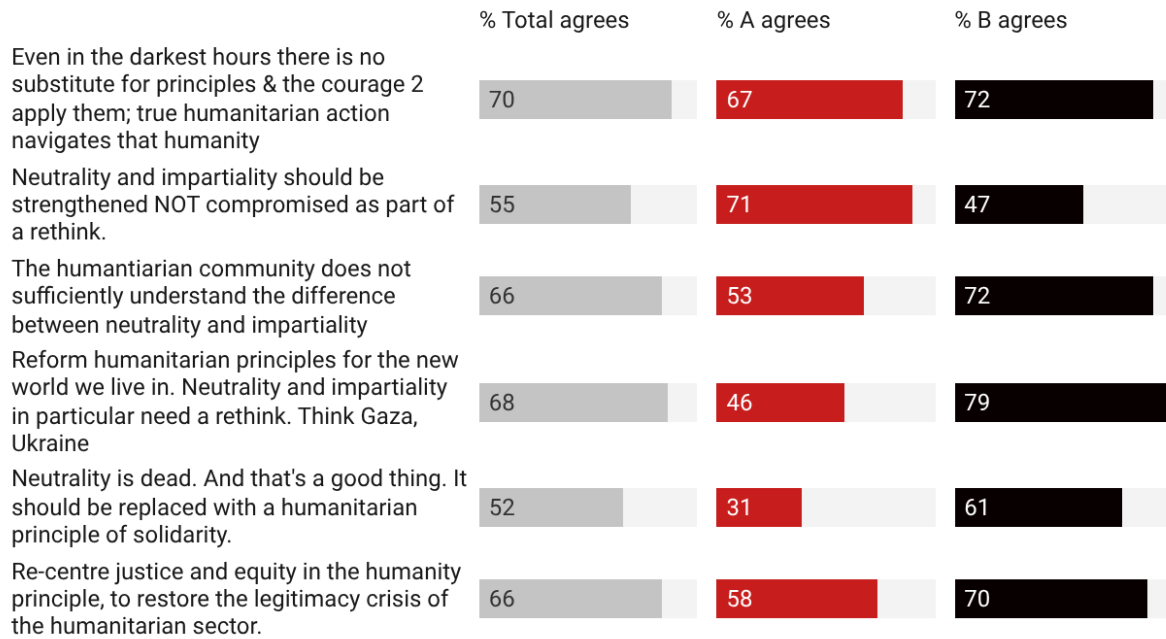


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## Bureaucratic capture and mission drift

There is a very strong consensus, with both a high volume of statements, and a high level of agreement, that something had gone badly wrong and the humanitarian system has become an industry more invested in itself than its mission. This has become a substantial challenge to legitimacy. The concentration of resources into headquarters and salaries was singled out for particular critique in this moment of major funding shortages.

