



A Bridge to the Future: Shifting Forward in 2026

Foreword by Cynthia Smith

Reflections by Chris Proulx, Jacqueline Asiimwe, George Ingram, Guillermo Correa, Shaun Samuels, John Coonrod, Goodness Odey, Ali Al Mokdad, Kim Kucinskaskas, Golda Fania, Amy Miller-Taylor, Brian Kastner, and Rachel Wilkinson

What has this past year taught you about the sector, and from where you sit, what changes, decisions, or actions would shift 2026 in a positive direction?

Humentum invited social good leaders across geographies and sectors to answer these two core questions in our new compendium.

What we received inspired us to think differently, embrace the unknown, and find optimism and refuge in the collective—knowing we can all go further together.

We hope their reflections below give you clarity and motivation, despite the uncertainty, to continue to move your mission and model forward and beyond the current system.

Table of Contents

The reflections can be read chronologically or selectively, depending on your interest. You may access each reflection by clicking on the title.

- 1. Foreword by Cynthia Smith**
Senior Director of Global Initiatives, Humentum
- 2. Emergence by Chris Proulx**
Co-CEO, Humentum
- 3. Recalibration by Jacqueline Asiimwe**
CEO, CivSource Africa
- 4. Resilience by George Ingram**
Senior Fellow, Brookings Institute
- 5. Endurance by Guillermo Correa**
Executive Director, RACI
- 6. Agency by Shaun Samuels**
Managing Director, SGS Consulting
- 7. Dignity by John Coonrod**
Founder & US Chair, Movement for Community Led Development (MCLD)
- 8. Equity by Goodness Odey**
Global Health & Development Professional
- 9. Transformation by Ali Al Mokdad**
Strategic Senior Leader
- 10. Regeneration by Kim Kucinkas**
Director of Global Initiatives, Humentum
- 11. Inclusivity by Golda Fania**
Global Health & Digital Transformation Strategist
- 12. Connection by Amy Miller-Taylor**
Chief Program Officer, GivingTuesday
- 13. Clarity by Brian Kastner**
Director of Engagement, Council on Foundations
- 14. Collaboration by Rachel Wilkinson**
Director of Programmes, International Civil Society Centre



Cynthia Smith

Senior Director, Global Initiatives
Humentum

Foreword

At the outset of 2025, [Humentum published A Bridge to the Future: Essays on a New Era for Global Development](#), to which various global thought leaders contributed. The overwhelmingly positive feedback we received signaled how hungry the social good sector is for grounded insights from an array of voices collectively navigating shifting terrain.

A year later, none of us could have foretold the seismic shifts the sector has experienced. From the dismantling of USAID and the across-the-board slashing of bilateral overseas development assistance (ODA) to increasingly restrictive civic space and the demonization of non-governmental and nonprofit organizations, 2025 forced the sector to terminate partnerships, close organizations, and do more with less.

Along with new voices, we asked The Bridge to the Future essayists to answer two core questions:

1) What has this past year taught you about the sector, and 2) from where you sit, what changes, decisions, or actions would shift 2026 in a positive direction?

We asked them for their personal, direct, and grounded thoughts – not polished “sector speak”. In response, they have captured the gravity of loss, along with an emerging clarity of purpose that only such profound constraint can generate.

In only a year, funding streams evaporated, trust in civil society and democratic institutions was eroded, partnerships ended, and once-solid institutions were left fragile and weakened.

For many, these shifts have proven catastrophic. Yet, as our essayists explain, they have also enabled a reimagination of what is required of the sector not only to survive but to thrive. Some emphasize taking pause and reflecting, while others prioritize exercising agility and experimenting.

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Cynthia Smith

Senior Director, Global Initiatives
Humentum

Foreword

Beneath this diversity of thought, though, runs a common current: the recognition that we are living through a systems-level change event that demands we let go of what once was, and nurture conditions for something more local, equitable, and resilient to emerge.

