



Crisis Leadership and the Protection of Elderly Populations: An Analysis of Humanitarian Governance in War, Conflict, and Natural Disasters

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Abstract

Armed conflicts, wars, and natural disasters frequently produce severe humanitarian crises that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, particularly older adults. Despite the growing global elderly population and their heightened susceptibility to health deterioration, displacement, and social isolation during crises, leadership strategies addressing their specific needs remain insufficiently developed. This study examines the necessity of specialised leadership frameworks for protecting and supporting the elderly in contexts of war, conflict, and natural disasters. The current study analytically explores leadership styles, behavioural responses, and human resource management approaches that can enhance crisis response for older populations. It identifies a significant gap in humanitarian leadership and disaster governance literature, where policies and response systems often prioritise children and general populations while neglecting the unique vulnerabilities of elderly individuals. Comparative analyses of crisis leadership responses in conflicts such as those experienced in regions influenced by leaders like Volodymyr Zelenskyy and humanitarian coordination efforts led by institutions such as the United Nations highlight the varying effectiveness of leadership strategies in safeguarding elderly populations. The current findings suggest that crisis leadership must integrate gerontological expertise, inclusive planning, and targeted resource management to ensure equitable humanitarian outcomes. Furthermore, this study suggests that leadership during emergencies must extend beyond immediate relief to include long-term institutional frameworks that address healthcare access, mobility limitations, and psychosocial support for older adults. Strengthening leadership capacity in disaster governance can significantly improve protection systems and enhance resilience among ageing populations. By examining leadership responsibilities in humanitarian emergencies, this research contributes to policy discourse on inclusive crisis management and advocates for the institutionalisation of elderly-focused leadership strategies in global disaster response frameworks.

Keywords: Crisis Leadership; Elderly Vulnerability; Humanitarian Governance; Disaster Management; Conflict Leadership; Ageing Populations

Introduction

Global crises such as wars, armed conflicts, and natural disasters have increased in frequency, scale, and complexity over the past several decades, generating profound humanitarian consequences for vulnerable populations. Contemporary disaster risk literature indicates that the intensification of climate-related disasters and geopolitical instability has expanded the number of people exposed to humanitarian emergencies worldwide [34, 36]. Among the affected populations, older adults represent one of the most overlooked groups in emergency planning and crisis leadership strategies. Despite their increased susceptibility to chronic illness, reduced mobility, and social isolation, humanitarian response systems often prioritise children, women of reproductive age, and economically productive populations while neglecting the specific needs of older individuals [16]. This pattern reflects a significant leadership gap within disaster governance frameworks where ageing populations are insufficiently integrated into preparedness and response planning. Existing research in disaster management has extensively examined leadership coordination, crisis communication, and emergency governance, yet comparatively little attention has been directed toward leadership structures designed to protect elderly populations [4, 19]. International organisations, including the World Health Organization, have recognised the importance of integrating ageing considerations into disaster planning, although implementation remains inconsistent across countries and

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humanitarian operations [40]. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by analysing the role of leadership in protecting elderly populations during wars, conflicts, and natural disasters.

The rapid expansion of the global ageing population further intensifies the need for leadership frameworks that prioritise elderly protection during crises. Demographic projections indicate that the number of people aged 60 years and older will increase dramatically in the coming decades, transforming ageing into one of the most significant global social transitions [32, 42, 43]. As societies continue to age, disasters and armed conflicts will inevitably involve larger numbers of elderly individuals who require specialised medical care, mobility assistance, and psychosocial support. However, many emergency response models have historically been developed around assumptions of physical resilience and mobility among affected populations. These assumptions frequently marginalise elderly individuals during evacuation processes, humanitarian relief distribution, and post-disaster recovery initiatives [16]. Structural barriers such as limited transportation access, disrupted healthcare systems, and weakened social networks can significantly increase mortality and morbidity among older adults during crises. Leadership within disaster management systems must therefore recognise the distinct vulnerabilities associated with ageing and incorporate gerontological awareness into crisis planning. Without deliberate leadership intervention, these vulnerabilities may transform humanitarian emergencies into disproportionately severe threats for elderly populations.