### Bureaucratic capture

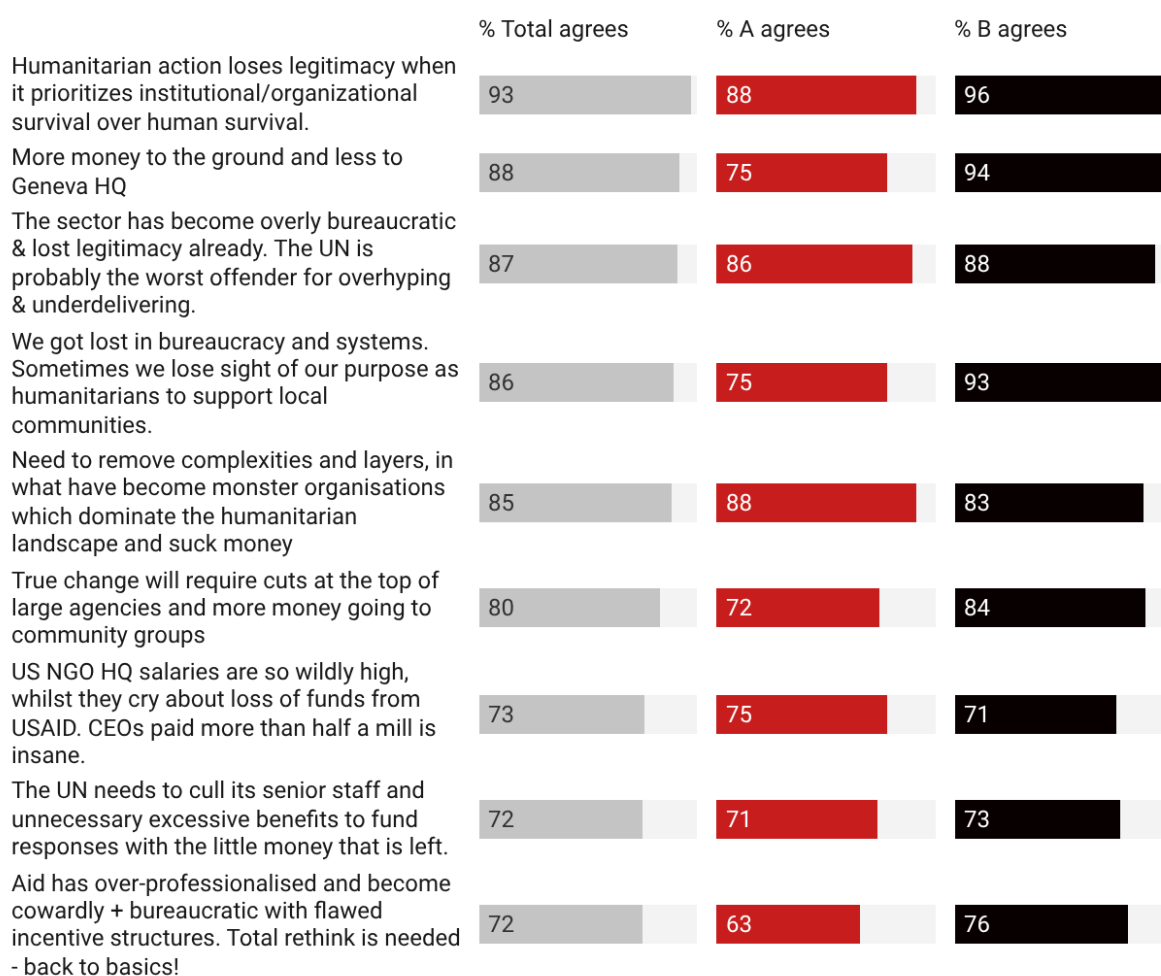


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The UN came in for particular criticism with a majority agreeing that the funding shock was a useful shake up for the UN to 'trim the fat'. The speed and transparency of downsizing and reform however, were called into question. And while opinions diverged somewhat between the As and Bs, overall, more than three quarters of participants agreed that OCHA should be focussed on serving populations in need, not fundraising for itself.

