

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT ANALYSIS

Geopolitical Transformations and the Near Future of International Geneva

2026–2029

Partner Organization: swissfuture
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Executive Summary

Since early 2025, the United Nations has experienced a series of blows to predominantly its financial and governmental health that have by extension affected International Geneva. As reported by Reuters, “over 3,000 Geneva-based jobs at the U.N. and international organisations have been cut or are transferring to cheaper locations, including about a fifth of U.N. posts.” (Farge, Graham, 2026). Furthermore, as of June 2026, the United States has not remitted the USD 4 billion in dues it owes to the United Nations, despite warnings from UN Secretary-General António Guterres that the organization is projected to exhaust its available cash by mid-August. These are details to the broader trends of a changing geopolitics and contexts in which international relations are conducted. The pillars in which United Nations organizations operate in, such as public health, humanitarian affairs, and global trade, are also changing in what gets prioritized for program delivery. International Geneva in totality is left to decide on what should be prioritized for its own survival in the short term while professionals across the sector are forced to navigate this uncertainty. In an effort to bring clarity to the times, swissfuture, in partnership with the Geneva Graduate Institute, has initialized this research report on the future of International Geneva in these current geopolitical times.

The objective of this research is to explore how shifting geopolitical dynamics alter the functioning of UN-funded agencies across different programming pillars, and how these changes in turn affect International Geneva. The research adopts a strategic foresight approach and treats the International Geneva ecosystem as the central focal object of institutional change, anchored in an in-depth analysis of three international organizations: the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the International Trade Center (ITC). For each organization, it develops three hypothesized futures scenarios covering the period 2026 to 2029. These scenarios draw on current data on funding trends, governance debates, geopolitical developments, and local realities in Geneva. The research concludes with an aggregate analysis by identifying which organizations are most affected and how those pressures might be addressed in order to preserve the stability of International Geneva.

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CHAPTER 1

Methodology: Strategic Foresight for the Future of International Geneva

Strategic foresight and futures studies can only investigate the present future—the future as we construct it from the perspective of the present. In other words, foresight does not aim to predict the future; it aims to produce normative or explorative futures that add possibilities to the thinking of our time. By embracing the future as uncertain, unproduced, and truly unpredictable, foresight gives us the tools to research the current moment with clarity to then enhance the adaptive capacity of our project. These same forces extend well beyond Geneva, reshaping global health, humanitarian action, and trade alike. Tracking how they unfold elsewhere is essential to anticipate pressures that will reach International Geneva’s institutions.

1.1 Research Questions

Our primary research questions to answer are the following:

- How is geopolitical reconfiguration reshaping the International Geneva ecosystem, at the example of WHO, OCHA, and ITC?
- What does a 2026–2029 scenario analysis reveal about divergent vulnerabilities and opportunities facing WHO, OCHA, and ITC within International Geneva?

1.2 Research Phases

The research concerning the three international organizations of our choice was conducted in three sequential phases, each building on the last phase.

1.2.1 Phase One: Horizon Scanning

The first phase involved horizon scanning—a systematic review of secondary sources across the three organisations in scope. Each document was read and coded for key drivers of change, institutional vulnerabilities, assumptions about the future embedded in official planning documents, and implications for Geneva’s role as a host environment. Sources prioritized were recent, authoritative, and explicitly forward-looking: internal organizational reports, host state agreements, think tank publications, and relevant news reporting. The goal was to build an evidence base that captured both what is stable and what is already shifting across the 2026–2029 time horizon.

1.2.2 Phase Two: Futures Wheel

The second phase used a futures wheel to brainstorm and trace the cascading consequences of the central topic. The wheel begins with the name of the organization at the very center of the wheel and then is expanded with six consecutive circles, expanding larger circles to establish a visual timeline. The wheel is then divided into six parts to capture distinct elements about the organization that have consequences into the future: internal coordination and organization, staff, location, governance, donors and finances, and programs. The first-order consequences represent the most immediate and direct effects of recently published organizational documents; second-order consequences follow from those; third-order consequences represent the longer structural shifts that accumulate over time. In this report, first-order consequences are mapped to 2027, second-order to 2028, and third-order to 2029. The technique is useful precisely because it makes visible the indirect and non-linear effects of a disruption that tend to be missed when analysis focuses only on immediate impacts. To increase the accuracy and understanding of such consequences, literature about institutional adaptation has augmented the research’s quality of understanding consequences.

1.2.3 Phase Three: Narrative Scenarios

The third phase translated the patterns emerging from the futures wheel into three narrative scenarios. These scenarios are not predictions; they are internally consistent, plausible alternatives that represent meaningfully different futures for the international organization at the center. Each scenario is rooted in the same evidence base but foregrounds different combinations of drivers and uncertainties. Together, they are designed to be used as planning tools by stress-testing institutional assumptions and revealing where current strategies may be insufficient.

1.3 Comparative Analysis

Upon completion of the individual futures wheels, the team conducted a comparative analysis of recurring patterns across all three organizations to identify shared trajectories for the ecosystem as a whole. Drawing on literature about institutional adaptation alongside each organization's internal planning documents, the team surfaced common vulnerabilities and inflection points that, taken together, suggest the conditions for meaningful structural change in the coming years.

1.4 Limitations

It should be noted that there are several limitations that constrain this analysis. The absence of primary interviews for each organization means that internal political dynamics and informal negotiations remain largely inaccessible. Augmenting each scenario with informality was unfeasible. The time horizon captures early effects of ongoing reforms rather than their long-term resolution. The secondary source base skews toward Western and Anglophone perspectives, underrepresenting Global South viewpoints. Finally, limiting scope to three organisations necessarily omits broader ecosystem interactions that may amplify or mitigate the dynamics identified here. The majority of the analysis was conducted as the nomination process for the UN Secretary General's race was beginning. The report does not scope the potential effects of each candidates' priorities for the United Nations. The purpose of this report is not to predict the future, but to draw modest, yet grounded, conclusions that are argued through the evidence of now.

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CHAPTER 2

Introduction to International Geneva

2.1 Summary of the Literature Review

The literature review synthesizes findings from twenty-nine sources¹ concerning the profound stress and structural transformation currently reshaping global governance. The documents collectively explore the fragmentation of the rules-based international system driven by intensified geopolitical and geoeconomic competition, alongside the consequential financial crises impacting international organizations.

The review has been divided into five relevant themes that contextualize these disruptions. The first one establishes the Conceptual Foundations: Multilateralism, Regionalism and the UN System (Theme I), tracing the evolution of global governance structures, and defining the core principles of multilateralism and sovereignty that have traditionally underpinned the post-WWII order. It examines the tension between universal cooperation and the rising logic of regionalism and minilateralism, setting the baseline against which current deviations and global landscapes are being measured. Building on this foundational understanding, the sources proceed to analyze the Macro-Geopolitical Shifts and the Erosion of Multilateralism (Theme II), moving from theoretical stability to the chaotic reality of a complex, multipolar world, and exploring how great-power rivalry is dismantling the “global good”.

Within this turbulent environment, the review investigates the internal Institutional Dynamics, Adaptation, and Bureaucratic Power (Theme III) of international organizations. It focuses on the mechanisms of “imperfect adaptation”, analyzing how bureaucracies navigate external pressures through specific taxonomies of geography, conceptualizing headquarter cities like Geneva as distinct ecosystems where local dynamics influence global operations. Deepening the analysis of institutional vulnerability, the literature turns to the critical theme of Financial Crises, Foreign Aid Cuts, and Dependency (Theme IV). It unpacks the structural tension between the democratic ideal of the UN (“tyranny of numbers”) and the reality of donor influence (“tyranny of the purse”). The sources examine the systemic shift from stable, assessed contributions to unpredictable, earmarked voluntary aid, highlighting how this financial volatility created dependency and serves as a tool for political coercion.

Finally, the review synthesizes the discourse on Strategic Policy Responses and Institutional Reform Agendas (Theme V). It outlines the emerging agendas designed to counter these crises, ranging from proposals for systemic consolidation to new financing modalities. Collectively, these themes narrate the struggle of international organizations to maintain relevance and operational capacity in an era of unprecedented structural stress.

Taken together, the sources provide the essential empirical foundation required to address the research project’s primary objective: investigating how ongoing geopolitical realignments and evolving donor relations will transform the landscape of International Geneva between 2026 and 2029. This literature enables the construction of the argumentative foresight scenarios central to the methodology which are necessary to model International Geneva.

2.2 A History of International Geneva

Geneva’s Nations district, in the north of the city, is home to the United Nations and a dense cluster of international organisations. The architecture consists mostly of modern office buildings, but there is one true stand out among them all: the Palais des Nations, home to the United Nations Office of Geneva and other UN agencies. The culmination of this area, nicknamed International Geneva, has been an important actor in key worldwide developments of the 20th and 21st centuries, but its own history extends back into the mid-nineteenth century.

¹See Annex B and Bibliography.

International Geneva's institutional legacy can be traced to when the city's humanitarian spirit was constructed by the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 under the leadership of Henry Dunant. His efforts produced the Geneva Convention of 1864, the first multilateral treaty dedicated to protecting the wounded in armed conflict, and established the city early on as a site of humanitarianism and international norm-making (Geneve International, 2025). Soon enough, Geneva gained momentum as a location of international law and norm construction that is invested in by other Western states.

Geneva's international role expanded decisively after World War One, when the city was chosen as the seat of the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization in 1919 (Geneve Internationale, 2026). That choice reflected a set of mutually reinforcing factors that remain central to the city's identity today: Switzerland's neutrality, Geneva's humanitarian tradition, and its reputation as a place intellectually suited for international cooperation. The role that the city plays in international relations was consolidated materially with the construction of the Palais des Nations, which the League occupied from 1936 until its dissolution in 1946 (Geneve Internationale, 2026). After World War Two, the League's assets were transferred to the United Nations and Geneva became the home of the UN's European office, preserving and extending the city's multilateral function. In the decades that followed, major organizations and UN bodies including the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), World Health Organization (WHO), World Meteorological Organization (WMO), and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) deepened the UN's institutional concentration in Geneva (Geneve Internationale, 2026).

Through consistent renegotiation and reasserting itself as a relevant location in international relations, International Geneva's robust history is therefore one of adaptation to the current events of meeting the time. This layered history is visible today in the sheer scale of International Geneva. The city now hosts 42 international organizations, 497 NGOs, and 185 diplomatic missions (Geneve International, 2026), making it one of the world's most concentrated ecosystems of multilateral governance. It is precisely this concentration, built up over more than a century, that the present funding crisis now places under strain, starting with the contributions on which the system depends. This history matters because International Geneva has never been a fixed inheritance; its position has been earned and re-earned through repeated adaptation to changing geopolitical conditions. The pressures examined in this report are the latest test of that capacity for renewal.

2.3 General Funding of the United Nations

International Geneva, the totality of United Nations agencies, treaty bodies, and international organizations headquartered in the city, runs on a combination of assessed and voluntary funding drawn from a limited number of donor states, predominantly Western. How these organizations are financed, and by whom, therefore shapes both what International Geneva can do and what is now at risk.

The UN system is financed through three principal streams:

- Assessed contributions are mandatory dues that member states pay according to the UN scale of assessments, a formula based on capacity to pay. The starting point is each state's share of global Gross National Income (GNI), averaged over base periods, to which several adjustments are applied: a debt-burden adjustment for states with high external debt, and a low per capita income adjustment that discounts the share of states below a threshold income level. The result is then bounded by a floor of 0.001 per cent, a ceiling of 0.01 per cent for least developed countries, and a maximum ceiling of 22 per cent, which currently applies only to the United States. Together these form the regular budget (RB)

of an organization, its baseline operating funds. Although legally obligatory, in practice they can be withheld or delayed as a political lever (Kim, Petersen, 2023).

- Window 1 (W1) funding consists of unearmarked voluntary contributions paid into an organization's general pool, granting the secretariat strategic flexibility (International Trade Center, 2024).
- Window 2 (W2) funding comprises earmarked contributions that a donor designates for a specific programme, country, or thematic priority (International Trade Center, 2024).

The concentration in a small number of donor states, typically Western, is striking. In 2023, annual contributions to the 21 largest Geneva-based international organizations totalled USD 18.7 billion, of which 12.45% came from non-state contributors (Silva-Muller, L. and Gassmann, R., 2024). The overwhelming majority came from member states, the top three being the United States (USD 3.93 billion), Germany (USD 1.29 billion), and the United Kingdom (USD 0.59 billion) (Silva-Muller, L. and Gassmann, R., 2024). European countries collectively being Germany, the UK, France, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy, contributed approximately USD 4.7 billion, or 25% of the total.

The United States holds the largest share by far, which makes its engagement, or disengagement, consequential for the system as a whole. In 2025, the US withdrawal compounded by cuts from other major donors, is forcing a structural reimagination of who funds the UN system and on what terms. That reimagination reaches well beyond balance sheets: it bears directly on the people the system employs. The host-state framework that brought them to Geneva is detailed in Annex [B].

2.4 Employment Distribution in International Geneva

The international sector is a sizeable, highly internationalised, and mobile component of Geneva's labour market. Across international organizations, permanent missions, and INGOs it accounts for roughly 36,908 jobs, distributed as follows (geneve-int.ch, 2025; Statistique Genève, 2025):

- International organizations with headquarters agreements: 26,729 jobs, including non-UN organisations such as EFTA (AELE) and CERN
- Permanent missions and consulates: 4,274 jobs
- INGOs and OINGs: 3,834 jobs across 497 organisations identified according to the criteria of the Centre d'Accueil de la Genève Internationale (CAGI)

This workforce is distinctly international and highly skilled (Fondation pour Genève, 2024): 81% of personnel are non-Swiss nationals, half have children, and only 17% were educated in Geneva, indicating that the great majority were trained elsewhere. Roughly two-thirds occupy highly qualified, high-value-added roles; 56% relocated to Geneva for career opportunities, and 43% plan to remain in the city for more than a decade.

This workforce operates in one of the most expensive environments in the UN system. Within the UN common system, Geneva ranks as the second most expensive duty station (index 188.4), just behind Hong Kong (200.3) and above New York (181.7) (UN International Civil Service Commission, 2025). With the US dollar having weakened by roughly 10% against the Swiss Franc since President Trump took office, Geneva's costs in dollar terms are about 10% higher still, sharpening the cost pressures bearing down on organizations already facing funding shortfalls.

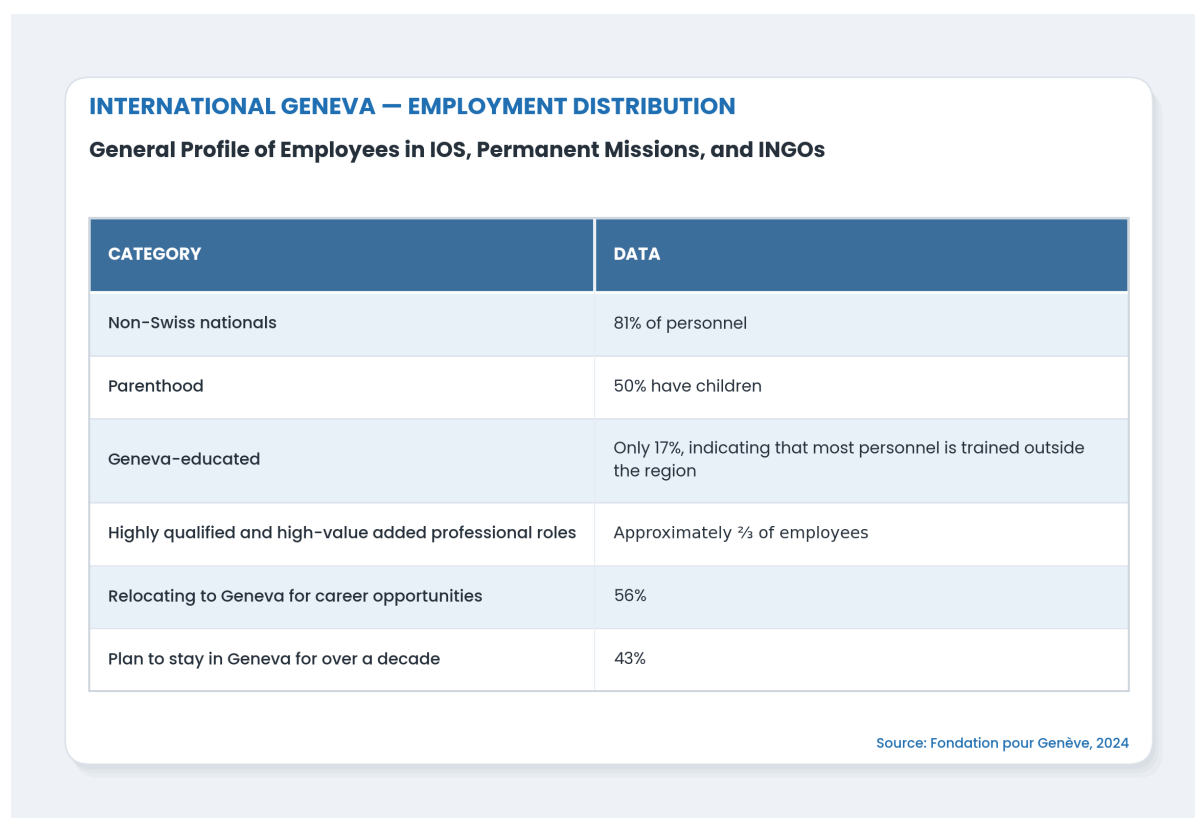


Figure 2.1: Employment distribution across International Geneva.

