the
Humanitarian Leader

CENTRE FOR
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LEADERSHIP

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THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER: 2024 EDITION

About

The *Humanitarian Leader/Leader Humanitaire*, a bilingual publication in English and French, is an independent voice for the humanitarian sector. We tell stories that challenge our collective assumptions and present concepts that help make humanitarian aid more just, equitable and effective.

Humanitarian Leader authors include researchers, activists, volunteers and humanitarian professionals—anyone with something to say about how aid could and should be better.

It provides a platform for non-peer-reviewed articles and allows authors to test ideas and insights in an accessible academic setting. All papers are published by openjournals@Deakin.

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present.

Editorial Office

Contributors

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Cover image: The Sarhad Rural Support Programme operates throughout north-western Pakistan © SRSP library

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership is a partnership between Deakin University and Save the Children Australia.

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Preface

It is a great honour and privilege to write the Preface marking the 2024 Annual Edition of the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire*. This flagship publication of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership has a very clear mandate—to be the bridge between practice and academia that challenges our preconceptions and assumptions on leadership within the humanitarian sector and the humanitarian sector more widely. This edition, and the four that preceded it, have challenged existing norms, highlighted new challenges and sought to raise questions on how to transform local and global responses to humanitarian events so that the entire humanitarian ecosystem is more equitable, just and effective.

This accessible, non-peer reviewed working paper series reflects the goals and purposes of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. This joint initiative between Deakin University and Save the Children Australia was established a decade ago with the aim of transforming the humanitarian sector for it to better embrace the agency of those peoples affected by humanitarian events and promote distributed power, social justice and equity. Whilst its initial remit was linked specifically with providing leadership education to humanitarian workers, it was soon determined that in addition to this necessary work, such transformation also requires thought leadership. The range of topics and discussions this working paper series has published and provoked has provided that intellectual rigour and contestation required to change this sector. These papers (rightly) pull no punches; provoking and challenging the traditional ways the humanitarian sector works. The titles of these papers give clear indication of their intent to transform the sector and question the status quo. They include, for example:

- Coloniality and the inadequacy of localisation
- Rethinking aid system narratives
- Beyond the 'Egosystem': A case for locally led Humanitarian Resistance
- It's time for INGOs to stop living with their parents
- Through the looking glass: Coloniality and mirroring in localisation
- The relationship between language and neo-colonialism in the aid industry
- The 'New Humanitarians': Vernacular aid in Greece
- Revolutionary Development: Why Humanitarian and Development Aid Need Radical Shifts

With tens of thousands of downloads each year, the reach of the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* is significant across all parts of the world. This reach is not unexpected as the articles published are so fundamental to the day-to-day work of humanitarian workers and leaders but also core to the pertinent questions and problems being addressed by those studying and researching this sector and these issues.

The *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* has published papers on COVID, palliative care in humanitarian settings, digital technologies, mental health, localisation, the role of the private sector within humanitarian responses, the use of language in humanitarian contexts, decolonisation of the sector and professionalisation of the humanitarian sector. This rich corpus of work deeply mines the current and emerging issues that need to be explored and discussed. While the majority of papers do not have a specific geographic focus, instead focusing on global issues, the ability to spotlight country-specific issues and contexts in some papers is highly valuable.

The greater worth of all these articles can be found in their authorship. Unlike most publications (whether in this field or any other discipline), less than half of all papers published within *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* have been written by those working within the university sector. Rather, the majority of papers are written by practitioners or those working in affiliated occupations. While twenty-two editions have been written by academics, 16 have been authored by those working in non-governmental or non-profit organisations, five have been written by those in the private sector, while the rest have been written by those in research centres, civil society organisations, social enterprises, government, multilateral organisations or other entities. This spread of organisations demonstrates the accessibility of this publication but also the breadth of readership. The ongoing challenge of this series is to continue attracting papers from practitioners, women, and francophone (and non-English speaking) authors.

It may also be expected that the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* may draw on a limited geography of its authors given its own location within an Australian university. However, fewer than half of the papers have been written by those residing in Australia. It now has an international reputation. Its authors reside in all parts of the globe, including Europe, North America, South-east Asia, Africa, Central and South America, the Middle East and Asia. More authors from the Global South would be welcome as the majority of contributors still do originate from the Global North (there have been no papers yet written by someone from the Pacific

region for instance), however, having just under a third of papers from regions more greatly impacted by humanitarian events is a great strength of this series and one that is rightly celebrated. This wide aperture of voices gives this publication an authenticity that is not replicated in more traditional forums or outlets. Indeed, seeking new voices and perspectives has been a key focus of the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* from its origins.

This focus on wanting to hear new voices and ensure global reach, is best reflected in the fact it is now a bilingual publication, being available in both English and French (with plans for further languages underway). The evolution of the *Humanitarian Leader* to be published in tandem as the *Leader Humanitaire* followed the expansion of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership's education offering into the Francophone world. The value and importance of this French-language post-graduate degree cannot be overstated—if for no other reasons than this was the first university qualification taught at an Australian university entirely in a language other than English. Deakin University was again at the vanguard of innovation by responding to the need to provide leadership education to non-English speaking humanitarian leaders. Supported by Save the Children and other international NGO partners, the logical extension of teaching in a language other than English was the provision of thought leadership material also in a language other than English. Thus, was born the French language *Leader Humanitaire*.

In December 2022, Justine de Rouck became the inaugural francophone editor, with the first bilingual edition published in early 2023. The English language dominates literature on humanitarian issues and so this French-language publication has been quickly embraced, with thousands of downloads since its first publication. A desire to further expand the reach of the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* saw Adelina Kamal's 2023 paper on resistance humanitarianism in Mynamar translated into Burmese to ensure greater impact and accessibility. This year, Carla Vitantonio's paper was translated into Italian, making her thought-provoking article available to our Italian-speaking colleagues throughout the world. While such endeavours take resources and commitment, it is also fundamental to achieving the remit of this publication. It should not be of any great surprise therefore to note future plans to further widen the series to be published in Arabic and Spanish.

On this impressive anniversary, it is also right and proper to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions made by a number of key individuals that have been core to the success of the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire*. Dr Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings was the inaugural editor soon after the series was launched. Dr Phoebe Downing and Dr Marian Abouzeid assumed this responsibility in 2023 and were joined earlier this year by Dr Joshua Hallwright. I noted above the leadership of Justine de Rouck for the French-language edition. Without their vision and hard-work (and make no mistake, editing such publications is a lot of hard-work!), we would not be celebrating this milestone.

Finally, it was my great honour to co-author the first *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* in 2019. This contribution was a provocative paper challenging the long-established principles of humanitarianism—humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. The purpose of this work was to seek to instigate a discussion within the humanitarian sector to reconsider these principles and question whether they were still fit-for-purpose in a significantly different environment from which they were first conceived. Alternative principles were presented in order to frame this contest. The independent voice of the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* meant it was the perfect outlet for which to launch this conversation. I have been so excited to watch subsequent editions continue to push, prod and prompt discussions that have not been had or been set aside as being too dangerous or uncomfortable for the humanitarian sector. The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership has sought to transform the humanitarian sector. Five years and 51 editions later, the independence of this accessible, non-peer reviewed series remains as a cornerstone of its value and importance.

I am sure the papers in this year's annual edition will further challenge the status quo of the humanitarian sector just as have the last four. As each edition builds upon the one before it, the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* has quickly become the go-to publication for new ideas and innovative thinking for humanitarian workers, leaders, policy makers and researchers. Our humanitarian sector needs to be transformed to become more equitable, just and effective and the *Humanitarian Leader / Leader Humanitaire* is at the fore of this change.

Deakin Distinguished Professor Matthew Clarke
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Evaluating humanitarian projects in Cameroon: When local consultants try to redefine North-South asymmetries

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Image: A woman in a UNHCR refugee camp in Cameroon, Africa © Mauritius images GmbH / Alamy Stock

Abstract

Since 2013, Cameroon has been a priority area for humanitarian action, and international expertise has long been used to evaluate and monitor humanitarian projects in this country. However, COVID-19 imposed restrictions on international mobility, causing access issues for outside experts, a process that had already begun prior to the pandemic. Indeed, COVID-19 merely exacerbated the immobility of international aid agencies that first started with the security crisis. So, while these agencies have long been reluctant to hand over the evaluation of humanitarian projects to local experts, the combination of security and health crisis has forced them to overcome this reluctance. Using the 'window of opportunity' model (Kingdon, 1984), this article shows how Cameroonian experts have benefited from the stagnation and immobility of international expertise in the country to take on the task of evaluating humanitarian projects. This repositioning in favour of local expertise has contributed to a redefinition of the power asymmetries between the Global North and South and of the relations of domination between national and international experts.

Leadership relevance

This paper discusses the unique 'window of opportunity' presented by the twin crises of COVID-19 and the disintegrating security situation in Cameroon for local experts to take on the work of monitoring and evaluation in humanitarian projects. The author contends that the possibilities for genuine localisation that have stemmed from this should become legitimised, institutionalised and embedded in the everyday practice of INGOs, and calls upon leaders within African governments, the public and private sectors, and academia to reflect on and implement a substantial, real and lasting humanitarian transition away from the use of international experts in monitoring and evaluating African humanitarian projects.

Introduction

Many humanitarian organisations have not yet adopted a culture of academic research, though one of the biggest challenges that the sector faces today is the need to produce scientific knowledge about international solidarity projects to develop and support evidence-based interventions. Some organisations are slowly starting to become aware of this. When they have not set up their own research units[1], analysis departments[2], think tanks[3] or foundations[4], they develop partnerships with other think tanks[5] or scientific journals[6]. In Cameroon, such cooperation projects between researchers and humanitarians are on the increase. The former recognise the latter's capacity for action. The latter recognise the scientific rigour of the former.

That mutual recognition encourages them to work together, to "move from mistrust to efficiency" (Ridde, 2021). This cooperation has long been fostered by international experts performing humanitarian evaluations, studies and research in the Global South. However, the travel restrictions imposed by COVID-19 have contributed to the immobility of this expertise, though it is also important to emphasise that in Cameroon this immobility is not new. The lack of international access predates the pandemic, which merely exacerbated a process that had already begun in Cameroon's high-risk security zones, where foreigners are strongly discouraged from travelling. Cameroon's stability was vaunted until 2013, but it is now suffering from a combination of security and humanitarian crises caused by armed groups and inter-community conflicts. These are multidimensional crises, possibly linked to other factors like climate change, epidemics, and food insecurity. In such a weakened country, whose sovereignty is fragmented by multiple allegiances, Westphalian state-centrism is challenged.

Nevertheless, for many years, international aid organisations were reluctant to transfer the management of humanitarian project evaluations to local stakeholders, although the health and security crises have pushed them to overcome this reluctance. It is also true that in many cases international experts continue to lead the assessment of these projects in Africa from afar, although the INGOS—having repatriated most of their staff—were

still forced to localise many of their monitoring and evaluation activities in order to cope with the mobility restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

So, how did a crisis that should have alarmed the African continent suddenly become an opportunity to strengthen local expertise? Drawing on John Kingdon's 'window of opportunity' model (Kingdon, 1984), this article shows how security and health crises have contributed to changes in humanitarian aid evaluation practices, and begun to rebalance the relationship between national and international consultants, using the case of Cameroon as an example. But before we do, it is necessary to take a closer look at the issue at the heart of the research.

How did a crisis that should have alarmed the African continent suddenly become an opportunity to strengthen local expertise?

Health and safety: a dual context

The emergence of the first case of COVID-19 in China was the start of a wide range of pandemic response measures. In a number of countries, the public health crisis led to restrictions on international mobility. In Cameroon, a "government response strategy" was put in place as a public policy to contain the pandemic. In the Cameroonian Prime Minister's special declaration of 17 March 2020, the government issued several measures, including "the closure of land, air and sea borders" and the suspension of "the issuing of entry visas to Cameroon at the various airports". Similarly, all the Schengen countries, the United States and Canada closed their borders (*New York Times*, 2020). On 4 September 2020, the European Commission adopted a proposal for recommendations for a coordinated approach to restrictive measures on mobility (Council of Europe, 2020). This public action was aimed at achieving greater policy coherence to contain the crisis and avoid member states adopting unilateral and fragmented measures.

Yet, the health crisis that began in March 2020 has had varying degrees of consensus about its severity as a global public health problem, and its inclusion on government agendas appears to be a process riddled with differing representations, meanings, and signifiers that were specific only to the stakeholders involved. Although some geographical areas of the world saw it as a global threat with cataclysmic consequences, others, on the contrary, saw it as an opportunity to reap some benefits. Fred Eboko and Sina Schlimmer (2020) point out that faced with fear of an apocalyptic collapse of African economies, Africa has emerged with a strong capacity for resilience. However, in Europe, a recent study has shown that these

[1] For example, the Research Unit on Humanitarian Issues and Practices of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Switzerland was set up in 2006 (http://www.msf-ureph.ch/fr)
[2] See Analysis Department of Médecins Sans Frontières – Belgium (https://msfanalysis.org)
[3] See the Centre de Réflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires (CRASH), Médecins Sans Frontières – France (https://www.msfcrash.org/fr)
[4] See the French Red Cross Foundation, dedicated to promoting scientific knowledge, ethical reflection and innovation (https://www.fondation-croix-rouge.fr)
[5] See the Observatoire des questions humanitaires of the Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS) Groupe URD (https://www.urd.org/fr/le-groupe-urd)
[6] See Alternatives Humanitaires (https://alternatives-humanitaires.org/fr)

restrictive measures have had more costs than benefits, particularly in terms of disrupting business travel (Martin and Rivard, 2020), with restrictions leading to not only substantial economic losses but also to standstill among international experts. In any case, because of these measures, Global North aid organisations in Cameroon were left to either cancel some activities in the country, or to start using local expertise.

However, there is another reason that explains the disappearance of international expertise in Cameroon—the security crisis. The pandemic undeniably had an accelerating effect on a series of realities already present in recent years (Vielajus and Bonis-Charancle, 2020). Well before the health crisis triggered by COVID-19, Cameroon was already being presented by certain diplomatic missions as a 'red country'. In other words, it was a risk because of the security crises it had been experiencing since 2013: the crises caused by terrorist attacks by the Boko-Haram group in the far north of the country, incursions by Central African rebels in the east of the country and recent secessionist movements in the south and north-west regions. The combination of these armed conflicts had already placed Cameroon as a high-risk country for foreigners. We all remember the kidnapping of the French Moulin-Fournier family in Waza in the far north of the country on 19 February 2013 (Leduc, 2013), or the kidnapping of the ten Chinese workers in May 2014 in Dabanga (*Le Monde*, 2014). Events such as these are becoming more and more frequent and are causing anxiety among people in the West—hence the inclusion of six regions of the country on the security map of the French embassy in Cameroon, as areas not recommended for foreigners[7]. Understanding the health and security context in Cameroon provides a better understanding of the issues involved and leads to a conceptual and operational framework for this research.

Understanding the health and security context in Cameroon provides a better understanding of the issues involved and leads to a conceptual and operational framework for this research.

The research: concept and plan

From a public policy perspective, monitoring and evaluation is a scientific approach that systematically and objectively examines the process, product or the effects of a public policy or a program. Evaluation then assesses public interventions to produce knowledge that

is credible, relevant and useful for the implementation of public policies, based on defined criteria. Evaluation is a source of information that can be used before a decision is taken (ex-ante evaluation), during the implementation of a program (in itinere or concurrent evaluation) or after a few years (ex post evaluation) (Steve, 2010). However, the concept of 'evaluation of humanitarian projects', as understood in this paper, refers to activities commissioned by UN agencies and humanitarian international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), which consist of measuring the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact of humanitarian projects.

Evaluations of humanitarian projects have already been at the centre of a great deal of discussion. While some authors have looked at the conflicts of interest observed in the conduct of evaluations (Pérouse de Montclos, 2011), others have focused mainly on their implementation and how they impacted a crisis (Rot-Münstermann, 2021), particularly with the contribution of new technologies (Ndenga, 2021). Some studies explain how evaluation methodology and approaches have been adapted to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 (La Rovere, Smith and Felloni, 2021) and how this new situation has allowed for some flexibility and innovation in order to maintain minimum standards of quality and accountability (Mivo Ndoubé and Onana, 2021). Without being exhaustive, this literature seems more expert than that from the social sciences, except for a rare work by Camille Laporte (2015), approaching evaluation as a policy object of development assistance. Certainly, some research has attempted to show the role of consultants in evaluating public policies as a form of emerging professional field (Matyjasik, 2010), but without ever addressing consultants from the Global South.

It is to shed light on these grey areas that this research focuses on these stakeholders, who are still marginal in the academic literature. These are local consultants, still referred to as local experts, who took advantage of the 'window of opportunity' opened by the health and security crises in Cameroon as a way of localising evaluation practices. This research aims to show that these two crises have contributed to the evolution of evaluation practices, leading to the repositioning of local expertise (national consultants), despite the catastrophes predicted to befall Africa. This evolution of practices, as a way of redefining power dynamics, refers to changes in the way project evaluations are conducted in times of crisis. The new context created by the security crises, which has been further amplified by the arrival of COVID-19, deeply transformed the process of these evaluations. These changes are of several kinds: the loosening of criteria for calls for tenders; the reconfiguration of strategies to gain access to the field; and the circumvention and reorientation of evaluation approaches, particularly with the introduction of subcontracting systems. These new practices have contributed to a relative redefinition of North-South asymmetries. In other words, they have helped to rebalance the structure of relations between

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national and international consultants and to deconstruct the relations of domination that govern them. What we can see here is a clear desire on the part of the national consultants to try to redress these asymmetries with their international counterparts. The crises seem to have given them greater prominence because of their privileged access to the fields of study.

This research aims to show that these two crises have contributed to the evolution of evaluation practices, leading to the repositioning of local expertise.

By taking on this work, local stakeholders are expressing a desire for empowerment and independence. This process of empowerment is not simply an approach based on involving stakeholders in the implementation of humanitarian projects, it is a deep desire to 'localise' the evaluation of humanitarian projects. This would enable local stakeholders to achieve greater functional and operational autonomy, breaking away from dependence on the Global North. François Audet (2022) describes 'localisation' as "a collective process in the humanitarian ecosystem which aims to put local stakeholders at the centre of local decision-making processes". Some prefer to refer to this 'localisation' as 'humanitarian transition', defined as an "obligatory transition between a humanitarian paradigm that is running out of steam and a new aid system that is more in line with the concepts of human development, sustainable development and social change" (Mattei and Troit, 2016).

While these two concepts are being interchangeably used, in practice this leads to a great deal of confusion. 'Humanitarian transition' appears to be the most accomplished form of localisation. It expresses the idea that local stakeholders should have clear autonomy, taking the form of a 'de-Westernisation' of humanitarian aid. In other words, it is a process that consists of taking humanitarian aid out of Western hands in order to strengthen the role of local stakeholders (Bazin, Fry and Levasseur, 2010). However, as local consultants are still trying to balance power with their Western counterparts in Cameroon, this research leans more into the concept of localisation, which seems to cover practices aimed at including local populations and local stakeholders in the decision-making process. This practice implies a collaboration with the Global North, but does not necessarily lead to autonomy, nor does it necessarily eliminate the logic of domination with regard to certain forms of subcontracting that are still being perpetuated.

In this scenario, the 'window of opportunity' expresses the amount of time that local consultants have to put a subject on the agenda or advance a cause, in order to start a 'humanitarian transition' enabling them to supplant their counterparts from the Global North.

Methodology

The population that participated in this research was composed of 30 Cameroonian consultants with varied professional backgrounds who had carried out at least one evaluation of a humanitarian project either in the context of COVID-19 or prior to the pandemic. Two consultants were mobilised from the outset to help identify other consultants, using the non-probability snowball sampling method of scientific research. Between February and May 2022, 30 one-to-one telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews were held with these national consultants. Most of the data used for this research came from these interviews, which were cross-referenced with data from around thirty humanitarian project managers who were also interviewed.

Loosening procedures

Prior to the twin crises, consultants were often recruited from international humanitarian organisations' headquarters and were then deployed to Cameroon to directly assess projects. But the health and safety crisis and the impossibility for international stakeholders to travel seems to have transformed these procedures. The conditions of eligibility in calls for tenders for the evaluation of humanitarian projects seem to have been loosened. Negotiations by mutual agreement or through intermediaries, or even by direct recommendation has emerged. Even when calls for tenders were issued, informal arrangements could be made to find another local consultant. These are the kinds of changes that have been observed during the pandemic in terms of organisations' attitudes, needs, and approaches. These changes varied from organisation to organisation and helped to speed up the relaxation of cumbersome procedures.

In the past, calls for tenders were published on the organisations' websites, but in a crisis context, consultants were often directly contacted, simplifying the procedure, and making it more flexible for local stakeholders. This easing of procedures means that international humanitarian organisations based in Cameroon must now contact their head offices so that they can directly identify local consultants, whereas in the past these head offices used to issue international calls for tenders, putting all candidates in competition. As one Cameroonian consultant said: "In a normal context, local experts would never have found themselves on shortlists. Today, they are gaining considerable market share, which traditionally eluded them, often finding it difficult to be shortlisted."[8] International organisations have had to review their conditions to make it easier for local firms to compete. In the past, these calls for tender might require the head of mission to have experience of five similar assignments in three different countries and on two different continents.

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[8] Interview with a consultant from the Centre de Recherche d'Études Politiques et Stratégiques (CREPS) at the University of Yaoundé 2 on 12 March 2022 in Yaoundé.

This level of requirement used to systematically disqualify the local consultants, even when they could provide proof of five years' professional experience in their own country. The benchmark also appeared to be highly discriminatory against professionals from the Global South. One of the strategies used by local firms to get round this was to line up heads of missions from other organisations with proven CVs.

Greater flexibility in procedures contributes to the reduction of North-South inequalities and the promotion of local autonomy. Cameroon does not seem to be the only country to have adopted this autonomous, sovereigntist humanitarian approach. Other countries in the Global South have long been calling for a form of 'humanitarian sovereignty' to empower themselves and 'free their systems' from dependence on foreign aid. While international humanitarian aid has until now perpetuated asymmetries of power, a transition towards humanitarian sovereignty would help to reduce inequalities between stakeholders. In a recent study based in the Republic of Vanuatu, the authors (Savard, Audet and Leroux, 2020) show how the archipelago relied on its own human resources after expatriates left in the aftermath of Cyclone Harold in April 2020 and the onset of COVID-19: "Having repatriated the majority of their staff to countries in the Global North, many international NGOs were forced to localise their aid to cope with the restrictions on mobility imposed by the pandemic". This research shows how, following the damage caused by Harold and the closure of borders, emergency relief was deployed without foreign aid, mainly through local associations, in a context where humanitarian interventions were still largely led by foreign international agencies. This example of the importance of local expertise in crisis situations can no doubt be transferred to Cameroon. The loosening of procedures has certainly helped to give local consultants a 'more important' role, but it has also enabled the emergence of new subcontracting practices between stakeholders in the North and South, and given rise to new power dynamics within local NGO and consultancies.

While international humanitarian aid has until now perpetuated asymmetries of power, a transition towards humanitarian sovereignty would help to reduce inequalities between stakeholders.

Reproducing the logic of domination through subcontracting

Following the example of Western consultants, subcontracting refers here to an operation in which the ordering party entrusts consultants with the responsibility of carrying out evaluation missions for projects that

they no longer have the capacity to execute. Since 2013, with the outbreak of the security crises, and continuing through to the health crisis of 2020, the positioning of local Cameroonian expertise has certainly progressed, but it remains under the regime of subcontracting systems, as these new markets were opened to nationals on the recommendation of Western experts, who still control the system from afar.

Nevertheless, as the dual crises continued, there was an explosion of expressions of interest from local experts. Three cases illustrate this situation. The first involves subcontracting between experts from the French firm F3E and those from the Cameroonian firm Multipolaire. Before the health crisis, the F3E network was already in the habit of carrying out study missions in Chad, the Central African Republic and Cameroon. Their studies, which required a specialised expertise, were mainly carried out by two consultants from the University of Bordeaux Montaigne[9] and the University of Perpignan[10]. These were projects led by the NGOs Noé and AfrONet under the Facility for Sectoral Innovation for NGOs (FISONG) funded by the French Development Agency (AFD). However, in 2022, because of travel restrictions, the French consultancy F3E[11] delegated the conduct of their expert missions to the Cameroonian consultancy Multipolaire, as part of a project implemented by the French NGO Noé et Man & Nature[12] in Cameroon. Yet in this project, the leadership remained with the overseas consultants.

The second case illustrates a subcontracting practice between a Cameroonian consultant teaching at the University of Maroua in the Far North Region of Cameroon and a British consultancy firm, Jigsaw Consult[13], which was selected to carry out the final evaluation of two education programs managed by Plan International Ireland between 2017 and 2021. The aim of the first program, entitled `Education, Quality, Inclusive, Participative (EQuIP) program', was to guarantee the right to education for all children in Burkina Faso, Guinea-Conakry, Guinea-Bissau and Mali. The second, the Humanitarian Programme Plan (HPP), was designed to meet the needs of children affected by conflict and protracted crises in the region of the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon) and the Central African Republic. Both programs represented a significant, long-term investment funded by Irish Aid and Plan International Ireland. Due to the health crisis and the restrictions on international mobility, the Jigsaw Consult

[9] Elisabeth Hofmann, development socio-economist, lecturer and researcher at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne.
[10] Karine Laroche, an agricultural engineer, brings her expertise to gender and agriculture, and in gender-sensitive studies of agricultural value chains and feasibility.
[11] The F3E network brings together a number of major players in the field of international cooperation and solidarity in France.
[12] Noé is a French non-profit association for the protection of nature, founded in 2001 by Arnaud Greth. The Noé association merged with the Man and Nature association, whose projects now form the Filières pro-biodiversité mission, with projects in Ghana, Chad and Cameroon. See https://noe.org/histoire-noe.
[13] Jigsaw Consult Ltd is a firm registered in England and Wales.

team was no longer able to travel and recruited a local consultant[14] in April 2021. Jigsaw was limited to providing remote supervision of the project, but, as stated in this paragraph from the final report of the evaluation it was not a deliberate choice:

> A mixed approach was applied, with remote in-country data collection. This two-tiered approach involved four "targeted countries" (Burkina Faso and Guinea Bissau for EQuIP; Cameroon and Niger for HPP), in which research consultants residing in the four target countries carried out face-to-face data collection, while remote data collection was carried out by the Jigsaw Consult team from the UK, due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions (Jigsaw Consult, 2021: pp 7-8).