## UN not meeting the moment

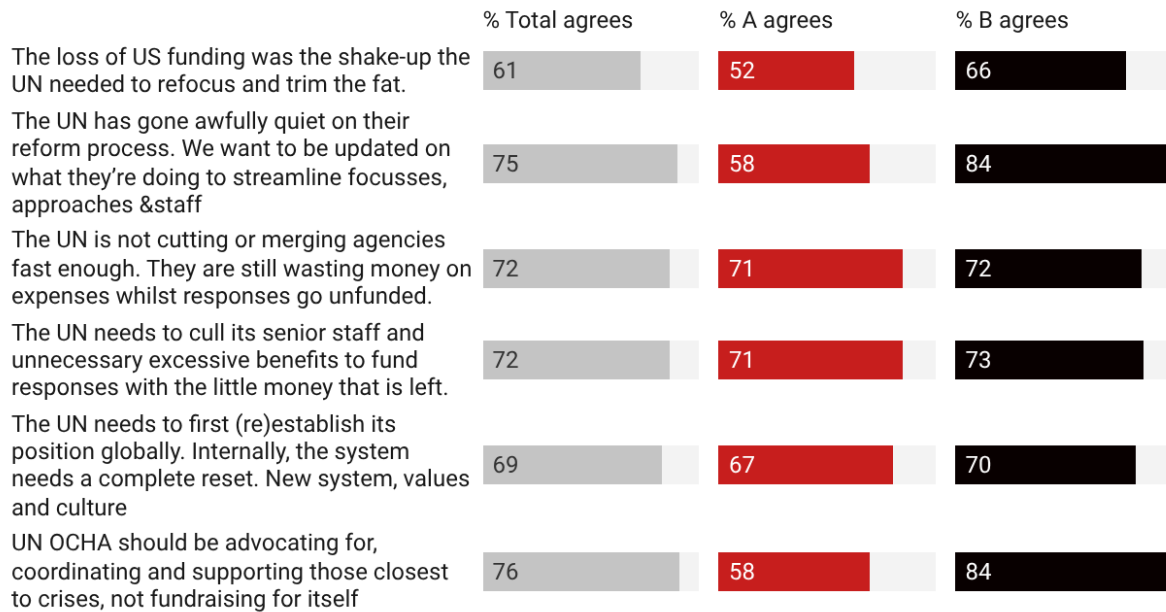


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## People at the centre

There is a high level of support for statements that assert that access relies on social consent from communities; that a “people-centred” approach is critical; and that legitimacy rests on delivering what people need and want. But the As are much less certain that the way to achieve that is through allowing affected people to decide or supporting local systems. The As are also very unsure about moving away from technical framings of needs towards a broader contextualised framing.