2.5 Cascading Economic Effects

The presence of international organizations generates economic value for the Canton of Geneva that reaches far beyond their own payrolls. International organizations, permanent missions, and NGOs create value added (valeur ajoutée), defined as the wages they pay being spent locally, the goods and services they purchase, and the wider circulation of money these activities set in motion across the canton's economy (Fondation pour Genève, 2024). A 2019 Fondation pour Genève study on these cascading effects found that every full-time equivalent (équivalent plein temps, EPT) in the international public sector supports approximately 0.5 additional jobs across the broader Franco-Valdo-Genevois region (Fondation pour Genève, 2024).

The aggregate figures are substantial (Fondation pour Genève, 2024):

- Total value added across the Franco-Valdo-Genevois region: CHF 6.88 billion
- Total value added for the Canton of Geneva specifically: CHF 6.236 billion
- Indirect jobs created in the Canton of Geneva: 5,319.6 EPT
- Induced jobs created in the Canton of Geneva: 1,835.5 EPT
- Total: 7,155 EPT

These figures make clear why the funding pressures facing International Geneva are not an institutional concern alone but a regional economic one: the value the ecosystem generates radiates outward through the local economy, so any contraction is felt well beyond the walls of the Palais des Nations. That economic footprint is ultimately a product of how these institutions cluster and interact, the ecosystem dynamics to which we now turn.

2.6 Ecosystem Aspects

International Geneva is best understood not as a collection of separate institutions but as an international-organization ecosystem: a location where multiple IOs are concentrated in “geographical and temporal proximity,” raising the question of whether that proximity also produces a “unit of action” among them (Fondation pour Geneve, 2024). The ecosystem operates on three levels. Socially, it functions as a shared labour pool, allowing organizations to recruit from a common base of internationally mobile professionals while enabling individuals to build careers across multiple institutions in the same environment. Organizationally, proximity facilitates interaction and networking, though collaboration does not follow automatically from co-location and often requires intentional leadership and institutional mechanisms. Environmentally, the ecosystem is shaped by the host-state context, with Swiss authorities providing the resources and institutional support that sustain both its infrastructure and its collaborative dynamics (Fondation pour Geneve, 2024).

Why international organizations cluster in particular cities is a broader question. Xu and Jin (2025) identify four determinants of IO location: economy, government action, talent gathering, and livability. Economic conditions matter because they foster international trade, multicultural environments, and the financial structures that facilitate IO operations; government action matters because coordinated national and local strategies, alongside infrastructure investment, can markedly enhance a city’s attractiveness (Xu and Jin, 2025). Yet the authors single out talent aggregation as the pivotal factor, since IOs depend on access to a large, highly qualified professional pool, typically anchored in strong higher-education institutions and research networks (Xu and Jin, 2025). Closely related is livability, healthcare, international schools, visa accessibility, and employment opportunities for spouses, all of which help attract and retain international staff (Xu and Jin, 2025).

Geneva illustrates these dynamics directly. According to Fondation pour Genève (2024), the principal factors drawing international organizations to the region are quality of life for personnel, Switzerland’s host-state policy, and the presence of other major institutions, a clear expression of the clustering effects at the heart of the ecosystem. As the report observes, “la force de Genève réside en partie dans le fait qu’elle accueille un grand nombre d’organisations et que celles-ci peuvent ainsi plus facilement collaborer entre elles” (Fondation pour Geneve, 2024). Together, these factors reinforce the concentration of international actors in the region and sustain Geneva’s position as a major hub of global governance. It is against this backdrop, a uniquely concentrated, externally funded, and economically consequential ecosystem now under strain, that this study turns to the question of how International Geneva might evolve under different geopolitical futures.

3

CHAPTER 3

The Global Scenarios

The following global geopolitical scenarios are a shared analytical framework, based on current trends in the global order. Each international organization was examined through all three scenarios to stress-test and generate additional futures scenarios around the organization's adaptive capacity. The purpose is comparative: to surface how the same geopolitical conditions produce different institutional pressures depending on an organization's mandate, funding structure, governance, and programs. International Geneva's standing depends on the collective presences, resources, and relevance of the organization it hosts; examining how geopolitical conditions reshape each institution individually allows us to trace the cascading consequences for International Geneva as whole.

3.1 Multipolar World Scenario

No single superpower dominates. Power is distributed across major and middle powers, with stronger regional governance and a more prominent role for emerging countries. Multilateralism does not disappear, but becomes more layered and negotiated through a mix of traditional international organizations, regional actors, and hybrid partnerships. Blocs are collaborative on the grounds of selective economic security, but remain fairly independent. Multipolarity is characterized by a persistent US-China rivalry as a throughline of antagonism. The EU, India, Russia, and other middle powers must navigate the resulting tension and position themselves strategically around it. The idea that there will be tiers of power (superpowers, potential great powers, and middle/regional powers) is central to giving structured thinking to actors outside the big rivalry. Non-aligned countries are connectors between the blocs. The Global South's strategic non-alignment is both a political posture and an economically functional role that can bridge the blocs on select issues. (IBEI, 2023; Momal-Vanian, Tribune de Geneve, 2026; CEPR "Decoupling without deglobalisation: The new geography of trade blocs", 2025; Bruegel "Geopolitical shifts and their economic impacts on Europe", 2025; Atlantic Council, "Three worlds in 2035: Imagining scenarios for how the world could be transformed over the next decade", 2025)

3.2 Zombie Multilateral World Scenario

Rather than disappearing, multilateralism persists in a weakened form. Formal institutions remain, but are increasingly delegitimized and sidelined by distrust and unstable alliances. The shell survives but there is silent erosion from within. In such a setting, collective governance gives way to ad hoc mini-lateral arrangements, while international organizations face growing risks of paralysis, marginalization, or collapse. In practice, the space within international organizations for issues like the Sustainable Development Goals are actively whittled down by dominant actors, eventually displacing such normative programming altogether. In a world of zombie multilateralism, neither the United States nor China are committed to acting as a benevolent hegemon. Global South countries have limited willingness to continuously defend a global order that they have repeatedly pointed out to be unjust and insufficiently representative. A world of zombie multilateralism can be fundamentally characterized as performantic. (IBEI, 2023; Momal-Vanian, Tribune de Geneve, 2026; Bruegel "Geopolitical shifts and their economic impacts on Europe", 2025; IPS "Zombie Multilateralism", 2026)

3.3 Re-globalization without the US Scenario

Governments collectively uphold the rules-based international order as the US withdraws from the architecture it once anchored. Most states remain non-aligned, able to engage across blocs and serve as connective pieces in a more fragmented system. Coalitions form around shared

priorities—humanitarian response, climate change, development finance—sustaining multilateral momentum where universal consensus is no longer available. The United State’s absence draws in private actors that command significant capital, which then raises accountability questions within institutions designed for state-to-state cooperation. Rising powers, regional bodies, and reform coalitions must actively hold the order together and ensure meaningful Global South inclusion. China participates selectively, neither replacing US leadership nor acting as a bystander, while re-globalization itself becomes a political act: a collective decision to sustain an international order on terms that no longer require US validation. (IBEI, 2023; Momal-Vanian, Tribune de Geneve, 2026; Bruegel “Geopolitical shifts and their economic impacts on Europe”, 2025; Bruegl “Tariffs, deals and multilateral ideals: can the World Trade Organization survive?”, 2025).

3.4 Overview of the Case Studies: International Organizations Profiles

The three organizations profiled below sit at the different pillars of International Geneva’s ecosystem and each registers the pressures of geopolitical reconfiguration in distinct ways. Understanding how they differ—in their basic facts, governance model, and workforce—is essential to assessing how each would respond based on the scenarios outlined above.

INTERNATIONAL GENEVA — PROFILE			
Basic Facts			
BASIC FACTS	WHO	OCHA	ITC
Headquarters	Geneva, Switzerland	Geneva, Switzerland	Geneva, Switzerland
Founded	1948	1998	1964
Member States	193	Not a member-based organization; department within the UN Secretariat serving 193 UN member states	Not a member-based organization; technical agency of UNCTAD and the WTO
Head of Organization	Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus	Thomas Fletcher	Pamela Coke-Hamilton
Nationality	Ethiopian	British	Jamaican
Elected / Term	2017 – Present	2024 – Present	2020 – Present
Total Staff	~9,500	~2,650	~400

The Future of International Geneva – Basic Facts – April 2026
Sources: WHO, OCHA and ITC official websites, 2025

Figure 3.1: Basic Organizational Facts of the WHO, OCHA, and ITC

INTERNATIONAL GENEVA — PROFILE**Governance Model**

GOVERNANCE MODEL	WHO	OCHA	ITC
Internal governing bodies	World Health Assembly (WHA) and Executive Board	UN Secretariat department; no separate governing board; UNGA oversight; ERC leadership reporting to UNSG; IASC as main humanitarian coordination forum	Joint Advisory Group (JAG); Consultative Committee of the ITC Trust Fund
Decision model	One state-one vote; simple majority for ordinary decisions; two-thirds majority for major decisions	Consensus-based within OCHA coordination mechanisms	Consensus-based within ITC leadership
Council / board composition	Executive Board: 34 members	Leadership ensured by the Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs/ERC and Assistant SG/Deputy ERC	Joint Advisory Group (JAG)
Global Majority vs Western balance	Western-dominated funding; limited Global Majority contribution	Western-dominated funding; limited Global Majority contribution	Western-dominated funding; limited Global Majority contribution
Mandate	Health equity; universal health coverage (UHC); pandemic preparedness and response; resilient health systems; multilateral cooperation; gender equality; climate and health: science and innovation	Coordination of global humanitarian response; mobilisation of humanitarian financing; advocacy for humanitarian access; support to affected populations in complex crises and those at risk.	Foster inclusive and sustainable economic development by supporting MSMEs in developing countries to become more competitive in global markets; green and digital transformation; regional integration and global advocacy

The Future of International Geneva – Governance Model – April 2026
 Sources: WHO, OCHA and ITC official websites, 2025

Figure 3.2: Governance Model of the WHO, OCHA, and ITC

INTERNATIONAL GENEVA — PROFILE**Workforce and Geneva Presence**

WORKFORCE AND GENEVA PRESENCE	WHO	OCHA	ITC
Global office structure	HQ in Geneva; 6 regional offices; 150 country offices	2 global hubs in Geneva and New York; 5 regional offices; 27 country offices; 22 Humanitarian Advisor Teams; 7 liaison offices	HQ in Geneva; 1 regional office; 2 liaison offices; 50+ country offices
Building ownership	Campus owned by the World Health Organization; comprises the main building, new building, and the UNAIDS building	Premises owned by the United Nations and administered through the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG)	Premises owned and managed by the Fondation des Immeubles pour les Organisations Internationales (FIPOI)
Renovation / host-state loan	Total investment of US\$250m; US\$140m covered by a 50-year Swiss host-state loan; US\$110m funded directly by WHO	CHF400m interest-free loan (federal and cantonal governments) for the renovation of the Palais des Nations / ONUG complex	US\$78m loan over 50 years provided to FIPOI for building renovation

The Future of International Geneva – Workforce and Geneva Presence – April 2026
 Sources: WHO, OCHA and ITC official websites, 2025

Figure 3.3: Workforce and Geneva Presence of the WHO, OCHA, and ITC



4

CHAPTER 4

World Health Organization (WHO)

by Marilyn Conde

4.1 Where WHO Stands Today

The structural rupture in WHO's financing did not emerge without warning, but 2025 made it permanent. In January 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of the United States from WHO, a decision that would take legal effect in January 2026 following the mandatory one-year notice period, but whose financial consequences were immediate (Fletcher, 2025). Having historically provided nearly \$1 billion in fixed and voluntary contributions in the 2022-23 biennium, the US left behind \$260 million in unpaid assessed dues for 2024-25 that WHO is unlikely to recover, compounded by a further \$130 million in 2024 contributions left uncleared before the administration transition (Fletcher, 2025). By April 2025, WHO officials told a global staff Town Hall that the organization faced a \$1.9 billion gap, nearly half the planned 2026-2027 base budget, on top of a \$600 million shortfall through end-2025, a combined crisis of \$2.5 billion (Fletcher, 2025).

Europe's retreat, quieter but no less consequential, compounded the damage. The European Commission cut its Global Fund pledge by 26.5% and confirmed that its next long-term budget will contain no dedicated health window, a deliberate deprioritisation of multilateral health financing, while the November 2025 replenishment, with France and the Commission withholding firm commitments, closed billions short of target (Sassmannshausen, 2026). Germany's WHO contributions, having peaked at \$1.26 billion in 2020-2021, fell to \$317 million for 2024-2025 (Sassmannshausen, 2026; Swissinfo, 2026).

The contraction of state financing did not go unanswered, but the actors who responded were not states. Private foundations, led by the Gates Foundation alongside the Novo Nordisk Foundation and Fondation Botnar, moved to partially fill the vacuum, materially reshaping WHO's financial architecture in the process. Their contributions, however substantial in headline terms, are overwhelmingly earmarked for specific disease areas and programmes, leaving WHO's horizontal, equity-oriented, and cross-cutting work, the institutional core of its universal health mandate, structurally underfunded regardless of what aggregate figures suggest (World Health Organization, 2025).

Into this vacuum, China moved with visible intent. Vice Premier Liu Guozhong pledged \$500 million in voluntary contributions over five years at WHA78, but as of May 2026 no disbursement has been confirmed, no payment schedule formalized, and no follow-up statement issued (The Washington Post, 2025). China had also initially signalled opposition to the 20% assessed contributions increase before eventually accepting it, a pattern that reflects a preference for maximizing diplomatic positioning over underwriting institutional independence (Anderson, 2025).

4.1.1 Institutional Response

The 78th World Health Assembly, the first in 76 years without American participation, responded by approving a reduced 2026-2027 base budget alongside the 20% increase in assessed contributions, cutting the base segment to \$4.27 billion, roughly a fifth below the original proposal and 14% below the previous biennium (Figure 4.1) (WHO, A79/13, 2026; WHO, A79/15, 2026; WHA78.2, 2025). The reassurance, however, is largely presentational. As Figure 4.1 shows, the Secretariat's headline of 90% funded depends on counting projected and pipeline contributions; only 73% of the base was actually secured as at 31 March 2026, so the comfortable 10% gap becomes a shortfall of roughly \$1.1 billion, over a quarter of the base, once unrealized projections are stripped out. As Director-General Tedros conceded, even the headline 10% "will not be easy to mobilize" in the current environment, leaving a structural emergency only nominally smaller than the previous biennium's (WHO, A79/15, 2026; WHO, A79/27, 2026; Swissinfo, 2026).

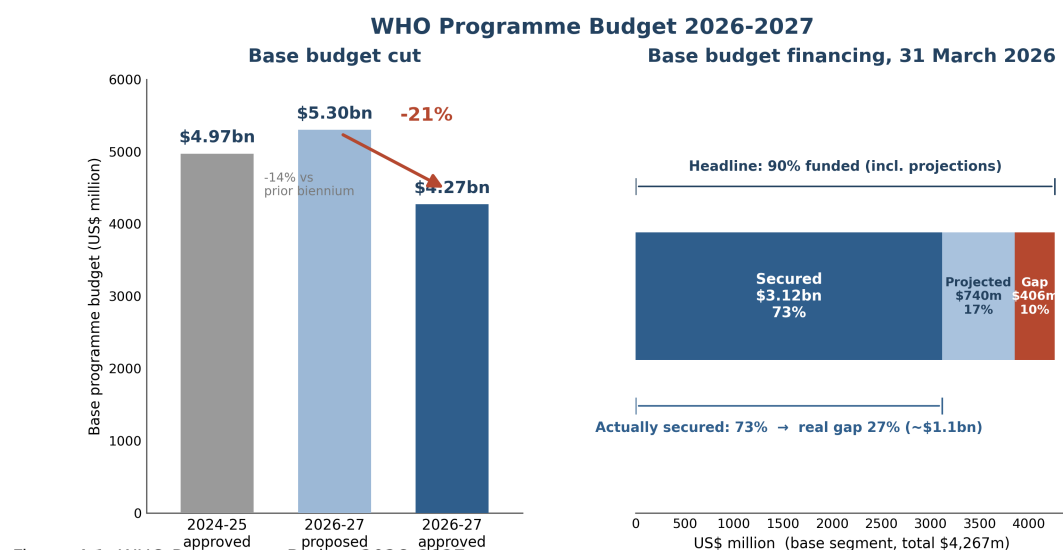


Figure 4.1: WHO Programme Budget 2026-2027.