Leadership during crises plays a critical role in determining whether vulnerable populations receive adequate protection, assistance, and long-term recovery support. Crisis leadership involves rapid decision-making, strategic coordination, and the mobilisation of institutional resources to address complex humanitarian challenges [4]. Effective leaders must coordinate emergency personnel, healthcare systems, and humanitarian organisations to ensure equitable access to shelter, medical services, and social support during crises. In contexts of war and armed conflict, leadership must also respond to large-scale displacement, damaged infrastructure, and psychological trauma experienced by vulnerable groups, including older adults. Recent global crises, such as the humanitarian emergency resulting from the war in Ukraine, demonstrate how national leadership and international humanitarian organisations must collaborate to coordinate large-scale emergency responses [35]. At the same time, humanitarian institutions play a central role in ensuring that vulnerable populations are protected under international humanitarian law. Examining leadership strategies within these contexts provides valuable insights into how governance systems can be strengthened to address the needs of ageing populations during crises. This study, therefore, analyses leadership styles, behaviours, and human resource management strategies that can improve humanitarian responses for elderly individuals affected by war, conflict, and natural disasters.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership in humanitarian crises can be understood through several theoretical perspectives that emphasise crisis governance, transformational leadership, and ethical leadership in complex emergency environments. Crisis leadership theory posits that leaders must demonstrate decisiveness, adaptability, and strategic coordination when managing high-uncertainty situations such as wars, armed conflicts, and natural disasters [4]. In such contexts,

leaders are required to mobilise resources rapidly while coordinating multiple actors, including governmental institutions, humanitarian organisations, and community networks. Effective crisis leadership, therefore, involves the capacity to manage complex systems while maintaining social legitimacy and public trust during emergencies. Research in public administration suggests that leadership effectiveness during crises depends on the ability to interpret rapidly evolving events and implement coordinated governance responses [19]. Within these environments, vulnerable groups such as elderly populations face heightened risks due to mobility limitations, chronic health conditions, and disrupted access to healthcare services [40]. Ethical leadership theory further emphasises that leaders have a moral obligation to protect disadvantaged populations during governance processes [6]. In humanitarian contexts, this ethical responsibility requires leaders to ensure that emergency response systems remain inclusive and responsive to populations that may otherwise be marginalised. Consequently, crisis leadership frameworks must incorporate ethical governance principles that recognise the rights, dignity, and well-being of elderly individuals during emergencies.

Transformational leadership theory provides an additional analytical lens for examining leadership effectiveness in humanitarian crises. Transformational leaders motivate collective action by articulating a compelling vision that encourages cooperation among diverse stakeholders, including governments, humanitarian agencies, and local communities [3]. Such leadership approaches are particularly valuable in disaster environments where coordination across institutions is essential for delivering timely humanitarian assistance. Transformational leadership also emphasises empathy, communication, and the empowerment of frontline responders responsible for implementing relief operations. These qualities strengthen organisational morale and enhance the capacity of emergency personnel to respond effectively to complex humanitarian challenges [23]. Studies in crisis management suggest that leaders who demonstrate empathy and transparent communication can improve public trust and institutional coordination during disasters [4]. For example, the leadership approach adopted by Jacinda Ardern during national emergencies demonstrated how compassionate communication and inclusive governance can strengthen societal resilience and public confidence in crisis management. Although such leadership occurred outside armed conflict contexts, it illustrates how empathetic leadership behaviour can improve the effectiveness of crisis response systems. Applying similar transformational principles to humanitarian crises involving elderly populations can enhance disaster preparedness and response outcomes.

Another relevant theoretical perspective for this study is inclusive leadership, which emphasises the integration of marginalised groups into governance structures and decision-making processes. Inclusive leadership theory argues that effective governance requires recognising and incorporating the diverse experiences and needs of different social groups within policy development [22]. In disaster governance, this perspective highlights the importance of ensuring that vulnerable populations are represented within emergency planning and response systems. Elderly individuals often possess valuable community knowledge, social networks, and coping strategies that can contribute significantly to disaster resilience. However, traditional crisis management frameworks frequently exclude ageing populations from leadership consultations and decision-making structures [16]. Inclusive leadership, therefore, challenges governments and humanitarian organisations to design

disaster response strategies that reflect the lived experiences of vulnerable populations. By integrating the perspectives of elderly individuals into disaster governance processes, leaders can create more equitable and effective emergency management systems. This theoretical framework provides a foundation for analysing how leadership practices can evolve to better address the needs of ageing populations during wars, conflicts, and natural disasters.