## People at the centre

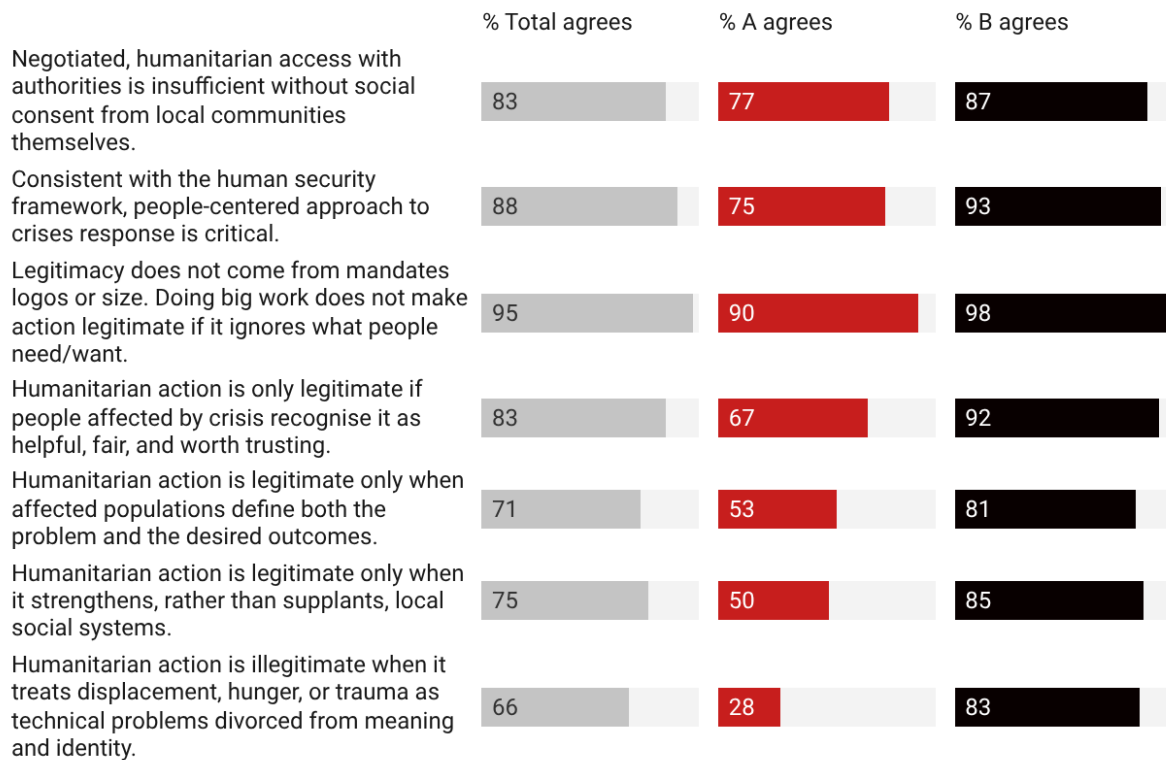


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## Shift the power?

In contrast with the rhetoric of the Humanitarian Reset and the Grand Bargain, in a time when competition for resources is rising, localisation turns out to be a relatively divisive issue. There is agreement that delivery on the localisation agenda lags behind the rhetoric, that in general humanitarian action should be locally driven, and that localisation is an important means to deliver more effective aid. But opinions are much more divided on what this means in practice. Most notable, among the As, there is little support for the contention that Global North actors should ‘get out of the way’ and play a supporting role to local and national actors, or that priorities should be determined by grassroots organisations. There is muted support for the idea that mutual aid provides hope for the future among the As. These views contrast sharply with those of the Bs. There are also differences of opinion about whether localisation can be sustained in the absence of external funding.