How, though? While not a blueprint for the future, our thought leaders call on us to:

- Reimagine our structures, power dynamics, operational and partnership models;
- Invest in collective action, trust-based collaboration, and radical solidarity;
- Foster local leadership and diversified, domestic resource mobilization that replaces dependency on donor-driven priorities and outside (and outsized) control.

They ask us to act with an integrity of mission – showing up for human dignity even though we may not know how to repair or rebuild the systems meant to protect it.

These voices invite us into that work, not with certainty about outcomes, but with clarity about shared values, commitment to community, and courage to transform into the future.



Chris Proulx
Co-CEO
Humentum

Emergence

2025 was the culmination of a multi-year process of exposing the illusions of certainty, predictability, stability, and growth. These illusions operated at the societal, organizational, and individual levels. Much of the disorientation and exhaustion that many leaders experienced in 2025 was a result of trying repeatedly for years to find stability and ground in places where the sand is always shifting.

Now that the illusion has been exposed, we are seeing a new energy emerging in a wide variety of spaces; a freedom to work together to create a world where communities can thrive without dependence on international donors. A world where civil society can function freely by building solidarity and mutual aid networks in new ways. A world where those closest to the need are equipped with the resources, people, and funding models to innovate toward new and sustainable solutions.

And so now the real work begins. Despite the significant funding flows in the prior aid paradigm, the sector operated from a scarcity mindset; a starvation cycle that has perpetuated for decades.

Now is the time to break that cycle for good.

New funding and financial models are being experimented with that could provide civil society organizations with autonomy, flexibility, and sustainability.



Chris Proulx
Co-CEO
Humentum

Emergence

Governance and leadership models can shift at both the organizational and sector wide levels, that break from the hierarchical and outdated approaches that kept power concentrated.

Generative AI offers both new opportunities to work in new ways and acute risks for the protection of communities and civic space. Yet it's up to us to engage as a community to define the ethical norms and standards we need to guide AI.

"What I learned from this past year is to challenge my own assumptions about what leadership looks like, about what a good business model should contain, and to not underestimate the power of collective action."



Jacqueline Asiimwe
CEO, CivSource Africa

Recalibration

If I were to hold 2025 in my hands, the word that rises quietly but insistently is re-calibrate.

This was the year the ground shifted beneath us. The USAID announcement sent a shockwave across our sector, not necessarily because all of us were directly funded, but because it exposed, with painful honesty, the fragility of the systems we lean on. It felt like someone had lifted the veil, revealing just how delicately our worlds are stitched together.

And when the ground trembles, you return to the foundations.

2025 forced us to confront uncomfortable but necessary questions: When did this work become about money? When did we tether our imagination to funding cycles? Have we allowed resources to replace relationships as the centre of our work?

Recalibration meant finding our way back to the deeper truths of solidarity, love, purpose, community. It meant remembering that our strength has never lived in grants, but in people.

Like COVID, this disruption arrived unwelcome, yet in hindsight, it carried a gift: the nudge to return to what matters. It pulled us back toward one another, to reach across aisles, rebuild trust, rediscover our collective muscle.

“And this year, I learned something profound: We are far more resilient than we often acknowledge.

We keep finding ways to continue. And at the end of the day, all we truly have, and all we have ever needed, is each other.”

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Jacqueline Asiimwe
CEO, CivSource Africa

Recalibration

"As I step into 2026, my guiding question is:

How do we build deeper, more radical forms of solidarity?

What does courageous collaboration look like now?"

In Uganda, our first-ever Philanthropy Week, co-created with NGO Forum, showed us the power of shared tables and shared vision. Partnerships blossomed into action: hiking for girls, standing together in Katwe with Galui Foundation, and countless other moments of community connection.

This is the momentum we must strengthen.

This is the recalibration we must continue in 2026.