Literature Review

The literature on crisis leadership, disaster management, and humanitarian governance has expanded considerably over the past several decades; however, the specific needs of elderly populations remain largely underexplored within these frameworks. Early research in disaster leadership primarily focused on organisational coordination, institutional decision-making, and the capacity of emergency systems to respond under conditions of uncertainty [4, 19]. Scholars emphasise that effective crisis governance requires rapid mobilisation of resources, clear decision-making hierarchies, and inter-agency coordination. While these contributions provide important insights into the mechanics of crisis leadership, they often conceptualise affected populations as homogenous groups, thereby overlooking variations in vulnerability across demographic cohorts. Older adults face unique risks due to chronic health conditions, limited mobility, and diminished social support, which elevate their susceptibility to mortality, injury, and psychological distress during disasters [40]. Despite these challenges, leadership literature has historically prioritised logistical coordination and operational efficiency over population-specific vulnerability, creating a notable gap in both theory and practice concerning the protection of ageing populations in emergencies.

A growing body of interdisciplinary research in gerontology and disaster studies has highlighted the disproportionate impact of humanitarian crises on elderly populations. Empirical studies of natural disasters, including hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods, consistently report that older adults experience higher rates of injury, displacement, and long-term health deterioration compared to younger populations [1, 11]. Structural barriers, such as inaccessible evacuation systems, mobility constraints, and inadequate healthcare provision, often prevent older adults from accessing timely emergency assistance [16]. These findings underscore the limitations of conventional disaster response models, which rarely account for age-related vulnerabilities. Humanitarian organisations, including HelpAge International, have called for the development of age-inclusive leadership frameworks and policies that explicitly consider the needs of elderly populations during crises [16]. Despite these calls, implementation remains inconsistent across global contexts, and leadership strategies targeting ageing populations are still in early stages of integration within national and international humanitarian frameworks. As the global population continues to age, the lack of systematic planning and leadership for elderly-focused disaster response represents a growing policy and governance challenge [32].

Comparative analyses of crisis responses in conflict and post-conflict zones further illustrate the heightened vulnerabilities of older adults during emergencies. In war-torn regions, the collapse of healthcare systems, transportation infrastructure, and social services frequently leaves elderly populations without access to essential support [1, 34]. For instance, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has revealed how older adults can remain trapped in active combat zones due to mobility limitations or family separation, even

when political leadership prioritises humanitarian coordination [35]. While leadership responses, such as those orchestrated under Volodymyr Zelenskyy, have emphasised inter-agency collaboration and emergency aid distribution, significant challenges persist in reaching elderly civilians in remote, contested, or resource-limited areas. Scholars increasingly argue that crisis leadership must integrate gerontological expertise and age-sensitive planning into disaster preparedness and response strategies [11, 40]. Incorporating such expertise allows leaders to anticipate vulnerabilities, adapt operational protocols, and improve the resilience of ageing populations during humanitarian emergencies. Expanding the scholarly focus on leadership, ageing, and vulnerability, therefore, represents an essential step toward more inclusive and effective disaster governance.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study explains how leadership during war, armed conflict, and natural disasters influences the protection and well-being of elderly populations through strategic governance, behavioural leadership responses, and coordinated human resource management. Disasters and humanitarian crises often create structural vulnerabilities for older adults due to limited mobility, chronic health conditions, reduced access to communication channels, and weakened social support systems [40]. In such circumstances, leadership becomes a central mechanism through which policies, resources, and emergency responses are organised to mitigate risks for vulnerable populations. Effective crisis leadership determines the success of evacuation planning, healthcare delivery, shelter provision, and psychosocial assistance for affected communities [4]. When leadership structures fail to recognise the specific vulnerabilities of older adults, emergency systems may inadvertently exclude them from relief operations and recovery programmes. Conversely, inclusive leadership that integrates gerontological perspectives into disaster preparedness and response strategies can significantly improve humanitarian outcomes for ageing populations [16]. The conceptual framework, therefore, positions crisis leadership as the central governance variable that mediates the relationship between disaster conditions and elderly well-being. By strengthening leadership capacity and institutional coordination, governments and humanitarian organisations can mitigate the disproportionate risks faced by ageing populations during emergencies [34].