WHO's internal response was immediate and severe, and it reached every category of its workforce. Alongside a hiring freeze, a shift to virtual operations, restricted technical support and deep cuts to travel and procurement (Fletcher, 2025), the organization shed staff on a scale unprecedented in its history: the headcount is projected to fall by roughly a fifth between early 2025 and mid-2026, through more than 2,500 separations and the abolition of some 1,280 posts (Figure 4.2) (WHO, A79/6, 2026; WHO, EB158/52, 2026). As Figure 4.2 also shows, the burden fell unevenly. The flexible workforce was cut far harder than permanent staff, with consultants and performance-based agreements absorbing the steepest proportional losses, and headquarters and Global Shared Services bore the deepest geographic reductions, with emergency response partially shielded and equity and chronic-disease programmes bearing the worst of the cuts (WHO, A79/21, 2026; WHO, A79/6, 2026).

WHO workforce contraction, 2025-2026: 2,507 separations · ~22% of staff · 1,282 posts abolished

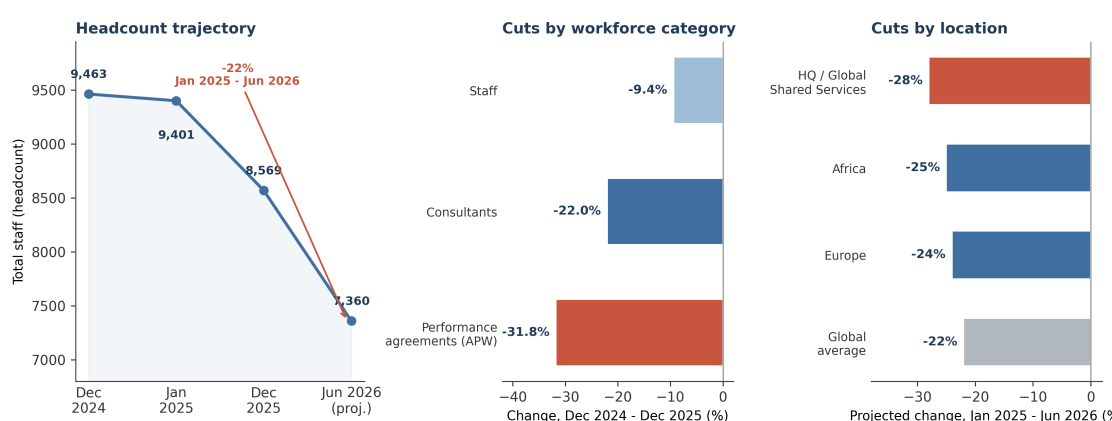


Figure 4.2: WHO workforce reductions, early 2025 to mid-2026.

The institutional disruption extended beyond headcount. The global internship programme has been fully suspended since the end of January 2025, with reopening only anticipated in the second quarter of 2026 (WHO, A79/21, 2026). The Global Geographical Mobility Policy and the reform of contractual modalities have both been paused, halting longer-term workforce

planning at precisely the moment structural reform is most needed (WHO, A79/21, 2026).

Against this backdrop, the Pandemic Agreement adopted at WHA78 stands as the most significant normative achievement in international health governance in a generation, secured at the very moment its operational financing backbone was being dismantled, and still awaiting the Pathogen Access and Benefit-Sharing (PABS) Annex required for it to enter into force, on which Member States failed to reach consensus at the resumed sixth IGWG meeting (World Health Organization, 2025; WHO, A79/6, 2026).

The governance architecture of the WHO is undergoing a structural transformation that precedes, and will outlast, any single leadership transition or budgetary decision. The U.S. withdrawal has not merely removed a donor; it has removed the actor that for decades anchored the organization's political centre of gravity, while simultaneously constructing a parallel health governance architecture designed to operate alongside and in competition with WHO. Washington was not alone: Argentina, under President Javier Milei, announced its own withdrawal from WHO in February 2025, echoing the United States' stated grievances over pandemic management and the Organization's alleged lack of independence, and the IOAC records that two Member States have now declared their intention to leave the Organization in 2026 (WHO, A79/6, 2026; Al Dallal, 2026).

Argentina's direct financial weight is marginal, but the political significance is not: the two withdrawals are ideologically aligned rather than coincidental, signalling that exit from the multilateral health order has become a viable sovereign posture rather than an unthinkable rupture.

The America First Global Health Strategy, launched and released by the US administration in 2025, replaces multilateral engagement with bilateral health compacts; as of March 2026, 29 countries have signed memoranda of understanding totalling at least \$20.2 billion for 2026-2030, routing health financing directly through national governance structures and bypassing WHO's normative framework entirely (Hirschfeld, Krugman, Bollyky, Psaki, Dieleman).

Within WHO's formal governance structures, China has moved to fill the leadership vacuum in Washington's absence, presenting itself as the defender of multilateralism, though, as its financing posture already shows, in pursuit of influence rather than institutional responsibility (Jovial, 2025). The Global South bloc, meanwhile, has grown more assertive in demanding reforms that reflect its demographic and epidemiological weight, even as its cohesion within WHO governance remains uneven (Shidore, 2026).

Looming over all of these dynamics is the most consequential governance event on the immediate horizon: the election of a new Director-General. The decisive contest, however, is less about personalities than about which states control the selection machinery. Because the Executive Board shortlists the three candidates the Assembly may choose from, its composition is where the election is effectively shaped, and that composition has shifted in ways that mirror the broader multipolar realignment. China is the most significant new addition to the Board this cycle, nominated by the Western Pacific Region in a contested closed-door process to replace Australia, with the region's seat distribution still to be finalized in 2026; the European Region's rotation logic, which reserves seats for its permanent UN Security Council members, returned the United Kingdom, with France to follow, while excluding Russia, which lost a competing bid to Georgia; and seven African states, such as the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Mozambique, hold a bloc of shortlisting votes disproportionate to their financial weight (Cullinan, 2026). The election therefore stages, in miniature, the same tension that runs through WHO's financing: Germany is openly seeking to convert its new status as the largest state donor into influence over the succession, while the regional blocs that contribute least retain decisive procedural leverage (Cullinan, 2026).

What is structurally certain, whoever emerges from this process, is that the election occurs at the precise moment the organisation's financial trajectory, governance reform process, and programmatic identity are all simultaneously unresolved, making the succession inseparable from the question of what WHO will be by 2029 (Sassmannshausen, Fletcher, 2026).

4.2 WHO in a Multipolar World

The governance challenge facing WHO in a multipolar world is not survival but relevance, and the multipolar condition has a specific shape: authority is dispersed across several competing poles, a U.S.-led bilateral bloc, China's expanding health diplomacy, a stabilising but fiscally constrained Europe, and increasingly assertive regional bodies such as the African Union and ASEAN, none of which can set terms for the others (Clark & Leung, 2026). In this configuration, WHO does not collapse or transform so much as find its functions split. It can retain its normative and standard-setting authority while losing operational centrality, becoming the convener of a layered system it no longer controls rather than the hub that runs it. The redistribution proceeds not through any formal challenge to WHO's mandate but through the bilateral health compact architecture already forming around it, and its defining tension is the one Clark and Leung identify, that the regional autonomy strengthening WHO's constituent parts may simultaneously erode the universal commitments that justify a single global body at all (Clark & Leung, 2026).

4.2.1 Authority and Governance

WHO's convening authority will be tested through 2028 by the proliferation of bilateral health compacts already bypassing its normative framework. But peripherality and authority are not an either/or here: as health financing routes increasingly through government-to-government agreements outside WHO's architecture, the organisation can become operationally peripheral in the countries making the most consequential decisions while still retaining the normative authority to set the standards those arrangements borrow from, the characteristic multipolar settlement of influence without control (Vota, 2026). Whether that settlement stabilises or decays into pure peripherality turns on whether WHO converts the GHA reform process, mandated by EB158(20) and formally established as a Member State-led joint process at WHA79 in May 2026, into a coordination framework that the competing poles actually adopt. Unlike a binding, member-state-endorsed architecture, such a framework would be soft and voluntary, positioning WHO as the standard-setter for a layered system rather than a competitor to arrangements it cannot police; were the task force to deliver one ahead of its final report to WHA80 in 2027, WHO would consolidate the influence-without-control equilibrium rather than slide beneath it (WHO, A79/24, 2026; WHO, A79/31, 2026; EB158(20), 2026). That process and the DG election are not separable. Whichever candidate the Executive Board shortlists for election at WHA80 will inherit whatever the joint process delivers or fails to deliver by then, and their first governance decision will be whether to accelerate or stall the reform momentum the crisis opened (WHO, A79/24, 2026; STAT, 2026).

The variable that decides between a stable multipolar settlement and a captured one is less any single bloc's cohesion than the capacity for cross-bloc bargaining. Clark and Leung's warning is precise here: "conversations among the like-minded alone... will have limited success," and a genuinely multipolar order requires reaching across political aisles to work with political foes (Clark & Leung, 2026). The interaction of the DG election, the assessed contributions reform, and health data sovereignty, where U.S. bilateral MOUs embed data-sharing obligations that WHO's existing frameworks were not designed to adjudicate, will therefore be settled not by the Global South acting alone but by whether it can assemble durable, issue-specific coalitions with middle powers and a stabilizing Europe, even across adversarial lines (Vota,

2026; Sassmannshausen, Fletcher, 2026). Were such cross-bloc coalitions to form, sustaining the assessed contributions vote in May 2027 and converging on a workable data-governance position, WHO could redistribute institutional authority in ways its founding architecture never achieved; were coordination to remain confined to like-minded blocs, the reform window the 2025 crisis opened could close without producing the structural change the evidence suggests the organization requires (Sassmannshausen, Fletcher, 2026; Moss, 2025).

Whether WHO governs global health or merely presides over it by 2029 will be determined not by a single vote or appointment, but by whether these accumulated, cross-bloc bargains produced an institution with the legitimacy, financial independence, and coordinating mandate to act (Sassmannshausen, 2026a).

4.2.2 Funding and Influence

In a multipolar world, the central financial question facing WHO through 2029 is structural rather than cyclical: not whether the organization can close this year's gap, but whether its funding base can be reconstituted on terms that restore meaningful institutional autonomy. Over 60% of WHO's total financing already originates from only nine donors, making the organisation structurally exposed to the political decision of a handful of actors, and the Investment Round launched in 2024 has secured only \$3.8 billion, 53% of its \$7 billion goal, with no confirmed pathway to close the remainder (KFF, 2026; cf. WHO, A79/INF.5, 2026, indicator 7.1.3.IND5, which records only 35% of the base budget as financed by donors outside the ten largest) (Demeshko, Baker, 2024).

The reform agreed in 2022 targets an increase in assessed contributions from 16% of the core budget in 2020-2021 to 50% by 2030-2031, raising assessed contributions in monetary terms from \$957 million to \$2.182 billion by 2028-2029 (Iwunna, Kennedy, Harmer, 2023; decision WHA75(8), 2022, as recalled in WHO, A79/6, 2026). Two increases have already passed. Two remain scheduled for May 2027 and May 2029 (WHO, A79/6, 2026). Were member states to sustain political consensus through each of these votes, WHO's financing base would become meaningfully less dependent on voluntary earmarked contributions, the ratio of flexible to specified funding would improve, and the organization would gain the financial capacity to allocate resources according to its own mandate rather than its donors' priorities. This outcome is plausible but not guaranteed. It requires sustained political will from member states simultaneously navigating domestic fiscal pressure, defence spending competition, and a geopolitically fragmented environment in which each assessed contributions vote requires active consensus.

If the reform loses political momentum, through middle-income country resistance, European fiscal retrenchment, or donor bargaining, WHO would remain dependent on a voluntary financing model in which 83% of total revenue is already voluntary and 88% of that arrives earmarked (KFF, 2026). The headline budget figure could remain nominally stable, sustained by private foundations and geopolitically motivated state donors including China, but its composition would increasingly reflect donor priorities rather than WHO's mandate. The gap between WHO's formal mandate and its operational capacity would widen with each budget cycle not through collapse, but through the quiet accumulation of conditions attached to contributions (Iwunna, Kennedy, Harmer, 2023).

Two distinct channels are at work here, and conflating them obscures the logic. The assessed-contributions share rises or stalls on the mandatory votes of 2027 and 2029, not on voluntary money. Given the second increase already approved, sustained consensus through both remaining votes could lift assessed contributions from roughly a quarter of the base budget today toward 30-35% by 2029. China's \$500 million pledge, by contrast, is voluntary and would flow into the Investment Round and the broader voluntary base; even if fully delivered on a

formalised schedule it cannot move the assessed-contributions percentage, though it could narrow the Investment Round gap and modestly diversify the donor pool. The downside is therefore not a sudden collapse but stagnation and concentration. The difference between these futures will not be determined by a single vote or a single pledge, but by whether the structural reforms already in motion receive the sustained, cross-bloc political commitment the evidence suggests they require (KFF, 2026).

4.2.3 Mandate and Programmes

The financial crisis has forced WHO into a programmatic triage that is reshaping what the organisation does and for whom. WHO has already stopped working on sexual and reproductive health, sanitation, and adolescent health in the Western Pacific, transferring these to UNICEF and UNFPA (Rigby / Farge, 2025), while halving its technical departments from 76 to 34 (Ravelo, 2025). The structural distortion is compounding: with the Gates Foundation accounting for 9.5% of WHO revenues between 2010 and 2023 through 640 grants worth \$5.5 billion, the overwhelming majority earmarked for infectious diseases by donor preference rather than by collective member state mandate (BMJ Global Health, 2025). In a multipolar world, WHO's programme priorities through 2029 will be determined not by its 194 member states collectively but by which donors show up, on what terms, and for which diseases. If earmarking deepens and becomes the primary mechanism through which remaining donors fill the funding gap, WHO's programme risks becoming a fragmented collection of donor-driven verticals without a coherent mandate. The pattern is already established: voluntary contributions concentrated on infectious diseases and vaccines by the Gates Foundation (Kennedy & Thakrar, 2025), European programmatic engagement increasingly oriented toward climate and health systems and Gulf state funding directed toward emergency response (BMJ Global Health, 2025). The NCD deficit is the clearest evidence of this distortion: the programme area carrying the greatest global burden of disease receives the least support precisely because it lacks a powerful bilateral funding coalition (World Bank Group, 2025).

Whether this triage hardens into permanent fragmentation or is redirected depends on the same cross-bloc dynamic that governs the budget. If the Global South can translate its health-sovereignty agenda into a programmatic coalition that reaches beyond the like-minded, the Accra Reset, launched in August 2025, proposes a reconfigured architecture anchored in sovereignty and decision-making power proportional to epidemiological burden rather than financial contribution, and its high-level panel, including the health ministers of Brazil and Indonesia, is now formally drawn upon by the WHO-hosted joint process established at WHA79, then WHO could enter 2029 with a programme agenda shaped by its most burdened members rather than its wealthiest donors (Adaba, 2025; Rainbow Radio, 2026; WHO, A79/24, 2026). The Lusaka Agenda, Accra Reset and parallel initiatives all prioritise national resiliency and domestic financing, and none proposes a total transformation of the system, so even a successful Southern coalition reshapes priorities within a layered, partly regionalised architecture rather than restoring a single universal agenda, the same autonomy-versus-universalism trade-off that defines this scenario (Clark Leung, 2026). Were even that bounded coalition to fragment, the Pandemic Agreement adopted at WHA78 in May 2025 would remain the last available multilateral anchor, and its implementation trajectory by 2029 the clearest indicator of whether genuine multilateral programmatic consensus survived the rupture or was finally consumed by it.