In a crisis context, 'localising' evaluation activities are used as a last resort.

This shows us that, in a crisis context, 'localising' evaluation activities are used as a last resort. As Marie-Claude Savard, François Audet and Marie-Pierre Leroux (2020) explain, it demonstrates the lack of willingness from international stakeholders to relinquish control of the interventions to local stakeholders. While local consultants expected greater autonomy, their colleagues in the Global North reinforced the remote control of these evaluations.

Finally, the third case shows a subcontracting system in the context of the 'Third Party' evaluations carried out by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). UNICEF usually organises supervision missions for the funding it has granted to different NGOs. Since 2021 and because of restrictions related to COVID-19, the UN has subcontracted some of these evaluations to the Cameroon Association for the Development of Evaluation (CaDEA). These partnerships, which used to be for UN experts only, are now being extended to local experts, as this consultant explains:

> "Local expertise is in no way inferior to Global North expertise, which only has the advantage of being better supervised. The intrinsic expertise isn't the problem, it's the working conditions and the critical mass that make the difference. In the Global North, it's easy to identify two or three colleagues to work with. Here, it's more difficult because we have so little expertise. When I'm looking for experts to carry out the economic analysis of a project, I can assure you that I don't find them easily, because the handful

that do exist are already busy working for the United Nations, the government or international NGOs"[15].

Cooperation between international organisations and those in the Global South overcomes a recognised obstacle: access to the field. But it also means that international standards can be adapted to benefit the local stakeholders involved.

Cooperation between international organisations and those in the Global South overcomes a recognised obstacle: access to the field. But it also means that international standards can be adapted to benefit the local stakeholders involved. The networking of Multipolaire and Arc Audit & Consulting (AAC) within the RFE and the Russell Bedford International Network shows us a good example of this and also helps to build the local workforce. AAC, for example, has recently aligned itself with the American International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) for financial audits, with the intention of entering a fruitful collaboration with the 'big four', as can be seen from the following comment:

> Some NGOs arrive in Cameroon with foreign firms already recommended by their head office. They will be told to work with 'big four' international firms such as KPMG, Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), Ernst & Young or Deloitte. Some of these firms have offices in Cameroon, a pivotal country in Central Africa, where expatriates and Cameroonians work together. That is why we at AAC had to be part of these networks, so that we had a certain standard, a view, so that we could present our statements in the same formats as the London and Paris firms.[16]

Because of the security and health situation, which has led to the immobilisation of international teams, Cameroonian experts are increasingly developing networks with their counterparts in the Global North. This reinforcement of long-distance collaboration has largely promoted the subcontracting approach, which is certainly mutually beneficial between stakeholders in the North and South, but which does not support and encourage real autonomy for local stakeholders. To bypass this system of power relations, several Cameroonian companies, research centres and individual consultants have positioned themselves within international networks based on cost-benefit equations with the intention of redefining North-South asymmetries.

Attempts to redefine North-South asymmetries

Despite the interdependencies that seem to remain, local consultants want to take further advantage of the 'window of opportunity' that has opened up. Unfortunately, this window appears to be very small. Indeed, the 'windows of opportunity' opened with the security and health crises, are limited in time, given their context and contingency. This period is equivalent to the three "streams" described by Kingdon: facilitating the meeting of a public problem (problem stream), a solution to the problem (policy stream) and a favourable political context in which to define an agenda and the rules of the game (political stream). The first "stream" corresponds to the period during which the security and health crises became urgent concerns (problem stream). During that specific time, "people are convinced that something can be done to improve the situation" (John Kingdon, 1984). The second "stream" comes into play when solutions are being found to the problems (policy stream). The final "stream" represents the way in which the authority manages and addresses the problem through rules and a plan (political stream).

Pauline Ravinet (2019) also explains that when these three streams come together, 'windows of opportunity' open. But they close just as quickly when the events that caused them to open are no longer relevant. Here, COVID-19 as an international public health problem and the different security crises have created a 'window of opportunity' in Africa, which has been seized upon by national consultants. The latter are increasingly questioning humanitarian aid, perceiving it as a Western expression of international solidarity. The so-called 'aid recipient countries' are showing a growing desire for more autonomy in the management of the activities that affect their populations. It seems like they are no longer willing to depend on international aid that they consider far removed from the concept of partnership, too asymmetrical and not in the interests of development and poverty reduction.

This may well be the case in Cameroon, where the country is now seeking to establish itself as a key player in humanitarian operations. This illustrates the state's desire for more autonomy in controlling the actions that will affect its population, as seen in the Anglophone crisis, with the CFAF 12.7 billion Emergency Humanitarian Assistance Plan (EHAP) for the populations of the North-West and South-West regions (Republique de Cameroon, 2018). This 'state humanitarianism' is also illustrated in the positioning and proliferation of public research centres which supply many consultants from state universities to organisations to evaluate humanitarian projects—another indication of the desire of local stakeholders to take ownership of the whole expertise process. The rise of academic expertise in the evaluation of humanitarian projects is getting more and more important. This academic awakening, combined with a strong desire for empowerment, seems to herald a rebalancing of asymmetrical relations between the North and the South. The involvement of the Centre d'Études de Recherche en Paix Sécurité et Intégration (CERPSI) housed at the University of Maroua, and the positioning of the Centre de Recherche d'Études Politiques et Stratégiques (CREPS) and the Bureau des Études Stratégiques (BESTRAT)[17] at the University of Yaoundé 2, illustrate this desire for more autonomy. These think-tanks are increasingly providing strategic and operational expertise to international organisations. Their investment in Cameroon's humanitarian sector could perhaps serve as a wake-up call for the development of strategic autonomy.

However, the Cameroonian state is not the only entity battling for autonomy in managing humanitarian aid. The involvement of the private sector can also be seen in certain consultancies, such as the Bureau d'Études Vision Positive du Développement (VIPOD) and Nouvelle Dynamique pour le Développement (N2D Sarl)[18]. Some national consultants have even started to set up their own structures to implement humanitarian projects, such as the Centre d'Appui au Développement Local Participatif Intégré (CADEPI)[19], based in Mora in the Far North of Cameroon, and the Centre pour la Promotion et la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (CPDDH)[20], based in the same area. We do not want to fall into the trap of Afrocentrism here, but our aim is to show how national consultancies are positioning themselves as key players in the evaluation of humanitarian projects. Whether it is public or private, the positioning of national stakeholders within project evaluation networks could toll the bell for the dominance of international stakeholders. In both cases, a humanitarian transition is taking place, a transition that is questioning the asymmetrical "centre-periphery" dependency (Samir, 1973; Moyo, 2009; Etounga Manguelle, 1985).

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[17] BESTRAT, based at the University of Yaoundé 1, has been working with the American firm Social Impact Inc since 2021 on the evaluation of the "OIT northern Cameroon initiative cluster evaluation" project. They are also working with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung on a number of crisis-related activities in Cameroon.

[18] These consultancies have been involved with the final evaluation of projects including the "Intervention for the education of children and young people affected by the humanitarian crisis in the far north of Cameroon" commissioned by Plan International, with funding from ECHO (European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid), in 2018, for an approximate value of services of 3,500,000 FCFA excluding VAT, or 5,535.72 euros. (see https://n2d-cameroun.com/document/Evaluation/20.N%C2%B08046PICMRACAMCDFY19.pdf). More information on the many projects evaluated with involvement from the Cameroon private sector can be found on the N2D website https://n2d-cameroun.com/activite_2.html

[19] CADEPI, coordinated by a lecturer at the University of Maroua, carries out several evaluations with humanitarian NGOs and United Nations agencies.

[20] Coordinated by an academic and human rights consultant, the CPDDH had already collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on the evaluation of the project entitled "Regional Stabilisation Facility for the Lake Chad Basin", in February 2021, https://procurement-notices.undp.org/view_file.cfm?doc_id=240745, consulted on 5 April 2022. The CPDDH is currently implementing a civil protection project in partnership with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the far north of Cameroon.

Security and health crises offer an opportunity to rethink the way humanitarian projects are evaluated, which for a long time was the preserve of Western consultants. These dynamics call for a real change in humanitarian action, beyond this unexpected transition period, and should reflect the shift from a paradigm of North-South solidarity, Western-centric in resources and practices, to a new multipolar model, more complex and based on concepts of partnership. As a possible response to the problems facing international humanitarian aid and the need to reform the sector, a 'local' and decentralised response to humanitarian needs has appeared on the political agenda. The Secretary-General's report from the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the resulting Grand Bargain called for responses that were "as local as possible, as international as necessary". The health and security crises in Cameroon seem to have provided an opportunity to rebalance the relations between Global South and North stakeholders in the assessment of humanitarian projects.

The dynamics [outlined in this paper] call for a real change in humanitarian action ... and should reflect the shift from a paradigm of North-South solidarity, Western-centric in resources and practices, to a new multipolar model, more complex and based on concepts of partnership.

Conclusion

While the collaborative approach adopted by organisations in the Global North and South has undoubtedly helped to redefine the balance of power, the weaknesses of such collaboration are clearly evident. 'Localisation' seems to be seen as a solution of last resort, because "despite the commitment of the Grand Bargain, which promotes the autonomy, funding and knowledge of organisations in the South, we are struggling to establish localisation as a humanitarian vision. It only happens when expatriates can no longer go to the field" (Savard, Audet and Leroux, 2020, p78). Savard et al further explain that localisation "is not a last resort, but a first resort". It is therefore regrettable that local consultants have been recruited on an 'intuitu personæ' basis rather than through institutional arrangements between humanitarian organisations and university-based research centres, for example. It is true that most consultants come from these research centres. However, in the field they often work on an individual basis. Without the ratification of agreements between structures, it is difficult to see how the legitimacy of local academic expertise can be strengthened. Private consultancies are also restricted in their impact, as they are usually run by individuals, and when this person stops working, their expertise is lost.

The crises have undoubtedly brought about changes and overturned certain practices. They have created a certain dynamism and reinforced the idea of the vulnerability of actors in the countries of the Global North, deconstructing the angelism of their dominance. But we must not lose sight of the fact that these changes are still far from having a longer-term impact. They must continue beyond the pandemic and security contingencies. The current reopening of borders is ample evidence that COVID-19 was nothing more than a very short-lived 'window of opportunity', leaving us very sceptical about the real capacity to bring about a genuine humanitarian transition. It seems that international experts will not make way for local stakeholders brandishing the scarecrow of COVID-19. Indeed, it is unfortunate that this research could not give the floor to Global North experts to provide a fuller analysis, which seems to be its main limitation, though other studies may be able to remedy this and there is no doubt that further longitudinal research will make it possible to assess the sustainability of this dynamic. However, the main advantage of Kingdon's model is that it provides an opportunity for the players involved to make substantial and structural changes. For that to continue, the role of synergies between African governments, their civil societies and the private sector must be questioned—especially if a genuine humanitarian transition is to take shape.

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Rethinking aid system narratives: The case for collaborative leadership

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Image: An IDP camp in Somalia. © Fredrik Lerneryd / Save The Children

Abstract

Disasters—whether so called 'natural' disasters or conflict related crises—are a growing challenge. Their impacts have a profound impact on development outcomes since disasters at best mitigate against development gains, and more commonly lead to development losses, particularly for people living in poverty. Yet while disasters are often treated as exceptional events, they in fact highlight failures in our development pathways—and expose the humanitarian and development system as unfit to respond adequately to these challenges. This paper reflects on the ways of thinking and incentives that shape the behaviour that leads to the perpetuation of this siloed and reactionary system and argues that there is a need to re-frame disasters as contextual factors rather than exceptional events within the development framework. Additionally, there is a need to support leaders who collaborate, instead of working to achieve individual success for their department or institution, and to strengthen accountability to make the development and humanitarian system more effective in supporting disaster affected and at-risk communities.

Leadership relevance

Many practitioners and policy makers complain about how the humanitarian and development systems are siloed and difficult to change. Too many leaders find themselves perpetuating the system even while they wish to change it. Yet if leaders can identify the incentives they are creating for others, and understand what behaviours they are adopting because of the incentives upon them, then there is the opportunity for them to make different choices. Sustainable change of the sector will require cooperation and collaboration across the boundaries of our siloed system, and a greater willingness to share success as measured by the perspective of the affected or at-risk communities rather than accumulating it for the individual or individual organisation.

This paper is based on a 2024 study, *Failing those most at risk* by Nigel Timmins, which was commissioned by Oxfam and is reproduced in part with their permission.

The system we have is not effective enough

The global humanitarian system that has evolved since World War II is failing to adequately meet the needs of communities affected by disasters. This matters today, but will matter even more so in the near future, given the expected rise in disaster impacts caused by climate change and the increasingly protracted nature of conflict related emergencies. The current system is reactive and siloed, and designed to meet the needs of those administering funds more than the affected communities. The resources available are not keeping up with demand, and there is weak accountability to those for whom the services are meant to work.

The focus of humanitarian action is on the consequences of disasters, yet multiple studies report that investing in resilience, disaster risk reduction and anticipatory action is much more cost-effective than ex-post response options (Hallegatte et al, 2019). Why are ways to prevent, mitigate, prepare for and respond to disasters and humanitarian crises not better planned for and resourced when the benefits of pre-emptive action are clear? Why is development not more risk-informed when hazards are contextual realities?

> *Why are ways to prevent, mitigate, prepare for and respond to disasters and humanitarian crises not better planned for and resourced when the benefits of pre-emptive action are clear?*

This paper is based on findings from a longer study commissioned by Oxfam Australia into the disparate crisis financing systems and processes, and the need for dialogue to bring greater coherence, efficiency, and ultimately impact across such systems in support of people affected by disasters and conflict (see Timmins, 2024). This paper analyses how the humanitarian system perpetuates both itself and its weaknesses. It focuses on the impacts of individual and systemic ways of thinking, speaking, acting and power, and suggests that reframing incentives and redefining behaviours will lead towards a more effective and equitable system. The paper looks at how:

a) Reductionist problem solving approaches and path dependency have led to the establishment of discrete areas of study and work which then develop and accrue their own language, reinforcing the boundaries between the different areas of work.

b) Institutions—or teams or departments within institutions—and funding mechanisms evolve to support these different areas of work.

c) Leaders are incentivised to be successful within institutional and financial terms and so perpetuate the narratives and ways of working that keep the system as it is—even while espousing the need for change.

d) The normal 'brakes' on any system of accountability are oddly skewed in the aid sector because it is generally not the recipient of the services who is paying for them.

To change these dynamics, it is necessary to redefine our understanding of disasters—recognising they are part of the development paradigm—and agree on development and humanitarian policies that are driven by the holistic understanding that local communities can provide of the connections between development and risk. This means going beyond the scope of any one institution or funding instrument, and humanitarian leaders will need to collaborate to build complementary responses—sharing success rather than seeking it for their institution alone. It will also require a change in political incentives, towards a system that rewards collaboration, develops common outcomes and offers blended funding opportunities. It is unlikely to be one individual 'superhero' who effects change, but rather a collection of individuals who 'pass the baton' between them. These people need to be diverse in perspective and thought, and be able to demonstrate and empathise with different experiences and viewpoints.

Disasters are normal

Across the world, disasters are seen in policy terms as exceptional, rather than a normal contextual reality. National governments have national development plans, many supported by bodies such as the World Bank, based on economic growth models in which strategies and models of analysis treat disasters as exceptional, unplanned, chance events rather than part of the context (See the Porter Diamond Model, for example).

> *When known and likely hazards turn into disasters, it reflects failures in development planning to consider contextual risk. Drought in the Horn of Africa is not a surprise. If one builds housing on a flood plain the clue is in the name...*

In practice, when known and likely hazards turn into disasters, it reflects failures in development planning to consider contextual risk. Drought in the Horn of Africa is not a surprise. If one builds housing on a flood plain the clue is in the name... And yet, development targets are frequently set without real consideration of disaster risk, leading either to maldevelopment by creating greater vulnerability or to under-investment if development practitioners view their likelihood of success as low.

Development Initiatives noted in their 2023 report that 75% (306.9 million) of all people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022 lived in countries facing at least two dimensions of conflict, climate and socioeconomic fragility. More than half (54%, or 220.8 million) of all people in need were living in countries facing a combination of all three vulnerabilities (Development Initiatives, 2023). Further, the report notes that "in the most recent data, from 2020 to 2021, development assistance from Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members to those contexts decreased from 54% of total Official Development Assistance (ODA) received by those countries to 48%. ODA supporting peace objectives reached a five-year low of 11% in 2021, down from 13% in 2019" (Ibid. p91), showing how funding has shifted from development to humanitarian objectives in those contexts.

As climate change predictions demonstrate more and more areas becoming vulnerable to extreme events, alongside increasingly protracted situations of fragility and conflict, our development pathways need to include an understanding of those risks. To not do so is to refuse to recognise reality and to condemn more people to suffering that could be avoided and is more costly. This requires framing the risks within a complex system analysis rather than taking a 'reductionist' approach.

Siloing is not the solution

A reductionist approach tackles problems by breaking them down into smaller components, resolving the individual component, and then building back up to the whole, based on the premise that the individual components will interact in predictable and proportionate ways. Much of the current aid architecture remains based on this logic (even if systems-based approaches have gained popularity in recent years). When a major issue is identified, an institution or a funding instrument, or possibly both, is created to address the identified problem. For example, there are UN agencies to address hunger (WFP), children's rights (UNICEF), gender equality and the empowerment of women (UNWOMEN), disaster risk reduction (UNDRR) and so on. Humanitarian funds are set aside for emergency response separately from development funds, even though it is understood that emergencies are borne of underlying issues that development funds should be addressing (see Blaikie et al, 1994).

From the point of view of policymakers, such institutional and funding instrument creation is necessary, as they need to make choices about resource allocation across different priorities, have fit-for-purpose processes, clarity of governance and the ability to measure progress. In some cases, funds or institutions have distinct legal protections. For example, in order for humanitarian funds to be used quickly and in line with humanitarian principles, independent of politics and according to need, humanitarian financing often has a separate legal foundation to protect that independence from broader development funding. However, these legal separations make joined-up work harder. Discussions around the humanitarian-development-peace nexus are seeking to conquer such a siloed approach, but the incentives to demonstrate specific impacts with specific funds make overcoming such silos difficult. As Andrew Natsios states, "those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable" (Natsios, 2010, p3).

Evolving niches and defining value

Once an agency is established, the question turns to defining the nature of success and clarifying organisational purpose, as each organisation seeks to establish its own niche and define its own value. This plays into the reductionist approach to problem solving, as it is easier to fundraise and campaign when you have clarity on what you are trying to achieve. Further, as contexts change, the targets for successful conclusion also move further away; great quests such as overcoming poverty have both absolute and relative elements, and thinking evolves over time. This was seen, for example, when the World Food Programme moved from the provision of food aid to the goal of ending hunger.

As new institutions mature, they seek to remain relevant, often by developing their own culture and language. As an interviewee to the Oxfam study put it, "Language is both a powerful tool as well as a tool of power" (Timmins, 2024). It can be used to convey concepts or ideas, such as 'resilience', that underlie policy choices and establish boundaries. New language is defined to capture issues in a new and fresh way, to reframe and propose solutions. To cynics this becomes jargon, 'buzz words', and the 'latest fashion'. But to the originator the creation of a new term lends leadership and authority. There is nothing wrong in this—it is how debate and knowledge is generated across all disciplines of study—and think tanks and international conferences are expected to generate new initiatives. A large conference with no new initiative is simply not doing its job. But in practice, these can turn into campaigns to win influence and resources, creating additional competition for the resources available. Because of this, new initiatives may meet resistance from practitioners still committed to existing approaches. The dynamic of who understands evolving terminologies can also exclude and create barriers to collaboration—many in the sector are already having to operate in their second or third language by using English rather than their mother tongue—and most new initiatives evolve in English.

This contributes to the competition that can beset organisations in the humanitarian and development sectors, and even internally between departments. How a fund is defined, and the language used to describe the purpose of the fund, has a direct bearing on people's access to that resource. As another interviewee put it, "Terminology itself is a fundraising mechanism" (Ibid.).

This further strengthens the reductionist rather than systemic approach to problem solving.

System perpetuation: Power and incentives for individual and organisational agents in the system

The agents in the aid and development systems are people, and every person has their own personal vision and career goals. Yet staff and policy makers working in international organisations also operate within a political and socio-technical context, their behaviour both influencing and influenced by the institutions, policy debates and financial instruments within which they work—creating an agent-structure co-evolutionary process.
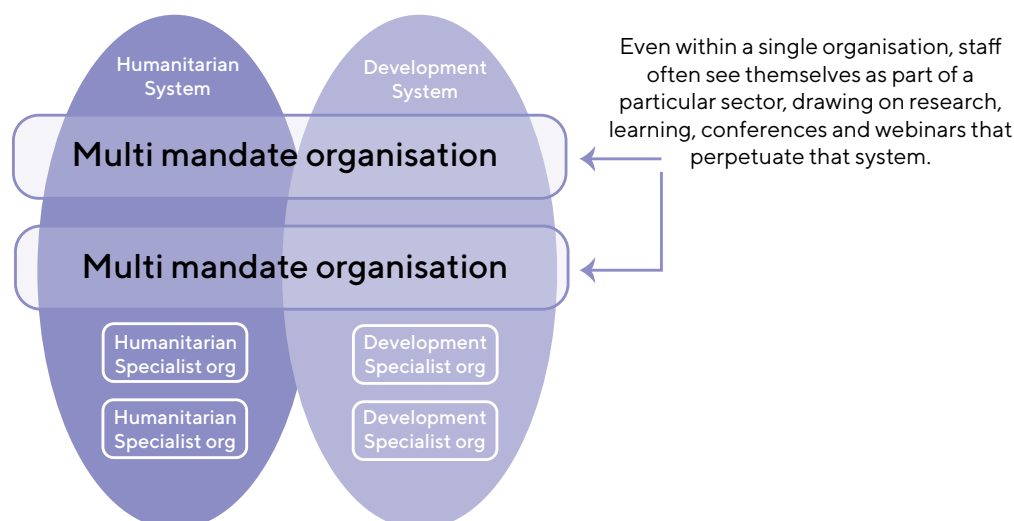
For example, an officer within a government donor agency with responsibility for funding and maintaining the partnership with a specific multilateral institution will navigate incentives, rewards and blockers with the donor to compete for allocations to their partner; they will also interact directly with staff of the agency they fund seeking to improve performance to help them make the necessary internal justifications to the donor as to why 'their' partner should have a funding uplift or preservation. The multilateral staff member will also be navigating the internal complexity of their organisation and likely coordinating with and attempting to satisfy multiple external donors. All the agents are both constrained by the system as well as pushing for change based on their ideas of what success would look like.

The authors' experience is that the legal frameworks, institutions and people within the development and humanitarian systems interpret the world differently, measure success differently and perpetuate their own system because they are incentivised so to do. The incentives between individual and institution mutually reinforce each other; most people, most of the time, respond according to the encouragement and discouragement of their line management, who in turn are shaped by a combination of performance benchmarks, repeated narratives or organisational culture that describes what success looks like. It may not only be a top-down incentive; most directors receive praise from their own teams if they are successful in winning funding for their department or agency and are seen in a poor or weak light if they fail and must impose cuts. Further, academic institutions, training courses, think tanks and research bodies exist and produce data and evidence that reinforce the need for addressing the various aspects of development and humanitarian system challenges from within their own framing.

To have the desired impact, most institutions are under pressure to grow their resource base. This pressure comes from multiple directions; the growing demands from the number and scale of disasters, with increased pressure on staff for the delivery of services and solutions demands more institutional capacity. Even if an organisation does not seek to grow itself but work through partners, there remains an expectation that it is able to program more resources to help those partners grow. When tackling a problem nearly every team feels it is under-resourced and needs more specialists or partners. When a specialist is appointed, they quickly advise that they cannot cover the whole breadth of an issue and a further specialist is needed. This pressure to grow is not cynical, it is professionals seeking to complete their responsibilities well. Most leaders, committed to the purpose of their role and wanting to support their team to achieve, seek more resources and greater influence. This incentivises leaders to show 'thought leadership' because fresh approaches to address thorny issues create visibility and may lead to increased influence and funding.

Figure 1: Perpetuating organisational silos

Humanitarian System

Development System

Multi mandate organisation

Multi mandate organisation

Humanitarian Specialist org

Development Specialist org

Humanitarian Specialist org

Development Specialist org

Even within a single organisation, staff often see themselves as part of a particular sector, drawing on research, learning, conferences and webinars that perpetuate that system.