The framework further identifies three key leadership mechanisms that influence the protection of elderly populations during crises: leadership style, leadership behaviour, and human resource management. Leadership style refers to the governance orientation adopted by decision-makers during emergencies, which may include directive crisis leadership, collaborative humanitarian leadership, or transformational leadership that mobilises collective action to protect vulnerable populations [23]. Leadership behaviour encompasses the practical actions taken by leaders during crises, including crisis communication, inter-agency coordination, and the prioritisation of vulnerable groups within policy responses. These behavioural strategies shape the capacity of governments and humanitarian agencies to respond rapidly and equitably to disaster situations. Human resource management represents the organisational processes used to mobilise and deploy healthcare professionals, emergency responders, social workers, and community volunteers to support affected populations [19]. The effectiveness of disaster response systems often depends on the coordination and training of these personnel. If leadership fails

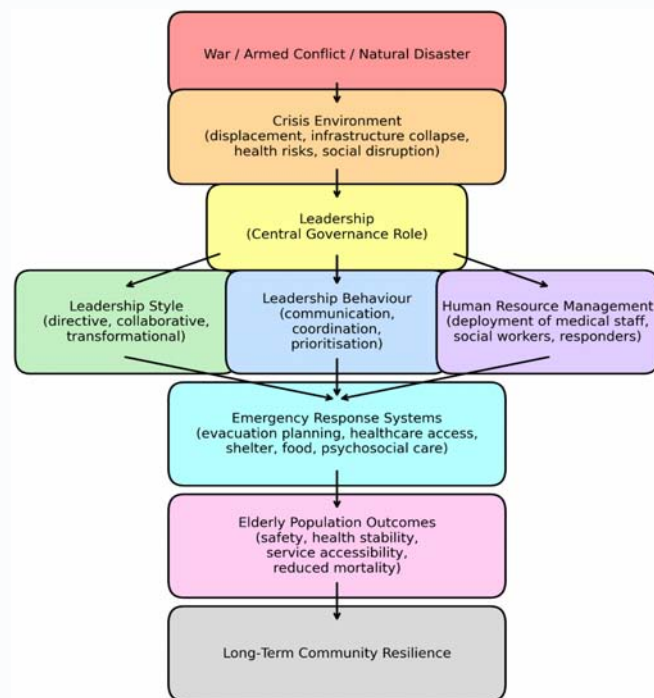


Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustrating the role of crisis leadership in protecting elderly populations during war, armed conflict, and natural disasters.

to integrate these mechanisms effectively, humanitarian systems may struggle to deliver timely and appropriate assistance to elderly individuals. However, when leadership strategies emphasise inclusive governance and coordinated human resource deployment, disaster response systems become more efficient and equitable in addressing the needs of ageing populations [1].

The final component of the framework focuses on outcomes for elderly populations, including safety, health stability, accessibility to emergency services, and long-term recovery support. Effective leadership interventions can reduce mortality risks, improve access to healthcare, and strengthen psychological resilience among older adults during crises [40]. In contrast, weak leadership responses often result in delayed evacuations, inadequate healthcare provision, and increased social isolation among elderly individuals affected by disasters or conflicts. The framework also recognises the role of external institutional support as a moderating factor influencing leadership effectiveness. International humanitarian organisations, healthcare systems, and community-based networks can strengthen crisis response capacity by providing additional resources and expertise [34]. Strong institutional collaboration enhances the translation of leadership decisions into effective humanitarian action. Conversely, weak coordination between institutions may undermine emergency response systems and exacerbate vulnerabilities among elderly populations. By integrating leadership theory with disaster governance and gerontological research, this conceptual framework provides a structured model for analysing how crisis leadership can better protect ageing populations during emergencies. Ultimately, the framework emphasises the need for inclusive, coordinated, and ethically grounded leadership in humanitarian crises (Figure 1).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative analytical research design to examine leadership strategies for protecting elderly populations

during wars, armed conflicts, and natural disasters. Qualitative approaches are particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena such as crisis leadership, as they enable in-depth interpretation of governance strategies within broader institutional and social contexts [8]. The research relies primarily on secondary data derived from peer-reviewed scholarly literature, policy frameworks, and humanitarian reports published by international organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). By synthesising insights from multiple disciplines—such as public administration, gerontology, and humanitarian studies—the study develops a comprehensive understanding of leadership responsibilities and practices in crisis environments. Qualitative policy analysis allows for the identification of structural gaps within existing disaster governance frameworks that may contribute to the marginalisation of elderly populations, emphasising analytical interpretation rather than statistical modelling [24]. This approach is consistent with prior research in disaster management, which has utilised qualitative methods to evaluate institutional effectiveness and leadership practices during complex emergencies [19].