4.2.4 Footprint and Presence

In a multipolar world, the question of where WHO is physically located is no longer separable from the question of who controls it and what it is for. The relocations already underway have established a functional logic that the evidence suggests will deepen rather than reverse, and

the competition among host states to attract WHO units signals that institutional geography has become a new arena of geopolitical contestation. What remains genuinely open is whether that logic produces a managed and coherent multi-hub architecture, or accelerates into a permanently decentralised model in which function rather than tradition determines where global health authority resides.

If functional relocation continues, WHO could become a genuine multi-hub institution in which geography follows mandate rather than tradition. WHO's own strategic relocation documents present the moves to Berlin, Dubai, Lyon, and Jamnagar as deliberate functional alignments rather than ad hoc cost-cutting, with each unit placed where the relevant infrastructure and partnerships exist (WHO, 2025). On this logic Geneva would house governance and diplomacy, Berlin surveillance and pandemic intelligence, Lyon emergency-response coordination, with further functional nodes emerging in the same pattern, a geographic distribution that mirrors the broader multipolar realignment, in which non-Western and emerging actors acquire institutional presence through functional rather than political means. The model has a structural vulnerability, however, that the Berlin case exposes: Germany's decision to cut funding for the Pandemic Intelligence Hub shows that a host state can defund the very function it hosts, which falsifies the premise that hosting and financing move together. A multi-hub WHO is therefore stable only if each hub's financing is decoupled from the discretion of its host, pooled or multilaterally underwritten rather than dependent on a single national budget; absent that decoupling, the architecture is directionally clear but operationally fragile, each node only as durable as its host government's current priorities (Sassmannshausen, 2026).

If decentralisation accelerates and digital governance matures, WHO's geographic model could become permanently functional rather than traditionally centred, with host states competing not for headquarters designation but for specific functional units. Yet this trajectory is bounded at both ends. Digital infrastructure reduces the operational necessity of physical centralisation, pushing toward dispersal; but the Swiss loyalty clause, conditioning CHF 38.7 million in suspended loan repayments on a ten-year commitment to remain in Geneva, pulls the other way, and cuts against a simple decentralisation reading. It is at once the strongest evidence that the host state takes the dispersal risk seriously and a contractual instrument that forecloses the most extreme version of it: WHO's governance core is locked into Geneva for a decade even as its operational functions migrate. The plausible multipolar outcome is therefore not full decentralisation but a bifurcated geography, a contractually anchored diplomatic centre in Geneva and a dispersed, host-contingent constellation of operational hubs elsewhere (Fedlex, 2025).

4.2.5 People and Capacity

With thousands of posts eliminated by mid-2026 and technical departments halved, WHO's workforce is being restructured in ways that will define its operational capacity through 2029 regardless of which broader scenario prevails, but the workforce has a property the budget does not: path dependence. If adaptation succeeds, WHO emerges with a smaller but functional permanent core supplemented by regional hiring, external experts integrated into operations, and digital teams substituting for physical units, a hybrid model consistent with the function-based, multipolar architecture toward which the organisation is moving. If consultant reliance instead becomes permanent, the shadow workforce of short-term contractors that already substitutes for eliminated staff deepens institutional-memory loss until WHO's technical authority, its most fundamental source of legitimacy in a world where it sets standards more than it implements, erodes from within. The key variable is partly the same as for the budget, if the assessed contributions reform generates enough stable financing to rebuild permanent capacity at regional level. But it is not only financial, because the loss is not symmetric with the recovery. Tacit expertise and institutional memory shed in 2025-2026

cannot simply be repurchased if financing improves in 2027-2029; the talent migrates to bilateral agencies, foundations and regional bodies, and the networks dissolve. A multipolar WHO that under-protects its core technical workforce now may find that even a later financial recovery cannot restore the authority that workforce underwrote, a hysteresis that makes the sequencing of cuts and rebuilding more consequential than their net magnitude.

4.3 WHO in a Zombie Multilateral Order

A second and distinct trajectory is one in which WHO neither adapts nor collapses; it simply persists. The organisation retains its Geneva headquarters, convenes the World Health Assembly, issues guidelines, and formally represents 194 member states, but the decisions that actually govern global health are made elsewhere. This is the multilateral zombie: institutional form without operational substance, physical presence without political authority. The conditions for this trajectory are not hypothetical; they are already partially assembled, and what distinguishes them from the multipolar world scenario is not their direction but their endpoint. The zombie scenario produces a world that is frozen, too costly to dismantle and too hollowed out to lead. The crucial point for foresight is that nothing in the present record has to worsen for this future to arrive. The \$1.1 billion that the 73%-secured base leaves unfunded is never closed but never quite forces a reckoning either; the 2,500 separations are never reversed but never formally acknowledged as a capacity loss; the GHA reform process meets, reports, and recommends without ever binding anyone. The zombie is what the 2025 rupture decays into if every reform window identified in this report opens and then closes unused.

4.3.1 Authority and Governance

This materialises if the 2027 DG election produces a leader with a politically contested mandate, either a candidate too closely associated with the current leadership to command broader re-engagement, or one whose election reflects geopolitical bloc bargaining rather than institutional reform consensus (World Health Organization, 2026). Since the Executive Board's composition has already shifted toward procedural leverage held by the regional blocs that contribute least, a shortlist assembled through bloc accommodation rather than reform consensus is not the unlikely outcome but arguably the path of least resistance, and it is precisely the outcome this scenario assumes. The deeper governance risk is not a deadlock but performance. WHA attendance remains high precisely because states continue to use the forum diplomatically even when they have no intention of implementing its decisions. Resolutions pass, declarations are issued, and the Assembly convenes, but the decisions that actually govern health financing, pandemic preparedness, and surveillance architecture are made through bilateral MOUs, foundation grant conditions, and regional compacts that WHO cannot enforce and was not party to (Klingebiel, 2026; Barnett, Finnemore, 2024). The 29 MOUs already totalling at least \$20.2 billion for 2026-2030 are not an aberration in this scenario but the operative system; WHA resolutions become the ceremonial layer above a financing reality conducted entirely outside the building. As one analysis has noted, international organisations in this condition persist because dismantling them is costlier than allowing them to continue, maintaining staff, issuing resolutions, and hosting meetings while remaining structurally unable to enforce compliance or drive collective action (World Health Organization, 2026). The Global Health Architecture Reform process, advanced by the Executive Board in February 2026 and formally established as a one-year, Member State-led joint process at WHA79, could yield a substantive roadmap by its final report to WHA80, or it could produce precisely the kind of process-heavy, commitment-light outcome that zombie institutions specialise in, which would be a document that records disagreement as consensus and defers structural reform indefinitely (WHO, A79/24, 2026; WHO, A79/31, 2026).

4.3.2 Funding and Influence

On budget and finance, this trajectory materialises if the assessed contributions reform stalls and earmarked voluntary funding remains the dominant financing mechanism. With assessed contributions currently covering 24% of the base segment, roughly 16% of the total programme budget, and the voluntary funding that dominates the budget arriving overwhelmingly earmarked, the organisation's financial architecture already structurally subordinates collective mandate to donor presence (WHO, A79/15, 2026; Iwunna, Kennedy, Harmer, 2023). The zombie path does not require a new shock; it requires only that the May 2027 vote join the pattern China modelled in 2025, accepted rhetorically, resisted in substance, until "consensus" becomes a procedural formality emptied of fiscal consequence. Were the remaining assessed contributions increases, in 2027, 2029 and 2031, to fail under political pressure from member states citing domestic fiscal constraints, WHO would enter the 2030s with a budget that is formally approved but substantively controlled by a small coalition of voluntary donors (World Health Organization, 2025). The structural exposure is already in the record: more than 60% of financing from nine donors, 83% of revenue voluntary and 88% of that earmarked, so the zombie budget is less a future state than the present state denied any corrective.

4.3.3 Mandate and Programmes

The gap between WHO's normative output and its operational reach is where the scenario becomes most visible. The organisation continues to publish guidelines, set standards, and formally coordinate, but in a context where 29 bilateral MOUs bypass its normative framework (Hirschfeld, Krugman, Bollyky, Psaki, Dieleman, 2026), where the Gates Foundation's earmarked grants shape the infectious disease agenda, and where the Western Pacific region has stopped work on sexual and reproductive health, sanitation, and adolescent health, the practical meaning of WHO's programme mandate is progressively hollowed out (Rigby & Farge, 2025). The zombie programme is not one that announces what it will no longer do, but one whose capacity to act has already been removed while the mandate to act formally remains, producing a permanent and widening gap between guideline and delivery. The NCD deficit hardens into the defining feature of this scenario, the area of greatest disease burden permanently under-resourced because it never attracted the bilateral coalition that infectious-disease verticals did, and nothing in the zombie path supplies one. The Pandemic Agreement, adopted at WHA78, is the clearest test of whether normative output can sustain operational relevance without the financial and political conditions to enforce it; an agreement without U.S. participation, without a resolved PABS Annex, and without a funded implementation architecture is itself a zombie instrument, formally historic, operationally inert (World Health Organization, 2025).

4.3.4 Footprint and Presence

What Geneva consolidation actually produces under this scenario is retention of WHO's physical presence without retention of its operational authority. Switzerland is paying CHF 269 million to keep international organizations on its territory, and the CHF 38.7 million loyalty clause locks the governance core into Geneva for a decade, but physical presence is not institutional relevance (FDFA, 2026; Fedlex, 2025). In the zombie scenario the Swiss leverage works exactly as written and yet achieves nothing of substance: it guarantees that the address stays in Geneva while the work leaves it. If the functional hubs in Berlin, Dubai, and Lyon continue to absorb operational capacity while Geneva retains the diplomatic and governance shell, the result is not a multi-hub institution but a headquarters that convenes without coordinating, the address of global health authority but not its home, and a host-state investment that has secured the building while losing the institution inside it (World Health Organization, 2025).

4.3.5 People and Capacity

The hollowing-out already visible in budget and governance produces a specific institutional profile that compounds over time. The most capable staff, recognizing that WHO no longer offers meaningful operational work, migrate toward bilateral health agencies, private foundations, and the growing network of regional health bodies, absorbing the functions WHO is vacating. What remains is an organization that retains its permanent staff, difficult to dismiss under UN employment protections (United Nations, 2026), but progressively loses the talent pool that gave it analytical and operational credibility (Patnaik, 2025). The expertise lost is precisely the expertise least likely to return, and a zombie financing base never generates the stable, mandate-driven work that would draw it back. The result is an institution that is expensive to maintain and structurally resistant to internal reform which would include payroll obligations that persist while the capacity to act on them diminishes. For Geneva specifically, this dynamic matters because the value of hosting WHO has never been purely about headcount; it has been about the concentration of expertise and institutional authority that accompanies it. A hollowed-out workforce retains the former while surrendering the latter.

4.4 WHO in a Re-globalized World without the US

This third scenario is not defined by what the United States has taken away, but by what the rest of the world decides to build in its absence. It begins from the same baseline as the preceding two, U.S. withdrawal is permanent within this planning horizon, but reaches a fundamentally different analytical conclusion: that U.S. absence, rather than producing fragmentation or paralysis, catalyses a deliberate act of institutional reconstruction by a coalition of middle powers, Global South states, and European actors who conclude that the cost of allowing WHO to fragment or hollow out exceeds the cost of rebuilding it on new terms. This is re-globalization without the United States. Not a restoration of the pre-2025 order, but the construction of a different one. It describes what actors choose to build when they recognise that adaptation alone will not be enough. The plausibility of this scenario rests not on new evidence but on a different reading of what the evidence already in the record actually demonstrates: that 193 member states adopted the Pandemic Agreement by consensus without U.S. participation, that 41 first-time contributors joined the Investment Round unprompted by Washington's leadership, and that the Carnegie Endowment's January 2026 analysis concluded that conditions are genuinely propitious for a loose network of middle-ranking powers to rebuild multilateral cooperation, provided they take the structural steps required to convert political solidarity into institutional commitment (Patrick, 2026). The facts are the same as in the preceding scenarios. The variable is whether the actors capable of acting on them choose to do so. The foresight question this scenario poses is therefore not "is it possible," the record already shows it is, but "what would have to be true by which date" for the latent coalition to consolidate, and the answer runs through a small number of dated decision points.

4.4.1 Authority and Governance

In this scenario, governance produces a Director-General elected by a stable and broad coalition, most plausibly a candidate with cross-regional support and reform credentials capable of assembling the coalition that re-globalization requires, and a Global Health Architecture Reform process, established at WHA79 as a Member State-led joint task force reporting to WHA80, that produces binding commitments rather than process documents (WHO, A79/24, 2026; WHO, A79/31, 2026). The shifted Executive Board composition, often read as a multipolar fragmentation risk, is reinterpreted here as an opportunity: the disproportionate shortlisting weight held by African states and the return of European Security Council members create exactly the cross-regional spread a broad reform coalition needs, provided

a candidate can speak to both at once rather than to one bloc against another. The middle power multilateralism literature consistently identifies coalition-building and institutional management as the defining competencies of this scenario's key actors: Europe, Canada, Japan, Australia, Brazil, and Indonesia are all simultaneously invested in WHO's survival and capable of the sustained diplomatic coordination that rebuilding it requires. Crucially, the DG election in this scenario is not merely a governance transition; it is the moment at which the political coalition responsible for re-globalization formally endorses its own institutional project, and the mandate of the incoming Director-General reflects that coalition's priorities rather than a negotiated compromise among competing blocs. This is the decisive divergence from the zombie path, which assumes the same election but a contested, bloc-bargained outcome. The same procedural machinery yields opposite institutions depending on whether the coalition behind the winning candidate is broad and reform-oriented or narrow and accommodationist.

4.4.2 Funding and Influence

Critically, the United States had been the primary obstacle to the assessed contributions reform throughout the Working Group on Sustainable Financing consultations of 2021-2022, resisting mandatory financing increases and pushing instead for a separate donor-controlled fund that would have preserved voluntary earmarking as the dominant mechanism (Guarascio, Nebehay, Hunnicutt, 2022; Fletcher, 2022). Its withdrawal removes that structural veto. In this scenario, the remaining assessed contributions increases, in 2027, 2029 and 2031, pass with a cohesion that the U.S.-anchored system never permitted, precisely because the coalition supporting them no longer needs to accommodate Washington's resistance. The reform's own arithmetic then works in the institution's favour with sustained consensus through both remaining votes. Simultaneously, the donor base undergoes a structural shift rather than a marginal broadening. In this case, the African Union and Global Fund's formalised cooperation framework, established in November 2025, anchors African regional financing commitment to WHO's core budget in ways that supplement assessed contributions with domestically mobilised resources (African Union, 2025). The African Export-Import Bank and Asian Development Bank, already present as contributors to aligned mechanisms, move toward more structural roles (Afreximbank, 2026). The 41 first-time contributors to the Investment Round are the leading indicator here, evidence that the donor pool can widen without Washington, and in this scenario they are converted from one-off entrants into recurring structural contributors rather than allowed to lapse. The result is a financing architecture that is genuinely multipolar in its donor composition, not European substitution for U.S. funding, but a genuinely different coalition in which the Global South is a structural contributor rather than a beneficiary.

4.4.3 Mandate and Programmes

On programme this scenario delivers what the Accra Reset, launched at the Africa Health Sovereignty Summit in August 2025 and extended to a global coalition at the 80th UN General Assembly, was designed to produce, a programme identity shaped by epidemiological burden rather than donor preference (The Presidency Republic of Ghana, 2025; Green, 2025; Oguanuo, 2025). The assessed contributions reform restores flexible core funding sufficient to finance non-communicable diseases, health systems strengthening, and reproductive health, the areas most chronically underfunded under the earmarked voluntary model precisely because they lacked the bilateral funding coalitions that infectious disease programmes attracted. The NCD deficit, the clearest single distortion of the donor-driven model, is therefore the clearest single test of whether re-globalization has actually occurred. A measurable rise in core-funded NCD and health-systems work by 2029 is the programmatic signature of this scenario, just as a persistent NCD deficit is the signature of the zombie path. The Pandemic Agreement provides the institutional infrastructure for health security; the reform provides the financial autonomy to fund equity-oriented programming alongside it rather than in competition with it, and in

this scenario the contested PABS Annex is resolved by the same coalition that adopted the Agreement, converting a historic-but-inert instrument into an operational one (World Health Organization, 2025; CIDRAP, 2025). By 2029, the gap between WHO's formal mandate and its operational reality narrows in ways that neither the multipolar adaptation nor the zombie persistence scenario could achieve.