## As local as possible?

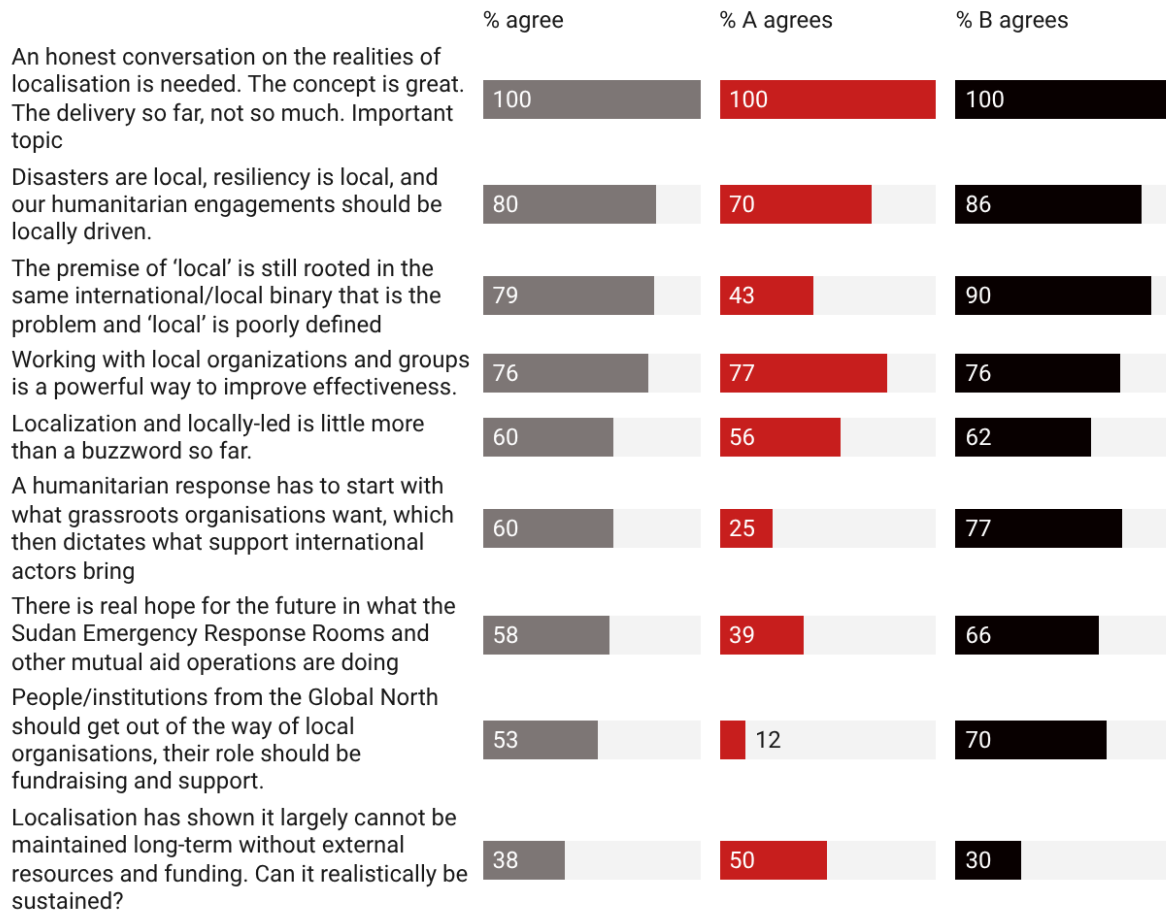


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## Decolonisation

Decolonisation was the most divisive issue across the consultation. The Bs support statements arguing that legitimacy rests on recognising crises as colonial consequences, that the system must completely decolonise and decouple from harmful colonial systems of oppression. The As firmly reject these views and in sharp contrast point towards the decolonisation agenda itself as being a major threat to humanitarian legitimacy, notably by promoting guilt among individual donors in wealthy countries. The As also question the financial viability of a decolonised system.