System perpetuation: Power and incentives for governmental agents in the system

Similar dynamics of siloed thinking and of prioritising visible and immediate needs play out at local and national government levels too, and often lead to an under-investment in as-yet unrealised risks. National governments are responsible for the wellbeing of their citizens and have a range of institutional and budgetary arrangements for responding to disasters—though these institutions also struggle with whole-of-system working because of the pressures of power, competition and self-interest and perpetuation.

The experience of COVID-19 vaccination distribution is a case study in self-interest. There was a clear and present risk from different variations of the virus circulating if the spread of the virus was not quashed as quickly as possible. Even from a position of enlightened self-interest, let alone the moral obligation to support the most at-risk communities first, it might have been expected that high-income countries would support as rapid a transfer of vaccinations as possible. But that was not the case. Even though there were initiatives—such as the Astra Zeneca vaccine being provided at cost, and the work of the vaccine alliance, Gavi—high-income countries prioritised their own populations, providing second and third booster injections while many other countries had not even provided first vaccinations to their frontline health workers (Peoples Vaccine Alliance, 2020). The agents in the system (the policy makers) felt the pressure of self-interest from their populations more deeply than the logic of the whole-of-system approach. In such a complex system, any significant change is inherently difficult to achieve.

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The decentralisation of responsibility to local government can be a tool for enabling greater local participation where the risks are better understood and more keenly felt, but local authorities are frequently under-resourced and constrained by low capacity (Scott & Tarazona, 2011). The allocation of resources can be a particular tension in some federal systems when the central government and state level government are led by opposing political parties and both want to have visible success to display to their constituencies. Evidence from Mozambique, South Africa and Colombia shows that un-earmarked funds for disaster risk reduction are frequently diverted to other areas that have a higher political profile, or where there are apparently more pressing needs (Ibid.).

The Philippines has some of the strongest disaster management legislation, and there is a legal requirement for the central government to allocate financial resources to different layers of government in anticipation of disasters. Local government units are mandated to allocate 5% of their budget to disaster risk reduction, risk assessments, contingency planning and other preparedness activities. This is overseen by a committee structure of government and civil society representatives, but even here there is still a low use of this financing and a greater emphasis on ex-post expenditure (Timmins, 2024).

In addition to the challenges of the vertical relationship between national and local governments, there are challenges in relating horizontally across government when different ministries or departments hold different mandates. In Kenya, the State Department for Development of the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands houses the National Drought Management Authority, but flooding comes under the Ministry of State for Special Programmes. The National Disasters Operations Centre, which coordinates response to acute events, sits within the national police service. Given challenges with government accountability, and in an attempt to attract private sector finance, in some cases parastatal bodies have also been established—such as the Water Sector Trust Fund. A social safety net system, the Hunger Safety Net Programme, is run by the National Drought Management Authority under the Ministry of Devolution and Planning to provide additional cash disbursements to households facing food shortages. But when a crisis does hit there can still be a need to divert resources from other budget lines. Unpublished Oxfam analysis shows that in 2019–2020, some KSh 3.9 billion (c USD $25 million) was diverted from other state departments to finance emergencies. This was in addition to the planned recurrent expenditure of KSh 1.17 billion (c. USD $7.6 million). This is a nearly threefold unbudgeted increase, which clearly demonstrates inadequate regular funding. One can therefore appreciate the sheer complexity of coordinating effective response and disaster management across so many institutions and funding instruments.

National governments have similar institutional arrangements based on disaster reduction approaches—ministries for agriculture, business, health, etc—though these institutions also struggle with whole-of-system working because of competition and power differentials between ministries. Most countries have a national disaster management agency or similar institution that seeks to coordinate across government from the local to the national level, and across line ministries. However, these agencies are frequently poorly funded and struggle to have the more dominant line ministries take disaster risk seriously.

Politicians are incentivised by what is popular among their constituents. This is not a cynical position—it is how the system should work—to create accountability by

making policy makers serve the people who elected them. Even in environments with no formal democracy, leaders seek the support of important constituencies to maintain their mandate. But election cycles are relatively short, mitigating against long-term planning and incentivising short-term outcomes (Malakar, 2012). Again, the system tends towards reductionist approaches as narrow, short-term policy objectives are set, often without adequate consideration of the wider system. To the extent that disasters are considered, policy makers are mostly rewarded in the public domain for effective and compassionate responses, much less so for investments in risk reduction or resilience. Even unelected officials who may have a longer-term perspective are required to serve the interests of elected ministers who commonly wish to leave a personal legacy. This can make their job of maintaining long-term policies difficult, and if there is a culture of 'pleasing the minister' then they may be coy in warning of any negative implications of policy changes. This is true of donor governments as much as national governments.

A lack of focus on disaster risk reduction tends to be reinforced by media and charity fundraising mechanisms that focus on the human tragedies rather than the predictability and benefits of investment for resilience. Policy makers can also fear criticism in the public domain if they are perceived as making the wrong investments (Centre for Global Disaster Protection et al, 2018) and even shy from publicising disaster risks at all for fear of investor flight, which mirrors development donors and investors not picking high risk areas and perpetuating vulnerability.

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In summary, the international humanitarian and development sector has evolved in a way that reflects a reductionist approach to problem solving, with disasters seen as a discrete sector when in fact they are part of our contextual reality, affecting all policy areas. Path dependency, together with power and funding structures, has led to incentivised behaviours, and agency-structure co-creation has forged a complex system that is siloed and resistant to change.
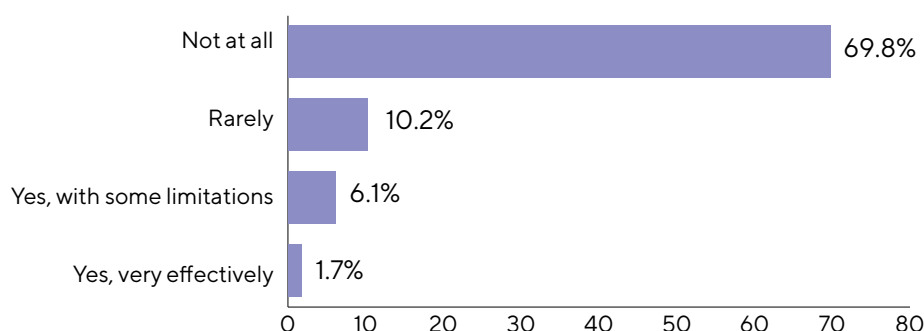
A lack of accountability

Issues of political economy are not unique to the humanitarian sector. But what is perhaps different is that the recipients of the services—the affected and at-risk communities—are often not seen as the primary clients, rather, those who pay for the services are. Normal service transactions see a client commission a service or buy a product and then pay for it. If they are not happy, they have control over the resources to exert their influence. But in the humanitarian sector this incentive structure is missing. Research by over 200 civil society organisations from the Global Network for Disaster Reduction of over 100,000 people in 625 communities in more than 40 countries concluded that, "people most at risk of being hit by a disaster aren't involved in decisions about how to reduce their own risk" (Global Network for Disaster Reduction, 2019). Only 16% of people at risk feel included in assessing threats, preparing policies and plans, and taking action to reduce threats, and only 31% said they are included in monitoring the effectiveness of disaster risk reduction interventions; 36% of people with disabilities and 30% of women said they are not consulted in the preparation of policies, plans and actions. In Pakistan, 53% of the local government officials surveyed admitted that they never involved communities in any consultations, while 82% of people with disabilities and 97% of women said they had never been included in risk governance processes. These figures vary from country to country. On a more positive note, in the Philippines, only 3% of local government officials said they do not consult communities when preparing policies, plans and actions.

Similarly, in ex-post humanitarian assistance, accountability to affected communities remains low. This is despite commitments going back to the adoption of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster relief over 25 years ago, as well as in the Core Humanitarian Standard and the Grand Bargain. Ground Truth Solutions has been tracking the experience of affected communities since 2012 and has consistently found, in multiple humanitarian environments, that the aid provided does not meet the priority needs as judged by them (Van Pragg & Sattler, 2022). A separate report found that displaced communities most at risk, especially women, are not adequately being involved in decisions that affect them (Global Network for Disaster Reduction, 2022). Two thirds of respondents to this survey felt that they are "not at all" consulted in the design of policies, plans and activities to reduce disaster risk, not given access to financial resources to reduce risks they face, nor have access to timely and usable information to help them reduce risks. Lack of information (18%), lack of awareness (15%) and extreme poverty (14%) were listed as key factors preventing inclusion in the policy environment.

Policy solutions and programs are not addressing the key concerns of the people in whose name they have been implemented. *Views from the Frontline* data (Global Network for Disaster Reduction, 2019) shows that local governments can have very different ideas from community members in terms of what is needed, often focusing on public assets, whereas households are more directly concerned about private productive

Figure 2: Responses to the question — "Are displaced persons sufficiently consulted in the design of policies, plans and activities to reduce disasters?"

Response	Percentage
Not at all	69.8%
Rarely	10.2%
Yes, with some limitations	6.1%
Yes, very effectively	1.7%

Source: Making Displacement Safer, 2022, GNDR.

assets to meet their needs. Many funding bodies, such as international funding institutions, deal almost exclusively with national governments, and so their perspectives are heavily influenced by views not reflective of those central to the endeavour.

Why, despite the multitude of evaluations and research, does it remain the case that the accountability of development and humanitarian actors to at-risk and in-need populations remains so weak?

Instead of being framed by those who are most affected, the basic political economy and incentive structures are articulated by the funding provider, for whom a reductionist approach is most useful. Until donors and funding agencies require systematic accountability data from project participants then there is limited motivation to change.

Recommendations

Given this analysis, what can be changed to build a more effective, efficient system that addresses the needs of those communities most impacted by crises?

Redefine our understanding of disasters
We need to redefine how we perceive disasters in national and global development. Specifically:

- **Hazards and vulnerabilities exist in every development paradigm:** high-, middle- and low-income countries and fragile states. These need to be considered in the mainstream of development strategies and planning as they impact all policy areas from health to educational outcomes and economic performance.

- The emphasis of any disaster response system, whether national to local, or international to national, needs to be on **supporting those impacted by the crisis to be the primary agents of their recovery.** Externally imposed solutions are rarely sustainable and fail to adequately build capacity to manage future crises.

- Making this conceptual shift would require development and humanitarian policies to be driven by the holistic understanding that local communities can provide. This would go beyond the scope of any one institution or funding instrument and **staff would actively collaborate with others to build complementary responses that recognise the holistic nature** of the problem and the reality of institutional and funding instrument boundaries. Post-crisis forensic/causal analysis should be systemised to feed critical insights upstream into development processes. Disasters are symptoms of failed development, so they can be used for learning. This will require **greater inter-sector dialogue and understanding.**

Change the political incentives
There needs to be a shift in political incentives. If there is greater citizen outrage directed towards predictable disasters being allowed to rob people of their lives and livelihoods, it would encourage movement from ex-post investment to ex-ante investment. Some options to address this include:

- **Educate media houses on the predictability of 'natural' disasters** and encourage them to report in a way that reflects the failure to plan and invest, rather than celebrating responses.

- **Support a better understanding of the links between environment, development, governance and crises within educational systems.** Engage in civic education and public awareness, working with trusted interlocutors.

- International and national NGOs' **fundraising campaigns should avoid perpetuating an 'exceptionalist' and charity-based approach to crises.** Rather, the opportunity should be used to create supporter awareness and greater space for funds raised during emergency appeals to be used for future risk reduction and preparedness.

- Donors (including philanthropists, trusts and NGOs in grants making), boards and philanthropists need to be more robust in requiring grantees to **report on**

their accountability to project participants.

- Greater investment is needed in third party organisations to **undertake independent accountability exercises**, to meet with communities and understand their perspectives, to have a more holistic view of the situation and the impact of interventions.

- Greater investment is needed in agencies and local government to **educate communities on their rights and legal protections**, including relevant disaster management legislation or international humanitarian law, as appropriate, to equip them with the ability to demand their rights.

Establish common outcomes to achieve the sustainable development goals

To avoid siloed initiatives driven by funding instruments over context analysis, greater emphasis should be placed on developing common outcomes, incentivised by funding that rewards collaboration with 'joint and several responsibility' for the actors involved.

This could be done by setting targets for future disaster impact reduction within the development goals. If a drought leads to 30% of people being food insecure, then set an objective that in the next drought 15% of people will be food insecure. Working towards this outcome will require a comprehensive analysis of the systemic factors leading to food insecurity during droughts. Only then should contextually appropriate solutions be co-developed with local actors and government.

Such common outcomes would require a more sophisticated approach to blending funding opportunities, as vulnerability is multifaceted and unlikely to be due to one unique issue, such as climate change. To use a medical metaphor, it would be like when a patient requiring surgery is supported by a multi-disciplinary team from the initial assessment and diagnosis through to the surgery, and then on to post-operative care at home.

Support leaders who collaborate

The only resource that controls all other resources is people. People are the free agents within the system that both shape it, are shaped by it, can change, and resist change. Research by the Development Leadership Programme of Birmingham University and La Trobe University over 15 years (Developmental Leadership Program, 2018) concluded that three ingredients are needed to effect change in complex systems:

1. Motivated and strategic leaders with the incentives, values, interests and opportunity to push for change.

2. Leaders able to overcome barriers to cooperation and form coalitions with sufficient power, legitimacy and influence.

3. The ability of leaders and their coalitions to win the battle of ideas.

The capacity of individual agents to navigate the complexity of the system makes a fundamental difference, and institutions can invest in people who demonstrate these skills, rewarding collaboration across internal and external organisational boundaries. To get to collaboration, the first step is to move from conflict or competition to cooperation. To incentivise this, donors, governments and organisations need to **establish performance indicators that reward collective achievement over individual success.**

Further recent research by the Australian National University School of Cybernetics (2022), suggests that for leaders to successfully deal with the complexity of 21st century challenges, they need to focus on:

- The relationships between people, organisations, and systems—to better understand which connections need nurturing, promoting, and renewing.

- The value of boundary spanning, of working across organisations and sectors to find commonalities, opportunities, and additional connections to create "systems of interests".

- That "leadership is a condition of an organisation not an individual" (Pangaro, 2002).

Importantly, these notions of collaborative leadership extend beyond existing humanitarian organisations to include communities affected by crises. When considering the value of boundary spanning, this is not limited to working across other humanitarian organisations but to working with communities and groups of community members from areas affected by crises. To navigate the complexity of the current humanitarian system and to contribute to transforming it according to the insights shared in this paper, organisations should incentivise and invest in support to develop collaborative leadership.

Conclusion

The global development and humanitarian systems are failing too many people. They achieve a great deal, which should be celebrated, but the threat of climate change and inequality make addressing the shortcomings an imperative for everyone. According to the saying attributed to Einstein, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results". Doing things differently will require some fundamental changes in our attitude to disasters, including how we analyse and problem solve, and how we choose to incentivise the agents in our system—but it is the only way forward.

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Coloniality and the inadequacy of localisation

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Image: A damaged toy doll found among rubble in Gaza, October 25, 2023. © Bissan Owda/ Save the Children

Abstract

This article uses coloniality as an analytical framework to critique the concept of localisation. It argues that localisation is inadequate to respond to the asymmetrical power dynamic that it seeks to dislodge. Fundamentally, this is because localisation does not account for coloniality, which is the underlying logic of colonialism embedded within the humanitarian sector. Positionality and funding are two factors that enable organisations in the 'Global North' to remain powerful even through localisation, but this article goes further to interrogate how epistemic and methodological coloniality reinforces and maintains subordination of organisations in the 'Global South.' Ironically, localisation seeks to recognise knowledge and experience from the 'local', but largely, this knowledge and experience must be produced through the methods and systems of the 'Global North'. This is self-defeating because institutions in the 'Global North' gatekeep methods and practices and perpetuate a capacity gap that prevents effective localisation.

Leadership relevance

This paper problematises the conceptualisation of localisation, an influential theory within the humanitarian sector. It does so by arguing that the power-hierarchy that localisation seeks to dislocate cannot shift until coloniality, the underlying logic of colonialism, is acknowledged and dealt with. The paper challenges the structural and foundational basis upon which humanitarian knowledge production and ways of being are founded and exposes the dominance of the 'Global North' within these systems. Using decolonial theory it disrupts dominant and mainstream positioning within the sector, debunks popular notions and raises critical questions for humanitarian leaders to confront in terms of 'international' – 'local' power relations.

Introduction

Localisation, though conceptually vague and contentious, remains influential within the international humanitarian agenda. Having gained new momentum following commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, it appeared to offer radical possibilities for addressing the power imbalance between organisations and institutions at the international level, and the local contexts where interventions take place. Localisation has been promoted for other reasons too, such as being more cost effective, but reconfiguring the power-hierarchy within the humanitarian sector remains at its core. The commitment by international donors at the WHS to divert at least 25% of direct funding towards local actors in a 'Grand Bargain' provided impetus and strengthened the prospect of localisation. Yet while there are few evaluations of localisation measures, concerns are emerging regarding its definitional ambiguity and the lack of clarity in its scope (Barbelet, 2018). Regardless, localisation continues to be presented and promoted as transformational, with limitations that are resolvable through greater clarification, commitment and implementation (Brabant and Patel, 2018; Spandler et al, 2022).

Localisation remains conceptually problematic and inadequate to shift the concentration of power from international to local.

I argue in this article that localisation remains conceptually problematic and inadequate to shift the concentration of power from international to local. This is because localisation does not address coloniality, the underlying logic of colonialism, which is embedded in the humanitarian sector and integral to the very power imbalance that localisation seeks to address. I will define coloniality and use it as an analytical framework to explain the limitations of localisation. This article is largely conceptual and theoretical with examples drawn only from existing literature to pursue the line of argument. Nonetheless, this conceptual analysis is important. Firstly, it exposes structural barriers to localisation that have been insufficiently considered in the literature and thereby advances from problematising the concept to understanding underlying factors stymieing it. Secondly, it points to its self-defeating nature of purporting to shift power while in effect maintaining and reinforcing a hierarchy. Recognising that the humanitarian sector is vast, my analysis here will mainly focus on the role of INGOs in localisation.

Decolonisation, which involves de-linking from coloniality and re-existence, should be the obvious recommendation to address the issues I raise here. However, I am hesitant to simplistically advocate for it because decolonisation goes far beyond the elimination of coloniality, and what that means for the international humanitarian and development sector requires substantial further thought. Moreover, decolonisation is a process, a movement that has to be developed from the bottom up rather than theorised and imposed as an academic or policy recommendation. I will argue that recognising and removing coloniality is a critical starting point to realise even the most basic outcomes of localisation.

Positionality is a crucial concept in decoloniality and mine is one tainted by coloniality. I am Sri Lankan in origin from a marginalised community, but I have been educated in the language and institutions of my former coloniser and I work in the academy, which was complicit in the colonial project (Bhambra et al, 2018). I have spent close to two decades working for and with INGOs, including in humanitarian crises, and even though hesitant to identify as an international actor, I could not claim to be part of the local or national contexts. This is partly the contention of being a migrant and reflecting 'hybridity' in both country of origin and residence. My background is primarily in human rights, though now as part of an academic centre specialising in humanitarian action, I am engaging and teaching on it. This positioning allows me to identify and recognise coloniality within the sector and I see this article as an intervention into the many conversations on decolonisation taking place within this space.

I am conscious of the immense challenges facing the humanitarian sector at the time of writing. The undermining of international humanitarian law in relation to the war on Gaza, the brazen targeting of aid workers, and the withdrawal of humanitarian funds from the UN Relief and Work Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) is straining the sector like never before. Coloniality is arguably also one of the major factors contributing to the present challenges in the humanitarian sector, especially to claims of 'double-standards' (Callaghan et al, 2023) and my hope is that the issues raised here can help to strengthen the sector rather than attempt to destabilise it.

I begin the article with a brief clarification on language, I proceed to assess limitations of localisation and then develop a conceptual framework on coloniality. I then use this framework to critique localisation before concluding with some analysis on what de-linking, if not decolonising, can offer the sector.

Terminology

Though seen as a considerable improvement from the language of 'first world' and 'third world;' 'Global North' and 'Global South' are still hugely problematic categories that I wish to deconstruct before having to use them in this article. Marnia Tlostanova (2011) provides a powerful critique of this binary categorisation, which she states essentialises and is racially, religiously and culturally

reductionist. She argues the divide is "produced by the north" and presents the south as "poor, suffering, and downtrodden, fixing its essentialised place as a victim which can be destroyed if its resistance becomes too violent and dangerous" (Tlostanova, 2011, p7). As I will explain below, the humanitarian sector has been complicit in maintaining this negative and vulnerable image of the Global South without sufficiently challenging the position of the Global North in constructing, naming and framing the 'other'.

Similar criticism on the grounds of binary framing has been applied to the terms 'international' and 'local' (Roepstorff, 2022). The naming of 'local' itself stems from within this power-hierarchy and questions have been raised as to who defines or frames the local (Baguios et al, 2022). Not only does this framing fail to sufficiently account for categories in between, such as national level actors, it also misses the crossovers between and within categories. In my own research on post-conflict justice in Sri Lanka, I have noted the hazy boundaries between local, national and international—where some international actors were involved in local projects; locals and nationals worked within the international, and diaspora groups based outside of the country had immense influence on local politics. Additionally, the 'local' does not operate with the sense of homogeneity that the framing suggests and the vagueness of the role of national vis-à-vis local can be damaging, especially in repressive contexts and where 'local' may constitute a minority population set against a national majority.

Scholars grappling with these issues have suggested some alternative interpretations. McGinty (2015) urges local to be thought of as a "system of beliefs and practices" that expand beyond geographical categorisation and can be loosely adopted by networks and communities. According to Baguios et al (2022), movements in the Global South see local primarily as being within the community level and extending to civil society at the national level, whereas organisations in the Global North see multiple stakeholders from national government actors to community-based organisations as local. While this may help to demystify and explain the local, the issues discussed above in relation to binary categorisation in particular, remain challenging.

In this article I use 'international' interchangeably with the 'Global North' and 'local' to denote all else, while acknowledging the discussed issues with this framing. International or 'Global North' is not necessarily a geographically or racially fixed category, it may include representation of the local, but it must be recognised for its particular historical, cultural and racial hegemonic situatedness.

Understanding and identifying coloniality

Coloniality is the underlying logic of colonialism (Quijano, 2007) that is continued through "colonial systems and technologies of domination into the present" (Rutazibwa, 2018). Anibal Quijano exceptionalises 15th century Eurocentric colonialism from other forms of colonialism because it was defined by the privileging of race through capitalism and modernity. According to Quijano (2000), with this Eurocentric, capitalist, colonial world power structure came a specific historical experience of modernity founded on European ideals of rationality. "The logic of coloniality is deep-seated and always masked by the rhetoric of modernity, whether that rhetoric claims to civilize the barbarians or spread democracy when the barbarians didn't elect nor ask" (Mignolo, 2020, p6). Decolonial scholars then suggest that despite not acting as coloniser anymore, Eurocentric/Western powers maintain hierarchical relations of "exploitation and domination" over the 'other', who are primarily colonised peoples, through racial and capital hegemony (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Like colonialism, coloniality presents the world in binaries: 'coloniser – colonised', 'civilised – savage', 'enlightened – barbaric', 'light – dark', 'saviour – victim.' As colonial powers did previously, coloniality now also masquerades as necessary, beneficial, well-intentioned, and transformative—when in fact it is disempowering, damaging and destructive.

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That coloniality exists and thrives within the humanitarian sector is no surprise considering its own historical association with colonialism. That the logic of development or human progress was derived from the civilisation mission (Aspergren, 2009; Williams and Young, 2009) and the vision of what this progress, growth and advancement entails in relation to modernity (the "other side of the coin" of coloniality (Quijano, 2009)), is now well established in scholarly work (Duffield and Hewitt, 2009). In exploring the work of Williams and Young, Duffield and Hewitt illustrate the continuities in the language of the civilisation mission reconfigured "into contemporary ideas on managing and imposing development and social change, 'at a distance' through conditionality and the role and intervention of outside agencies, professional bodies and non-state actors" (2009, p6). The development of humanitarian action through colonialism and its failure to critique or protect from colonial atrocities is also well documented (Pringle, 2017). Increasingly synonymous

with 'white saviourism' and accused of producing and securing 'whiteness' (Pallister and Wilkins, 2021), the humanitarian field also enables the Global North to maintain domination and exclusion under the pretext of ethics of care (Reopstorff, 2020).

INGOs working in this field have not been spared this critique. They stand accused of perpetuating colonial legacies and western dominance through the guise of independence and neutrality. Wright (2012, p123) quotes Wallace (2014), who refers to NGOs as "trojan horses for global neo-liberalism" questioning their legitimacy and accountability due to their dependence on donor funding, much of which is from states and "propagators of western hegemony" through bureaucratisation, technocratisation, homogenisation, and corporatisation.

Coloniality offers a vital critical lens, but must not be seen as 'perfected'. Scholars have pointed to its own essentialising capacity in its reference to Eurocentrism or the West, which includes settler-colonial states such as the United States, Australia and New Zealand. The historical experience from which coloniality as a concept has been derived is not synonymous with all colonised countries. Additionally, though decolonial scholars have discussed in some detail the positioning of Russia and China, they remain limited considering the more recent political and economic prowess of both countries. In spite of these arguments, coloniality offers a framework to understand imbalance in global power-dynamics, particularly the difficulty in dislocating or shifting this power. As Meera Sabratnam (2017, p4) states, coloniality explains how failings reoccur "because they are constituted through structural relations of colonial differences which intimately shape their conception, operation and effect". This is especially important in relation to knowledge production, which I will focus on in more detail in relation to the humanitarian sector.