4.4.4 Footprint and Presence

In re-globalization, the multi-hub architecture is formally endorsed through member state resolution, each hub's mandate, governance structure, and financing explicitly defined by the coalition that now underwrites it (LSE, 2026; World Health Organization, 2026). This is the direct corrective to the structural vulnerability identified in the multipolar location analysis. By underwriting each hub multilaterally rather than leaving it to a single host's discretion, re-globalization decouples hosting from financing and removes precisely the fragility the Berlin defunding exposed. Geneva retains diplomatic authority not because Swiss financial leverage has secured physical presence, but because the non-Western coalition has made an affirmative political choice to anchor WHO's normative functions in a neutral host state, so the same Swiss loyalty clause that merely traps a hollow shell in the zombie scenario instead secures a freely chosen and substantive centre here. In this scenario, institutional geography is a political statement rather than a functional residue.

4.4.5 People and Capacity

Re-globalization reverses the talent erosion visible in the zombie trajectory. A Director-General with a clear reform mandate and a broadened, more stable financing base restores the conditions under which highly qualified staff choose institutional careers over bilateral or private alternatives. Here the workforce hysteresis identified earlier becomes the binding constraint on how fast recovery can occur. Because expertise shed in 2025-2026 migrated to bilateral agencies, foundations, and regional bodies and cannot simply be repurchased, even a fully funded re-globalized WHO rebuilds its technical core over years rather than budget cycles, and the sequencing of rehiring becomes a deliberate institutional project rather than an automatic consequence of restored funding. The talent pool WHO retains in Geneva is no longer sustained by inertia or contractual protections; it is sustained by the credible prospect of meaningful, mandate-driven work. For Geneva specifically, this is the scenario in which the concentration of expertise that makes hosting WHO strategically valuable is preserved rather than gradually surrendered to the functional hubs and bilateral agencies that have been absorbing it (Fletcher, 2025).

5

CHAPTER 5

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

by Isabel Bokung

5.1 Where OCHA Stands Today

As alarming numbers of protracted conflicts and climate-related disasters increase global humanitarian needs, the humanitarian sector, dedicated to supporting the preparedness, response, and recovery of crisis-affected communities and those at risk, has experienced a pattern of operational and financial turmoil. This is mainly due to the politicization of humanitarian assistance stemming from geopolitical fragmentation since 2024 and to deeper losses in core funding in 2025, which are considerably jeopardizing the organization's coordination architecture mandated to ensure multiagency response. (ICVA, 2025; ALNAP, 2025)

In early 2025, President Trump's suspension of U.S. humanitarian and development funding, along with USAID's closure and the termination of 83% of its contracts, caused a 60% drop in global ODA, exposing deep systemic dependencies and vulnerabilities. This shock has triggered ripple effects, compounded by the rise of military expenditure prompted by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and a pivot towards nationalist interests leading to shifts in foreign policy strategies. These emerging trends have given rise to a broader retreat from the largest donor bloc, led by European States such as France, the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, or Finland, resulting in an unprecedented decline in humanitarian aid financing, with Germany – the second-largest donor after the U.S. – slashing its humanitarian budget by 52% amid populist and fiscal pressures. (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025; ALNAP, 2025; CHA, 2025) Direct implications showed that OCHA faced a general \$58 million funding gap in 2025 (The New Humanitarian, 2025), further destabilizing the organization, whose decade-long hurdle had mainly stemmed from its structural, heavy reliance on a Western donor base and limited flexibility in multiyear funding (CHA, 2025). The 2025-2026 period reveals a severe funding crisis. In 2025, only \$183 million of the \$272.2 million required in voluntary contributions was pledged, leaving an \$89.2 million shortfall (33%). By 2026, the gap widened to 57%, with just \$96 million received against a \$223 million requirement: a \$127 million deficit (UNGA ACABQ, 2025). The increasing cross-sectoral funding gaps between needs and requirements have forced the UN Secretariat department to implement a series of institutional adaptations and efficiency measures, following Antonio Guterres' request for a 15-20% reduction in the 2026 regular budget. (OCHA, 2025).

The Grand Bargain remains the central reform agenda for improving aid efficiency and equity—particularly by expanding quality funding and increasing support to local actors—yet its core promise of genuine localization is still only partially achieved, with local responders receiving a minimal share of humanitarian funding. (IASC, 2023) In March 2025, the UN80 Humanitarian Reset broadened the reform effort, aiming to redesign the system for faster, more locally driven and less bureaucratic responses amid severe funding shortages and geopolitical fragmentation. (IASC, 2025) As part of the immediate institutional response to the sector's largest funding shock, OCHA announced a 20–25% workforce reduction across 60+ country operations by mid-2026, alongside UN-wide austerity measures, including recruitment freezes, voluntary separations, post abolitions, and strict limits on the use of consultancy services. (OCHA, 2025; UNGA, 2025) As evidenced by the 2025-2026 Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO), OCHA faces the need to “do less with less,” an ongoing hyperprioritisation process that forces the targeting of only a small portion of the people most in need with considerably reduced financial requirements. Amid escalating humanitarian needs and conflicting pressures from interest- and principle-oriented donors, OCHA faces what experts call a profound “crisis of legitimacy, morale, and funding,” drawing severe criticism from diverse humanitarian actors, namely local NGOs and the OCHA Donor Support Group. Thus, the global discourse is currently focused on decentralization to conflict zones, emphasizing the transfer of decision-making to local actors, greater accountability, and system-wide efficiency. (CHA, 2025)

In late December 2025, the U.S. announced a \$2 billion pledge under a humanitarian agreement with OCHA, even as the cuts are pursued. (UN News, 2025) Despite accounting for only a tiny fraction of the funds that the U.S. historically allocated to the UN, these earmarked funds specifically target 17 crises, excluding Gaza and Afghanistan, in line with President Trump's pretext for efficiency. (Al Jazeera Staff and News Agencies, 2025; Foulkes, BBC News, 2025). Critically, this foreshadows a broader, problematic trend in humanitarian financing in the foreseeable future, as the U.S. has not only cut a significant amount of aid but is also making funding conditional. In May 2026, an additional \$1.8bn allocation to OCHA was announced, outlining improved US-UN cooperation. (UN Web TV, 2026) This move, however, despite aiming to reaffirm support for pooled funding and localization, shows that the reliability of humanitarian financing is increasingly in question, driven by irregularities in donor pledges and commitments, with U.S. funding behavior serving as a critical case in point.

Given the circumstances, OCHA and, more broadly, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – the primary UN forum for global humanitarian coordination, chaired by the Emergency Relief Coordinator – will have to adapt to the scale of the new normal to the best of their ability, as ongoing reform exercises haven't yielded the expected results, casting doubt on their relevance. (ALNAP, 2025; Geneva Solutions, 2026).

5.2 OCHA in a Multipolar World

One thing is certain: the unprecedented liquidity crisis facing global humanitarian action raises broader questions amid great uncertainty about its future impacts. Not only have voluntary core contributions and earmarked project funding been deeply affected by geopolitical fragmentation, but the system as a whole is also being exposed to cascading risks across sectors, countries, and institutions, posing an existential threat to its longevity. (Cook, RSIS, 2025) Therefore, in a multipolar world characterized by decentralized humanitarianism, minilateral blocs and middle and emerging powers would converge to restructure both the donor and the decision-making landscape, leading OCHA to undergo a major systemic transformation by 2029.

5.2.1 Authority and Governance

In terms of governance and international coordination, the Grand Bargain and the newer Humanitarian Reset are both responses to the same structural problem: humanitarian needs are rising faster than the funds, political attention, and institutional capacity available to meet them. These initiatives, initially presented as transformative, have largely devolved into procedural exercises, with their central goals remaining unmet given their disconnection from realities on the ground. (ALNAP, 2025) At the same time, the emphasis on triage reinforces a shift toward short-term, project-based interventions, sidelining broader systemic needs.

As international cooperation and coordination weaken, with IASC facing increasing demands for more political relevance in humanitarian policy processes by local actors, and the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)'s resources, priorities, and political stance being misaligned and dispersed, OCHA's influence and operational space decline. In the face of both internal and external erosion and marginalization of mandates, the tendency accelerates a structural shift toward a multicentered humanitarian order defined by regional leadership and shared governance rather than UN dominance. (Thompson, The British Academy, 2025; VanRooyen, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2025) The outcome of all the main vectors would push OCHA out of the center of the humanitarian landscape, benefiting a cohort of different humanitarian actors as an adaptation strategy. (ALNAP, 2025)

5.2.2 Funding and Influence

As of today, the proposed revised UN regular budget for OCHA in 2026 reflects a 15.6% reduction in assessed contributions compared to the previous year, further undermining OCHA's finances, as it was already one of the UN Development System (UNDS) member agencies that received the least in this category of contributions. (Aly et al., ODI Global, 2025; UNGA, 2025). Furthermore, the U.S., whose erratic pledges already signaled a shift toward conditional, crisis-specific funding, moves further toward transactional humanitarianism. In the bargain, 40 donors had pledged \$300 million to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) in 2026, a significant drop that reflects the dire state of the landscape, which had historically been accustomed to a \$1 billion annual funding target. (OCHA, 2025) In essence, humanitarian funding prospects are grim, with nearly half of the top 20 donors planning major ODA cuts, which deepens uncertainty across the sector. And although pooled funds were introduced as a key reform measure, they remain unsustainable and limited, as donors continue to favor direct bilateral funding for greater control and visibility (Aly et al., ODI Global, 2025; ALNAP, 2025; CHA, 2025).

5.2.3 Mandate and Programmes

The current programmatic direction is toward a leaner, more prioritized system: pooled and more flexible funding, stronger support for local responders, greater use of anticipatory action and cash-based assistance, and more radical choices about where humanitarian agencies should operate or step back, including reducing programs and merging coordination structures. (ReliefWeb, 2025) Nonetheless, reform debates acknowledge an uncomfortable reality: triage would inevitably entail the projectification of humanitarian aid, thereby instrumentalizing the system and its resources. This approach, shaped by funding losses, emphasizes immediate life-saving interventions for a diminishing population in need, often at the expense of a narrower scope that overlooks complex, interconnected, and long-term needs. Hence, the ongoing hyper-prioritization process does not aid lifesaving action but is counterproductive. This is less a moment of reform than one of adaptation under scarcity, in which the sector is trying to defend humanitarian principles while redesigning itself for a world where consensus can no longer be assumed. (ALNAP, 2025; MOPAN, 2025)

5.2.4 Footprint and Presence

In a multipolar world, dual headquarters in New York – focusing on the UN and Member State relations – and Geneva – focusing on operational coordination and hosting the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – would remain in place, furthering their distinct yet complementary mandates, which both contribute strategically to anchoring global engagement. In terms of implications for Geneva, the city would remain a good option, given Switzerland's neutrality and good relations with the various regional blocs, despite being clearly more closely aligned with Europe. With growing multipolarity, Geneva's role becomes more of a regional coordination anchor than the global center, as part of a decentralized network of hubs.

5.2.5 People and Capacity

With increased multipolarity, OCHA's global structure, which used to function as an integrated network linking field operations to regional and global coordination, is now deeply fragmented as posts continue to be abolished for hyperprioritization. The result is that regional offices, country offices, Humanitarian Adviser Teams, and liaison offices continue to scale back their operations, with only a few remaining in the most critical locations for strategic purposes.

5.3 OCHA in a Zombie Multilateral Order

A second trajectory emerging in global governance concerns a hollowing-out dynamic that may be accelerated by geopolitical rivalry, donor fatigue, and the erosion of international norms converging to undermine the foundations of humanitarian cooperation. While OCHA does not yet fully exhibit all the symptoms of this malaise, such as entrenched gridlock, declining relevance, and procedural formalism, it operates within an environment increasingly defined by those. (ALNAP, 2025; CHA, 2025) Looking ahead to 2029, OCHA's survival may hinge on its core international coordination mandate, which could remain indispensable even as its endurance diminishes considerably.

5.3.1 Authority and Governance

As multilateralism weakens, OCHA's central coordination mandate becomes simultaneously more necessary but somewhat less achievable, undermined by fragmented donor engagement, particularly among European actors, which remain divided, despite their potential to anchor a coherent global humanitarian agenda given that they make up 9/12 of the largest donors in the humanitarian system and account for 43% of OCHA's global funding, surpassing the US. (CHA, 2025). More concretely, the degree to which European actors operate as a coherent whole, or instead remain fragmented, duplicative, or even counterproductive, raises a fundamental question about the coordination of global humanitarian policy and its real-world effects both now and in the foreseeable future. In a context of "zombie multilateralism", where hollow global governance drives states toward bilateral and minilateral approaches, sidelining collective mechanisms, OCHA and IASC's convening power diminishes as participation becomes increasingly symbolic. By 2029, OCHA's role persists in form but not in substance, reduced to a platform unable to meaningfully shape or exercise strategic or operational priorities.

5.3.2 Funding and Influence

OCHA would enter this "Zombie multilateral" phase already weakened by a period of financial instability stemming from deeper cuts to assessed and extrabudgetary funds. In this scenario, funding becomes a tool of geopolitical signaling rather than global solidarity, and Western donors, historically the backbone of humanitarian financing, continue to retrench due to global instability and prove unable to address existing structural gaps. (ALNAP, 2025) These challenges become particularly visible within UN humanitarian agencies, which receive roughly 70% of global humanitarian funding and are deeply dependent on donor behavior. Moreover, although European states hold prominent positions on the boards of major humanitarian agencies such as WFP, UNHCR, or UNICEF, and collectively provide substantial financial resources, their influence remains diluted by divergent priorities and fragmented donor structures. (CHA, 2025) The result is a humanitarian financing landscape marked by volatility, politicization, and chronic underfunding, mainly with CERF contributions falling far below historical norms. By 2029, pooled funds will no longer be viable as global public goods; instead, they will function as boutique instruments serving narrow donor interests. Additionally, OCHA's financial legitimacy erodes accordingly, and it begins to rely on ad hoc bilateral donors, given that fragmentation would have led to generalized distrust of multilateralism and a UN bypass. (IBEI, 2023; VanRooyen, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2026)

5.3.3 Mandate and Programmes

In programmatic terms, OCHA's focus narrows to its most essential functions: life-saving coordination, access negotiation, emergency response, and advocacy for International Humanitarian Law, reflecting a shift from comprehensive system leadership to crisis-driven operational survival. By 2029, OCHA has not collapsed, but it has been fundamentally transformed. Its endurance stems not from renewed political commitment but from institutional inertia, and the IASC remains the default coordinator because no alternative exists. Yet its authority is

diminished, its resources depleted, and its legitimacy questioned. In this zombie multilateral world, OCHA becomes a paradoxical institution: indispensable yet ineffective, present yet sidelined, formally empowered yet substantially hollowed out. Its trajectory reflects the broader fate of the UN system: still standing, still speaking, but increasingly unable to act.

5.3.4 Footprint and Presence

Location-wise, given that headquarters have become increasingly bureaucratic and constrained by political considerations, authority and initiative are likely to shift toward the field. This decentralization produces uneven organizational outcomes: while some regional offices consolidate to strengthen operational coherence, others contract due to resource limitations. The overall effect is a redistribution of power within OCHA, driven by institutional rigidity at the center and adaptive pragmatism in the field, which reshapes the balance between global oversight and locally grounded humanitarian action. OCHA's office in Geneva remains symbolic, yet in a world where multilateral diplomacy is hollowed out, its influence wanes. The city could become a venue for ritualized meetings rather than substantive negotiation. New York headquarters, meanwhile, is constrained by the Security Council paralysis and the politicization of debates over humanitarianism.

5.3.5 People and Capacity

OCHA's global architecture was designed for a world in which multilateral coordination had strong political backing, but under zombie multilateralism, it became unsustainable. (ALNAP, 2025) Budget cuts force OCHA to consolidate or close field offices, beginning with the shutdown of The Hague hub in late 2026. Humanitarian Adviser Teams are shrinking, reducing OCHA's ability to maintain a presence in fragile contexts. Staff morale declines and becomes risk-averse as mandates expand while resources contract. The organization becomes increasingly reliant on junior, temporary or seconded personnel for cost-efficiency purposes, undermining institutional memory and technical expertise. By 2029, OCHA's footprint resembles a skeletal version of its former self: thinly staffed, overstretched, and unable to provide the robust coordination support it is expected to provide.