## Divisions around decolonisation

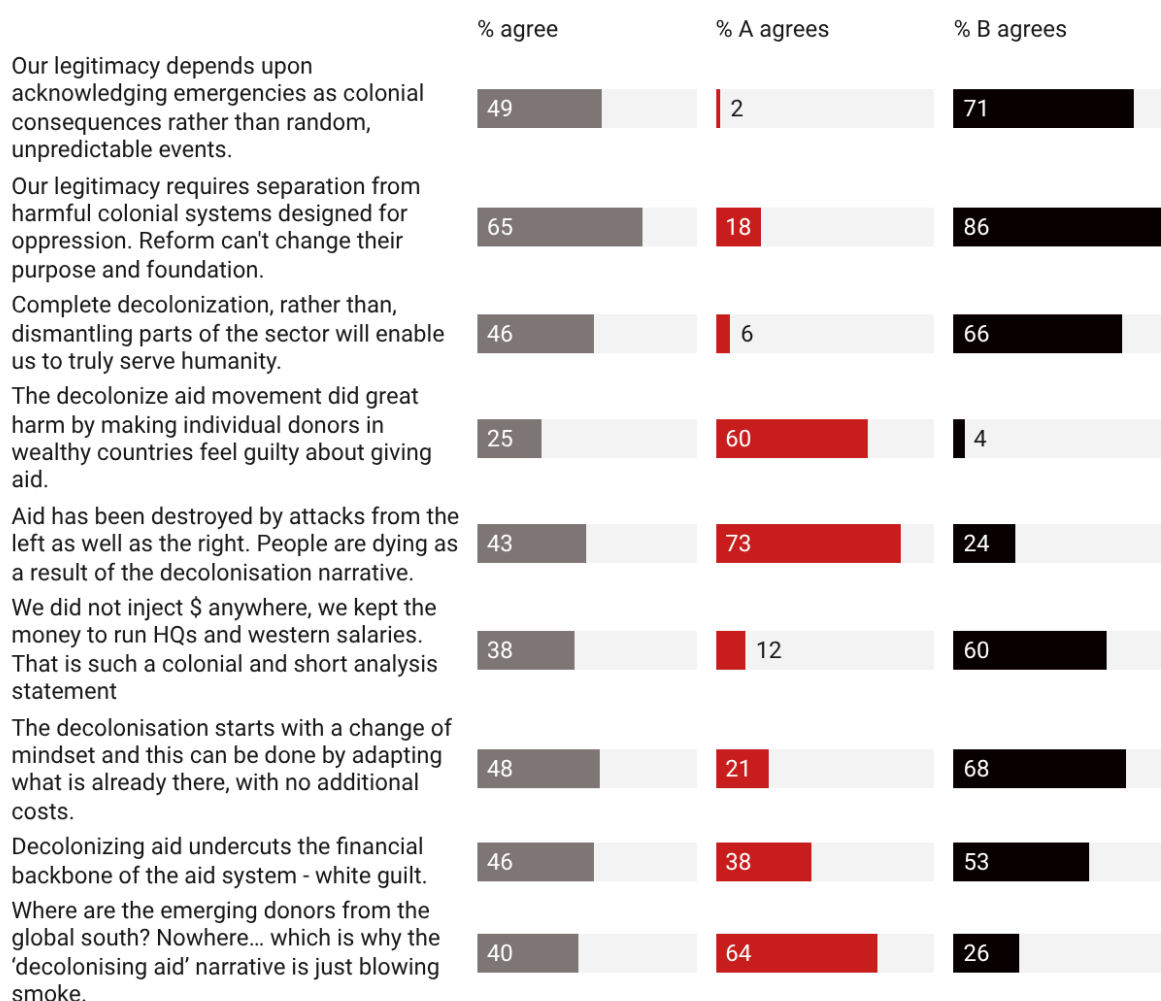


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Decolonisation is clearly polarising. The consultation did however surface some important areas of common ground. Firstly, there is broad agreement that decolonisation is only part of the power dynamics that need to be challenged. And that while structures may be problematic, the individual impetus towards altruism and helping others should be understood separately from the historical legacy.

## Common ground

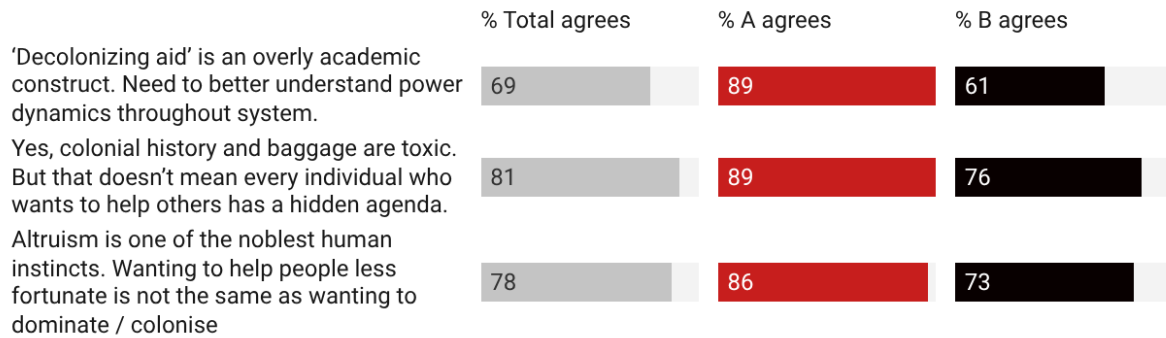


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## Accountability incentives

A complicated picture emerged on the theme of holding the system to account for results. On the one hand, there was broad agreement that this is reasonable. But there are also strong feelings that the current focus on results is missing what is important, has become an exercise in spin, and ultimately undermines credibility. Alternatives proposed include broad agreement on the idea that results should not focus on accountability to single donors, rather a more coherent assessment. There is considerable disagreement on less concrete proposals on moving beyond simple results metrics to holding to account against principles, and assessing more less tangible human impacts.

## A 'results' reset?



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