[Back to the table of contents](#)



George Ingram
Senior Fellow
Brookings Institution

Resilience

A key lesson from 2025 is that the future of U.S. development cooperation will be shaped as much, or even more, by politics as by policy. Despite the widespread benefits of development cooperation, there are widely acknowledged [shortcomings](#) of the U.S. foreign assistance apparatus, including its diffused focus, risk aversion, excessive paperwork, and accountability structures that privilege process over results—often driven by donor priorities rather than partner needs.

However, the near-total assault on the sector had little to do with programmatic weaknesses; it was driven instead by ideology and power politics largely outside the realm of development policy. As such, it was nearly impossible for those within the development community—who are steeped in evidence- and values-based arguments—to gain purchase on the debates of the last year.

While it's hard to be optimistic about where U.S. development cooperation strategy will head in 2026, seeds for positive change remain and can continue to be sown over the next year and beyond. Importantly, there is more public and political support for this work than may be evident. Multiple [polls](#) show that the American people support helping people around the world. Recent advocacy efforts, notably collaborative work of civil society organizations led by the [US Global Leadership Coalition](#), suggest strong if latent bipartisan support for foreign assistance – as evidenced by the House and Senate appropriators producing a [bipartisan bill](#) that reduces international affairs spending for FY 2026 by 16% rather than the administration's 48%.



George Ingram
Senior Fellow
Brookings Institution

Resilience

Further, the resilience of the development community is demonstrated by the extensive efforts of career development professionals to come together in [existing](#) and new NGOs to support their [colleagues](#) and the mission of development. One can never anticipate when Newton's Third Law of Motion— "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction"—will take hold. But maintaining the drumbeat of the value of foreign assistance will help create that dynamic, if not in 2026, then in the years that follow. One part of that work is preparing now the policies and processes that correct the shortcomings of the past.

"While it's hard to be optimistic about where U.S. development cooperation strategy will head in 2026, seeds for positive change remain and can continue to be sown over the next year and beyond."



Guillermo Correa
Executive Director
RACI

Endurance

2025 showed me how fragile the status quo really is, and how quickly the ground can shift beneath us. It was a hard year. Some organizations couldn't keep going, and that reality needs to be acknowledged. But the difficulties didn't defeat civil society.

What I saw instead was a continued effort to stay strong, adjust course, and find practical, creative ways to keep doing the work.

Strength wasn't a concept; it was showing up, making tough decisions, and refusing to walk away from our missions. Another clear lesson was that no one gets through moments like this alone. When resources shrink and pressure grows, working together matters more than ever. Collaboration proved to be the only real way forward in an uncertain and demanding year.

From where I sit, more civil society will always mean more democracy, and protecting that link is essential. A positive shift in 2026 would come from making civil society's work more visible and better understood beyond our own circles. There is extraordinary work happening every day, and more people should know about it, connect with it, and feel part of it. Another key shift would be creating more balanced relationships between the

Global North and the Global South, based on shared decision-making and mutual trust rather than hierarchy. Working together on equal footing strengthens legitimacy and leads to solutions that are more grounded and effective. Bringing in new people, new voices, and new allies is also critical. The stronger the connection between civil society and society at large, the stronger democracy itself becomes.

"No one gets through moments like this alone. When resources shrink and pressure grows, working together matters more than ever."

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Shaun Samuels
Managing Director
SGS Consulting

Agency

2025 exposed how much African development still rests on borrowed stability. As global politics shifted, funding tightened, stalled, or disappeared, often without warning. I saw how quickly social justice work becomes vulnerable when it relies on decisions made elsewhere.

At the same time, South Africa hosting the G20 was a powerful reminder that Africa is not marginal to the global economy. We are central, asset-rich, and strategically important, yet our choices remain constrained by external control.

This year made one thing clear: the crisis is not a lack of resources, but the power structures that decide who controls them. Sustainability is not about efficiency or innovation; it is about agency, political will, and economic sovereignty.