5.4 OCHA in a Re-globalized World without the US

If the world order were to re-globalize with the U.S. retreating from its traditional leadership role, it would most likely manifest as a recalibrated form of multilateralism. This can only happen if countries can rely on a strong set of existing rules and principles, as is the case in trade. (García Bercero, Elcano Royal Institute, 2025) However, if funding reductions originate from multiple donor countries, any resulting recalibration is likely to be limited in scale—insufficient to sustain genuine multilateral cooperation. Such fragmentation risks undermining the coherence and effectiveness of humanitarianism as a global enterprise, with potentially adverse implications for OCHA's role and influence. In this scenario, regional organizations, through coalitions of countries, may increasingly fill coordination gaps, but their reach and legitimacy remain uneven, raising questions about the future architecture of humanitarian governance and forcing OCHA to act strategically. (IBEI, 2023) New technologies would emerge as the backbone for coordinating equitable, data-driven humanitarian responses, redefining global solidarity through private tech-enabled transparency and shared accountability. (Torres Rossel and Soumare, World Economic Forum, 2026)

5.4.1 Authority and Governance

OCHA's effort to reposition itself comes amid a landscape in which private actors and regional blocs increasingly pursue their own strategic agendas. (IBEI, 2023) This shift enables OCHA to

reclaim a form of normative leadership in a re-globalized environment shaped by the absence of U.S. influence. However, humanitarian assistance may become more conditional in crises where powerful states seek greater control, creating new pressures on the system. These dynamics collectively elevate OCHA's political neutrality into a strategic asset, as competing geopolitical blocs seek to fill the vacuum left by the United States and find a trusted referee to anchor principled humanitarian action. Moreover, by 2029, OCHA's engagement with emerging private actors would prompt a restructuring of roles within the humanitarian system, introducing formal coordination frameworks to manage these partnerships. Additionally, tech companies would begin to supply data, AI tools, and satellite imagery capabilities, while logistics corporations and philanthropic foundations would become operational pillars for large-scale response. This growing reliance on private capacities risks fragmented, actor-driven humanitarian action, thereby heightening the need for a neutral arbiter. In effect, OCHA evolves into the central broker tasked with ensuring that private influence does not undermine coherence, principled action, or system-wide coordination (Torres Rossel and Soumare, World Economic Forum, 2026).

5.4.2 Funding and Influence

With the U.S. withdrawing from traditional multilateral governance, OCHA would lose a major donor and political backer. This would come with the formation of a more cohesive coalition of middle powers and Global South actors who want multilateralism to survive. (Patrick, Carnegie Endowment, 2026) Additionally, as some states intensify their commitment to rules-based cooperation, they expand outreach to emerging actors such as Japan, the Gulf countries, China, Türkiye, or African regional blocs to build stronger operational partnerships. (ALNAP, 2025) This shift encourages the creation of multi-donor trust funds, often involving private actors to compensate for the loss of earmarked U.S. funding, thereby increasing the influence of private stakeholders within the humanitarian system. By 2029, the combined effect of continued funding cuts and deeper collaboration among like-minded states is a gradual restructuring of the humanitarian financing landscape, driven by both necessity and strategic realignment.

5.4.3 Mandate and Programmes

In programmatic terms, by 2029, OCHA's trajectory is likely to shift once the U.S. retreats from its traditional leadership role, prompting the organization to advocate for mandatory reporting requirements from new humanitarian partners to preserve system-wide transparency. In addition, this recalibration process would accelerate a broader digital transformation through a partnership with the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation to address challenges faced by humanitarian supply chains and ensure that aid effectively reaches those in need. This kind of initiative would drive substantial investment in digitized bureaucracy, predictive analytics, early-warning systems, AI-supported needs assessments, and blockchain-based tracking tools that facilitate risk management and identification.

5.4.4 Footprint and Presence

While OCHA's main office in Geneva's Palais des Nations is likely to stay in place as Switzerland values its legacy as a global hub for humanitarian affairs, the future of the New York office is less certain. The unpredictability of the current Trump administration may cast doubts about whether OCHA's headquarters will remain in New York as his presidential term ends in 2029.

5.4.5 People and Capacity

The digital transformation process would, of course, entail training OCHA's technical and operational personnel and ensuring seamless integration among systems and stakeholders. (Torres Rossel and Soumare, World Economic Forum, 2026). The cumulative effect of these

developments is the emergence of OCHA as a central actor in digital humanitarian governance, leveraging technological innovation to address geopolitical gaps and reinforce principled coordination in an increasingly fragmented environment.



6

CHAPTER 6

International Trade Centre (ITC)

by Bronwyn Beatty

6.1 Where the ITC Stands Today

In recent history, global trade has been reorganized along geopolitical fault lines that are redefining the terms of international commerce. According to the World Economic Forum Cooperation Barometer 2026 survey, U.S. tariffs caused a reconfiguration in goods trade; U.S. imports from China fell approximately 20% (between January to July 2025 versus the same period in 2024) while simultaneously imports from Europe and geopolitically proximate to Asia increased (WEF Global Cooperation Barometer, 2026). This is in line with the ongoing fundamental shift from multilateral trade agreements to “minilateral” and “plurilateral” trade agreements. The reconfiguration is not just about with whom trade is happening, but what is being traded; intangible flows, such as services, capital, and data, are gaining ground as the resilient core of the new architecture, while goods trade fragments along geopolitical lines (WEF Global Cooperation Barometer, 2026).

Despite the major trends of budget cuts and governance crises across the United Nations, the International Trade Centre (ITC) has demonstrated agility to navigate such shocks. A joint agency of the United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the ITC provides technical assistance to small-, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing countries and economies in transition on matters related to trade promotion and export development (ITC, 2026). As a technical assistance agency, the ITC has a broad political coalition of supporters from the Global South who benefit from its mandate, but the organization is traditionally funded by Western donor nations. Internally, Joint Advisory Group (JAG) meetings take stock and are a consultative exercise, where all WTO and UNCTAD members are invited. The Consultative Committee of the ITC Trust Fund (CCITF) reviews the ITC’s operational plan and reporting documents to then provide feedback. While the ITC must navigate the new trade reality, the organization’s operational configuration must adapt to the two simultaneous realities: commodity market volatility and geopolitical regionalization (ITC Strategic Plan 2026-2030, 2026).

The ITC is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland and has a core staff of 409 posts along with even more consultants, UNDP and UNOPS staff, and interns (ITC Annual Report 2025, 2026). In November 2025, the ITC opened its first regional corporate office at the UNON compound in Nairobi, and more recently in April 2026 opened a liaison office in Brussels (ITC Annual Report 2025, 2026, ITC Website, 2026). In July 2025, the ITC convened the inaugural Global SME Ministerial Meeting in Johannesburg, a forum set to meet biennially, where more than sixty delegations endorsed a Call to Action: a pledge to share best practices and actionable solutions for SME digital, financial, and green reforms (ITC SME Ministerial, 2025). The ITC’s 2026-2030 Strategic Plan has four strategic goals for SMEs: increase value-added trade and investments in sectors with high growth and sustainable development potential, leverage the green and digital transitions for increased competitiveness, accelerate transformational benefits for women, youth, and other underrepresented groups, and have SMEs play a greater role in varying levels of decision-making processes and platforms (ITC Strategic Plan 2026-2030, 2026). Most importantly, for 2026, the United Nations and WTO each reduced their contributions to the ITC’s regular budget by approximately 11%, rounding the ITC’s full regular budget to approximately CHF 38.43 million (UN General Assembly, 2025).

In an interview conducted with a high level staffer at the ITC, asked to be anonymous, they stated that the ITC had an “enormous increase in window two [that] has been accompanied by a [...] 40% drop in terms of our window one” in 2025 (High Level ITC Staffer Interview, 2026). Traditional Western donors dominated W2 funding (ITC Appendices to the Annual Report, 2024) and mostly still do. In 2025, the ITC had gross contributions of USD 129.95 million of W2 funding, up 15% compared to 2024 (ITC Annual Report 2025, 2026). In the first half of 2025, the EU was the largest programmatic donor, representing 52% of W2 funding (ITC

CCITF H1, 2025). Other programmatic W2 donor governments include the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Japan, Korea, Italy, Spain, Belgium, and China (ITC Annual Report 2025, 2026) among various others. The earmarked nature of each of these countries' donations shape the strategic priorities for program design and delivery, but constrain the organization's autonomy. Corporate and philanthropic donors—including Finance in Motion, Maersk, the Visa Foundation, and the Mastercard Foundation—alongside regional multilateral development banks such as the African Export-Import Bank and the Asian Development Bank, further shape the W2 funding landscape (ITC Appendices to the Annual Report, 2024; ITC Annual Report 2025, 2026). As described by the high level staffer, W1 funding allows the ITC to innovate on programs and their global public goods. Six countries—Germany, Iceland, India, Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland—were the sole contributors for W1 funding for 2025 (ITC Operational Plan 2026, 2026). In 2025, the ITC secured USD 8.44 million of W1 funding and has USD 7.1 million of that funding planned for program delivery and expenditures (ITC CCITF November, 2025; ITC Operational Plan 2026, 2026). This is a notable downward shift of W1 funding secured; in 2024, the ITC had USD 10.68 million from 8 contributors and a record high of USD 14.16 million in 2021 from 10 contributors. Overall, the ITC has an agile trajectory over the next few years to adapt to many geopolitical scenarios.

6.2 The ITC in a Multipolar World

In a multipolar world, the International Trade Centre must navigate a donor landscape with a more mutually beneficial agenda and simultaneously adapt its programmatic strategy to further match the diversity of clientele. In this world, there is stronger regional governance and a genuine opportunity for Global South countries—who in large part already constitute the organization's political base—to further assert themselves in trade governance.

6.2.1 Authority and Governance

These new configurations will fundamentally surface in the balance of voices within the JAG and the CCITF as Western donor weight declines and Global South coalitions become more assertive. The adaptation will be uneven and the landscape will be difficult to navigate. As European donors focus on their national interests in W2 funding in JAG and CCITF meetings, the United Arab Emirates and Korea have the opportunity to form a coalition with regional partners. Mid-tier donors have a potential opportunity to deepen their regional partnerships through their existing W2 relationships. Furthermore, if the African Union, ASEAN, Gulf Cooperation Council work with existing Global South W2 donors, these blocs could use the CCITF participation to provide consultation to the ITC's programmatic priorities toward their regional development agendas.

6.2.2 Funding and Influence

The drop in the number of W1 funders in the past several years is indicative of the larger landscape of donor governments. The EU representing over half of W2 funding is a structural risk, exposed if EU priorities shift under Global Gateway pressures or domestic fiscal constraint. If the world were to become increasingly multipolar, the current funding W1 trends could accelerate. Philanthropic foundations, such as the Visa Foundation and Mastercard Foundation are interested in the ITC for the organization's mandate of technical assistance (ITC Annual Report 2025, 2026), which serves as a specific support for their own perspectives in developing markets. The existing regional MDB relationships and funding become even more important for the ITC to leverage for stable regionalized funding because MDB mandates are aligned with the same regional integration corridors the ITC serves. Using its mandate as the anchor for more money with less autonomy, the ITC will potentially spread itself thin over the next few

years to accommodate such needs of donors at the expense of its own programmatic coherence.

6.2.3 Mandate and Programmes

The ITC's inclusive trade programming has been traditionally funded by European donors (ITC Appendices to the Annual Report, 2024), inclusive trade programming is at risk of being underfunded in comparison to other urgent themes. As European donors redirect priorities or face fiscal pressure, inclusive trade loses its primary funding coalition. The vulnerability also carries opportunity. As South-South trade becomes more programmatically expanded, such as Africa-Asia, Africa-Caribbean, and Africa-Gulf corridors, the ITC can differentiate itself in the multipolar world through a more diverse portfolio that converts the multilateral programming into multipolar programming. In this world, the ITC's strongest asset is its own mandate. The Strategic Plan 2026-2030 is a framework that can guide vision that can be adapted into any regional context, and the three tracks of the 2025 SME Ministerial tracks affirm and operationalize the plan. The ITC has the opportunity to act as a knowledge broker and data intelligence provider for the emerging regional arenas. Program coherence could emerge as an issue, but the mandate itself provides a throughline.

6.2.4 Footprint and Presence

The ITC greatly benefits from the Geneva trade ecosystem and must maintain these relationships, but Geneva's centrality is under pressure in a multipolar world. Swiss-ITC relations are strong, which will anchor the organization to the city of Geneva, but in a multipolar world, Switzerland must continuously reassert this relationship as a neutral anchor. The multipolar mentality will deeply affect the Geneva ecosystem that the ITC depends on because of not as cooperative information sharing between regions and interests. Finally, reductions in the ITC regular budget could inhibit the pursuit of greater in-country engagement and presence that the ITC aims to pursue (ITC 2026-2030 Strategic Plan, 2026). Multipolarity could force the ITC to strategically prioritize their own placement of in-country presence rather than equally pursuing relationships across every area of urgency.

6.2.5 People and Capacity

Due to budget shocks, staffing recruitment has slowed (ITC CCITF H1, 2025) and post abolishment signals active contraction (Annual Report 2025, 2026). A consequential risk is what a prolonged recruitment slowdown means for future capacity; technical assistance is knowledge-intensive. A resulting thinning pipeline of incoming talent may leave the ITC ill-equipped to keep pace with the speed of change in a multipolar order. That being said, there is an opportunity for the ITC to hire a different kind of expertise; regional hiring and country program capacity become the priority investment area. To match the regional programming, the ITC can look for profiles of individuals that are well-versed in regional trade networks and have strong partnership building skills.

6.3 The ITC in a Zombie Multilateral Order

If the world moves in a direction of zombie multilateralism, the International Trade Centre will need to be prepared to move in their own direction. The ITC's mandate will remain on paper, but the ability to deliver on technical assistance is complicated by a functional hollowing of the organization.

6.3.1 Authority and Governance

As described by the high-level staffer, the ITC and its parent organizations have a lockstep relationship, where each organization's stance on an issue is not far away from the others (ITC

High Level Staffer Interview, 2026). In this world, the joint step approach of UNCTAD, WTO, and ITC could splinter. The WTO is at risk of being preoccupied with reform debates and multilateral deal management. UNCTAD leadership could have its attention taken by deepening international crises and their economic fallout. The relationship of its parent organizations and the ITC's cooperation becomes episodic and the ITC loses the institutional anchors for its work. The ITC risks operating in step with donors who, as the most consistently engaged actors in governance meetings, shape the agenda by default. As time goes on, WTO and UN diplomats are increasingly absorbed by their own organization's work that they are unable to attend JAG sessions with the same level of attention.

6.3.2 Funding and Influence

As evidenced by both the steep decline in the number of contributors and the volume of contributions, the ITC is in a tight position to innovate. The ITC now must turn to common strategies of diversifying donors and resource mobilization efforts to fill this gap (Mopan, 2025), but finding long-term non-state W1 donors will take extensive research and partnership networking. As the host state, Switzerland has a strategic interest to provide such funding continuously, but in totality the low W1 funding is likely to stabilize in this scenario. W2 funding fragmentation accelerates with EU Global Gateway priorities, Korean SME interests expand, and Gulf state transaction interests capture different projects. There is no fundamental collective donor vision, especially with the introduction of private foundations and corporate donors. The constant uptake of new donors will reflect the zombie dynamic: the institution is funded but unable to act with careful strategy if the CCITF members do not adhere to the strategy developed into the 2026-2030 strategic plan.

6.3.3 Mandate and Programmes

The requirement to embed one of the four strategic goals across all donor-funded projects creates the conditions for rapid programme expansion that satisfies formal compliance while drifting from substantive mandate coherence. In this world, portfolio incoherence becomes a risk as it now depends on individualized donor priorities. The SME Ministerial Conference Call to Action has weak follow through; by the 2027 SME Ministerial Conference, implementation of previous pledges have slowed down. The digital trade programming grows, but is driven by donor commercial interests and haphazard implementation dependent on country infrastructure. Goal three of the 2026-2030 strategic plan will be harder to resource adequately because it lacks a dedicated bilateral funding coalition.

6.3.4 Footprint and Presence

The Geneva ecosystem that the ITC benefits so much from is jeopardized in this fragmented world. As ODA stabilizes to record lows and the W1 funding shrinks, it is hard to justify Geneva's costly location. With country engagement and country presence already at play in the strategic plan (ITC CCITF H1 Report, 2025), a zombie multilateral system diminishes the effects of the ecosystem of benefits that the ITC receives from Geneva and initiates a conversation about potential relocation to Nairobi. With over 51% of region-specific delivery in early 2025 being in Sub-Saharan Africa (ITC CCITF H1 Report, 2025), Nairobi presents potential operational advantages given the concentration of Sub-Saharan African program delivery. But it should be noted that the net financial case for relocation is more complex than operational delivery ratios alone suggest, as cost savings in some areas may be offset by higher expenditures elsewhere. Given that this is a zombie multilateral scenario, full relocation to Nairobi should be examined with caution given the ITC's reduced institutional capacity to manage such a transition under conditions of fragmentation.