Localisation

Though conceptualised in relation to culture, the work of Homi Bhabha is useful to understanding localisation. Bhaba (1994) refers to the 'third-space' as 'in-between' sites of negotiation and contestation where new forms of identity are produced in colonised contexts. Such 'hybrid' 'third-spaces', where identity and cultures become mixed, are very familiar in the international humanitarian and development sector in which INGOs operate. These have increasingly become sites where locals and nationals traverse into international, at times returning to the local; or where internationals spend long enough to immerse into the local; 'mimicry' of internationals is also visible in some locals and nationals.

Localisation is in part a response to the sector's association with the legacy of colonialism. In extending power, autonomy, funding, responses, etc, to the 'local', the hope has been to thin out the asymmetrical power structure and destabilise the centre-periphery dichotomy. I posit

that localisation is a product of the 'third-space' and the 'hybridity' that has developed within INGOs in the humanitarian and development field, which is important to recognise as it acknowledges that 'locals' were never simply passive recipients of international aid but 'resisted' their hegemony and attempted to shape outcomes for themselves.

Existing critiques of localisation centre around the following arguments: its lack of clear definition; its binary framing; problems in the categorisation of local and international; and concerns regarding its scope, implementation and evaluation (Barbelet, 2018; Baguios et al, 2021; Fast, 2017). There is also important work uncovering the power-imbalance within it (Baguios et al, 2021; Barbelet, 2018; Fast, 2017; Piquard, 2021; Roepstorff, 2019), including discussing colonial legacies and coloniality (Roepstorff, 2019; Zadeh-Cummins, 2022). I want to expand and build upon Roepstorff's (2019) analysis of coloniality within the binary framing of international versus local in the conceptualisation of localisation. Through a broader coloniality lens I will explore beyond the binary and posit that localisation is inadequate to significantly shift the power dynamics within the humanitarian sector because it is fundamentally tainted in coloniality. It is not simply at "risk" of "perpetuating the very issues it wants to address", (Roepstorff, 2019, p1) but is in fact self-defeating.

Positionality: power and finance

My starting point is with what decolonial scholars like Walter Mignolo refer to as the "locus of enunciation", or the position from which one speaks. Mignolo (2009) argues that while this positioning from which edicts are made may be presented as neutral or independent, it is often culturally and geo-politically situated. Even if we are to see localisation as emerging out of a 'third space', its locus of enunciation is in the Global North. There is an underlying and overt power structure that comes with this positioning.

Even if we are to see localisation as emerging out of a 'third space', its locus of enunciation is in the Global North. There is an underlying and overt power structure that comes with this positioning.

The historical and structural link between the humanitarian sector, colonialism and coloniality is what underlies localisation. This includes issues such as the missionary zeal of humanitarians that extended to 'saving' natives in colonised contexts from their own 'barbaric,' 'savage' beliefs, practices and forms of existence, while failing to critique the exploitations, pillaging, dehumanisation, and destruction of the coloniser, including when countries

sought and gained independence (Baughan, 2020). What is the role of colonialism in the conflicts and crises that humanitarian actors from the Global North intervene and assist in? Inherent is also the role of aid; the coloniality and politics of it. What is the relationship between humanitarian aid and the foreign policy of 'western' states? What is the politics of this 'humanitarianism' of aid and assistance, especially when it corresponds with the failure by some international actors to uphold the basic laws and norms that protect lives? These are conversations that take place at different levels within the humanitarian sector but not necessarily in relation to localisation. To conceive of localisation as removed from these questions, without dealing with the foundational factors that produced the unequal power structure it seeks to address, is superficial and problematic.

The more overt consequences of localisation's locus of enunciation being in the Global North is that internationals then set the terms and define and dictate the concept. This is reflected in the varying definitions of localisation. Though fundamentally aiming to centre local actors in the humanitarian process (Geoffroy, Grunewald and Ní Chéilleachair, 2017), the lack of a uniform definition is a clear problem with localisation.

The definitions of localisation by major donors vary significantly. USAID, for example, defines it as "internal reforms, actions, and behavior changes" that seek to put local actors "in the lead, strengthens local systems, and is responsive to local communities" (USAID, n.d.). Europe aid refers to "empowering local responders in affected countries to lead and deliver humanitarian aid" (European Commission, n.d.). They stress strengthening capacity and resources to meet this aim sustainably. The global network of humanitarian NGOs, ICVA, defines localisation as the "process through which a diverse range of humanitarian actors are attempting, each in their own way, to ensure local and national actors are better engaged in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action, while still ensuring humanitarian needs can be met swiftly, effectively and in a principled manner" (ICVA, 2019).

Whether it be "empowering", "putting in the lead" or "better engaging" local actors, these definitions clearly connote who is in control of the process. While it may be demanded from the bottom-up, its framing is very much as an offering from the top-down, with actors in the Global North setting the criteria and deciding on how and when to enable. Pardy et al (2022) alludes to this in their references to the "grand silencing" which occurred with the onset of the Grand Bargain, signed by 30 participants, all from the Global North, after a large and effective consultation at the World Humanitarian Summit of around 23,000 participants, many from the Global South.

Though some have argued that the Global North needs to take the initiative to account for their historic role in causing the power imbalance, in its current shape localisation is at the mercy of actors in the Global North, who with the same logic of the colonial masters, can continue to maintain the subjugation or selectively empower local actors within the humanitarian sector.

The power of finance is another critical factor. The early momentum on commitments by international donors and organisations, including in funding, appears to be declining. According to the 2023 Global Humanitarian Assistance report, international assistance directly provided to national and local actors was a paltry 1.6%, which is less than the 2.3% it was in 2016, when the Grand Bargain was made. On the other hand, funding channelled to multilateral organisations rose from 52% to 61% in 2023. This regression in funding commitment suggests that localisation is at threat of offering little more than empty promises, but even if the funding commitment is met, actors in the Global North will still be in a dominant position over those of the South.

Decolonial scholars have successfully established the link between capital and race within coloniality. Quijano (2000) demonstrated this link is the logic that enabled exploitation and pillage to operate through racism and slavery in an unprecedented way to allow for European colonial dominance (Quijano, 2000). Even a 25% shift in funds to local actors cannot sufficiently reconfigure structures and flows of funding within the humanitarian sector, resulting in the preservation of coloniality.

Coloniality of being and knowledge

Ontological coloniality explains how colonial damage to ways of being continues in the present day (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). This includes, but is not limited to, forms of identity, cultures, traditions, ways of life, world views and spirituality. Native and indigenous ways of existence were destroyed while colonial ways of being were presented, imposed and made attractive as 'civilised', 'superior' or 'enlightened'. Decolonial thinkers argue that this logic remains in place through ontological coloniality that is proliferated by modernity, globalisation and development. This puts into question what constitutes a dignified, progressive, secure existence; is it based on dominant perspectives from one part of the world, rather than having been developed through a plurality of ways of being. Within the humanitarian sector, this becomes evident in what scholars refer to as "industrial white saviourism" and the ethics of how suffering is portrayed, often in formerly colonised countries (Calain, 2013; Kherbaoui & Aronson, 2022). Sylvia Wynter (1996) and Mignolo (2009) both question the racial, gender, cultural and historical construction of the term 'human', which purports to be universal, but originated to protect only specific groups. Pallister-Wilkins (2021, p98) state that this not only allows white supremacy in humanitarianism to go "unchallenged but also to thrive". Though not specifically using the language, more recently media articles have alluded to ontological coloniality within the humanitarian sector in how 'victims' or 'beneficiaries' are portrayed and fostered through the humanitarian responses of international actors (Jayawickrama, 2018; Gathara, 2020).

Interestingly, the reported reasons for hesitation on the part of internationals to implement localisation exemplifies coloniality. These include perceptions of local actors as lacking in accountability and unable to reliably uphold humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality (Baguios et al, 2021). This is despite internationals having been criticised for lacking accountability to local communities and their own categories of beneficiaries (Baguios et al, 2021). Similarly, assertions that locals are unable to be neutral or impartial could also be made against internationals who depend on and are swayed by the politics of governmental aid. However, through framing locals as 'lacking' (as colonisers once did), internationals are able to provide continuing justification to 'civilise' 'modernise' and 'develop' them.

In response to this, 'ways of being' are construed by some as an important dimension of localisation, which argues for humanitarian responses to be true to local forms of existence rather than represent an outsider, imposed version (Baguios et al, 2021). There is, however, very limited reference to this aspect of localisation within the literature in the humanitarian sector. Additionally, it is questionable how local ways of being can develop and flourish in the sector when the foundational structures, systems, and processes remain not only partial to, but prioritise western, modern, colonial ways of being.

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These ways of being stem from what we believe and know about our existence and are closely tied with knowledge production. Quijano (2007) illustrates how former colonial powers systematically evaluated native knowledge and forms of knowing, appropriated what they found useful and then successively derided, discarded or destroyed that which could not advance their colonial project. Mignolo (2009) refers to a duality of "destitution" of local knowledge and "constitution" of external, western, European, rational thought and knowledge, which Quijano (2007) explains was presented with a sense of "totality", as perfect or complete.

Grosfoguel (2011, p5) summarises the coloniality of knowledge as "the hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms that have informed western philosophy and sciences in the 'modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system' for the last 500 hundred years assume a universalistic, neutral, objective point of view". In the humanitarian sector this is (re)produced through emphasis on 'authoritative', 'credible', 'acceptable', 'reliable' or even 'universal' knowledge and methods which INGOs often stake claim to over local organisations.

Let me explore this further on two accounts: what constitutes knowledge and how it is produced. Knowledge within the humanitarian sector becomes necessary to understand, plan, prepare and respond to crisis, and to review, assess and evaluate these responses.

Academics and researchers have already raised the political, cultural and power positioning in what can be construed as knowledge within the humanitarian sector (Piquard, 2021; Baguios et al, 2021). Piquard (2021, p87) argues that local knowledge in humanitarian contexts is mainly seen as "'tacit': non-formalised and practical, intuitive, resident within behaviours and perceptions of individuals or local organisations". Consequently, local knowledge is often "put aside or confined to specific roles" (Humanitarian Action Group et al, 2021). This could, for example be to provide contextual, situational knowledge. Even so, the interpretation, sense making and utilisation of this knowledge in the humanitarian context, relies on internationally dominant systems, tools and frameworks. Information derived from the local often gets interpreted and packaged into terminology and frameworks used within the international that are less familiar to the local.

Additionally, international actors often maintain their prominence as 'experts,' 'specialists' and providers of 'technical' knowledge that is derived from their particular international perspective and understanding of laws and norms. Such positionality, which commands specialised knowledge that is seen to be beyond the reach of locals, in addition to the control of the coding, framing and interpretation of knowledge produced at the local level, enables internationals to stay on top of the knowledge hierarchy.

This superiority relies on colonial binary constructs of 'civilised' and 'enlightened' as against 'primitive' and 'savage', as well as on the linear presentation of time—with Europe seen to 'progress' from the 'dark ages' to 'enlightenment', therefore necessitating the civilisation mission through colonialism (Quijano, 2007).

Moreover, this power-hierarchy is validated through claims that the methods of knowledge production of the Global North are superior, or even perfected. The standards, norms, principles, practices, tools, and processes within the humanitarian sector are purportedly derived through 'globally' tried and tested methods that provide for their credibility, reliability, and authority. That these research and standard producing methods largely originate from the Global North, with the particular cultural, historical, and ideological positioning that entails, are veiled in claims of their neutrality, universality and internationally acceptability. Alternative methods, such as, for example, forms of oral transmission or interpretations of natural or other phenomenon that have acted as early warning triggers and saved communities from disasters, remain sidelined by organisations within the Global North (HAG

et al, 2021)—often seen as unreliable or failing to meet the necessary evidence base. HAG et al (2021) record numerous examples of local knowledge that is of critical value to the humanitarian sector, but which at best is seen as 'an object' that may be used in an advisory capacity but not beyond.

Although some progress is being made towards documenting and utilising local knowledge there is little discussion within the debates on the need to localise modes of interpretation and analysis and methods of knowing. Even as participatory forms of research, monitoring and evaluation gain ground they continue to operate within the methods, systems, tools and approaches that are western and Eurocentric but which are presented as 'global' and 'authoritative'.

Coloniality of knowledge and the perpetual capacity gap

One of the reasons organisations in the Global North provide for the delays in advancing localisation is the lack of preparedness of local actors to meet 'global standards'. In a global system there is no doubt that common principles and standards are necessary, and this article does not deny that. Rather it challenges the neutral/universal derivation of 'global/international' and questions the political, economic, and cultural power that underlines the setting of these standards. It is possible to argue that a few locals (representationally and ideationally) were part of the principle setting through third spaces. However, a coloniality framework enables us to understand how the underlying power imbalance and control of systems and methods by the Global North eventually maintains its superiority and domination of knowledge, standards and processes, even where they may be produced or influenced by the local.

The idea of localisation can then be seen as dependent on standards derived from, produced by and developed with the knowledge and understanding of the dominant power, creating a system (akin to the civilisation mission), that allows the Global South to aspire to localised control and influence that can never be fully attained.

This produces and maintains a capacity gap that again reinforces the dominance of actors in the Global North. Barbelet (2018) explains that in spite of the lack of clear definition of 'local' and 'capacity', the latter has become a central issue. While she argues that capacity must be understood as an actor's contribution to alleviating suffering rather than their ability to manage resources and report on actions, international humanitarian organisations still consider it a technical exercise (Barbelet, 2018). This is partly because international actors prioritise certain capacities, without questioning the assumptions and criteria needed for alleviating suffering rather than managing resources, which Barbelet (2018) attributes to the "power-dynamics and neo-colonial undertones"

that current capacity assessment processes entail. This, I would contend relates to my argument that coloniality within localisation provides for a perpetual capacity gap that self-defeats its aim of shifting power to the local. This supposed knowledge gap has to be filled by 'trainings', 'took-kits' and 'technical capacity development' by INGOs which enable them to cement a position of authority and indispensability in knowledge production.

Even though evidence suggests that local actors are often first at the scene of a crisis and respond adequately to meet people's needs, INGOs see locals, as colonisers did, to be lacking.

'Capacity building' has for decades been a central component of INGO programs in the Global South, which involves 'developing', 'building' and 'strengthening' the capacity of local actors. Even though evidence suggests that local actors are often first at the scene of a crisis and respond adequately to meet people's needs, INGOs see locals, as colonisers did, to be lacking. Local actors' capacity is deemed poor and needing strengthening purely to meet criteria set by the Global North—be it complying with international norms and standards or reporting to international donors. Indeed, even actors in the Global North have to adhere to these standards, but my argument is that both the standards and criteria measuring how they are met are largely top-down. OXFAM (2023) has recently attempted to rebalance this relationship by referring to capacity sharing, nevertheless, as long as local actors have to work within the epistemic and methodological tools and approaches of the Global North, they will always be wanting. As long as knowledge and methods of knowledge production remain within the control of Global North, those in the south will be permanently 'catching-up' and unable to gain genuine equality.

Conclusion

Without identifying and removing coloniality, localisation can only become another tool by which international actors can scrutinise, measure, limit, restrain, and control local actors and maintain their hegemony within the humanitarian sector. De-linking, dis-obeying and re-existence or decoloniality is critical for the humanitarian sector before and above localisation. This would involve firstly, identifying the sector's historical association with colonialism and present day coloniality and systematically removing them. It also involves shifting the locus of enunciation away from the Global North and enabling re-existence and ways of being to develop and flourish. Decoloniality has a very particular interpretation, it is not

a euphemism for diversity or inclusivity. It encompasses gender, racism and varying forms of discrimination. Decoloniality is not a program or a policy that international organisations can create and commit to, it is a process that has to be driven from the local. However, by its very nature coloniality is intangible and less visible. Moreover, colonialism, coloniality and modernity have for centuries implanted their superiority in our thinking and assumptions in ways that many of us may not even be aware of and will find difficult to disentangle. Nevertheless, decoloniality is occurring through acts of resistance, including the push by local actors to localise, which can be encouraged, supported and built-on.

De-linking, dis-obeying and re-existence or decoloniality is critical for the humanitarian sector before and above localisation.

Genuine decoloniality would result in a recentring of power, which would require a re-existence for international actors as well. As international institutions and organisations have been built and exist on coloniality,

removing it would disrupt their very being. This is a major predicament for international actors and possibly why there is such reluctance to consider decoloniality. It exceeds having to transfer control, management, and decision making to the Global South and includes having to fundamentally develop new ways of knowing and being; including methods, systems, processes and tools that don't fit into their 'global', 'international' accepted models. In practice, this would mean unlearning and relearning, where the capacity building of the Global North is firstly built with knowledge and methods from the South so sharing can take place. Decoloniality does not require discarding the methods, tools, and practices of the Global North but dislocating the powerful position they hold and reconfiguring them with 'othered' 'marginalised' knowledge and ways of being.

This is a seismic shift for the humanitarian sector and one that would require significant internal introspection and commitment to deep structural changes that are above and beyond localisation. Unless radical and transformative change that addresses and redresses the inequality and injustice within the humanitarian sector occurs, this shift is only likely to take place at a superficial level.

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Digging in: A consideration of 'grassroots' in localisation discourse

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Image: Young plants grow in a backyard garden set up by a mother in Karamoja region, North Eastern Uganda. © James Mbiri / Save the Children International

Abstract

Humanitarian localisation seeks to make aid more equitable and effective by empowering local actors. However, ambiguity surrounding the definition of 'local actors' hinders progress in this direction. Despite growing discussions on localisation, there remains a significant gap in understanding the role and consideration of grassroots actors within humanitarian discourse. This article aims to critically review some of the discourse on humanitarian localisation, particularly focusing on the consideration given to grassroots actors, to address this gap and foster a deeper understanding of their significance. Using a scoping review, the article analyses three key articles published between 2020-22, examining their consideration of grassroots actors and concepts within the context of humanitarian localisation. While specific explorations of the idea of 'grassroots' are limited, the reviewed articles reveal critical engagement with related concepts, such as the emergent transnational, transcultural and translocal dynamics that are challenging traditional notions of local action. Expanding the understanding of grassroots beyond traditional boundaries is essential for promoting local empowerment and more effective and inclusive localisation efforts in humanitarian responses. Acknowledging grassroots actors as distinct stakeholders is crucial for advancing equitable and impactful humanitarian practices.

Leadership relevance

This paper critically informs humanitarian leadership practices by highlighting the overlooked role of grassroots actors within the discourse of humanitarian localisation. By scrutinising the consideration of grassroots concepts in key articles, it challenges traditional assumptions and underscores the necessity for humanitarian leaders to recognise the unique contributions of grassroots initiatives. This understanding urges leaders to adopt more inclusive and contextually sensitive strategies, fostering meaningful partnerships and enhancing the transformative potential of localisation efforts. This paper prompts humanitarian leaders to reassess their approaches, ensuring they are responsive to the diverse needs and dynamics of local communities.

Introduction

Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), the concept of 'localisation' has been centre stage in discussions around humanitarian reform and has shaped the understanding of best practice in humanitarian decision-making and leadership. The sentiment within the WHS for the future of humanitarian assistance to be "as local as possible, as international as necessary" spoke to a need for humanitarianism to become more equitable, efficient and effective by playing a more supportive role to local responders (United Nations, 2016). The transfer of funding as directly as possible to local actors and the subsequent localising of humanitarian action has increasingly come to be seen as the panacea to the ineffectiveness and inefficiencies seen in traditional international paternalistic humanitarian response mechanisms (Roepstorff, 2022). Yet despite the steps taken towards this reform, the question might be asked: how can we know the impact that funding local actors brings when it has not been properly explained what a 'local actor' really means (Roepstorff, 2020)? In an effort to answer this question, this paper will review a small part of the discourse surrounding localisation—how and to what extent 'grassroots' actors are considered within localisation literature.

What is local and why do definitions matter?

One common idea expressed within the localisation discourse is the need to move away from ambiguous and consequentially assumptive use of terminology. Without agreed upon definitions, many local stakeholders can be excluded from humanitarian practices, effectively narrowing the scope and mobility of localisation efforts (ICVA, 2019). The ambiguous and varied use of 'localisation' within humanitarian practice literature results in an overwhelmingly dichotomous lens being cast onto the 'local' and equally, the 'international'—a contradiction that doesn't account for a multitude of other actors that don't easily fit within these two binary categories (Roepstorff, 2020; Mac Ginty, 2015).

The ambiguous and varied use of 'localisation' within humanitarian practice literature results in an overwhelmingly dichotomous lens being cast onto the 'local' and equally, the 'international'—a contradiction that doesn't account for a multitude of other actors that don't easily fit within these two binary categories

When talking about local actors, it is important to understand what is meant by the term 'local' in a humanitarian context. In 2018, the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) worked alongside Grand Bargain signatories and a network of Global North and South actors to create a 'localisation marker' and decide what constitutes a local and national actor. This localisation marker was designed to be used for measuring global localisation outcomes. The resulting definition of local non-state actors includes local and national NGOs, civil society organisations, national Red Cross/Crescent Societies, and private sector for-profit organisations (IASC, 2018). These broad subcategories outline which nonstate actors qualify as part of the 'local' in the eye of the international majority, but fail to distinguish any priority as to how the share of localisation funding should be divided between differing local and national actors. Both the Grand Bargain and the localisation marker also fail to recognise the nuanced and complex translocal and transcultural dynamics that exist within local humanitarian practice (Roepstorff, 2020; IASC, 2018; IASC, 2016). These dynamics are important to consider within both humanitarian policy and practice, as the current binary construction of the local and the international risks the recreation of historic power imbalances and stereotypes within humanitarian action (Melis and Apthorpe, 2020).

One subcategory of the IASC's definition of local non state actors that is oversimplified and requires further examination is the subcategory of 'civil society organisations' (IASC, 2018). Although much has been published on the legitimacy and effectiveness of civil society, little attention is paid to what makes up the civil society or what constitutes a civil society organisation, ultimately leaving the definitions and uses of these terms open to interpretation (Tjahja et al., 2021, p1). Civil society's broad membership has been stated to include but is not limited to: community-based organisations, NGOs, social movements, nonsecular groups, local initiatives and grassroots organisations operating in the public sphere outside the market and the state (Tjahja et al., 2021, p4; WEF, 2013; Publications Office of the European Union, 2022). All these groups offer their own unique strengths and benefits to broader society, contribute to its functioning and risk being overlooked if not explicitly referred to within social policy and practice literature (WEF, 2013), but it is the latter with which this study is most concerned. Grassroots organisations (GROs) function across multiple sectors, including the humanitarian sector, and offer a particular point of interest in the dynamics that exist at the intersection of grassroots action, humanitarian work and broader society, especially when considered within localisation discourse.

Aims and objectives of the study

In taking these ideas on board, this paper asks—to what extent do current concepts of localisation consider the grassroots? I argue that while there is limited direct consideration of grassroots because of a lack of inclusion of grassroots terminology, there is still a critical engagement with concepts relating to these types of organisations and actions.

What follows then, is an overview of the concept of 'grassroots' in the humanitarian context, after which the methodology for a scoping review of the academic localisation discourse is outlined to identify key theories, concepts and research gaps (Grimshaw, 2020) and consider how the 'grassroots' concept is used, discussed and studied within literature (Peters et al., 2020).

This paper then provides a brief overview of recent academic humanitarian localisation literature and explores to what extent this literature considers grassroots, using an inclusion criterion to identify which data is extracted and how. The results are summarised and discussed in depth, along with a discussion of the various implications for further research and practice that are associated with this review.

What does grassroots mean in the humanitarian, aid and development space?

'Grassroots' is a concept that exists within many aspects of society and across different sectors. 'Grassroots organisation' (GRO) refers to individuals associating through mostly voluntary and not-for-profit work, pursuing common interests and often formed by activists within social movements (Flores & Samuel, 2019). Grassroots action is often linked closely to local concerns and communities, as motivation generally comes from the desire to improve the current physical, cultural, economic and social wellbeing of individuals' families, communities and societies. While there are many conceptions of what constitutes grassroots, grassroots associations usually gain members from the communities that they wish to help and within which they function (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

There is a wide range of terminology used to refer to grassroots movements within humanitarian, development and wider political literature. Some of these include: GRO, grassroots movement, new social movement, citizen initiatives, small-scale civil society actors, micro movements, demotic humanitarianism, volunteer humanitarianism and informal humanitarianism. This diverse use of terminologies referring to the grassroots within various theoretical backgrounds leaves the literature specifically related to 'grassroots' fragmented and disjointed (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019).

[The] diverse use of terminologies referring to the grassroots within various theoretical backgrounds leaves the literature specifically related to 'grassroots' fragmented and disjointed.

It has also been contended that some of the terminologies used to refer to grassroots are misused, such as the use of

'new social movement', 'civil initiative' and 'NGO' (Pattnaik & Panda, 2005; Vandevoordt, 2019). This is important to note, as even though a GRO may exist within one or all of these categories, it is the specific characteristics relating to the nature of grassroots that sets GROs apart from other distinct forms of association, therefore necessitating an explicit distinction when discussing these groups (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This distinction of GROs as separate from other civil associations allows for a deeper investigation into the grassroots and the dynamics that exist within grassroots initiatives and between GROs and other civil, state or international initiatives.

Chowdhury et al. (2021) construct a visual framework for understanding the distinction between GROs, NGOs and social movement organisations (SMOs), the two types of civil initiatives in which GROs are often grouped (see Figure 1). The distinction is made with the use of two key characteristics of GROs, namely locality and moderate formality.