A real shift in 2026 would come from tackling Africa's core challenges together: economic dependency, patriarchal systems driving gender-based violence, and deep climate injustice. The most important action is mobilising domestic resources at scale, through stronger local philanthropy, public finance reform, and catalytic grants that unlock capital for prevention, not just response.

Gender-based violence must be treated as an economic and governance failure, and climate justice as a development priority. This also means confronting racialised and patriarchal power that shapes institutions and funding decisions, including within Africa.

"Reducing dependency on foreign aid is not withdrawal; it is dignity, accountability, and resilience."



John Coonrod

Founder & US Chair

Movement for Community Led Development (MCLD)

Dignity

This year has been a crash course in the importance of being able to turn on a dime, of solidarity with broadly-inclusive groups of people for sustained collective action. Not in my fifty-some years in this sector has the political environment changed so rapidly and with fewer guardrails or time for democratic processes to protect human rights. A primary lesson has been that the ethical foundation of the Post-WWII order – a shared aspiration to respect human dignity that was built over three centuries – has been broken, and it is not clear we know how to repair it. Yet this year taught us that we must show up for human dignity.

We cannot poke around the edges – we need to invest time, creativity and money in rebuilding a consensus for human rights. First, we must articulate a simple, clear vision for global development based on human rights and social justice and get it onto the agenda of progressive political actors.

Franklin Roosevelt did this in 1933, another moment of rising authoritarianism. He rejected the armed interventionism of his predecessors in favor of international policies of mutual respect and cooperation. I think Americans are sick of both global bullying as well as traditional foreign aid, and they want meaningful leadership on climate, humane migration, and public safety.

The politicians most likely to champion this vision are local, not national leaders, as they are directly accountable to local people.

A trend I am most excited about is “local multilateralism” – local leaders working together internationally when national progress seems impossible. The change that will likely make the most difference is strengthening progressive, inclusive local governments and a vibrant civil society that holds it to account.

“A trend I am most excited about is “local multilateralism” – local leaders working together internationally when national progress seems impossible.”

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Goodness Odey

Global Health & Development Professional

Equity

What a Year! 2025 began with a storm of uncertainty and rapid changes, both foreseen and unforeseen, particularly in the field of Global Health and Development, and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), where my work primarily lies.

What has it taught me?

To PAUSE.

Really, just taking a Pause.

In the thick of fast-paced decision making, competing priorities, uncertainties and tradeoffs that many times can be painful, I learnt to take a much-needed pause, and ask myself what all this really means, and why the work I do, the communities I serve and learn from, are critical. To consciously center equity in the mix of it, hard as it can be.

This led me to work with colleagues to design an Equity Pause Checklist.

Another equally profound lesson is the power and value of community. The bond, acknowledgement, and presence of the community of change makers in the space, who have stood by each other, listened, held space for, and reminded ourselves that WE ARE STILL HERE, and we've got each other.

"This community has shown resilience, solidarity, vulnerability, and strength to keep pushing on our shared purpose for a more equitable, healthier, and prosperous world for all. I am grateful for this gift."

An action that I believe holds great potential in shifting the field of Global Health and Development/SRHR in a positive direction in 2026 is an intentionality to listen to the felt needs of the communities we serve and intentionally co-create that much-needed change with them.

Not in some tokenistic, ticking-a-box approach, but one that comes with trusting communities as producers and sustainers of their health and overall well-being.

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Goodness Odey

Global Health & Development Professional

Equity

Also key are trust-based partnerships.

2025 saw many global partnerships and the solidarity that comes with multilateralism greatly severed. How can we partner better? One that is mutually beneficial, non-oppressive and grounded in shared prosperity?

The answer lies in co-designing a shared purpose, accountability, and trust-based systems, bearing the humility to listen more and collaborate better.

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Ali Al Mokdad
Strategic Senior Leader

2025 confirmed two truths at the same time. It exposed, again, how deep the aid industrial complex can be, with incentives that reward process, branding, and control more than outcomes. And it also confirmed something else: the resilience that lives in people, and the quiet humanity that keeps showing up as a principle, not a slogan. In the middle of mixed signals and hard trade offs, adaptation remained the backbone, the skill that turns uncertainty into forward impactful motion.

