Bridging Humanitarian Coordination and Gulf Philanthropy: Foundations, Gaps, and Opportunities

Virtual Dialogue

17 – December 2025 | Zoom

On 17 December 2025, Pearl Initiative's Governance in Philanthropy Programme, in collaboration with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the UAE, convened a 1-hour virtual talk titled "Bridging Humanitarian Coordination and Gulf Philanthropy: Foundations, Gaps, and Opportunities." The session brought together an expert panel to examine how governance shapes the relationship between Gulf philanthropy and the humanitarian multilateral system, and how we can work together to co-create the conditions that enable more principled, coordinated, and accountable humanitarian action.

The conversation took place at a moment of significant strain on humanitarian systems. Speakers acknowledged that existing models are under pressure, funding is increasingly unpredictable, and trust across the ecosystem is fragile. At the same time, there is growing momentum in the Gulf toward strategic, impact-oriented philanthropy. The session explored how governance can act as the connective tissue between these realities.

Speakers

- **Ms. Sajeda Shawa**, Head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the UAE

- **Mr. Kareem ElBayar**, Programme Coordinator, OCHA–UNDP Connecting Business Initiative (CBI) and Head of OCHA Private Sector Unit

- **Mr. Mohamed Abdelnabi**, Humanitarian and Development Expert, Global Impact Consultancy

Moderator

- **Ms. Nadeen Alalami**, Programme Manager, Governance in Philanthropy, Pearl Initiative

Key themes

1. Humanitarian coordination as a foundation for principled action

The session began by grounding participants in the humanitarian coordination architecture and its governance logic. Ms. Shawa outlined OCHA's mandate and core functions, including coordination, advocacy, information management, humanitarian financing, and policy. These were framed not as administrative layers, but as practical governance mechanisms designed to enable principled action at scale. When functioning well, these mechanisms enable humanitarian response to be more principled, more coherent, and more accountable to affected communities. When governance is weak, however, we see more fragmentation, inefficiency, and erosion of trust.

2. Moving from partnership as "fundraising", to partnership as co-creation, trust, and shared governance

A key thread across the panel was the need to shift how collaboration with philanthropic and private sector actors is approached. Speakers noted that for many years, "private sector engagement" often meant fundraising. The panel argued for a shift toward co-creation grounded in mutual accountability, where problems are defined collectively and solutions are designed together. In this framing, governance becomes about who sits at the table, how decisions are made, and how responsibility is shared. This shift aligns closely with the priorities of many Gulf donors, who are seeking greater visibility, strategic coherence, and confidence that their resources are contributing to meaningful outcomes.

3. Collective action as critical a requirement

The panel repeatedly returned to the cost of fragmented efforts. Parallel initiatives, duplication, and weak alignment between actors can dilute impact and strain trust. Speakers highlighted the role funders can play in shaping better governance by requiring collaboration, supporting shared platforms, and prioritizing investments that strengthen system-wide coordination. In this sense, governance becomes a lever for impact. It determines whether humanitarian action reinforces a coherent system or fragments it further.

4. Localization beyond buzzwords

Localization was discussed as a governance challenge rather than a purely financial one. While increasing direct funding to local actors remains important, speakers stressed that localization also depends on decision-making authority, information access, and feedback loops.

Effective localization requires governance arrangements that integrate local actors throughout the project cycle, from design to evaluation. It also requires investment in capacity over time and openness to learning from local knowledge. Without these governance shifts, localization risks becoming a buzzword rather than a structural change.

5. Accountability, learning, and trust

Speakers identified trust as a central issue shaping relationships between donors, UN agencies, and implementing partners. Bureaucratic delays, slow adaptation, and limited transparency can leave donors feeling distant from real implementation realities. At the same time, implementing partners often operate under pressure and may feel incentivized to hide challenges rather than surface them early.

The panel emphasized the need to normalize real-time learning and to treat monitoring and evaluation as a shared tool for course correction, not a compliance exercise designed to catch failures. Stronger community feedback mechanisms were highlighted as a valuable governance tool that enables accountability grounded in lived experience.

Practical takeaways for philanthropists and donors

1. **Support coordination, not just project activities:** Invest in the systems that enable coherent response, including coordination mechanisms, information sharing, and accountability structures.

2. **Use funding and influence to shape better governance:** Require collaboration, transparency, and alignment as conditions of support, and prioritise system-strengthening investments.
3. **Co-create from a clear problem definition:** Ask partners to define the problem in a grounded way, then build solutions together that leverage philanthropy's unique agility, networks, and strategic intent.
4. **Treat localization as long-term capability-building:** Prioritize sustained capacity strengthening, locally informed design, and local market support where appropriate, not one-off trainings.
5. **Move reporting requirements toward outcomes and capturing lived change:** Go beyond output reporting by elevating narratives that capture community experience and what has shifted in real terms.
6. **Support sustained community feedback mechanisms that truly shape programmes:** Integrate feedback loops that match the realities of literacy, connectivity, safety, and trust within the communities being served by the programme, then ensure that programmes are closing the loop by showing how feedback shaped decisions.

Closing Reflection

As humanitarian systems continue to evolve under pressure, there is a clear opportunity for Gulf philanthropy to engage not only as a source of funding, but as a partner in shaping the governance practices that enable coordination, accountability, and dignity. The Governance in Philanthropy Programme will continue to create spaces in 2026 where these conversations can move beyond dialogue and translate into practical shifts in how giving and humanitarian action are designed and delivered.