Figure 1. Comparison of Social Movement Organisations (SMOs), Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and Grassroots Organisations (GROs)
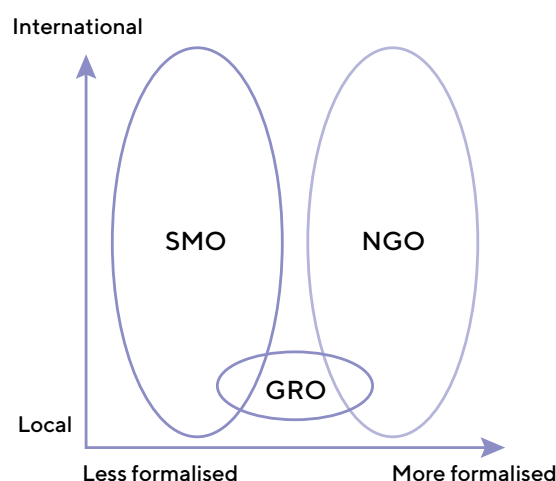
Source: Chowdhury et al. 2021: p424

The notion of locality is central to grassroots. As the name suggests, grassroots is often understood to encompass one of the fundamental building blocks of society—that is, regular people. It is often through dissatisfaction with the status quo that these regular local people associate (Fechter & Schwittay, 2019). This means that GROs are generally driven by a shared, locally specific mission created through common dissatisfaction, and guided by the core values and interests of the members through their shared locality (Chowdhury, 2013). In contrast with this, SMOs usually address larger societal issues across multiple organisations, and NGOs tend to be more driven by policies which pertain to broader groups of people across multiple localities (Chowdhury et al., 2021). However, with greater globalisation and increasing social technologies, the characteristic of locality in relation to

grassroots has evolved to now include more complex relational networks that extend beyond a single place, embracing local and translocal relationships of solidarity (Roepstorff, 2020; Fechter & Schwittay, 2019; Dunn & Kaliszewska, 2023).

Central to the achievement of the usually very specific goals of GROs, is the need for moderate formality in order to maintain a strong internal democracy, uphold independence and autonomy from other networks, and avoid bureaucracy (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This moderate level of formality is perceived by many stakeholders to be a lack of capacity rather than a strategic choice. As a result, GROs are often excluded from meaningful discussions (Jalali, 2013). This issue of marginalisation forces GROs to construct their legitimacy as stakeholders in addressing societal issues (Van Oers et al., 2018). To maintain this legitimacy, GROs are often best placed to narrow their focus and aim at addressing much more specific problems (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002). Addressing narrow and specific issues requires the use of more formal processes relating to membership and objectives than that of SMOs, while still being less bureaucratic and formal than what is required of NGOs (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This characteristic of moderate formality allows GROs to carve out a space across different sectors that is uniquely strategic in its tackling of locally specific issues (Van Oers et al., 2018). GROs can over time begin to act as SMOs and transform into NGOs; it is the changing level of formality and locality of a GRO that signals this transformation (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

Separating GROs from other civil society actors through the theoretical distinction above is helpful in properly understanding GROs, however, GROs don't operate exclusively in these theoretical silos. While many GROs working in more politically charged situations will choose not to work with governments or international agencies as a form of civil disobedience or protest, there can be many benefits from collaboration between GROs and other stakeholders (Vandevoordt, 2019; McGee and Pelham, 2018; Flores and Samuel, 2019). Increased accountability, mobilisation and transparency are three key areas that highlight the strength of GROs and the benefits of collaboration between GROs and other stakeholders. Because GROs are made up of members of the community in which they are operating, they offer a unique strength to social operations in the form of citizen monitoring (Flores and Samuel, 2019; Jalali, 2013). By mobilising members of the community to collect data via interviews or observation, more frequent accountability updates on quality-of-service delivery or operation can be made. Because the information can be taken across the community for a longer period, GROs can better record systematic problems as well as smaller or individual issues relating to social action (Flores and Samuel, 2019). Campaigns that are created by or involve grassroots action, such as citizen monitoring, will be much more likely to gain higher mobility into the community and surrounding areas (Jalali, 2013). Along with the higher rates of mobilisation, the resulting increase in local knowledge of best practice and the concurrent increase in operational expectations of social action campaigns enables GROs to demand a higher level of transparency from various operations (Flores and Samuel, 2019).

Accountability, mobilisation and transparency are three key areas that highlight the strength of GROs and the benefits of collaboration between GROs and other stakeholders.

Methodology

Inclusion Criteria

It is important that the study selection and inclusion criteria are systematic in nature, in order to ensure consistency in decision making and the possibility to replicate or repeat the review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). As the research question is relevant to conceptual positions on localisation, rather than works of policy or practice within the humanitarian discourse, this review only includes academic peer reviewed articles in its review. Furthermore, the studies included in this review are only articles that offer a conceptual understanding or analysis of localisation. The question is also specifically interested in current concepts of localisation. Accordingly, this review only analysed articles that were published within three years of this review being written, i.e. 2020-22. This choice was made under the rationale that the humanitarian sector is very rapidly changing, and that more recent work would account for the failure of the Grand Bargain's major goal to provide 25% of global humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020, as this is a very significant event within the localisation discourse (IASC, 2016; Development Initiatives, 2021).

The number of citations in each article was also considered as one of the inclusion criteria, with an inclusion of articles with 20 citations and above. This preference for higher citations ensures articles have a high level of influence within the localisation discourse (Teplitskiy et al., 2022). It should be noted that the time and scope restraints of this review greatly limited the amount of data that was analysed and affected how generalisable the findings will be. This review aimed to accommodate these limitations by selecting the most influential articles, but there are also many articles with less than 20 citations that are very influential and significant to humanitarian reform. As such, this review aims to serve as a glimpse into the localisation discourse. It should also be noted that this review only included articles that were written in English.

Search Strategy

The three sources that were used to find suitable studies to answer the research question are the online databases EBSCOHOST and Google Scholar, and the bibliographies and reference lists of significant relevant peer reviewed and grey literature. Searches were performed through a key phrase search on both online databases: "local OR localisation OR localization" AND "humanitarian OR humanitarianism". The articles from these searches that included the key phrases in their titles and were published between 2020-22 were flagged for further inspection. A citation search was also used, in which the lists of significant and relevant articles' citations were searched, flagging the articles in this list with titles that included the key phrases used in the key phrase search. The bibliographies and reference lists of significant, relevant and recent peer review literature (flagged in previous searches) and grey literature were also searched, with articles that included the key phrases in their title being flagged for further inspection. Once this list of articles was narrowed, further inclusion criteria were applied, which included the reading of abstracts of the articles to assess whether they offered a conceptual understanding or analysis of localisation.

Data extraction

The articles that were chosen were then analysed for data specific to the research question and any instance of direct or indirect consideration of 'grassroots' was recorded. Direct consideration was taken to be any use of the terms: grassroots, grassroots organisation, grassroots movement, grassroots aid, volunteer groups, citizen initiative, citizen aid, micro movement, demotic humanitarianism, demotic humanitarian, demotic aid, everyday humanitarianism, and everyday humanitarian. Indirect consideration was understood to be the description of key characteristics of GROs, as outlined in the literature review, without directly naming them. These key characteristics included: locality, moderate formality, specific/narrow goals and low resources. It should be noted that because there isn't a unified description of grassroots, this analysis considered the description of concepts similar enough to, but not the same as, this review's depiction of grassroots as a consideration of grassroots.

Limitations

The restrictive inclusion criteria (papers published between 2020-23 with at least 20 citations) combined with journal publication lag times (including the time required for papers doing the citing to be published), means that not all relevant papers published during the study period were necessarily captured in this review. The resultingly small sample size limits understanding of the breadth of the localisation discourse and its consideration of grassroots and is better placed as a review of only the most influential current concepts of localisation and the extent to which they consider grassroots. Because of this, the findings of this review are not easily generalised across a larger humanitarian discourse. Furthermore, as the humanitarian landscape and literature are very broad and rapidly changing, many more articles that were excluded from this review's narrow inclusion criteria could offer significant value on this subject. There is space, therefore, for a broader review of the consideration of grassroots within the localisation literature in the form of a scoping review with a greater sample size or a systematic review.

Results

Given the above parameters and limitations, three articles were chosen for the scoping review:

- Roepstorff, K. (2020). 'A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action', *Third World Quarterly*, 41(2):284-301, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160

- Barakat, S. and Milton, S. (2020). 'Localisation across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 15(2):147-163, DOI: 10.1177/1542316620922805

- Pincock, K., Betts, A. and Easton-Calabria, E. (2021). 'The rhetoric and reality of localisation: refugee-led organisations in humanitarian governance', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 57(5):719-734, https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2020.1802010

Each article offers a different critical analysis of localisation, and considers the concept of 'grassroots' to varying levels. While Roepstorff (2020) and Barakat and Milton (2020) both use language that directly references grassroots, there is minimal effort to unpack the concept. In saying this, Roepstorff (2020) critically engages with concepts relating to grassroots, offering a meaningful indirect consideration of the term. In contrast, Pincock et al. (2021) offer a direct and critical engagement with the concept of grassroots through the analysis of refugee led organisations within the humanitarian system.

Written in 2020, Roepstorff's 'A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action' deconstructs the movement towards localisation and examines the dynamics that exist between actors that are often constructed as binary opposites—such as local and international. There is limited consideration of any specifically grassroots actions or groups, with the closest mention being the use of "ad hoc volunteer groups" in a discussion of crisis first responders (Roepstorff, 2020, p284, p287). While this is an important consideration, as it outlines the centrality of volunteers within the humanitarian response, the use of "ad hoc volunteer groups" without further examination leaves the meaning of this term unclear. The label "civil society" is also used throughout the article. This can be considered as a bucket term in which GROs are included, but as there are many varied members of and interpretations of 'civil society', it is too broad and vague to consider it a direct consideration of GROs and their actions.

While an explicit consideration of grassroots in the article is limited, Roepstorff does critically engage with concepts that relate to grassroots. She states that there is a tendency to construct the local as being inherently authentic and legitimate, which "circumvents the need to critically assess who the local represents" (Roepstorff, 2020, p291). This concept of a romanticised, amorphous 'local' offers an explanation to why various actors, including GROS, are often overlooked in humanitarian academia. Roepstorff also interacts with grassroots concepts in her consideration of the emerging transnational, translocal and transcultural relationships that exist as part of the local within the humanitarian space (Roepstorff, 2020, p285). Her analysis points to the limiting nature of conceptualising grassroots action as only existing within a certain locality.

This concept of a romanticised, amorphous 'local' offers an explanation to why various actors, including GROS, are often overlooked in humanitarian academia.

In contrast to Roepstorff's article, Barakat and Milton's 'Localisation across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus' has more specific references to 'grassroots', with four direct uses of the term. However, although there are direct references to grassroots, there are no attempts to consider and interact with any of the concepts that surround the term. Barakat and Milton's article analyses localisation across the three theoretical backgrounds that make up the 'triple nexus'—humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding. While this article considers community level grassroots capacity and the challenges that the Arab region has in identifying this capacity, there is no discussion of why it is important to identify such a capacity (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p148). Further mentions of grassroots are made in the article's outline of the history of development and peacebuilding, as an example of a bottom-up alternative to the Washington consensus in the 1990s (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p150). It seems then, that although grassroots is given a certain level of direct consideration within Barakat and Milton's article, closer scrutiny reveals that 'grassroots' is not explored in a particularly meaningful sense. The article lacks an in-depth explanation or analysis of grassroots and the role that it plays within conflict response. The section of the article that more closely analyses humanitarian action in the conflict response also presents a limited understanding of the dynamics of a humanitarian response. In Barakat and Milton's description, the only non-international non-state actors that are acknowledged to take part in a crisis response are NGOs (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p149). This failure to consider the different types of actors that take part in a crisis response—including nonsecular groups, community

groups and GROs—overlooks and actively excludes such actors from humanitarian discourse.

The final article analysed as part of this scoping review interacts much more significantly with concepts relating to grassroots. Pincock et al.'s 2021 article 'The rhetoric and reality of localisation: refugee-led organisations in humanitarian governance' directly analyses grassroots through the exploration of refugee-led organisations (RLOs) in Kampala, Uganda. The result of this exploration is a conceptual bottom up understanding of localisation that is driven by RLOs. The paper explores the RLOs striving for legitimacy by fostering transnational and transcultural relationships and their bypassing of the national level of humanitarian governance. Although there is only one direct use of the term 'grassroots', the concept of RLOs is taken to be a direct consideration of grassroots (Pincock et al., 2021, p725).

While RLOs fit the previously stated definition of grassroots, in Uganda many of these organisations register themselves as NGOs because of a desire to partner with INGOs and UN bodies and the country's relatively easy process to legally register (Pincock et al., 2021, p720). Alongside this desire for partnership and the funding that comes with it, Pincock et al. outline the RLOs push to become increasingly formalised, culminating with the creation of the Refugee Led Organisation Network (RELON). By founding this network, Uganda's refugee led grassroots action groups are moving away from narrow conceptions of grassroots by tackling broader goals, becoming more formalised and widening the definition of locality, resulting in a 'grassroots' movement that encompasses the broader translocal, transnational and transcultural definitions of Roepstorff's critical localism (Roepstorff, 2020).

By understanding Uganda's GROs as groups that are already filling key gaps and finding legitimacy by establishing transnational connections that bypass restrictive national humanitarian governance, and in finding ways to establish themselves as important actors in humanitarian responses despite a marginalising environment, Pincock et al. contend that RLOs succeed "in spite of, rather than because of, the formal humanitarian system" (Pincock et al., 2021, p721).

Discussion

These articles all discuss different aspects of humanitarian response and how concepts of localisation function within humanitarianism. The consideration of grassroots varies greatly between each piece, although the direct use of the term 'grassroots' is limited across all three. When the term is mentioned, there is no effort to define or explicate the concept. This lack of definition leaves the concept open to interpretation and fails to contribute to axiological discussion specific to grassroots in localisation. While concepts relating to grassroots can be explored without needing to use specific terminology, this may limit

the unification of a larger and specifically 'grassroots' discourse. There also seems to be a tendency (perhaps in the interest of brevity), to use broad terminology when describing large groups of actors (Roepstorff, 2020, p291; Barakat and Milton, 2020, p149).

While the use of terms such as 'NGO' and 'civil society' do encapsulate a large array of actors in a concise and simple way, they can be problematic when used self-evidently. Grassroots groups can be understood to exist in both categories but, as previously mentioned, their unique characteristics require explicit distinction within literature, and failing to do so risks overlooking grassroots actors as distinct stakeholders in humanitarian response (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

While specific grassroots terminology is inadequately explored in these articles, discussion of related terms and ideas offers important critical engagement with the concept. All the articles offer a similar critique of the common approach to localisation that creates a binary distinction between the local and the opposing international, arguing that it is not reflective of the true dynamics of humanitarian response (Roepstorff, 2020; Barakat and Milton, 2020; Pincock et al., 2021). This tendency to construct the local as inherently authentic, legitimate and parochial is counterintuitive to critical engagement with what constitutes local and who is represented by the local (Roepstorff, 2020; Barakat and Milton, 2020). A binary definition of local is also not reflective of local actors. As Pincock et al. show, the grassroots actions of RLOs in Uganda foster complex transnational and transcultural connections in order to achieve their complex goals (Pincock et al., 2021). This emerging concept of larger and more complex transnational, translocal and transcultural dynamics within which local actors exist, is alluded to and explored across all three articles (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p154; Pincock et al., 2021, p721; Roepstorff, 2020, p291). When applied to local grassroots actors, this more dynamic concept of 'local' challenges common conceptions of grassroots as being bound by locality and specific goals (Chowdhury et al., 2021; Van Oers et al., 2018). These transnational, translocal and transcultural grassroots dynamics can be seen in the actions taken by RLOs in Kampala (Pincock et al., 2021), as well as in the context of the European refugee crisis in 'The Jungle' refugee camp in Calais and in response to the influx of refugees from the war in Ukraine (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019; Dunn and Kaliszewska, 2023).

Conclusion

Expanding the understanding of grassroots beyond traditional notions tied to locality and parochiality will better reflect the grassroots action that is seen today (Pincock et al., 2021; Fechter and Shwittay, 2019; Dunn and Kaliszewska, 2023). This more dynamic and globalised view of grassroots could be seen as a truly locally driven alternative to current attempts to 'localise', which are overwhelmingly top-down and hold a limiting and limited understanding of local actors.

More dynamic and globalised view[s] of grassroots could be seen as a truly locally driven alternative to current attempts to 'localise', which are overwhelmingly top-down and hold a limiting and limited understanding of local actors.

Further research on this topic, such as a larger-scale scoping review or systematic review, would help examine the extent to which grassroots is considered within the localisation literature. It could also tackle the implications of inherently political grassroots actors taking part in humanitarian action and what that means for the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, as well as the possibly artificial divisions between grassroots driven and implemented humanitarian responses and grassroots development work.

Understanding and acknowledging grassroots actors as distinct stakeholders in humanitarian response is crucial for promoting inclusivity, local empowerment, and effective localisation efforts. Not only will localisation efforts become more successful, but by acknowledging and incorporating the unique strengths of grassroots actors, humanitarian leadership itself will become more effective, complementary, and context driven. As the humanitarian landscape is forever changing, humanitarian leadership needs to grow to incorporate new understandings of humanitarian stakeholders and response mechanisms. By critically engaging with grassroots concepts and challenging existing frameworks, humanitarian leaders can foster more meaningful partnerships and enhance the transformative potential of localisation in addressing humanitarian crises.

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Envisioning empowerment: Mapping the paths of widowhood in Northern Uganda

JUMA BOSCO NAMUTEBI

Juma Bosco Namutebi is a psychologist from Uganda, currently collaborating with Makerere University in Kampala. Drawing from his academic background in psychology, his focus is on women's mental health support services. Notably, he has initiated small support groups for women to share their experiences amid the diverse social pressures they face. He is actively engaged in enhancing the accessibility and inclusiveness of professional mental health support systems, advocating for their expansion to serve a broader population in Uganda.

Image: A boy waves goodbye to his grandmother on his way to school in Uganda © Save the Children in Uganda

Abstract

The traumatic experiences of widows in Northern Uganda are in a subtle intersection of cultural practices, social stigma, and the impacts of widowhood on their mental and physical health. Utilising data from local 'Specialised, In-Depth Information & Newsletters' (SIDINL), this analysis captures a comprehensive narrative of widowhood through online platforms that serve as micro-humanitarian networks. These networks enable widows to share their stories, access support, and engage in a communal healing process facilitated by local therapists and humanitarian workers. Using Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), these interventions aim to foster resilience and positive change among the different types of widows. Culturally sensitive and community-based approaches address the unique challenges of this local context such as the polygamous marriage balance, childlessness, and land grabbing issues. The findings advocate for humanitarian leaders at all levels to tailor strategies to empower all people in crisis, by integrating legal, economic, and psychological support to transform their roles from passive recipients to active participants in their healing and empowerment journeys.

Leadership relevance

This analysis informs humanitarian leadership by highlighting the necessity of tailor-made, culturally sensitive, community-based interventions that address the diverse challenges faced by the different types of people requiring humanitarian assistance around the world, in this case, widows in Northern Uganda. The innovative use of SIDINL newsletters as micro-humanitarian networks in this region showcases the potential of interpersonal digital platforms to bridge gaps between local experiences and global humanitarian efforts, capturing more nuanced, timely, and detailed data, and enabling the design of empowering and effective humanitarian support programs that combine in-situ knowledge with broader humanitarian strategies. This paper also urges humanitarian leaders to consider the unique social environment of each region, ensuring interventions are inclusive and equitable for all, from the most empowered to the most vulnerable.

Ethics Statement

The newsletters used to access the widow's stories are contained within a private digital space and are not publicly available online. Permission to use this data was obtained from the creators and all participants involved. Consent was explicitly granted by the participants for their stories to be used in this article, ensuring confidentiality and respect for the participants' privacy. The author has confirmed consent from research participants and confirmed that, in this context, a formal institutional ethics process was not required.

Introduction

In many African communities, patriarchal traditions dictate that women have limited rights and autonomy. Widows, in particular, frequently experience social discrimination and stigma. Vulnerable to isolation, they feel like social burdens and lack support. For instance, widows in rural South Africa perceive themselves as burdens to their extended families and struggle with deep social isolation and humiliating cultural stereotypes, while childless widows in rural Nigeria endure extreme distress and ostracism, with their childlessness intensifying their life hardships (Motsoeneng and Modise, 2020; Ugwu et al., 2020). This isolation is compounded by community perceptions that view them as a bad omen or as individuals who bring bad luck.

Widows are often blamed for their husbands' deaths and subjected to harmful cultural practices such as widow inheritance, where a widow is forced to marry a male relative of her deceased husband to retain her social status and property (Asiimwe, 2001; Karanja, 2003). The experiences of female widowhood in African societies are shaped by factors such as location, social connections, age, status, class, and ethnicity, but are all linked by the theme of social belonging (Fasanmi and Ayivor, 2021). The stress and trauma of losing a spouse, coupled with these challenges, have profound impacts on the mental and physical health of African widows. They often suffer from depression, anxiety, and other health issues due to their precarious living conditions.

Widowhood in Uganda, as in many other African countries, presents a severe source of various humanitarian challenges.[1] This article explores the traumatic experiences of widowed women in Uganda using qualitative data found through a netnographic approach from online reports that act as micro humanitarian networks. These humanitarian networks foster a communal journey from trauma toward healing for widows, who work in collaboration with therapists, humanitarians, and local people within a shared space to share their widowhood experiences and seek support.

Humanitarian workers and independent researchers bolster these efforts by providing necessary resources to enhance the capacity of these networks, ensuring they can offer effective and sustainable support to widows. The micro-networks facilitate a deeper understanding of the issue by connecting local widowhood experiences with external professionals who can investigate the problem in depth, offering insights and solutions that might not

be apparent from a local perspective alone, combining localised knowledge with broader humanitarian strategies.

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The research concept

The study leverages Specialised, In-Depth Information & Newsletters (SIDINL) networks as a tool for analysing the trauma and challenges faced by widows in Uganda and the tools being used to support them. SIDINL networks function as micro-humanitarian networks, providing a structured yet flexible platform for gathering, curating, and disseminating localised information and experiences. These networks operate as a series of online newsletters curated by local knowledge holders, specifically designed to address the information needs of researchers and workers mostly in the humanitarian field by presenting a range of firsthand accounts and localised perspectives. The curators, deeply embedded within their communities, collect and present information that reflects the immediate realities and challenges faced by local populations. There is a decentralised vision and minimal central oversight of the newsletters, allowing local curators significant autonomy in selecting topics and narratives. This structure ensures that the newsletters remain relevant and resonate with both local and international audiences, fostering a richer understanding of local contexts (Nsokele and Kika, 2024). A more detailed analysis of the mechanisms of these micro-networks is presented in Figure 1.

For this study, online reports from SIDINL newsletters distributed throughout 2023 were gathered to analyse female widowhood practices in Uganda, focusing primarily on the northern rural region.[2] In this instance, the newsletters are structured as social media platforms where women share their stories in private digital spaces with each other and a small audience of external foreign professionals, like humanitarian or mental health practitioners.

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[1] There are various estimates about the specific characteristics of widows in Uganda, but the latest detailed data from the Uganda National Household Survey 2016-2017 (Table 10.11) reports: i) 86% of widows live as the heads of their households, ii) 74% of widows are economically active, iii) 48% of widows have never been to school, iv) 68% of widows are illiterate, v) a large majority of widows live in rural areas, engaging in subsistence farming. In total, there are over 1 million widows in Uganda, or 12% of the female population aged above 15 years old. See: https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/03_20182016_UNHS_FINAL_REPORT.pdf.

[2] The northern region has historically had the highest ratio of widows, and the proportion was highest in the sub-region of Karamoja, with 8% of the total male and female population aged above 15 years old being classified as widow or widower in the latest 2019-2020 Uganda National Household Survey Report. See: https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/09_2021Uganda-National-Survey-Report-2019-2020.pdf.

Figure 1. SIDINL micro-networks

Mechanisms of SIDINL

1. LOCAL CURATION AND REPORTING
Local curators gather data on social isolation and economic hardships, creating accessible reports.

2. ETHICAL FRAMEWORK AND STANDARDS
Newsletters follow strict ethical standards to ensure balanced, transparent reports.

3. TARGETED AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT
Distributed to selected humanitarian workers and researchers for effective intervention.

4. FEEDBACK AND INTERACTION
Encourages dynamic exchange of ideas and feedback between curators and audiences.

Enhancing Humanitarian Efforts

1. RESOURCE PROVISION
External professionals provide resources and expertise to support local communities.

2. COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH
Professionals collaborate with curators for in-depth studies and strategies.

3. POLICY ADVOCACY
Use network information to advocate for policies that empower local people.

"SIDINL MICRO-NETWORKS ENHANCE HUMANITARIAN EFFORTS BY CONNECTING LOCAL AND GLOBAL INSIGHTS."

Source: Nsokele and Kika (2024).

The reports follow the journey of healing of widowed women over several months and offer a dynamic and evolving perspective on their experiences. Unlike most humanitarian reports that capture static snapshots through one-time or short interviews, these reports provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the ongoing challenges and resilience of the women, ensuring that the complexities of their healing processes and the influence of various support mechanisms can be better documented[3].

Community psychology

An analysis of the reports identifies key themes and narratives that run throughout, including envisioning a preferred future, recognising strengths and positive moments, and fostering a communal journey toward healing in collaboration with local therapists. The latter theme is emphasised and enhanced through the use of the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) intervention model (Joubert and Guse, 2021), which emphasises the individual's

Figure 2. Structure of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) Intervention Model

Theoretical Foundation

SOLUTION-FOCUSED ASSUMPTIONS
- Solutions separate from problems.
- Future is created, not determined by the past.
- Solutions co-constructed in therapy and community.
- Language builds solutions, not diagnoses problems.
- Problems are not constant; exceptions build solutions.
- Small changes lead to larger shifts.
- Clients have motivation and resources to improve.