Above all, 2025 taught me that our problems are human made, and they can be solved by humans. Systems are people. When we treat governance as a technical exercise instead of an ethical one, we produce fear, silence, and compliance, then call it performance. When we lead with clarity and courage, trust returns.

I witnessed that among the leaders I collaborated with, especially those leading local organizations and volunteer teams.

"The biggest positive shift in 2026 would be to move from aid as a permanent operating model toward aid that unlocks trade, jobs, and local systems, while keeping principled humanitarian support where needs are acute."

Practically, that means testing innovative funding models: pooled funds, private sector partnerships, impact investment, and faster direct allocations to local responders, including peer to peer diaspora support through crypto and cash transfers, with clear safeguards and accountability.



Ali Al Mokdad
Strategic Senior Leader

It also means adopting cash first and anticipatory approaches as the default and encouraging smaller organizations to build social enterprise pathways that reduce dependency over time.

At the same time, the need for stronger and wider voices for localized interventions, and serious investment in ethical AI adoption: training, policies, and governance, so technology strengthens trust instead of creating new risks.

Finally, as migration conditionality is likely to rise, it becomes even more important to keep humanitarian action anchored in community defined needs, rights, and dignity.

Assistance should remain guided by impartiality and by what people themselves identify as urgent, safe, and necessary.



Kim Kucinskis

Director, Global Initiatives
Humentum

Regeneration

This year taught me that we are well and truly in the middle of a systems level change event, and no matter how people are personally processing it (and there is a lot of processing happening), most people are here for it.

There is a recognition that whatever happens next needs to be more than surface level change or process tweaks. The way that society in general has been operating at a global level is not natural or healthy, and there is an innate desire to return to a way of living and working that is more balanced, rooted, relational, and slower paced.

Our task isn't just to adapt to depleted soil — it's to regenerate the soil itself: rebuild trust, rebalance power, and nurture the conditions for new systems to take root.

For 2026 to move in a healthier direction, we need more people actively regenerating the soil they're planted in by:

- Living their values even when it's hard
- Choosing to lead from where they are and adapting their leadership behaviors to meet this moment
- Experimenting and trying new approaches
- Building trust by nurturing relationships, naming the hard things, and showing up consistently
- Small actions, taken seriously and in community, can shift the conditions for real transformation to take root

"Our task isn't just to adapt to depleted soil — it's to regenerate the soil itself: rebuild trust, rebalance power, and nurture the conditions for new systems to take root."

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Golda Fania

Global Health & Digital Transformation Strategist

Inclusivity

2025 taught me that real progress is built through collective effort, not just individual achievement.

While determination can take you far, it's the people who guide, encourage, and open doors that truly shape your journey. Life is built on the relationships we form and nurture, and when we invest in others, life often rewards us in ways we can't predict.

My work in digital transformation reminds me that while technology drives much of our world, true change happens when we bridge divides, whether digital, geographic, or cultural. Small, local actions can have ripple effects, and the most powerful tools we have for navigating our complex world are empathy, patience, and collaboration.

In 2026, the most impactful shift would be a global commitment to true inclusivity, not just in language but in action.

We need to give marginalized communities real agency in shaping policies that affect them, creating solutions with lasting social impact. The world's challenges can't be solved by a few experts or leaders in a room; we need equitable partnerships where power and resources are shared.

For true progress, local leadership must be prioritized, ensuring that those most affected by decisions are heard, respected, and empowered.

"Life is built on the relationships we form and nurture, and when we invest in others, life often rewards us in ways we can't predict."



Amy Miller-Taylor
Chief Program Officer
GivingTuesday

Connection

In 2025, I was forced to break promises to people doing life-changing work in the world's hardest places. Funding cuts left our partners vulnerable—activists stranded, safe houses shuttered, lives literally at risk.