The research methodology also incorporates comparative case analysis to explore leadership responses across diverse crisis contexts. Comparative analysis facilitates the examination of differences and similarities in leadership strategies between situations of armed conflict and natural disasters (Ragin, 2014). Wars and armed conflicts typically involve complex political dynamics, restricted humanitarian access, and disrupted institutional coordination, whereas natural disasters often necessitate large-scale logistical operations, including emergency medical services, search-and-rescue missions, and infrastructure repair [4]. Comparing leadership approaches across these contexts enables the identification of common challenges, adaptive strategies, and best practices in protecting elderly populations. Moreover, comparative analysis highlights the role of

political leadership in shaping humanitarian priorities, as illustrated by international frameworks such as UNDRR and the coordination efforts of national governments during emergencies [34]. Examining these cases provides insight into the relationships between leadership decision-making, organisational coordination, and humanitarian outcomes.

To enhance analytical rigour, the study employs a systematic approach to reviewing existing literature and policy documents. Academic sources were selected based on their relevance to crisis leadership, disaster governance, ageing populations, and humanitarian response systems. International reports produced by organisations such as the WHO, HelpAge International, and the UN provide empirical data and operational insights into the experiences of elderly populations during crises [16, 40]. Integrating academic research with policy literature allows the study to evaluate both theoretical and practical dimensions of leadership in disaster management. This methodological strategy ensures that the analysis remains grounded in real-world humanitarian challenges while reflecting scholarly perspectives. By synthesising evidence from multiple sources, the study identifies leadership strategies capable of improving protection and support for elderly individuals during crises. The findings contribute to broader policy discussions on inclusive disaster governance, ethical leadership, and effective humanitarian coordination.

Leadership Behaviour in War, Conflict, and Natural Disasters

Leadership behaviour during crises significantly shapes how effectively vulnerable populations, including elderly individuals, receive protection and support. In contexts of armed conflict, leaders must navigate complex security challenges while ensuring the safety of civilians who may be unable to flee due to limited mobility, chronic illness, or separation from family networks [1, 4]. Effective leadership in these settings requires proactive humanitarian coordination, clear communication with emergency responders, and prioritisation of evacuation systems, medical assistance, and humanitarian corridors. Research demonstrates that failures in leadership behaviour—such as delays in resource allocation or lack of coordination—can exacerbate mortality and morbidity among older adults [19]. Leadership that integrates humanitarian ethics, prioritises inclusivity, and maintains situational awareness can reduce the disproportionate risks faced by elderly populations during conflict situations. The decisions of political leaders and humanitarian coordinators are therefore critical in shaping the responsiveness and ethical orientation of crisis interventions [4].

Natural disasters present different but equally complex leadership challenges for protecting elderly populations. Events such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and pandemics require rapid mobilisation of emergency services, including medical teams, search-and-rescue operations, and temporary shelter provision [11, 34]. Elderly individuals often encounter barriers to accessing evacuation transport, emergency shelters, and healthcare due to physical limitations or chronic health conditions. Leadership behaviour in disaster management must therefore prioritise planning and coordination that ensure accessibility and safety for older adults [16]. Inclusive crisis leadership further requires empathy, community engagement, and culturally sensitive communication to address both physical and psychosocial vulnerabilities. Leaders who demonstrate such behaviour enhance public trust, improve

adherence to emergency procedures, and strengthen social resilience during recovery processes [23].

Comparative analyses of leadership behaviour in armed conflict versus natural disasters reveal both similarities and important differences. In both contexts, leaders must act decisively to coordinate resources and ensure timely humanitarian assistance. Conflict settings often involve additional security risks that complicate relief operations, whereas natural disasters require large-scale logistical coordination to deliver aid efficiently [4, 19]. Regardless of the type of crisis, leadership must account for the specific vulnerabilities of elderly populations, including limited access to digital communication, transportation barriers, and reduced mobility. Inclusive leadership behaviour, therefore, necessitates a combination of strategic foresight, empathy, and inter-institutional collaboration. By adopting such behavioural strategies, leaders can significantly improve humanitarian outcomes for ageing populations in diverse emergency contexts [11, 40].