Practical Application
Respect each client's unique journey. Incorporate community voices and adapt interventions based on client needs.

Outcome Goals
Increase hope and well-being by focusing on future possibilities, leveraging strengths, and creating an empowering narrative.

Components of Narratives

THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP
- Collaborative partnership; therapist and client co-travel, empowering the client.

MEETING POINT - ESTABLISHING THE CLIENT'S GOALS
- Identify desired outcomes early.
- Use questions to clarify goals, fostering hope and direction.

PREFERRED FUTURE PATH
- Help clients articulate their desired future, cultivating positivity and motivation.

RESOURCE PATH
- Identify and reinforce strengths, past successes, and exceptions.
- Use resource-oriented techniques to build resilience.

LANGUAGE BRIDGE
- Use future-focused language to promote a positive narrative.
- Amplify client's strengths and preferred futures.

POINT OF DEPARTURE - CONCLUSION OF THERAPY
- End sessions with positive affirmations and reflections.
- Encourage clients to notice small successes and continue effective behaviors.

Source: Adapted from Joubert and Guse (2021)

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[3] This approach can be supported by the findings presented in humanitarian reports like the 'UN Women Uganda Q4 Newsletter 2023', which profiles activities and voices of program beneficiaries, including those related to women's economic empowerment and ending violence against women.

desired outcomes, strengths, and resources, and focuses on novel solutions, hope, and subjective well-being within the community. This method underscores the therapeutic-community relationship as a cooperative endeavour to foster positive change, aligning with the broader objectives of positive psychology and adapting to various trauma types and individual recovery paths. The structure of the SFBT model, which was implemented in these instances for widows in Uganda, is presented in Figure 2.

The SFBT approach highlights the collaborative nature of community-based positive psychology, and emphasises the significance of cultural context and the development of local social support systems in promoting well-being. African psychology, in particular, underscores the centrality of culture and the inequitable distribution of power in multiracial social spaces. This perspective recognises that local psychosocial support practices are inherently more collective and pragmatic, and capitalises on networks within the cultural contexts of each region (Ebersöhn et al., 2018).

The online interactions in these newsletters, facilitated by local curators who present this community mental health journey of female widowhood in a respectful and private manner, alongside external humanitarian professionals who meticulously examine this collaborative effort, provide valuable insights. These insights elucidate the impact of contextual factors on mental health and well-being within one of the most vulnerable social groups in Uganda and also provide an important insight into effective community-based mental health practices for vulnerable groups in humanitarian crises across the world.

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Illuminating trauma through SFBT

The SFBT interventions focus on current circumstances and future hopes, rather than analysing the past. Although it is often conceived of as a short-term, goal-focused therapeutic approach, emphasising the construction of solutions rather than dwelling on problems, it distinguishes itself from traditional therapies by starting with a vision of life where the issue is resolved and then working backward to identify resources and steps to get there.[4] In the Ugandan context, this begins with asking widows questions like:

[4] See: https://solutionfocused.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SF-Treatment-of-Trauma-revised.pdf

- What would it look like if you could return to the job market with confidence?

- How would your day change if you felt more welcomed by your community again?

- What would you do differently if you no longer felt isolated?

These questions help establish a positive focus and create a vision that motivates the widows to work towards their goals. The mental health therapist collaborates with the widow to identify existing strengths, coping mechanisms, and social support, resources that become the building blocks for healing. Follow up questions might include:

- How have you managed to take care of your children despite the challenges?

- What community resources, like women's or local groups, have you accessed before?

- What traditional practices or beliefs have given you strength?

Relational questions are crucial to explore connections with others, extending the therapy sessions beyond the widows themselves. This involves discussing supportive family members, friends, and networks in a longer-term scope of community participatory action. Examples of relational questions, tailored to local customs and relationships in Northern Uganda, include:

- How can the elders in your village support your healing journey?

- What role does religion (church, mosque, etc.) play in your support system?

- How can we involve your children in creating a positive environment at home?

In one example, a widow who lost her husband due to bandit violence envisioned a future where she feels safe, connected, and empowered. The widow revealed that she has a group of supportive younger sisters who check on her daily and that she also finds strength in her faith and daily prayers. She describes a life where she lives freely in her village without fear, even taking up leadership roles in local women's groups, but says that this might change when her sisters marry in a few years, and she will not be able to be active in public life.

Another widow grieving the loss of her partner focused on maintaining her cultural rituals and traditions as a way to honour his memory and find solace. She envisioned a future where she regularly participates in cultural rituals that celebrate her husband's life and strong legacy in the community. She was part of a polygamous marriage, but

now she has no communication with the other wives of her husband. She mentioned a local elder who guides her in performing rituals with a community group that participates in these traditional ceremonies, since her husband remains an outstanding and honorable person for the village. In this example, practical steps to foster healing and connection might involve creating a support network among the wives, allowing them to share together as a small group their grief and their life experiences.

This form of collective narrative therapy with social interventions that encourage group-led practical actions, group discussions and activity sessions, showcases the potential of the SFBT model to enhance mental health in impoverished communities across Africa, and foster closer collaboration between vulnerable people, therapists, reporters, humanitarian practitioners, and communities.

Understanding diverse conditions

The application of the SGBT model in Northern Uganda involves integrating this mental health approach into humanitarian efforts and requires leadership and coordination from local and international NGOs working in the region. Therapists and humanitarian workers conduct regular group sessions where widows share their desired outcomes, strengths, and support systems. Community meetings are organised to discuss and enhance social networks, involving local leaders and various practitioners to provide holistic support. This ensures that the therapy is as culturally sensitive as possible and effectively addresses the unique challenges faced by widows in this region.

The narratives of grief that are presented in the therapies and the corresponding wider discussions in the newsletters reveal a rare peculiarity that can be easily misrepresented in humanitarian terms. Polygamous marriages are still very common in the northern regions, and a deceased husband may reflect a loss for many wives and their families.[5] The power relations within polygamous marriages can significantly affect the different experiences and coping mechanisms of widows. The newsletters show, for example, that older wives, who typically have more children, may possess greater influence within the family and continue to manage household affairs. They may even have the authority to rule over other wives or marry another male relative to maintain their status and security. This arrangement can provide stability for herself and her children, and may partially address the emotional and psychological aspects of her grief. On the contrary, other widows may find themselves completely isolated, especially the younger, childless wives. They might be relegated to a subservient role, remaining unmarried and exposed to economic hardships and social stigma. A young,

childless widow might be seen as a burden and may receive little support from her late husband's family. She could face severe social isolation, making it difficult to secure basic necessities for herself and any dependents.

Younger, childless widows often face the double stigma of being widows and not having children. This dual burden exacerbates their social isolation and reduces their chances of remarrying or being accepted by the community (Ugwu et al., 2020). A young widow without children can be viewed with suspicion and pity and might avoid public life and remain secluded, fearing judgment from both her in-laws and her community in rural Uganda.

The therapy sessions and newsletters reveal this complex social structure of interconnections between widows in polygamous marriages and highlights how certain widows are hidden from humanitarian interventions, excluding them from potential support networks. These women might not seek out or receive aid, as they do not participate in community activities where such support is typically distributed, further entrenching their isolation and hardship. Invisible widows like these women highlight the importance for humanitarian organisations to look beyond what is immediately discernible in crises, and make forming deep connections with local leaders and all types of community members essential to the earliest planning stages of interventions.

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Understanding other regionally specific issues like land grabbing, which threatens many widows' survival across Uganda (International Justice Mission, 2014), are similarly vital to designing effective interventions. For many widows, land is a crucial asset that supports their livelihood through agriculture. When their land is taken away, they lose their primary source of income, plunging them into deeper poverty. Many widows reveal that they often face legal challenges in asserting their rights to land, particularly in regions where customary laws and practices deny them inheritance rights. Land grabbing not only strips widows of their economic resources but also isolates them from their communities. Without land, widows may lose their social standing and connections, further alienating them and limiting their access to community support (Mwaka, 1998). Widows who are forced off their land may move to urban areas in search of work, losing their ties to the rural community that once provided them with social support.

[5]   According to the 2019–2020 Uganda National Household Survey Report, 6% of Ugandans over 15 years old are in polygamous unions. In the northern regions polygamy is much more common, and in Karamoja sub-region over 26% of persons are classified as polygamous. See: https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/09_2021Uganda-National-Survey-Report-2019-2020.pdf

Humanitarian implications

Understanding these diverse scenarios reveals some key considerations and strategies for humanitarian organisations and leaders, both in this specific Ugandan context, and more generally in crisis situations across the globe.

In Northern Uganda, acknowledging the intra-widow hierarchies in rural societies, especially among widows of polygamous marriages, is essential. Interventions must be tailored to address the specific needs of different types of widows in Uganda, ensuring that those with less power and visibility receive adequate support, and remain at the core of relevant support systems (Tshaka et al., 2023). Implementing targeted outreach programs should involve home visits from local therapists that can help identify and support the most vulnerable widows who are isolated due to stigma. Therapists may also perform the role of an informal humanitarian worker, providing isolated widows with essential food, medical care, and psychological support.

Close analysis of SIDINL reports reveal the unique, situational needs that should be addressed in developing support and humanitarian programs in any crisis. This might include something more than simply counselling services or communication sessions, but also skills training, and economic empowerment initiatives. In the Ugandan case, it could be vocational training programs for widows to gain skills to achieve financial independence, reducing their reliance on family members who might not be supportive.

In Uganda, the community psychology SFBT approach has created small community sensitisation programs aimed at reducing the stigma associated with widowhood or childlessness. These programs involved local leaders, religious figures, and other community groups to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment (Nwaoga et al., 2021). Collaborating with village elders to create safe spaces for all widows to gather, share their experiences, and receive support can enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions (Dube, 2022). These resilient support networks should be open to all widows, without power imbalances, providing emotional support, practical advice, and a sense of community, particularly among themselves. In the wider context, involving local leaders and elders in support processes to ensure interventions are culturally appropriate and widely accepted is key to any effective intervention. Their endorsement can help legitimise the support programs and encourage community participation (Motsoeneng and Modise, 2020).

An effective intervention requires looking at people and their needs from within the local context, rather than imposing external perceptions and solutions, and understanding the specific cultural and social nuances of each community is crucial. In Northern Uganda, widows in polygamous marriages face unique challenges that differ significantly from those in monogamous marriages, and programs that do not account for these differences may fail to address the root causes of their vulnerabilities.

An effective intervention requires looking at people and their needs from within the local context, rather than imposing external perceptions and solutions, and understanding the specific cultural and social nuances of each community is crucial.

Foreign humanitarian organisations working in Uganda often recognise that social stigma traps widows in poverty. However, they must also consider how this stigma operates on multiple levels, particularly affecting younger or childless widows in polygamous marriages (Kassaw and Shumye, 2021). While foreign NGOs acknowledge the presence of local female support systems, often, they do not investigate how these incorporate all conditions of widowhood.

Additionally, foreign organisations may attribute the poverty of widows to a lack of education or opportunities, failing to see it as a result of pervasive social discrimination and cultural norms, since some widows might possess necessary skills and knowledge but still face economic hardships due to land grabbing, legal discrimination, and social ostracism. Humanitarian program design and planning should ensure that support is accessible to all different instances of people, especially those who are the most vulnerable and overlooked, inclusive of all, and accounting for the diverse conditions they face (Mezzanotte et al., 2022; Wirastri and Van Huis, 2021). This involves, however, very detailed assessments of local social structures and power.

Newsletters as humanitarian networks

The Northern Ugandan SIDINL micro-networks operate as places to tell shared stories of widowhood, and play a crucial role in shedding light on these complex realities—providing valuable insights that inform humanitarian strategies. Each widow's situation requires a tailored approach that considers her specific context, ensuring that she receives the support she needs to rebuild her life with dignity and hope. Personalised healing strategies involve understanding the trauma experienced by each widow and offering individual and collective care that addresses her specific psychological and emotional needs. This might include one-on-one counselling, group therapy sessions, or community support groups. For instance, a widow who has experienced or still faces violence may benefit from intensive trauma-focused therapy and support from peers who have undergone similar experiences, in and out of the local context (Mahat Shamir and Leichtentritt, 2023). The diverse scenarios in the SIDINL newsletters illustrate the

complexity of widowhood, and the importance of tailoring support and healing strategies with unique attention (Thomas, 2021).

The Northern Ugandan SIDINL micro-networks operate as places to tell shared stories of widowhood, and play a crucial role in shedding light on these complex realities—providing valuable insights that inform humanitarian strategies.

The SIDINL newsletters also serve as vital humanitarian networks by documenting and disseminating the diverse experiences and survival strategies of widows. They showcase diverse situations of life, capturing a wide range of widowhood experiences, from those who thrive with strong community support to those who struggle in isolation. This diversity is crucial for designing interventions that are inclusive and comprehensive. By sharing stories of widows in polygamous marriages, childless widows, and those who have faced extreme isolation or even violence, the newsletters can provide a holistic view of the varying needs and challenges (Tshaka et al., 2023).

The newsletters also have the potential to inform humanitarian strategies by offering data-driven insights into the real-life situations of widows, which can inform the design and implementation of targeted programs (Nsokele and Kika, 2024). For example, analysis of the newsletters reveals other common themes such as land disputes, social stigma, and economic hardship, which can then be addressed through specific programs and policies. The newsletters perform as networks of interactions and can help ensure that interventions remain responsive and adaptive to changing circumstances by regularly updating the experiences and needs of widows (Huisman and Lemke, 2022). For example, if the newsletters report increases in land grabbing incidents, humanitarian organisations can prioritise legal aid and land rights advocacy in their interventions.

Encouraging the participation of people in crisis in creating and refining support programs helps to ensure that interventions are relevant and effective. Regular feedback through newsletter networks such as the one operating for widows in Uganda can guide the development of community-based initiatives that better meet individual and community needs.

Envisioning empowerment

Across different African cultures, widows are subject to various forms of discrimination and deprivation, often suffering deplorable abuse and powerlessness. In Uganda, the SFBT community psychology approach in relation to widowhood is creating safe spaces where widows can share their experiences, and gain support from local therapists, fostering a sense of community and collective resilience essential for their long-term well-being (Joubert and Guse, 2021).

In humanitarian terms, enabling widows to take control of their lives and situations reflects the framework of empowerment theory (Ude and Njoku, 2017). Empowerment theory focuses on reducing powerlessness created by negative valuations based on membership of a stigmatised group, and involves developing an effective support system for those who have been blocked from achieving individual or collective goals because of the severity of the discrimination they suffer. Applying empowerment theory to humanitarian interventions involves helping vulnerable people attain consciousness of their lack of power and an awareness of the forces that perpetuate their powerlessness. Empowerment signifies developing a capability to increase personal, interpersonal, or political power, allowing vulnerable groups, like Ugandan widows, to have greater control over their life situations. In this context, practical humanitarian applications of empowerment theory have included:

- Consciousness raising and educating widows about their rights and the social, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to their oppression. This can be achieved through community humanitarian programs, and informational campaigns that highlight legal rights and available resources.

- Collective action through encouraging widows to form or join support groups where they can advocate for their rights and support each other. These groups can serve as a humanitarian platform to share experiences, provide mutual support, and engage in collective bargaining for better treatment.

- Economic empowerment by providing business support to help widows achieve financial independence. This includes training in sustainable agriculture, crafts, and small business management to become economically self-sufficient and less vulnerable to exploitation.

- Legal advocacy and support through the establishment of legal aid services to help widows navigate the legal system and assert their rights. This includes providing legal representation, human rights education, and assistance in drafting documents.

Final remarks

This analysis underscores the profound need for local, personally responsive interventions to support different situations of widowhood in Northern Uganda and beyond. The importance of empowering widows through community-based approaches and personalised healing strategies has significant humanitarian applications. True humanitarian support extends beyond immediate aid, since it requires fostering a sense of more direct agency and resilience among vulnerable people, enabling them to reclaim their lives and roles within their communities.

True humanitarian support extends beyond immediate aid, since it requires fostering a sense of more direct agency and resilience among vulnerable people, enabling them to reclaim their lives and roles within their communities.

The use of SIDINL newsletters as micro-humanitarian networks showcases the potential of some interpersonal, digital platforms to bridge gaps between local experiences and global humanitarian efforts. Widows in Uganda can share their stories in safe, private spaces as therapeutic sessions, accessing a spectrum of support that includes mental health professionals and external humanitarian workers. This digital approach enhances the visibility of their struggles for suitable recipients of knowledge, and facilitates the development of tailored solutions that can be practical and sustainable.

This humanitarian approach is empowering, integrating various support systems (legal, economic, and psychological) as part of a holistic strategy to address trauma. The shift towards more inclusive, personally integrated, and supportive efforts can create a robust framework for aiding vulnerable people such as Ugandan widows on a one-on-one basis. This is a very resource-intensive approach, but better addresses immediate needs, building a foundation for long-term resilience and empowerment, and transforming widows from passive recipients of aid to active participants in their journey towards healing and self-sufficiency.

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Evolution, ideas and the possibility of change of the humanitarian sector

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Abstract

This article reflects on the research project _Thinking about the evolution of the humanitarian sector: an exploration within the world of ideas_, conducted by Raphael Gorgeu, Senior Research Associate at HERE-Geneva. The project explores the dynamics of change specific to the humanitarian sector through a socio-phenomenological approach, acknowledging the centrality of ideas in order to grasp how social reality changes. Based on a literature review of 8,000 documents from the international humanitarian system, it describes the historical evolution in the way humanitarian aid has been thought of over the period between 1991 and 2021, and reveals the presence of autonomous forces and mechanisms shaping the idea of humanitarian action over time. By introducing the approach developed for this work and discussing some of its conclusions, this article aims to be as useful for researchers as it is for humanitarian aid professionals and leaders, providing an original way to think through the logics of change specific to this sector.

Leadership relevance

By exploring the dynamics of evolution specific to the humanitarian sector, this article contributes to reflections on how professionals, leaders and researchers in the sector think about change. The original analytical framework, the broad historical perspective on the last thirty years, and the revelation of some mechanisms and forces that orientate logics of transformation offer useful additional levers to approach the conduct of change.

Introduction

Since its formalisation at the beginning of the 1990s, the humanitarian sector has undergone profound changes. These transformations have accelerated since the 2000s, and even more so in the last decade, notably under the influence of an expansion of the sector, its globalisation and various reforms. In light of this evolution, I conducted, as Senior Research Associate at HERE-Geneva, a research project titled, _Thinking about the evolution of the humanitarian sector: an exploration within the world of ideas_, which explores the dynamics of change specific to the humanitarian sector.

Applying insights from theoretical frameworks in social sciences which acknowledge the centrality of 'the world of ideas', this work seeks to bring new perspectives on how to approach change in humanitarian aid by focusing particularly on the period 1991-2021.

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This article aims to introduce some of the key elements of this research and is intended to be useful to scholars, professionals and leaders of humanitarian aid in thinking about how to approach logics of change specific to this sector. It discusses the importance of examining the collective representations of humanitarian aid (and their evolution) in order to contribute to reflections on how change unfolds within this sector. It also focuses on the central argument of this research, namely the presence of mechanisms and forces autonomous to agents[1] that influence the transformation of these collective representations. In the light of this finding, the article concludes by questioning the room for manoeuvre available to humanitarian agents in driving change. The reader can refer to the full report of this research for further details and content, and to the podcast episode _Spelunking_ produced by The Trumanitarian, which also offers an overview of this work.

The centrality of ideas to think about change and the notion of a 'conceptual framework of thoughts'

Various approaches could be mobilised to address this issue of change of the humanitarian sector. Some would be inclined to examine, through a 'clinical' approach, the geopolitical characteristics of each context in order to analyse their impacts on the modes of action,

opportunities and limits of each agent and of the sector in general. It would be equally relevant to look at the evolution of crises and needs in an attempt to explain how this sector seeks to adapt to an external reality in continuous transformation. Others could try to mobilise macro political analyses to explain how this sector is influenced by a more global geopolitical context (decolonisation, the end of the cold war, the shift towards a multipolar world, etc.). It would also be possible to analyse the evolution of the structuring of the sector as a factor to explain change by highlighting games of influence or domination between agents. All these approaches have in common the understanding of the evolution of this sector through mechanisms of adaptation and influence in light of an external reality ('_out there_').

However, to address this question, this research took an alternative path, drawing mainly from the phenomenological current of philosophy and the constructivist paradigm in International Relations and sociology. Described as _socio-phenomenological_, the approach developed consisted of acknowledging the centrality of ideas and representations for understanding how social reality changes, considering that they have a significant influence on agents' behaviour and on the trajectories of a sector.

Applied to the humanitarian domain, the ways in which reality and humanitarian aid are approached, and thus the ways for an agent to subscribe to them, would be the very basis of any action and transformation. The behaviours, choices, strategies, actions of agents, and the orientations and mechanisms of evolution of this sector, would be fundamentally part of ways of thinking, and ways of reading a reality. The evolution in the ways of thinking about crises, of considering what humanitarian action means or of approaching the nature of needs would then be central constituents of response strategies deployed by agents and would shape the trajectories through which the sector evolves.

**Describing and thinking about a crisis mainly as an emergency situation, or on the contrary, as a protracted situation, impacts the manner an agent (and the sector) articulates its action in this reality.**

For instance, describing and thinking about a crisis mainly as an emergency situation, or on the contrary, as a protracted situation, impacts the manner an agent (and the sector) articulates its action in this reality. Another example that illustrates this is how describing and considering a crisis as mainly a humanitarian situation or as mainly linked to political issues, influences the way an agent designs its operational strategy in this reality. For instance, some organisations (such as Médecins Sans

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[1] The term 'agents' is to be understood in this article as referring to structured and recognised organisations, and not to individuals.

Frontières), see the migratory situation in Europe as a consequence of the inhuman policies of European states and the European Union. The action they then take is a form of political engagement, where their presence is not only justified by and articulated around a response to humanitarian needs but is designed as a political act that aims to confront European migration policies.

One final example is evidenced by the humanitarian response of the United Nations and its partners (NGOs and donors) to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21. This response was mainly part of a global reading of this crisis, understood as a human and societal one (and not only as a matter of public health), an approach that was presented in the reports of the UN Secretary General (UN, 2020). It was no longer a question of only responding to a medical emergency but of thinking about humanitarian action in a broader economic and social framework, articulating both short-term and long-term actions, and multi-dimensional in its nature.

Each agent considers its action and its mode of action within the frame of specific meanings given to humanitarian aid. These different ways of thinking about aid (which translate into action) refer to what this work has called 'conceptual frameworks of thoughts'. These conceptual frameworks of thoughts constitute the very foundations of the action of the various agents involved in humanitarian work.[2] Within the humanitarian sector, various conceptual frameworks of thoughts face each other. Some conceptual frameworks of thoughts are more dominant than others (carried and integrated—to different degrees—by a majority of agents), and thus construct significant trajectories and contours in the way in which the idea of humanitarian aid evolves and influences the positionings of the different agents. The more these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts are internalised within a sector, the more they influence the behaviours and ways of doing of agents and of the sector.

These dominant frameworks of thoughts are reflected in narratives and patterns of responses to crises. They are modes of thoughts which, imposing themselves as dominant, orient the modalities of action, but leave a margin of manoeuvre in the way they are translated into reality. Exploring how change deploys within the humanitarian sector therefore required examining the evolution of these dominant conceptual frameworks.

Methodological approach

In order to grasp the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector, this work took a kind of shortcut, focusing mainly on the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the dominant social group in the sector, i.e. what is commonly referred to as 'the international humanitarian system' under the aegis of the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Indeed, the characteristics of this international humanitarian system allow us to consider it as a social group envisaged as a "real, but partial, directly observable collective unit based on collective, continuous and active attitudes" (Gurvitch in *Lexique de Sociologie*, 2010, p150), whose members "interact according to established rules" and "define themselves as members of the group; in other words, they have specific ideas about the forms of interaction and these ideas are morally binding expectations for them and for the other members of the group but not for the ones outside" (Merton in *Lexique de Sociologie*, 2010, p150). Furthermore, due to its weight in the humanitarian sector (such as its financial volume), the organisations which compose it and gravitate around it, its normative role which orients (or at least influences) a large number of humanitarian agents, and its legitimacy granted by the United Nations resolution 46/182 of 1991, this international humanitarian system has raised itself as the dominant mechanism in the sector.

On these bases, the methodology consisted, first of all, of a literature review of all the documents produced or referred to by the IASC (and its subsidiary groups) over the period 1991-2021 (or at least the documents accessible over this period[3]). These documents range from meeting notes, to action plans, strategic documents, policy frameworks, evaluation or mission reports, and operational procedures, but also include documents external to the IASC such as UN policy documents, reports of summits and key conferences, independent studies or evaluations, contributions from a multitude of agents, etc.

Additionally, considering that conceptual frameworks of thoughts translate in action, this literature review was complemented by the analysis of all Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs or CAPs[4]) developed within the international humanitarian system during the period studied. These Humanitarian Response Plans present the operational approach designed for a response to a humanitarian crisis under the coordination of the IASC. Finally, these two blocks were reinforced by other existing research (notably linked to the evolution of the humanitarian sector and analysis of specific crises or themes) and by the mobilisation of other documents

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[2] This focus on 'the world of ideas' finds its roots in the phenomenological paradigm in philosophy, as well as in the constructivist paradigm in International Relations and in phenomenological sociology. More specifically, the notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts has been inspired by the concept of épistémé developed by Michel Foucault and that of social representations put forward by Serge Moscovici. The reader can refer to the full version of the research paper for further details on the theoretical framework used to develop this general approach, along with a more detailed definition of this notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts. A partial bibliography is also available at the end of this article.