6.3.5 People and Capacity

In this scenario, the ITC staff risk cumulative role creep that has permanently created a workforce that is fundraiser, program manager, donor relation manager, and compliance officer. Staff will need technical assistance expertise in trade, but devotion to spreading the knowledge will be limited. Structural conditions actively undermine the Strategic Plan 2026-2030 for optimized support functions and strategic workforce management.

6.4 The ITC in a Re-globalized World without the US

If the world moves in a strategic direction of creating collective action without the United States for a rules-based order, this will create a net positive cascading effect for international trade and cooperation. Technical assistance that the SME Ministerial Meeting Call to Action has developed, such as digital transformation, access to finance, and green transition, will generate political investment for the ITC's mandate. In this scenario, the ITC's Global South political base is important for the development of the program delivery.

6.4.1 Authority and Governance

In a re-globalized world, both JAG and CCITF meetings have various actors that come re-engaged from the renewed assertion of rules based trading. Re-globalization creates genuine competition among actors for influence over ITC's programmatic priorities and governance agenda. The European Union and European nations have a more spirited interest to attend such meetings as they are now looking to actively take advantage of the opportunity of the speed of new re-globalized trading. China, who has already sent six delegates before (List of JAG Participants, 2025) would be keen on setting a standard of presence in where the United States withdraws from. The meetings at the CCTIF are not frictionless; W1 and W2 funding are still contested because of the increased opportunity and rapid development of new rules. The 2027 Global SME Ministerial Meeting could flourish in this scenario with a vibrant presence of the ITC and its parent bodies, ministries that are interested in capitalizing on partnerships, and the private sector.

6.4.2 Funding and Influence

The financial architecture of the ITC in a re-globalization scenario is defined by existing multilateral architectures that rebuild themselves. A crucial partnership that the ITC can leverage more are regional multilateral development banks such as the African Development Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. These banks have a time horizon of two to three years to provide W2 funding for innovation in future proofing SMEs as outlined in the 2025 Global Ministerial Meeting. Individual European W2 donors re-engage on terms that specifically align with the EU Global Gateway that demand technical assistance. ODA does not recover to pre-2024 levels, but instead stabilizes at the current floor that is sufficient for the ITC to plan accordingly. The result is a financial structure that is more multipolar than 2025, but more coherent than the zombie scenario.

6.4.3 Mandate and Programmes

Digitally delivered services are the fastest growing trade category globally, while goods trade grows below GDP (WEF Global Cooperation Barometer, 2026). With the support of partnerships from MDBs, the ITC can build a services trade intelligence platform that draws upon regional data from the partnerships. This becomes the ITC's most distinctive programmatic contribution in this scenario. Deeper MDB partnerships can provide windows of information into opportunities for cultural SMEs by connecting the ITC with on the ground stakeholders. Women and trade programming does not disappear; instead, it is folded into the

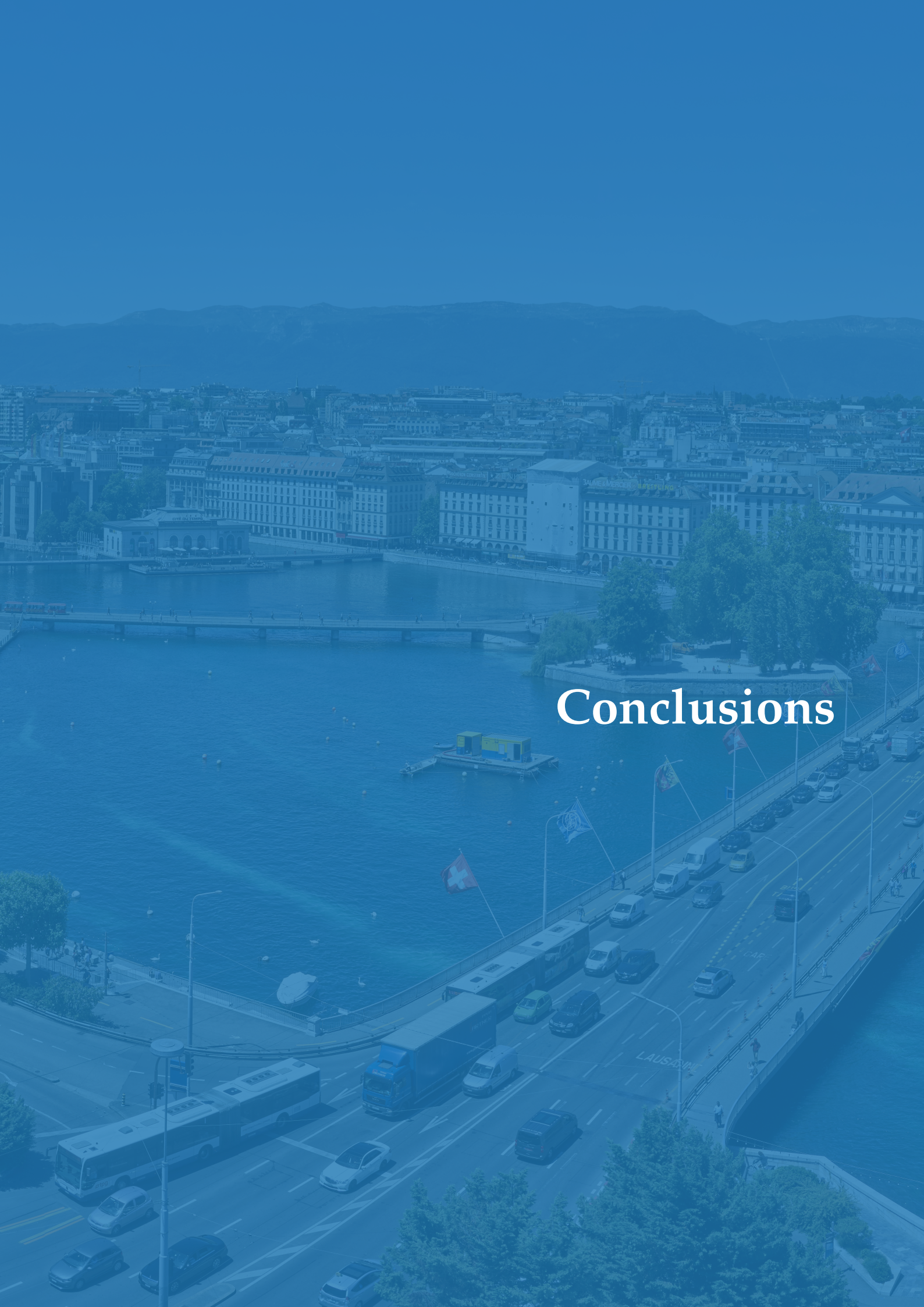
digital trade and green transition programming as a cross-cutting measurement framework.

6.4.4 Footprint and Presence

A re-globalization scenario provides the ITC with the financial and political justification to pursue an even deeper country presence and engagement that previous funding constraints made difficult to realize. The ITC begins to scope a second regional office in Jakarta, Panama City, or Accra (High Level ITC Staffer Interview, 2026) early in this scenario to be fully operational by 2029. The ecosystem remains essential for governance purposes; the WTO reform, the UNCTAD relationship, and the global diplomatic engagement all require senior leadership proximity to Geneva. The unique concentration of diplomatic missions and embassies from across all regions is an irreplaceable asset for the ITC's governance and partnership functions that no other host city can currently replicate.

6.4.5 People and Capacity

Re-globalization does not expand the ITC's headcount, but it creates the conditions for the Strategic Plan's workforce vision to be realized. The profile shift is from Geneva-based generalists managing donor relationships to a more distributed workforce combining Geneva-based governance expertise with regionally embedded technical specialists. People who understand aid, trade policy, and private sector representation are strong candidates for the ITC in this world. People who are MDB-fluent, capital development literature, and comfortable with innovation cycles will be important for building new partnerships. The ITC in globalization does not have more staff, but better positioned ones.



Conclusions

International Geneva's stability, at this moment, can be characterized as fragile but intact. The three case studies do not point to a survival question so much as a question of redefinition. The city will be very likely to persist, but the breadth of its relevance is what is genuinely at stake. The aggregate norm each scenario projects onto Geneva makes this clear.

Multipolar World: Geneva survives as a governance venue, but loses programmatic centrality; the ecosystem of organizations differs between institutions who can leverage diplomatic density (WHO, ITC) and those who cannot (OCHA).

Zombie Multilateralism: Geneva persists physically, but hollows out functionally across all organizations. The ecosystem decline is gradual and hard to reverse.

Re-globalized World: Geneva has a revitalization pathway, but it requires active political investment from Switzerland, the EU, and the at-stake reformed institutions.

By 2029, the International Geneva will have a clearer view of the risk creep into the different pillars of multilateral action. A first cross-cutting observation is that exposure is uneven, and that unevenness is itself a finding. ITC is the most agile, a lean technical mandate and a Global South base that wants what it provides. WHO is structurally transformable but burdened by scale, a politicized succession, and irreversible workforce loss. OCHA is the most precarious—Secretariat-dependent, without an independent funding base, and holding a coordination mandate that becomes more necessary precisely as it becomes harder to exercise. The ecosystem will therefore not contract uniformly; it will hollow out selectively, and the organizations least able to leverage diplomatic density are those whose erosion most directly threatens Geneva's identity as a humanitarian capital. Private capital and foundations will have had an impact on the partnerships built in the city, but real attention should be given to the retreat of traditional Western donor patterns.

Across the geopolitical frameworks examined in this report, six shared themes emerge. They map where pressures are concentrating and where the future of International Geneva remains open.

6.4.6 How is geopolitical reconfiguration reshaping the International Geneva ecosystem, at the example of WHO, OCHA, and ITC?

The Geneva ecosystem's core asset, density of co-location, is under stress in every scenario. Co-location benefits erode when institutions decentralize, when donor governments pull back diplomatic engagement, and when the dysfunction of one organization reduces the actionable capacity of others. This is most acute under Zombie Multilateralism, where Geneva becomes a venue for ritualized meetings and performative action rather than substantive decision-making.

The scenarios diverge on whether Geneva's neutrality is an asset or a relic. In the re-globalization scenario, Swiss neutrality is an asset that compels political re-investment. In the zombie multilateralism scenarios, neutrality is quietly devalued. In a multipolar world, it is essential to getting different regions into the same room. Unlike the New York headquarters, whose politicization is now overt, Geneva's neutrality could go either way. The deeper implication is that Geneva's worth is granted externally by which the geopolitical world materializes, rather than being an instinct property Geneva controls.

The Global South's assertiveness is a variable to be considered. Across all three institutions, the Global South appears as a decisive actor, a marginalized voice, and as incoherent forces. If the Global South actors consolidate governance influence, they may push for institutional presence closer to their own regions as a legitimacy demand, not just a cost argument.

6.4.7 What does a 2026–2029 scenario analysis reveal about divergent vulnerabilities and opportunities facing WHO, OCHA, and ITC within International Geneva?

Physical presence is decoupling from functional authority. The most consistent pattern across all three institutions and scenarios is that Geneva retains headquarters presence but loses decision-making weight, as operational functions migrate elsewhere. Switzerland's loan suspension program for the physical assets of international organizations signals that their role and mentality as a host state has shifted from engaged beneficiary to engaged director of the multilateral order.

The financing shift from assessed to voluntary earmarked funding is a shared structural vulnerability. Across all three institutions, the erosion of assessed and core funding and the rise of earmarked voluntary contributions is the central financial dynamic. This matters for Geneva because earmarked money is tied to bilateral relations and programmatic priorities, not to a location, thus severing the link between the funding that sustains the ecosystem and the place that hosts it.

Private capital entry is a shared trend with shared risks. Private actors and philanthropies appear wherever clear market interests exist. Their common feature is earmarked, mandate-shaping funding that does not require a Geneva presence. While such capital provides short-term stability, in aggregate it weakens Geneva's claim to be the necessary hub for institutional governance and raises accountability questions for institutions designed for state-to-state cooperation.

The table below summarizes each organization's projected trajectory across headquarters location, governance, and workforce under each scenario. The color scale runs from red (Critical/Collapse) to green (Reinforced/Thriving), with intermediate descriptors capturing degrees of stress, adaptation, and stabilization.

Institutional Outlook by Scenario

		Headquarters location	Governance	Workforce
Multipolar World	WHO	Contested Fragmented	Contested Strained	Contracting Eroding
	OCHA	Conditionally stable Eroding	Fragmented Contested	Contracting Overstretched
	ITC	Conditionally stable	Adapting Repositioned	Strained Overstretched
Zombie Multilateralism	WHO	Hollowed Performative	Performative Gridlocked	Eroding Overstretched
	OCHA	Hollowed Performative	Gridlocked Paralyzed	Severely contracted At risk
	ITC	At risk Contracting	Fragmented Performative	Overstretched Donor-captured Skeletal
Reglobalization without the United States	WHO	Secured Conditionally stable	Transforming Strengthened	Sustained Reinforced
	OCHA	Secured Strengthened	Transforming Reinforced	Expanding Sustained
	ITC	Secured Expanding	Secured Reinforced	Sustained Repositioned

Severity scale

How each status word maps onto the critical-to-thriving continuum

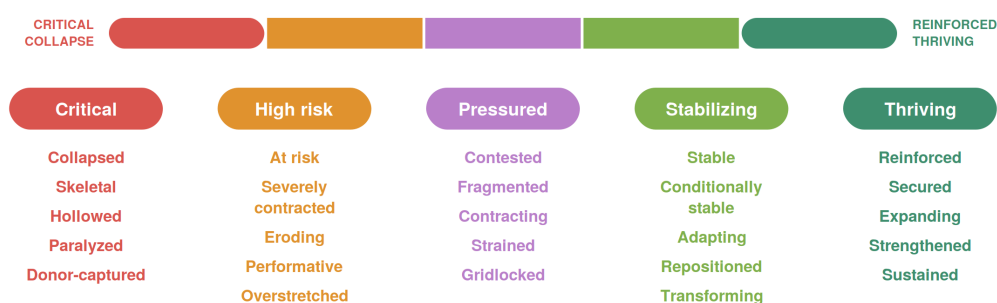


Figure 6.1: Scale of descriptive words for each IO per scenario

6.4.8 Conclusion

International Geneva is entering a period of genuine uncertainty—not the managed uncertainty of institutional adaptation, but the kind in which foundational assumptions about who funds, governs, and hosts global cooperation are all in question simultaneously. The structural forces mapped in this report are real and already converging. This report has mapped these events and trends, drawing on the evidence as generated by the institutions. What remains genuinely open is how they interact, how quickly they compound, and whether the political will to respond materializes before the window closes. Multilateralism is not collapsing cleanly; it is fragmented unevenly, with some institutions hollowing out, while others adapt, some donors retreating while others reposition, and some political coalitions fracturing while new ones form. With so much in flux, foresight can only offer a clearer view on the forces already in motion and the choices that will determine how they land. The future of International Geneva will be shaped as much by decisions not yet made as by the trends this report has traced.

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Annexes

6.5 Annex A — Employment in the Canton of Geneva

The Swiss Host State Act of 2007 establishes the legal basis for the privileges and immunities granted to personnel of international organizations in Switzerland. Its purpose is twofold: to protect the functional independence of these organizations and to reinforce Switzerland's attractiveness as a host state (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007).

Within this framework, international personnel may benefit from exemptions in taxation and social security, and senior staff from diplomatic status (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007). One of its defining features is that international staff are generally excluded from the Swiss social security system (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007); this reflects the functional autonomy of international organizations, many of which run their own internal social-protection schemes, and avoids overlap between domestic and institutional arrangements. The framework also provides tax privileges that may extend to direct and indirect taxes as well as certain customs duties and import-related charges, easing the operation of international organizations and helping maintain Switzerland's competitiveness as a host country (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007).

These privileges are not automatic but conditional. In the area of direct taxation, exemptions may apply to international personnel, although Swiss nationals employed by international organizations benefit only where the organization has established an internal taxation system for its staff, and only when permitted by international law (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007). More broadly, privileges and exemptions are determined case by case rather than applied uniformly, according to Switzerland's international legal obligations and commitments, customary practice, the beneficiary's legal status, and the importance of the functions exercised in international relations (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007). In this way, Switzerland balances the functional autonomy of international organizations against a structured and differentiated regime of privileges and immunities (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007).

6.5.1 Visas and access to the Swiss labour market

The host-state framework extends beyond officials themselves to their accompanying family members. Under the Ordonnance sur l'État hôte (OLEH), spouses living in the same household as the principal beneficiary are expressly recognised as authorised accompanying persons (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007, art. 1). Entry and residence still depend on nationality: the ordinance does not remove ordinary visa obligations at the point of entry, requiring valid identity documents and, where necessary, a visa under Swiss migration law (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007, art. 16). Once a staff member takes up their functions, however, the regime changes. The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA/DFAE) issues a *carte de légitimation* not only to the staff member but also to authorised accompanying persons, including spouses (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007, art. 17), and this card becomes the principal instrument for residence authorisation and administrative facilitation (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007, art. 1).