Human Resource Management in Crisis Leadership for Elderly Protection

Human resource management (HRM) plays a central role in determining the effectiveness of humanitarian responses during crises affecting elderly populations. Crisis leadership requires coordination of multidisciplinary teams, including healthcare professionals, social workers, rescue personnel, and community volunteers, to provide targeted support to older adults [18, 24]. Leaders must ensure that personnel possess specialised skills in geriatric care, mobility assistance, chronic disease management, and psychosocial support. Without appropriate training and deployment, emergency responders may inadvertently overlook the unique needs of elderly individuals, reducing the overall effectiveness of humanitarian interventions [11]. Strategic HRM, therefore, involves careful recruitment, training, and deployment of staff who can deliver age-sensitive assistance during emergencies.

Training and professional development are critical components of HRM in crisis leadership. While many emergency response programmes focus on general disaster response procedures, few incorporate modules on elderly care, accessibility planning, or communication strategies for older adults [16]. Leaders must ensure continuous professional development that equips responders to recognise early signs of medical distress, psychological trauma, and social vulnerability among older populations. Interdisciplinary collaboration between healthcare institutions, social services, and disaster management agencies further enhances the capacity of humanitarian systems to respond effectively [1]. By prioritising ongoing skill development, leadership can strengthen the competence and responsiveness of emergency personnel.

An additional dimension of HRM involves integrating community-based support networks into disaster response systems. Local volunteers, religious organisations, and neighbourhood associations often hold critical knowledge about elderly residents and their specific needs during crises [11, 34]. Effective leaders coordinate these networks with formal emergency teams to ensure rapid identification of vulnerable individuals and targeted delivery of assistance. Community engagement not only facilitates more efficient humanitarian operations but also fosters social cohesion and resilience during and after crises. By combining professional expertise with local knowledge, leaders can create inclusive and adaptive emergency response systems that prioritise the safety, dignity, and

well-being of elderly populations [16, 23].

Conclusion

The increasing frequency of wars, armed conflicts, and natural disasters underscores the urgent need for leadership frameworks that prioritise the protection of vulnerable populations, particularly the elderly. This study has highlighted a significant gap in crisis governance and humanitarian leadership literature, where the needs of older adults remain insufficiently addressed in disaster response planning. Leadership strategies often focus on general population needs while overlooking the specific vulnerabilities associated with ageing, including chronic illness, reduced mobility, and social isolation. Addressing this gap requires a fundamental shift in how leaders conceptualise humanitarian responsibility during crises. Governments and international organisations must recognise that ageing populations will increasingly shape the demographic landscape of future emergencies. Without targeted leadership interventions, elderly individuals will continue to face disproportionate risks during wars and disasters. Developing inclusive leadership frameworks is therefore essential for ensuring equitable humanitarian protection.

The analysis of leadership behaviour demonstrates that effective crisis leadership must combine strategic decision-making with empathy and ethical responsibility. Leaders must coordinate humanitarian resources, communicate clearly with affected communities, and ensure that relief systems remain accessible to individuals with limited physical mobility. Human resource management also plays a critical role in strengthening crisis responses for elderly populations. Emergency teams must receive specialised training in geriatric care and accessibility planning to address the complex needs of ageing individuals. Interdisciplinary collaboration between healthcare professionals, social workers, and disaster management personnel is essential for creating comprehensive support systems. Community networks should also be integrated into formal emergency planning processes to ensure that vulnerable individuals are identified and assisted promptly. These strategies can significantly improve humanitarian outcomes during crises.

Ultimately, leadership in war, conflict, and natural disasters must evolve to reflect the realities of an ageing global population. Inclusive crisis governance requires leaders to prioritise vulnerable groups and develop policies that address their specific needs. By integrating gerontological expertise into disaster management systems, governments and humanitarian organisations can strengthen their capacity to protect elderly populations during emergencies. Such reforms will not only improve crisis response effectiveness but also promote social justice and human dignity in humanitarian governance. The development of elderly-focused leadership strategies, therefore, represents a critical step toward building more resilient and inclusive societies in an era of increasing global crises.

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