[3] All these documents were mainly found on the IASC website, Welcome to the IASC | IASC (interagencystandingcommittee.org)
[4] CAPs (Consolidated Appeals Process) and HRPs (Humanitarian Response Plans) are the main tools for articulating the international humanitarian system's response strategies to a crisis and for aggregating all the funding needed to implement them. CAPs were created following the resolution 46/182 of 1991, while HRPs appeared later.

when the literature review exercise was not sufficient or needed to be completed (such as donors' annual reports, strategic documents of certain NGOs, etc).

In total, approximately 8,000 documents were reviewed as part of this research project.

The idea of humanitarian aid in constant transformation

On the basis of this literature review, this research attempted to construct a historical description of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector. Grasping these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts and their evolution over the last 30 years means identifying the major and profound trends in the ways of thinking about humanitarian aid, which guide action, and which can be observed over a long period of time. This historical description highlights that the dominant collective representations of humanitarian aid are neither pre-existing nor fixed. Despite certain continuities, profound changes in the way humanitarian aid is conceived of and deployed (in terms of its main orientations) can be observed and identified.[5]

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As an illustration, the link between humanitarian aid and a comprehensive approach to needs has undergone an evolution in the last three decades. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, humanitarian action was mainly considered as an 'emergency action', relatively disconnected from broader developmentalist and political agendas. In the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, the concept of a linear continuum between 'emergency, rehabilitation and development' emerged. This concept has evolved again since the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, and a certain consensus has appeared around describing some humanitarian contexts as 'long-term crises', alongside an associated narrative about the volume and cost of humanitarian assistance and the lack of development means in such contexts. This consensus has contributed to an evolution in how to address the vulnerabilities of populations. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals that are currently occupying a central place in humanitarian action, a new paradigm has emerged seeking a nexus between humanitarianism, development and peace.

Another example is the central role of national governments in humanitarian assistance. In the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the global geopolitical landscape and the dominant position of international NGOs within this sector allowed very little space to think of the central role of national governments in humanitarian action. However, this concept has gained considerable importance in recent years and is now firmly anchored in the dominant thoughts of the sector, reinforced by the United Nations resolution 46/182 of 1991 and the road towards Agenda 2030.[6] This trend is not only imposed by a broader geopolitical context (such as the greater capacity of some states to coordinate humanitarian assistance or the desire for others to assert their sovereignty), but is widely promoted within the sector itself. The crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has consolidated this trend, catapulting the role of states into a new dimension of leadership.

The idea of the scope of humanitarian action has also evolved over the last thirty years. Mainly focused on 'life-saving' activities such as emergency health, and access to food, water, and shelter during the structuring phase of the sector in the early 1990s, it now embraces a wider range of actions considered inherent to humanitarian action, including income-generating activities (from 1996 onwards), rehabilitation and early recovery (from 1997), mental health care (from 1999), disaster risk reduction (from 2000 and even more so from 2005), etc. A turning point took place from 1997 onwards, with the emergence of the concept of 'protection' as an integral part of humanitarian aid. This concept was mainly initiated in the frame of what was then called 'complex emergencies'[7]. It was then extended to the rest of the international humanitarian system through the development of specific approaches to protection according to topics or contexts, such as the application of protection in situations of internal displacement (IASC, 1999) or in the context of natural disasters (IASC, 2006). Assistance and protection are seen as complementary, and this complementarity as indivisible, though they continue to exist as two distinct pillars which cannot exist without each other.

This evolution in the way of thinking about the scope of humanitarian action nevertheless reveals certain invariants, such as the 'domain approach', which organises humanitarian aid into categories of specific needs (health, food and food security, water and sanitation, shelter, protection, etc.). Humanitarian responses are to some extent predefined in broad terms through this

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[5] The reader can refer to the full report for a more complete presentation of this historical description. Briefly, it is articulated around five main elements: the extension of the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid; humanitarian aid, a question of contexts; humanitarian aid, a question of agents and partnerships; humanitarian aid, a question of proximity and links with related sectors; and the idea of a humanitarian sector as a specific sector, the central piece behind the edifice of conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

[6] Agenda 2030 is the overall UN framework for pursuing Sustainable Development. See https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

[7] The term *complex emergencies* was defined by the IASC in 1994. It refers to crises characterised by a breakdown of authority resulting from conflict and requiring the mobilisation of the entire international humanitarian system and enhanced coordination to better navigate the political dimension of such contexts.

domain-based structure, mobilising general frameworks of approach and operational procedures which need to be contextualised and coordinated in their application. However, this continuity in the way humanitarian aid is understood has been challenged in recent years by the growing importance of multi-purpose cash-based assistance and social protection applied to humanitarian action. This has initiated a change in the way the needs and vulnerabilities of populations, pre-categorised by domains of activities, are understood, as well as in the way humanitarian aid is integrated into wider national policies and programs, going beyond the traditional boundaries of humanitarian aid.

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This literature review has also clearly revealed another central invariant—a very simple but particularly powerful idea—that humanitarian aid is a sector, specific and different from all others. It is anchored so profoundly in the collective representations of the humanitarian sector, that it appears to be the centrepiece of the structure of all the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. This idea is so deeply rooted in the humanitarian sector itself, but also in other sectors, that it has become impossible to imagine doing without it. Behind every discussion, every operation, every way of doing things, every policy, every document examined in this work, appears in watermark this central idea. It is difficult to trace when this idea became so important that it finally imposed itself. Based on research into the history of humanitarian aid, I would say that this idea really began to appear in the 1980s, which is considered the first stage in the structuring of the sector. With the establishment of the international humanitarian system and the UN resolution 46/182 in 1991, it gained depth and acquired a particularly strong degree of stability. The periods that followed have, for the most part, been opportunities to reinforce it, to anchor it even more deeply in the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

The evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts is certainly not linear. There are shifts and reversals, along with opposition and alternative discourses. Furthermore, no agent will fully identify itself with all these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. Indeed, they go beyond the agent's level. They should be understood as an aggregation of similarities in thinking about humanitarian aid within the sector, and more specifically within the international humanitarian

system; like a photo taken with the benefit of hindsight of the humanitarian sector as a whole, which highlights some remarkable forms.

Finally, tracing this evolution over the last thirty years in no way amounts to questioning the relevance and effectiveness of the way in which humanitarian aid is thought about and deployed. The aim of this research was not to criticise the content of these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, but simply to describe their transformation over time.

The modalities of evolution

On the basis of this historical perspective, this research also aimed to examine the modalities of evolution of these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. However, the purpose was not to look at each conceptual framework of thoughts or each situation with its respective characteristics and unseal the modalities of change specific to each. The objective was to identify potential underlying trends, in the form of forces and mechanisms of change, which go beyond particular situations, the will of agents and the particularities of each conceptual framework of thoughts; to identify certain regularities which are found over time in the way change in the humanitarian sector develops.

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In this analysis, the totality of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts are together taken as a *sui generis* social fact, considering them as a "proper object, independent of individuals" (Durkheim, in *Lexique de Sociologie*, 2010, p132). A sui generis social fact consists of "ways of acting, thinking and sensing which are external to the individual and which are endowed with a power of coercion by virtue of which they are imposed on her/him" (Ibid.). Accordingly, we shall therefore consider that "social phenomena are things and must be treated as things" (Ibid.). This 'proper object' responds to patterns of realisation which, even if resulting from a social construction, would go beyond individual will, and would impose themselves on agents. On the basis of the literature review conducted for this research, approaching the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector as a sui generis social fact comes back to trying to understand how this social object is evolving, and the mechanisms and forces at work behind this transformation.

This article presents five of the forces and mechanisms identified in this research that seem particularly enlightening for contributing to further reflection on the change modalities linked to the humanitarian sector[8].

The articulation between the diversity of agents and their positioning patterns

In parallel to games of influence and domination between agents that impact the realisation of change, the evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector is directly influenced by the number and diversity of agents which interact within, or on the periphery of, this sector. Surpassing the control that agents can have of this landscape or their capacity to influence it are two autonomous and opposing forces. One encourages the stabilisation of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector by pushing agents in the sector to share relatively similar conceptual frameworks of thoughts, to embrace the dominant ones, and thus to reinforce them. The other tends towards an extension and explosion of the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector.

The globalisation of humanitarian aid is an interesting phenomenon to illustrate these dynamics. The globalisation of humanitarian aid has led to an increase in the number and diversity of agents interacting in and with the international humanitarian system (and more generally the sector). This globalisation has accelerated since the second decade of the 21st century. Alongside traditional UN agencies such as WFP or UNHCR and international Western-led NGOs, certain states, including the BRICS countries, are making their appearance on this chessboard, as are some regional organisations such as ASEAN and other institutions like the World Bank. 'Global South' NGOs, local organisations and private sector actors are also more present in the current humanitarian space.

Within this space, logics of social reproduction and integration are developing, encouraging 'newcomers' to integrate into the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. This maintains a certain continuity and uniformity of thoughts and actions within the humanitarian sector. However, this diversification of agents also affects and profoundly transforms the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the whole sector. Indeed, each agent brings to the table its own perspectives on the manner in which humanitarian aid is (and should be) conceptualised and articulated. The meanings of humanitarian aid are therefore directly influenced by the autonomous dynamics of interactions between agents, by what is at play around the table, as well as by the porosity with other sectors in which all or some of these agents

evolve. Thus, the greater the number of agents and the greater the diversity of agents, the more the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector are likely to evolve and diversify.

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Processes and degrees of internalisation

A conceptual framework of thoughts can be recognised by, among other things, its stability over time. It is of course not irremovable or fixed for eternity, and as such it can evolve. But it is sufficiently stable to be recognised, observed and above all to eventually acquire a dominant nature. And every dominant conceptual framework of thoughts has a degree of internalisation. The higher the degree of internalisation, the more stable and embedded a conceptual framework of thoughts will be in the international humanitarian system. For instance, the concept of the centrality of protection in humanitarian action has become more deeply anchored since the late 1990s, while the degree of internalisation of the nexus between humanitarianism, development and peace is still relatively fragile.

This degree of internalisation is made possible by a *process of internalisation* that takes many forms. For instance, it manifests in the development of reference documents that articulate a conceptual framework of thoughts and define its modes of application. It can also be seen in the way a system organises itself structurally. Finally, and crucially, this internalisation process is achieved through the concrete operationalisation of a conceptual framework of thoughts. This operationalisation, whatever the judgement that some people may make of its relevance and quality, allows for concrete applications in action, responding to one of the main characteristics of a conceptual framework of thoughts: its translation into action and its ability to guide action. This is, for instance, the main challenge at stake today in the internalisation of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, which requires concrete implementation throughout humanitarian crises.

The degree of internalisation therefore fulfils a function of resistance towards the evolution of a conceptual framework of thoughts: the higher the degree of internalisation of a conceptual framework of thoughts, the more difficult it will be to revisit it.

Internalisation's impacts

In light of the weight of these degrees and processes of internationalisation, two questions arise. Does this process of internalisation impact on the very content of the conceptual framework of thoughts that it seeks to deeply anchor? And/or does it facilitate the emergence of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts?

The observations made through this research tend to show that an internalisation process does not directly influence the possibility of the emergence of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts, even if this possibility cannot be totally excluded. However, a period of intense internalisation tends to hinder reflections on other conceptual frameworks of thoughts. In this type of period, it is as if the agents' strong focus on the internalisation of a conceptual framework of thoughts leaves little mental space for discussion or reflection and revisiting the conceptual framework of thoughts concerned or other issues. In this respect, the implementation period of the cluster reform[9]—which required a considerable effort over two years (between 2005 and 2007)—was certainly one of the poorest in terms of open reflection on the ways to think about humanitarian aid.

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This observation should also be linked to what appears to be a limited capacity of the international humanitarian system to simultaneously process other or new conceptual frameworks of thoughts. Although it is difficult to assess this capacity precisely, it seems clear that the more one issue takes up space on the agenda, the less space there is to address others.

As for the impact of the internalisation process on the content of the conceptual framework of thoughts it seeks to anchor, the answer is more nuanced. Even if it appears that an internalisation process does not tend to profoundly change the conceptual framework of thoughts on which it acts, the latter is nevertheless adjusted through this process through an *operation of simplification* (or to be more exact, an *operation of decomplexification*). An overly complex conceptual framework of thoughts must, in order to gain depth during this process of internalisation, be simplified, decomplexified, and unpacked, in order to create a common understanding for the greatest number of agents. To put it another way, a conceptual framework

of thoughts that is too complex will have more difficulty establishing itself as a dominant conceptual framework of thoughts. It will need to be simplified if it is to gain acceptance in the international humanitarian system.

Confrontation between degrees of internalisation

These internalisation logics also impact the possibilities for the evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. The observations made in this research tend to show that the possibility of the emergence of a new dominant conceptual framework of thoughts is linked to the confrontation of the latter with more internalised conceptual frameworks of thoughts. That is, the more a new conceptual framework of thoughts comes into tension or confrontation (or is perceived as such) with a more deeply rooted one, the more difficult it will be to stabilise and internalise itself. Conversely, the more a new conceptual framework of thoughts does not clash with a very internalised one, or even consolidates it, the greater its possibilities of emergence.

The more a new conceptual framework of thoughts comes into tension or confrontation (or is perceived as such) with a more deeply rooted one, the more difficult it will be to stabilise and internalise itself.

In this game of confrontation between degrees of internalisation, one dominant conceptual framework of thoughts seems to be particularly powerful in its capacity to facilitate or hinder the development of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts: the idea of the humanitarian sector as a specific sector. If the emergence of a new conceptual framework of thoughts comes into tension with the idea of a humanitarian sector as a specific sector, then the force of resistance will be significantly increased. In a way, if the humanitarian sector's very existence is threatened (or is perceived to be threatened), then the forces of resistance to change will be all the stronger. This threat seems to be perceived as even greater when new ways of thinking come from outside the international humanitarian system, and even more so from outside the humanitarian sector.

These forces of resistance to preserve the existence of the humanitarian sector as an object in its own right could be seen as an additional factor in understanding why the various calls to 'break down the silos' between different sectors are so difficult to translate into action.

[9] The cluster reform, established in 2005, aimed mainly at a better coordination of the international humanitarian system. See What is the Cluster Approach? | HumanitarianResponse

A logic of progressive evolution

There is a *limited range of possibilities* for the emergence of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. That is, there is no infinite number of possible dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts at any given time. It should be considered that the *perimeter of this range of possibilities* around the development of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts is correlated to existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. That is to say, a new way of approaching humanitarian aid must be able to draw on pre-existing dominant frameworks of thoughts in order to emerge and hope to be anchored in the long term. In this sense, if an evolution in humanitarian aid implies too great a gap from existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, then the new idea will have difficulty in uniting and finding its way into collective minds. Conversely, if an evolution in the manner of approaching humanitarian aid involves a certain proximity to existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, then this new idea is more likely to develop and take root within the international humanitarian system. The evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts is therefore mainly gradual, not radical.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to highlight three main points.

The first one is to acknowledge that change of the humanitarian sector cannot be approached without looking at the world of ideas. The world of ideas shapes the way reality is interpreted and constructed. It significantly guides the behaviours of agents and the transformations of the sector. In developing this notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts, the aim was to capture some of the main collective ideas about how humanitarian aid is thought through. The second one refers to the continuous evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector. Collective representations of humanitarian aid are constantly evolving, and continuously transforming the sector. There is no one 'original' humanitarian aid that has evolved and that we should find again, as some would like. The idea of humanitarian aid is plural over time and space and is inherently changing. The third idea is that the change of the humanitarian sector, and more specifically of its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, is the result of a social construction. At the heart of this construction are forces and mechanisms of change that deploy in an autonomous manner, imposing themselves on agents.

Confronted with such a conclusion, a legitimate question must be asked: faced with forces and mechanisms of change that have acquired a certain degree of autonomy, what place is left to agents in conducting change? A constructivist approach such as the one used in this research would usually discredit the notion of a 'rational agent', which would act following a conscious, articulated reflection to bring about change. The capacity for reflection on the part of the agent is not in question here, but needs to be nuanced. Each agent is capable of making choices and decisions, which it takes in a reflective manner, which it can explain (a priori or a posteriori). Each agent also has a degree of influence and can deploy strategies in an effort to provoke change. However, an agent, and even more so a group of agents, must also deal with the forces and mechanisms that impose themselves on it (even if socially constructed), and which in many cases are sometimes unknown to it, or of which it is not really aware.

To what extent, then, do these forces and mechanisms dominate what an agent can think, how an agent behaves and how it can attempt, in an articulate way, to come up with strategies for change? The reflections that have emerged from this research, combined with my own personal experience in the humanitarian sector, leads me to suggest that the voluntary or conscious capacity of an agent or group of agents—and thus the willingness of agents to lead change—is probably overestimated.

> *To what extent, then, do these forces and mechanisms dominate what an agent can think, how an agent behaves and how it can attempt, in an articulate way, to come up with strategies for change?*

What I wish to express here, without questioning the voluntary influence that an agent can have on the evolution of the humanitarian sector, is that the change of the international humanitarian system (at least in its current state) and its conceptual frameworks of thoughts is above all a matter of mechanisms and forces relatively autonomous of agents, which are beyond the control of agents and of which the latter are rarely aware.

Of course, there are many examples of the willingness of certain agents to bring about change in the humanitarian sector. But the fact remains that in-depth discussions within the international humanitarian system on mechanisms for change are mostly absent. No broad plan, no strategy, no 'theory of change' (as it is commonly called) could be found throughout this work. Certainly, there might be ancillary discussions or documents to which this research has not had access. But the simple fact that—if they exist—they cannot find their way (in various forms) to the level of the IASC given the latter's central space within the international humanitarian system is perhaps a sign that broader thinking about change is laborious, and that the forces and mechanisms of change revealed here

are probably unknown to some, or not really considered by others.

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We are then entitled to ask ourselves whether, by being more aware of these forces and mechanisms at play, agents would gain more room for voluntary manoeuvre? Would it be possible to better control some of the modalities of change if some of them were revealed and taken into consideration by the agents? The question, as far as the humanitarian sector is concerned, remains open. Personally, I would tend to think so, but the room for manoeuvre gained might not become central to the realisation of change. The general equation is so complex, and perhaps elusive, that it would be particularly difficult to believe that we could control all aspects of how a sector evolves. Indeed, this work has identified some of these autonomous mechanisms and forces. But surely others also exist. Furthermore, these forces and mechanisms are not independent of one another. They intermingle, oppose and complement each other through complex interactions. Their weights and influences fluctuate according to situations. Attempting to model these interactions and variations in influence in their entirety appears very laborious, if not impossible, at this stage of knowledge.

But faced with of all this, the agent's intention remains. A ball thrown by an agent coming up against a multitude of others in a complex field of forces will always be difficult to control. Nevertheless, it has at its source, the agent's intention to contribute to change.

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Building stronger field teams for better outcomes: The Field Team Impact Kit

KATHRYN HARRIES

Kathryn Harries has over two decades of experience working in, with and leading or coordinating technical field teams in humanitarian and development contexts. She has recently developed a guide to support and empower these teams, which is available at www.teamimpactkit.com.

Image: Health facilities in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. © Catherine McGowan / Save the Children

Abstract

There is inadequate support for leadership, management and learning within technical field teams in humanitarian organisations, and this hinders timely, effective humanitarian action. This paper describes the journey to develop the Field Team Impact Kit (FieldTiK), an approach that provides practical guidance and tools, rather than just soft skills, to improve field team performance. It addresses the recognised challenges: that support for team leaders is scarce, access to relevant resources is often poor, team knowledge is incompletely retained, and adapting and continually improving can be difficult. Sector experts overwhelmingly agreed that use of the FieldTiK would fill a significant gap, particularly for local non-governmental organisations, enabling improved outcomes, including in accountability, locally led response, quality, adaptability, safeguarding and team well-being.

Leadership relevance

Humanitarian organisations consist of many semi-autonomous teams, often led by people with little formal leadership or management experience. The Field Team Impact Kit (FieldTiK) provides in situ, step-by-step practical guidance for improved team performance—strengthening outcomes as well as team leadership, management, knowledge, and learning. The approach encompasses the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act continuous improvement cycle, supports teams to retain knowledge between projects and emergencies, and encourages a demand-led, rather than supply-driven, flow of knowledge to field experts operationalising an organisation's vision. The FieldTiK fills a key leadership gap in the system and helps to enhance trust and accountability, for more timely and effective humanitarian action. Please contact the author if you are interested in helping to progress, pilot and refine this initiative.

Ethics Statement

This project received ethics approval from Deakin University. All research participants explicitly granted consent for their comments to be published, on the understanding that their contribution would be anonymous–aliases are used– and generalised–their organisations can't be identified. This allowed the participating sector experts to speak openly about the challenges they have experienced throughout their careers.

*This paper is based on a PhD research thesis entitled, Improving Humanitarian Impact: Development of an Innovative Guide for Empowering Technical Field Teams by Kathryn Harries.

Introduction

There continues to be inadequate support for leadership, management and learning at field level in humanitarian organisations (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018; Ramalingam, 2008), reducing the effectiveness of interventions (Larson & Foropon, 2018). This is despite the understanding that:

> Effective international action is in large part dependent on the ability of operational staff to manage and implement programmes and projects. Therefore, the operational level should be where much of the learning that is crucial to the success of international action takes place, and where critical improvements are made. (Ramalingam, 2008, p. 5)

This is a particularly acute problem for local actors and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are even more excluded from learning and training opportunities (Tanner, 2016), impacting locally led action.

The research presented in this article focuses on providing a solution to this problem for technical field teams—that is, the staff working at the frontline in technical areas such as health, shelter, or water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) who are generally the organisational representatives closest to people affected by crisis.

ALNAP (2022) reports that more than 630,000 humanitarian staff were working in countries experiencing crises in 2020, more than double the number a decade earlier—and 90% were national workers. The growing number of frontline staff means there is a "need for greater investments in management and training to ensure quality and safeguarding standards" (ALNAP, 2022, p. 62). Humanitarian field teams are central to long-neglected sector-wide challenges, including ensuring staff have the requisite skills, incorporating feedback from crisis-affected people in program design, making programs more context-specific and improving adaptability, preventing abuse and exploitation, monitoring focused on outcomes rather than outputs, and insufficient localisation (ALNAP, 2018).

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Technical field teams in humanitarian organisations operate with greater independence and less training than teams in other emergency services. Government and defence organisations follow incident management systems, such as the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AFAC, 2017), which includes comprehensive training, a single incident controller, a top-down plan, clear roles and responsibilities (including for intelligence and planning), and common terminology (Kalloniatis et al., 2020).

In contrast, field teams in humanitarian organisations operate with much weaker command and control systems (Knox-Clarke, 2017); "NGO staff and volunteers are used to significant autonomy, objectives that are long-term and often broad, consensus model decision making, and a strong focus on the needs of communities and individuals, particularly the most vulnerable and/or marginalised" (Harris, 2016, p. 21). In addition, humanitarian field teams must operate with accountability to both affected people and donors; typically, with unpredictable and inadequate levels of funding and other support (Borton, 2016). They work independently, though recognising government has primary responsibility; paying attention to cross-cutting factors such as localisation, safeguarding, diversity and inclusion; and often in dangerous environments, remote locations, with variable access to telecommunications. The devolved decision making (Bowers & Cherne, 2015; Clarke & Ramalingam, 2008) means they operate semi-autonomously, and allows for more responsive, flexible and dynamic humanitarian planning and action (Bowers & Cherne, 2015).

The need to empower humanitarian field teams is recognised in the sector. ALNAP, the global network for learning about and improving humanitarian action, recognised that supporting "field staff and partners to anticipate change and adapt their operations and programming based on new learning" will "deliver more relevant, appropriate and effective responses for millions of people affected by crisis each year" (Obrecht, 2019, p. 112). Another ALNAP report states that "effective and timely changes are harder to achieve when the knowledge of staff who are closest to communities is not maximised and respected within an organisation" (Doherty & Sundberg, 2022, p. iii). Moreover, to improve the flexibility of response, "humanitarian agencies need to engage seriously in rethinking their systems and practices to give greater decision-making power to their field teams, local partners and crisis-affected communities" and "focus on the realities that front-line staff are facing" (Obrecht, 2019, p. 12). Similarly, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance et al., 2015, p. 31) states:

> an effective response is not simply about ensuring that skilled staff are present – it will also depend on the way that individuals are managed. Research from emergency contexts shows that effective management, frameworks and procedures are as important as, if not more important than, the skills of personnel in ensuring an effective response.

The need for systematic, in situ guidance in humanitarian response has only increased since the beginning of the

COVID-19 pandemic and the greater use of remote management it engendered (HAG & CARE International, 2020).

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Humanitarian field teams are not alone in operating in an environment of devolved decision making (although they are certainly at the extreme end of the spectrum). For example, Padaki (2007) asserted that new staff in development organisations are often in roles that "require extraordinary levels of analytical, managerial, and relational skills, for which they have neither the training nor life experience" (p. 72). As a result, many field teams develop internal systems and guidance that "recreate almost the same thing many times in different functions and countries" (Parris, 2013, p. 462). Such duplication and lack of knowledge management represents a considerable waste of time and other resources that could be better directed towards maximising the effectiveness of humanitarian response.

Challenges facing field teams

A literature review identified four main problems facing technical field teams in humanitarian organisations. These are explained below.