The framework also supports the professional integration of accompanying spouses, who benefit from facilitated access to the Swiss labour market for the duration of the principal's assignment (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007, art. 22). While the ordinance stops short of describing this access as unrestricted, it exempts spouses from several constraints normally applied to foreign workers, including labour quotas, labour-market priority rules, and preliminary checks on salary and working conditions (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007, art. 22). In practice, access is implemented through a special work authorisation, the *permis CI*, issued by the competent cantonal authorities on the basis of an employment contract, a job offer, or, for self-employment, a declaration of the intended activity (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007, art. 22). The permit replaces the spouse's *légitimation* card and remains valid for the duration of the principal beneficiary's assignment (Conseil Fédéral Suisse, 2007).

Taken together, these provisions show that Switzerland's host-state framework goes well beyond privileges and immunities for officials: by reducing administrative barriers and supporting dual-career mobility, it actively facilitates the residence and professional integration of accompanying families, strengthening Switzerland's appeal to international organizations and to highly qualified personnel alike.

This legal architecture is reinforced by dedicated support institutions that sustain the everyday functioning and social embeddedness of International Geneva. Chief among them is the Centre d'Accueil de la Genève Internationale (CAGI), founded in 1996 by the Swiss Confederation and the Republic and

Canton of Geneva and supported by more than thirty public and private entities (CAGI, 2025). CAGI facilitates the settlement and integration of international newcomers and their families, advises NGOs seeking to establish themselves in the Lake Geneva region, supports the accommodation of delegates from developing countries, and promotes links between the international community and the local population through cultural and networking activities (CAGI, 2025). Its work reflects the weight of the international sector as a component of employment in Geneva, spanning international organizations, diplomatic missions, and international NGOs.

6.6 Annex B — Literature Review

6.6.1 Theme I: Conceptual Foundations: Multilateralism, Regionalism and the UN System

Theme I: Conceptual Foundations: Multilateralism, Regionalism and the UN system, bases itself in an analysis of the evolution and present state of global governance structures, with a focus on multilateralism and the UN. They trace the historical trajectory from the Concert of Europe and the League of Nations to the founding of the UN in 1945, outlining its principal organs (Security Council, General Assembly, Economic and Social Council) and the core tension between sovereign independence and the need for collective cooperation. They also unpack the emergence of “new” multilateralism, marked by the rise of BRICS and the growing importance of minilateral formats such as the G-20 and G7/G8, and introduce regionalism as preferential trade agreements (customs unions and free trade areas) whose logic sits uneasily alongside universal, non-discriminatory multilateralism under GATT/WTO.

These sources are going to be useful for the research because they provide the core conceptual and historical context needed to answer questions on geopolitical transformations and the future of International Geneva. By clearly defining multilateralism, regionalism, minilateralism and sovereignty, and by tracing the evolution of global governance from the Concert of Europe and the League of Nations to the UN system, they give the vocabulary and analytical lens to examine how power shifts are reshaping UN governance structure and group dynamics (e.g. Security Council, General Assembly, GA groupings). Their discussion of “new” multilateralism, the rise of BRICS, minilateral formats such as the G-20 and G7/G8, and North-South coalitions like the G-77 and NAM helps understand changing power dynamics, donor realignments and the potential repositioning of key funders within the UN system. At the same time, they situate WHO and WTO within the broader UN architecture and illuminate trade dynamics and regional trade agreements that may affect their mandates, effectiveness and future presence in Geneva. Overall, these conceptual foundations serve as an analytical blueprint for the foresight work, helping identify the main actors, drivers and uncertainties that will feed into the construction of plausible scenarios for International Geneva between 2026 and 2029.

At the same time, the sources show certain limitations for Geneva-focused foresight research. Regionalism is approached almost exclusively through the lens of economic integration and trade, primarily customs unions and free trade areas with very limited attention to forms of political, security, or normative regionalism. As a result, the literature underplays how regional organizations and coalitions might influence agenda-setting, coalition-building and burden-sharing across Geneva-based institutions.

Overall, these sources excel at delivering the conceptual language and institutional background of the literature review while revealing that international cooperation operates along a spectrum from UN based universal multilateralism to minilateral clubs and regional trade blocs, an insight that will be central when later themes examine how such shifts shape the future of International Geneva.

6.6.2 Theme II: Macro Geopolitical Shifts and the Erosion of Multilateralism

The foundational theme of this research: Macro Geopolitical Shifts and Erosion of Multilateralism, is addressed comprehensively across the selected documents, which together depict the chaotic nature of the contemporary world order. The sources describe a world in which the Western-dominated rules-based order, with the United Nations (UN) as the “avatar of internationalism”, is “in disarray” and increasingly unstable. This disintegration is driven by a deep crisis of multilateralism, in which national interests systematically override the global good.

The geopolitical landscape is characterized by a shift toward complex multipolarity, marked by multiple

power centers and, above all, the persistent rivalry between the United States and China, currently the only two superpowers. This rivalry fuels instability and competition across economic, technological, and security domains. The literature also highlights how US unilateralism and protectionism, China's assertive economic strategies, and Russian aggression directly undermine and paralyze UN governance structures.

Within this context, the documents are highly relevant for this project since they provide theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and strategic foresight framework needed to delimit the scope of the research. They synthesize the dominant theories and discourse in geopolitics, identifying complex multipolarity and great-power rivalry as the defining macro shifts. They also link these dynamics to the future of key international organizations giving an example on how the WTO faces potential structural collapse due to US actions on the Appellate Body and targeted Chinese coercion, while OCHA and UNHRC operate in an environment where humanitarian aid and respect for human rights are weakening, despite Geneva's status as a humanitarian capital. The sources further illuminate how US measures such as the IRA, the TCJA, and unilateral tariffs contribute to economic fragmentation and heightened US fiscal needs, creating precisely the kinds of external financial pressures that this project traces through budgetary changes.

In addition, the documents provide three established, high-level geopolitical scenarios for 2030-2035 which are Collapse, Blocs and Reinvention. These scenarios offer a validated basis for developing future scenarios for International Geneva. They also assess the strategic relevance of International Geneva itself, arguing that the "Spirit of Geneva" remains a necessary "tool" for cooperation and underscoring its strength as a hub of multilateral diplomacy. This directly supports the project's aim of evaluating Geneva's strategic advantages under different futures.

Some limitations of these sources include their temporal scope, where parts of the literature are rooted in pre-2008 or early post-Cold War contexts and do not fully capture the latest phase of geopolitical realignment, as well as a tendency toward Euro-centric, macro-level analysis rather than IO-specific institutional dynamics. Moreover, elements such as detailed national foreign-policy advice or highly granular domestic fiscal data are tangential to the project's mandate and add limited value for high-level scenario modelling of IO funding and operations in International Geneva.

Taken together, however, this macro-geopolitical lens provides the external backdrop against which Theme II will examine how international organizations, and the UN system in particular, adapt internally through institutional dynamics, bureaucratic power, and organizational path-dependencies.

6.6.3 Theme III: Institutional Dynamics, Adaptation, and Bureaucratic Power

The literature collectively investigates how international organizations respond to macro-level geopolitical shifts and contestation of the liberal world order by examining organizational adaptation mechanisms, bureaucratic agency, shifts in financing structures, and the influence of headquarters location. It finds that IOs rarely achieve perfect adaptation, instead displaying "imperfect adaptation" that balances new demands with sticky organizational values and bureaucratic interests, mainly via incrementalism, layering and conversion that generate often unforeseen, "uncoordinated" change. This process has transformed UN financing from egalitarian multilateralism based on mandatory contributions toward earmarked voluntary funding, empowering individual donors and turning UN entities into virtual contract agencies for bilateral agendas. Efficiency pressures drive internal administrative reforms led by executive heads invoking "efficiency" and "cost-effectiveness", yet limited convergence across agencies points to "independent problem solving" tailored to specific challenges. Power is analyzed through compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive dimensions, highlighting how actors such as China and seemingly "weak" players (small states, IO staff) exploit diplomatic and institutional niches. Finally, IO headquarters cities are conceptualized as ecosystems (e.g. Geneva) where spatial and temporal proximity shape operations through social (labor pools), organizational (coordination/synergies), and environmental (host state support factors).

These documents help the research by detailing power shifts which are compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive, crucial to map evolving geopolitical dynamics and analyze the changing power dynamics within the UN governance structures, particularly concerning the influence of China and G77 member countries. Specifically, the insights on how China mobilizes its structural and institutional power at the UN provide mechanisms to address the guiding question of who are going to

be the key funders and how non-Western alignments will evolve. The foundational analysis of gradual transformation in UN financing is directly applicable to modeling the formal and non-formal factors of the ongoing UN financial crisis. The research can use the documented shift towards earmarked voluntary contributions as the central driver of change, which directly informs the analysis of budgets, mandates, and operational infrastructure. Furthermore, the principle of “imperfect adaptation” is vital for constructing the mandated foresight scenarios, as it allows researchers to predict that the four IOs will adapt their mandates and discourse in ways that maintain core organizational values even under extreme pressure, rather than merely reflecting donor preferences. Finally, the conceptualization of the HQ city as an “ecosystem” defined by social, organizational, and environmental variables provides the direct analytical lens needed to assess the strategic advantages and disadvantages of Geneva as a host city and analyze how changing power dynamics affect synergies between IOs, linking the macro-geopolitical environment to the local realities of Geneva’s institutional infrastructure (staffing, office locations, budgets).

While highly relevant, the sources also have empirical and temporal limits for the research. Several focus on non-target causes (e.g. peace operations, FAO/ILO/IMF/World Bank or on historical periods, so their findings must be applied by analogy to the Geneva-based specialized agencies WHO, WTO, OCHA, and UNHRC rather than directly applied. Others are single-case or broad syntheses (e.g. International Geneva as ecosystem, UN-wide power shifts), which constrain generalizability, contemporary data and complicate short-term (2026-2029) foresight.

Collectively, this institutional and financial lens offer the crucial “inside view” of how IOs absorb and negotiate external pressures, providing the bridge between macro-level geopolitical shifts and the concrete scenario-building that follows.

6.6.4 Theme IV: Financial Crises, Foreign Aid Cuts, and Dependency

These sources are highly beneficial for the research theme of: Financial Crises, Foreign Aid Cuts, and Dependency as they supply the necessary structural analysis for a project that seeks to map how geopolitical realignments within the ongoing UN financial crisis, including the projected 20-50% staff reductions in Geneva will reshape international organizations and create the need for targeted strategic recommendations.

The documents collectively analyze the complex and often politically charged financial landscape of the United Nations system, highlighting a fundamental tension between the “tyranny of numbers” (equal voting power of member states) and the “tyranny of the purse” (the disproportionate influence wielded by major donor nations). This tension is explored through the lens of UN financing, which is characterized by a fragmented, decentralized structure that increasingly relies on unpredictable voluntary contributions rather than stable assessed dues. The sources examine how the resulting systemic financial difficulties and chronic arrears, particularly those accrued by the largest contributor, the U.S, serve as political tools to compel organizational reforms or impose policy objectives, thereby linking financial stability to political compliance. Finally, the materials track the evolution of financial pressure from historical legislative acts requiring assessment caps and withholding dues to contemporary, radical proposals involving widespread foreign aid cuts, funding freezes, and the dismantling of development agencies, ultimately demonstrating how dependence on specified, earmarked funds leads to the “bilateralization” of multilateral cooperation and allows donors to exert control over policy substance.

The sources directly support this objective by establishing that financial crises stem from the UN’s institutional reliance on unstable funding modalities, noting that chronic arrears and liquidity problems are a constant feature of the system. The sources clarify that the shift from stable assessed contributions to unpredictable earmarked funding is the structural root of the bilateralization of multilateralism, offering a clear mechanism to explain how dependency is generated and sustained by major donors. They provide deep historical context of the political levers, such as the threat of withholding funds or imposing assessment rate caps that the U.S. has used to secure policy objectives and structural reforms, thereby demonstrating how financial weakness translates into political coercion within the UN. Moreover, the discussion of the contemporary “assault on foreign aid” offers current insights into the immediate, sectoral, and regional consequences of sharp, sudden foreign aid cuts, noting severe implications for vulnerable populations and critical infrastructure in different regions.

However, the usefulness of the sources is constrained by some weaknesses. A primary limitation is

the time-bound nature of foundational data and organizational analyses, as comprehensive reviews of UN budgetary processes often rely on data and reports pre-2010. Although the identified structural problems, like liquidity crises and cumbersome procedures remain, specific figures regarding arrears, funding levels, and implementation of early-21st century reforms may not reflect the precise current scale of the financial crisis. While the sources meticulously analyze the power dynamics of U.S. financial coercion, they exhibit a comparative weakness in comprehensively detailing the financial cuts and dependency dynamics imposed by other rising global powers outside the U.S.-UN context, which limits the scope of analyzing “geopolitical realignments” beyond the Western donor sphere.

Taken together, this body of literature equips the project with a solid basis to connect high-level geopolitical realignments to concrete patterns of dependency, budgetary stress, and organizational vulnerability in Geneva-based IOs, directly feeding into the foresight scenarios and development targeted.

6.6.5 Theme V: Strategic Policy Responses and Institutional Reform Agendas

The theme: Strategic Policy Responses and Institutional Reform Agendas is supported by the provided sources. This literature collectively outlines a multifaceted crisis afflicting the international governance architecture, characterized by a severe UN financial crisis resulting from assessed contribution payment delays and massive cuts in voluntary aid, particularly from the US. This fiscal stress is running parallel to proposals for institutional overhaul, known as the UN80 Initiative, which seeks to rationalize mandates, merge entities, and streamline operations across the peace and security, humanitarian development, and human rights pillars.

Simultaneously, this evidence emphasizes the strategic policy responses necessary to shift reliance away from highly unpredictable, earmarked funding toward higher-quality financing mechanisms, such as assessed contributions and inter-agency pooled funds, to safeguard multilateralism and ensure predictable delivery of core mandates.

These documents are highly beneficial because they help anchor scenarios in geopolitical and budgetary change by providing a catastrophic financial baseline and a precise crisis trigger. The sources confirm the existence of a deep financial crisis and quantify the resulting cuts, stating that the UN system is expected to contract by 30 per cent in 2025 compared to the 2023 peak, which provides the “plausible trigger” required by the methodology. They also identify the shock driver behind this contraction which is the “significant vacuum” created by the unexpected USAID on January 20th, 2025, noting that USAID supplied 42% of all humanitarian aid in 2024. Given that two units of analysis are major humanitarian agencies (OCHA and UNHCR), these cuts explain why their operations are described as “catastrophic” and subject to “hyper prioritization” of life-saving activities. At the analytical level, the materials explicitly use Dependency Theory to interpret the USAID cuts, discussing the push for “self-reliance” among recipient nations and the potential power vacuum that could be exploited by countries like China, thereby directly supporting the requirement to map evolving power dynamics and changing roles of Member States.

The documents also comprehensively map strategic policy responses and reform agendas. The UN80 reform document sets out explicit, high-level proposals for systemic reform and consolidation, including a thorough assessment of a merger between certain organizations. They directly address Geneva relocation risk by linking efficiency gains, reduced fragmentation, and expanded shared services to possible office relocation to cheaper duty stations. They provide the structural context for funding volatility by noting that 62% of UN system funding in 2020 was earmarked and by highlighting the Funding Compact as a long-term strategic response to achieve “more predictable, coordinated and flexible funding”.

Despite their strengths, the sources have three main limitations. First, many UN80 reforms are still only proposals, so the analysis must rely purely on foresight, with misaligned “money, mandates, and majorities” casting doubt on implementation. Second, the key financial data (from 2020) predates the 2025 aid cuts and focuses on assessed-budget liquidity, giving only a partial view of challenges for voluntary-funded Geneva agencies like OCHA and UNHRC. Third, certain documents lack some Geneva-specific internal detail (IO dynamics, staff unions, host-state constraints, concrete pros/cons vs. cheaper duty stations), so gaps must be filled through other sources.

Overall, these sources on strategic policy responses equip the project with the policy and normative

basis needed to translate a crisis baseline into concrete strategic choices for international Geneva. They link the quantified financial shock, the UN80 reform proposals and debates on funding quality, thereby grounding the foresight scenarios in clearly specified reform pathways and trade-offs that Geneva-based IOs may face in the future.