My powerlessness extended to keeping my own job.

But 2025 also revealed something powerful: I witnessed how solidarity and generosity flourish where formal systems fail. The truth is, though, I only fully reclaimed my energy and motivation when I took a short break at the end of the year.

My lesson: you can't reimagine the future you want from a survival state.

"Rest, healing, and connection aren't luxuries—they're prerequisites for building what comes next."

2026 can't be about individual organizations or maintaining what exists. We need safe spaces with peers who are both strategic advisors and cheerleaders, and partners who support us to make strategic shifts toward shared leadership and collective action.

We need efforts that serve the sector as a whole, bringing together people with different perspectives to test what's possible, identify common agendas, and pursue shared goals. And we need to resource what already works: community-led models that bring people together to pool their power, voice, and resources for the change they want.

The shift is recognizing that connection, collaboration, and collective infrastructure are how change happens.

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Brian Kastner

Director, Engagement
Council on Foundations

We sit at a relatively unique crossroads, being a membership association with a thousand members who represent all sections of America and many foundations who work internationally as well. But we also are a public charity with a mission to advance.

So, I think from this perspective, it's been really important to stick to our values and our mission.

Responding to everything that happened in 2025 would've driven us a bit crazy, but more importantly, would've resulted in some pretty severe mission drift.

I know many others in the social sector are grappling with the same tension and how to be relevant in this evolving ecosystem — for us, relevance has come just by doing what we do well and sticking to our priorities.

We saw that there are misperceptions about what the majority of the sector does and how it operates that can be amplified and exacerbated through misinformation and social media. But I think we as a sector also need to look at how the stories we tell (or don't tell) and the language we use have often contributed to these perceptions.

So, I'd like to do away with jargon and encourage the sector to clearly communicate what we really do daily – strengthen American communities by supporting a variety of causes.

"I'd like to do away with jargon and encourage the sector to clearly communicate what we really do daily."

That starts with a broader recognition that we can all do a better job of communicating the value of our work to the public.

[Back to the table of contents](#)

Clarity



Rachel Wilkinson

Director of Programmes

International Civil Society Centre

Collaboration

Working at the International Civil Society Centre, I spend a lot of time thinking about how civil society organisations adapt, innovate, and keep going in difficult conditions.

What 2025 really reinforced for me is how easy it is to get pulled into the urgent and lose sight of the important. Too often, civil society organisations devote excessive time and energy into firefighting—such as balancing budgets, meeting targets, and resolving operational issues.

As a result, decisions can become reactive, driven by external challenges rather than guided by our shared long-term purpose.

Taking time to reflect on complex factors and interdependencies of 2025, while also looking beyond the year ahead, helped me see the value of planning now for the future. Prioritising lasting impact enables organisations to navigate complexity more effectively and remain committed to meaningful change over time.

“Positive change can, and will, happen when we work together. For 2026, I believe genuine collaboration—connecting with wider civil society, establishing new partnerships, and combining efforts will move us in that positive direction.”

Real collaboration involves risk, experimentation, and having less control. Embracing opportunities to learn from others, challenging assumptions, and finding creative ways to address shared challenges will require effort but will pay off.

[Back to the table of contents](#)



Rachel Wilkinson

Director of Programmes

International Civil Society Centre

Collaboration

I am convinced that trust is at the heart of meaningful collaboration, trust in the people we collaborate with, and in the ideas we explore.

Trusting new ways of working, new approaches, and trusting the collective potential of civil society.

By working together, leaning into new experiences, and building equitable partnerships, civil society organisations can create meaningful, lasting change that goes beyond what any one organisation, no matter how large, could accomplish alone, and move towards a thriving civil society for all.

[Back to the table of contents](#)

About Humentum

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Our decades of experience working with thousands of organizations translate into deep understanding and visible results.

We support you through:

- Individual, group, and organization-wide training
- A robust membership platform with peer-to-peer networking, on-demand courses, and strategy sessions

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