Inadequate support for team leaders

The leaders of technical field teams may steer their teams over multiple projects spanning years, yet they generally receive inadequate support. It has been reported that humanitarian field staff experience stress and angst that stem more from "organisational and managerial pressure, as well as ineffective managers" than "considerations of security or exposure to risk" (Olive et al., 2019, p. 29). ALNAP (2018) assessed "slightly less than half" (48%) of country-level organisational leaders as being "good" or "excellent" (p. 192). Typically, organisations focus on training a single "hero" leader at country level, and "have arguably failed … to put the teams, structures and procedures in place to make leadership work" (Knox-Clarke, 2014, p. 65).

Leadership training opportunities are even harder to come by for team leaders of local actors and national NGOs. As Tanner (2016, p. 48) stated:

> The sector does not generally invest heavily in building organisational capacity or government capacity at the local level. In particular, local actors and national NGOs

are often marginalised from the most sophisticated learning and training opportunities that address leadership, management and coordination.

Knox-Clarke (2013) found that effective standardised procedures were largely lacking in the humanitarian sector. To be effective, these procedures "should be based on local [country office] good practice and regularly updated to take account of new learning", rather than the "cumbersome and inflexible … detailed procedures imposed from others" such as headquarters (Knox-Clarke, 2014, pp. 44–45).

Access to relevant resources

Team members have difficulty accessing relevant resources to fill gaps in knowledge. Attempting to do so can be overwhelming, even in a development context (Grant et al., 2016), due to poor filtering mechanisms, inadequate internet access, and lack of time. Technical field staff often begin work with narrow technical expertise (e.g., a water supply specialist or a development WASH specialist may be recruited as an emergency WASH specialist), and need to learn rapidly on the job. This includes discovering how to operationalise global initiatives such as accountability, localisation, safeguarding, gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches. A Sustainable Sanitation Alliance study (Shaylor et al., 2018) found practitioners wanted "easily locatable consolidated credible information on various topics … [and] practical project guidance documents" (p. 4). When teams have trouble accessing useful resources rapidly, they may resort to reinventing the wheel, reducing the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of their work.

Poor retention of knowledge within and between emergencies and projects

Team knowledge is lost due to slow recruitment and high staff turnover from short-term contracts (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018), and poor team and organisational knowledge systems (Beck et al., 2004). Doherty and Sundberg (2022, p. iii) stated:

> The knowledge of individual frontline staff is often not shared regularly among peers or senior colleagues. This means that the experiences of implementing one project are not adequately used to improve the outcomes of other ongoing or future projects. (p. iii)

In an emergency context, this includes basics such as the ability to find the latest needs assessment, contact lists and preparedness plan, but also locally appropriate technical solutions and processes, national standards, and practical global resources. Learning within projects and to inform future projects, such as from lessons learned reports, has also been identified as an area of significant weakness in the humanitarian field, lacking clear assignment of responsibility (Warner, 2017).

Where it exists, knowledge management support, is generally the responsibility of a single staff member or department producing or collating a 'supply' of knowledge for individual team members to access. Harries (2017a) termed this "individual-led knowledge management," because it relies on a staff member proactively accessing the data, and proposed an alternative "demand-led" approach driven by a field team or the team leader, along with an initial framework (Harries, 2017b). A disadvantage of a dedicated knowledge management department or person is that "giving responsibility to one person absolve[s] others of concern over the management of knowledge" (Roberts, 2015, p. 14).

Inability to adapt to meet changing local needs

Field teams' ability to adapt and continually improve their response is hampered by various barriers. They have little time or support for reflection (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018; Ramalingam, 2008) to identify problems and self-correct. Monitoring data can bypass the team. ALNAP (Warner, 2017) found that "reporting to donors and to headquarters is still [considered] more important than using monitoring information 'on the ground'" (p. 17). Indicators often don't provide the information required to improve the quality or effectiveness of interventions (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018), and timely analysis and decision making are not prioritised (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018). Moreover, many "lessons learned" sessions are in fact mostly about "lessons identified" (Centre for Army Lessons Learned, 2011, p. 3), because they provide an input into a donor report rather than lead to action. These factors affect a team's ability to adapt to meet changing community needs or deal with unintended consequences, support a community's move from crisis back to normal development conditions, and continually improve practice within and between emergencies.

Sector expert reflections

Sector experts interviewed for the research believed that the less than optimal functioning of technical field teams was a significant problem–described as crucial, enormous and widespread. Interviewees raised the following issues:

• The humanitarian world operates in silos that come together to be operationalised at the field team level, yet no holistic tools support them to work together as a functional team that learns and improves in this environment.

• There is no standard systematic approach to leading field teams, which is a difficult task due to high staff turnover, uncertain funding, and the specialised knowledge of team members.

• Organisations have poor ability to build dynamic teams, and this affects the quality of their response.

• There is insufficient focus on staff well-being.

• Loss of knowledge affects the team, program and organisation.

They also considered that existing management and leadership training tends to be focused on the top level, doesn't go into enough detail, and is focused on individual skills and soft skills rather than practical ways to maximise the effectiveness of teams. Fareed (interviewee names are pseudonyms), from the Global North, explained that mid-level managers look for their own resources, so it's "very sort of hodgepodge." Bisa, also from the Global North, said "I've never been in a mission where improving the team's capacities was not a top priority issue. However, out of all of those, [on] very few [occasions] something was done," due to lack of an appropriate tools and time. She felt that no such guide existed because no one has responsibility for this area, so no one took the lead.

A way forward?

The literature review explored possible solutions to the problems being experienced by technical field teams in humanitarian organisations. None of the approaches reviewed offered a complete solution to the research problem. In summary:

• **Leadership** literature is predominantly focused on individual top-down leaders, assumes field staff to be passive followers (DeRue, 2011; Zaccaro et al., 2009), and its theories miss the "how" of leadership (Kozlowski et al., 2009).

• **Academic management** literature is largely theoretical and disconnected from practice (Bell & Thorpe, 2013).

• **Practical management** literature predominately takes a project-based approach, regarding each project as a unique, temporary endeavour (Project Management Institute, 2017). It does not meet the challenges facing semi-autonomous field teams, particularly around retaining knowledge and enabling continual improvement between projects and emergencies. The alternative is a process-based approach, designed for continuously improving recurrent activity and, more specifically, a complex process-based approach (Harvey & Aubry, 2018), that does fit the current problem. Harvey and Aubry (2018) asserted that many interventions that are currently considered projects would benefit from improved learning and continual improvement if they were instead considered complex processes.

• The small body of **team management** literature is focused on top-level teams. The literature on team development interventions—actions taken to improve the performance of a team—is "piecemeal" (Shuffler et al., 2018, p. 688) and focuses on smaller interventions like

team task analysis and team composition rather than the holistic approach envisaged in this research.

- **Knowledge management** literature generally takes an organisation-wide or top-down approach (Visscher et al., 2006), so neglects the knowledge management occurring within field teams. It also does not include the subsequent use of knowledge to change practice, which generally fits within the field "learning organisation" (Roberts, 2015).

The literature review concluded that there was no guidance on how to lead humanitarian field teams in this environment, access relevant resources, retain knowledge within and between emergencies, and adapt and continually improve to meet changing local needs. The best foundation to use as the basis for such a guide was identified as a process-based integrated management system, based on a novel use of the International Organization for Standardization's (ISO) non-linear environmental management standard (ISO, 2015a). The environmental ISO standard is based on the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act continuous improvement cycle (Deming, 1986). Ideally, the guide would support teams to independently develop site-specific integrated management systems, given their unique cultural diversity, team dynamics and emergency context. This would also meet Castler et al.'s (2011) call to strengthen the competency of field teams directly, without having to rely on consultants, so they can design and implement their own system and effectively communicate relevant aspects of the approach to partners.

The prototype FieldTiK guide builds upon this foundation to fill the gap, providing humanitarian field teams with guidance to learn from others to develop context-specific approaches to improve how they function as a team, and combine the various aspects of humanitarian response together holistically within a dynamic environment. It is a tool that allows the transference of knowledge over time and between people despite high staff turnover and a means to connect people with existing relevant resources, relevant leadership and management practice. The guide is also tailored to a team's needs, so staff can better meet the needs of people affected by crisis and other local actors, and continuously improve within and over successive emergencies.

Rigorous development

To develop a prototype guide, the research used the paradigm of design science research (van Aken et al., 2016), and employed the underlying theories of adaptive management (Allen et al., 2011), knowledge management (Milton, 2020; Milton & Lambe, 2016) and the learning organisation concept (Senge, 1990). The conceptual framework that guided the research, illustrated in Figure 1, captures the focus on technical field teams, progressing through the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle to move up the continual improvement slope as they improve their outcomes, with a knowledge wedge to capture local best-fit practice. The model incorporates the system-wide environment and the inherent empowering of and learning from partners, where relevant, and target communities. Figure 1 captures the five elements (1a–4) required to solve the research problem.

**Figure 1: The conceptual framework of the research**
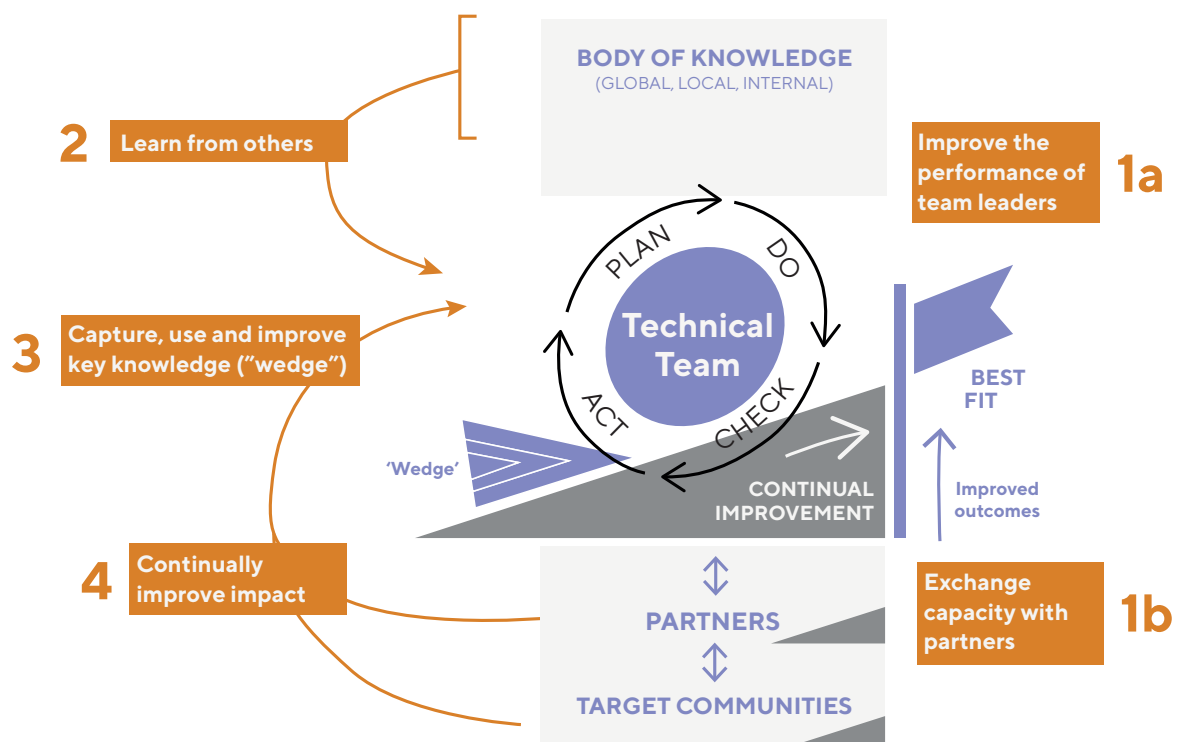
Semi-structured interviews with 20 sector experts were conducted to document challenges and best-fit practices (Ramalingam et al., 2014), and to gather content for the prototype guide, while another 21 interviews were undertaken to evaluate and refine it. Interviewees were members of humanitarian field teams or key stakeholders (e.g., line managers and government officials), with roughly half from the Global South. The interviews were analysed using template analysis (King & Brooks, 2017) and the spreadsheet from framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002), and the resulting theme hierarchy became the guide headings. Content analysis of existing resources was used to ensure that the guide built on and complements guidance, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance et al., 2018).

Innovative solution: Field Team Impact Kit

The Field Team Impact Kit (FieldTiK), as shown in Figure 2, provides guidance and examples (level 1) that a technical field team can use to develop site-specific processes (level 2). These overarching processes support the implementation of individual projects (level 3). The guide is designed to support humanitarian teams to operationalise their overarching organisation's vision, strategy, policies and guidelines.

The guide was developed to be a non-prescriptive, adaptable, non-linear (for a complex environment), modular, bottom-up, action-focused, systems-based, holistic and risk-based tool for technical field teams.

Figure 2: Scope of the FieldTiK guide
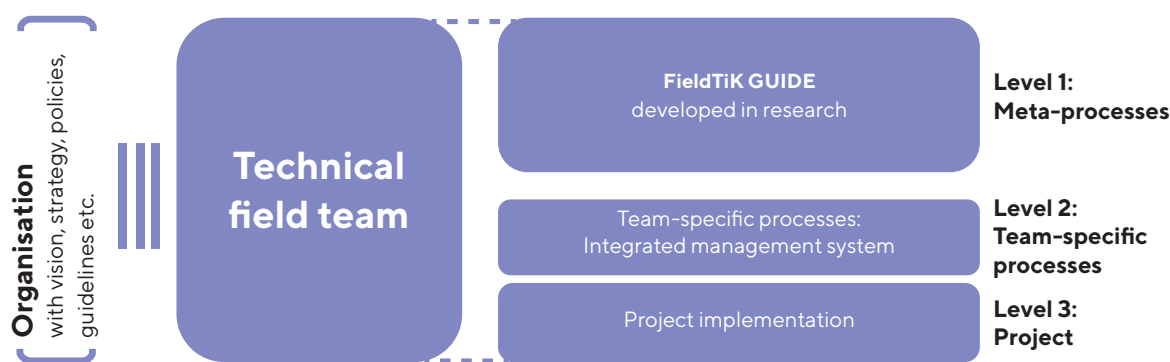
Prioritised action

The FieldTiK guide consists of a short team diagnostic questionnaire, followed by modular guidance. Teams follow three iterative steps (Figure 3). First, the team use a diagnostic questionnaire to prioritise tasks, starting with quick wins that are high-impact and low-effort. Second, they action priority tasks, using the modular section for guidance, to develop team-specific best-fit practice, and implement it. Third, every 1–3 months, they review actions to date and tackle new ways to improve performance. A team leader could also use the diagnostic questionnaire as a checklist during the busy first phase of a humanitarian response.

The modular part of the guide follows the structure in Table 1 (see the guide for level 3 headings). Each level 3 heading contains 2–4 pages of guidance for teams to access as needed. The structure was created to capture the challenges and recommendations shared in the first round of interviews, and to engage time-poor practitioners working in widely varying contexts and cultural environments, using the guide voluntarily.
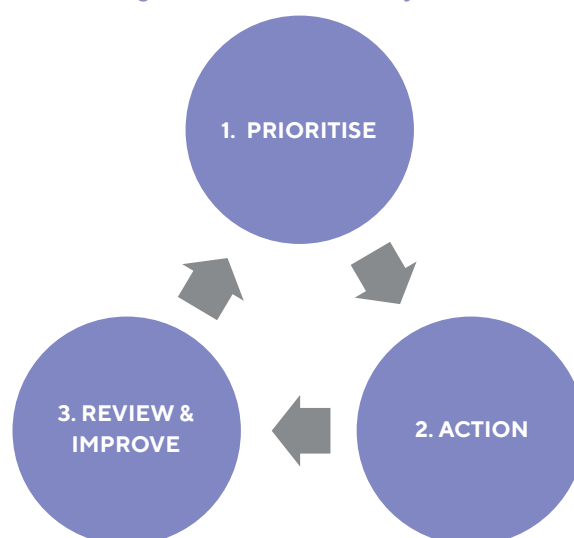
Figure 3: The FieldTiK cycle

Table 1: Top-level structure of the FieldTiK guide

No.	Level 1 heading	Level 2 heading
1	Create an empowering environment for the technical field team	
2	Accountability to affected people	
3	Locally led response	
4.1	Utilise the power of the team in a time-efficient way	Build trust and appreciate diversity
4.2		Establish a common team direction
4.3		Easy access to information for decision making
4.4		Maintain results during staff turnover
4.5		Consistently achieve a quality outcome
5	Evaluate, continually improve, adapt, innovate	
6	Preparedness	

The information under each level 3 heading is structured around common sub-headings: *Challenges facing technical field teams, Recommendation(s), Examples and, where relevant, Resources.* The summary of challenges facing field teams in each area is designed to reassure the user that they are not alone and raise awareness of other issues they should address. It also informs senior decision makers, within the organisation and sector, of the challenges field teams face.

As an example, the *Challenges* section in "access to the latest documents or emails quickly (document control)" includes the following:

> Although effective document control is "essential", "crucial" (Fareed) and "101," or basic (Amina), participants spoke of **"atrocious"** document handing systems (Iesha), it being **"a nightmare"** to access badly organised cloud-based resources (Fareed) and being **"aghast"** (Amina) at the lack of a common shared drive. Emailed links are hard to find again (Orla)—difficult when a "tsunami" of directives can flow through the system from the top (Dharmendra). Many people find Sharepoint (a document management and storage system) difficult to use, and version control "one of the biggest frustrations in management" (Orla). Many donors and management are not concerned with knowledge management, seeing it as a team or individual responsibility (Jairo).

The second sub-heading, *Recommendation(s)*, provides 1–3 objectives for users to meet, using existing or new approaches, in a way that best suits the team in their unique context and organisational environment. For the same heading, this is "have an agreed method of finding the latest document quickly and easily".

The third sub-section, headed *Examples*, shares good practices suggested by interviewees, or found in content analysis, for teams to use to meet the previous recommendation(s). It is suggested that users adopt one of the exampled approaches or use them as inspiration to develop their own approach. They are encouraged to seek out any organisational guidance first. In this way, the guide is adaptable for different contexts and teams.

The final sub-section, headed *Resources*, provides useful documents and websites for the target audience. Relevant technical resources are provided under the level 3 heading "Locally appropriate technical approach that meets diverse needs". These are currently for WASH, as the author is a WASH specialist, but can be easily updated for other technical areas. Key external guidance, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance et al., 2018), is referred to throughout the guide in the relevant sections to support teams as they develop their unique approach. The Core Humanitarian Standard will be updated to the latest version (CHS Alliance et al., 2024) in future iterations of the guide.

Sector expert feedback

Seventeen of the 21 sector expert reviewers were very positive about the FieldTiK guide; the remaining four were positive, but more measured in their responses. Experts from the Global South and North responded

similarly. The guide met the design science research indicators: all participants considered the guide would empower technical field teams to achieve a more effective response (pragmatically valid) and addressed a significant field problem (practically relevant).

Feedback from sector experts included:

- "This is the missing element in everything we're doing". (Daktari, WASH technical lead, Global North)

- "It would help people to avoid common issues that regularly appear in lessons learned exercises … This is what is really missing". (Oceana, ex-government humanitarian, Global South)

- "It would empower temporary team leaders [surge staff] to identify challenges quickly and transparently, to help them familiarise themselves and target the right team processes to improve. It should facilitate open communication that allows team issues to be raised while avoiding personal issues". (Diya, senior manager, Global South)

- "Very practical". (Jairo, country humanitarian lead, Global South)

- "Very, very useful". (Dumi, technical training lead, Global South)

- The guide "addresses an enormous gap in the humanitarian sector" that we have previously been putting "bandaids" on rather than "tackling the roots". (Bisa, WASH advisor, Global North).

The interviewees saw the guide as particularly useful for teams in national organisations, with some suggesting that it would be more useful to them than for teams in international organisations. Diya, from the Global South, a top-level manager in an international organisation, thought "local NGOs are probably one of the biggest customers" of the guide, assuming the guide was available in local languages. She felt that the training programs in which local NGOs often invest are not specific and are theory based, whereas the guide was "very practical" and designed for "the people implementing on the ground." Other expert reviewers felt that additional promotion, contextualisation and capacity development to support access, understanding and use would be needed for field teams in national organisations. All participants thought that the potential benefits of the guide outweighed the time and resources required to implement it.

Benefits

The experts who reviewed the prototype FieldTiK guide identified that it could improve:

- accountability and outcomes;
- localisation;

- continuity, ability to adapt and continually improve, both within and between responses;
- well-being and retention of staff;
- system-wide response;
- operationalisation of organisations' visions and policies; and
- relations with donors.

The FieldTiK guide complements existing humanitarian initiatives, introducing new teams and/or leaders to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance et al., 2024; CHS Alliance et al., 2018) and other global guidance, such as Mercy Corps' (2015) tips for adaptive management. Its foundation on the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act continual improvement cycle means the approach encompasses adaptive management and learning initiatives, such as action learning. The guide also links to existing project management guidance and shares tools used in agile project management. It should enhance donor-to-field team project-based guidance like Groupe URD's quality and accountability compass (Groupe URD, 2018). Building from, and linking teams to, this guidance should make them more efficient, adaptable and accountable, and able to work more effectively with affected people, government, other local actors, donors and management.

The FieldTiK guide should improve the respect, trust and communication between field teams and management, and the operationalisation of the organisation's strategy and policies. It should complement leadership approaches such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), by providing a structured approach to empower field teams. The approach also meets relevant criteria in four leading team empowerment and thriving models (Haas & Mortensen, 2016; Hackman, 2002; Narel et al., 2019; Salas et al., 2009; Seibert et al., 2011).

The FieldTiK guide should improve the respect, trust and communication between field teams and management, and the operationalisation of the organisation's strategy and policies.

The guide addresses the challenges facing technical field teams identified in the literature review. It provides practical guidance and tools to strengthen the leadership and management skills of team leaders, as well as team members, working in a dynamic humanitarian environment—providing them with transferrable skills they can use throughout their careers. It strengthens team-based knowledge management by linking field teams to existing relevant resources and improving knowledge retention, within and between emergencies, projects, and staff change—critical for converting lessons identified into change in practice. The underlying framework,

built around the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act continuous improvement cycle and international good practice in non-linear management, enhances the team's ability to adapt and continually improve to be accountable to people affected by disaster and support a locally led response.

These benefits showcase the potentially considerable impact of using the FieldTiK guide to overcome many of the challenges facing the humanitarian sector, as part of a bottom-up process of rejuvenating the humanitarian system.

Next steps

The interviewees' recommended a range of steps for the author, researchers, and humanitarian leaders to progress use of the FieldTiK guide. These included:

For decision makers at global, network or organisational level

- Recognise the challenges facing field teams in humanitarian organisations and initiate action; including organisation or sector-wide discussion on how to overcome them, using the guide as a starting point.

- Pilot the guide within a range of teams (from local, national and/or international organisations), ideally within a field office or national cluster. The guide could be customised for the organisation, cluster and/or country.

- Develop an online platform to offer the latest guide and support material, facilitate a community of practice, and collect additional best-fit practice and case studies to continually improve the guide, and refine the approach. The prioritisation process could be automated, to make it simpler for teams, and a summary of areas teams target used to advocate for improved systems and guidance. The guide will need to be translated into multiple languages for widespread use.

- Identify who, within an organisation and across the sector, has overarching responsibility for empowering field teams. Options include human resources and knowledge management departments, but these may reduce engagement by line-management. If it is to be part of knowledge management, it could be known as team-based holistic knowledge management.

- Donors could endorse the guide—like a gender marker—or it could be endorsed by the Core Humanitarian Standard custodians, to facilitate its ongoing (rather than once off) use. Alternatively, individual organisations could institutionalise the approach. A call to action, by interested headquarters-level advisors, to advance donor endorsement was suggested.

For the author

- Develop support and training material, including for facilitating workshops for teams using the guide, implementing it at multiple levels within an organisation, and for how to incorporate the approach in after-action reviews, real-time evaluations and other feedback opportunities to convert lessons into sustainable change in practice. Training material can also be developed for staff onboarding and other internal needs.

- Share the guide across the sector and encourage its use to improve localisation and sector-wide initiatives such as the WASH Roadmap competencies. Discuss it with global bodies, international organisations, clusters and government via presentations and webinars for dissemination and feedback. Present at conferences and learning events. Ask clusters to promote the guide via their monthly newsletters and place it in their central document repositories.

- Contextualise the guide to suit other users, such as national cluster teams, sector-wide coordination, or to improve coordination between affiliate organisations within confederations, such as Oxfam International. The guide may also find traction in other organisations with semi-autonomous field teams.

For researchers

- Research the impact of a field team, field office and/or national cluster piloting or using the FieldTiK guide.

- Conduct further research into technical field teams in humanitarian organisations or the broader grouping of semi-autonomous field teams impacting complex environments.

Conclusion

Technical field teams in humanitarian organisations face significant challenges that the innovative FieldTiK guide can help them to overcome. The guide can assist leadership and management of semi-autonomous teams and the simultaneous empowerment of partners and the target communities. It can inform humanitarian teams about relevant and practical resources, from within and outside the sector, bringing together previously siloed, often elusive guidance in one place. It can support teams to retain local knowledge within and between emergencies, and to improve how they adapt and continually improve to meet changing local needs. The approach supports a demand-led, rather than supply-driven, flow of knowledge, from the field experts who are operationalising their organisation's vision. The FieldTiK guide is considered particularly valuable for field teams in local or national humanitarian organisations to strengthen the locally led response.

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Reflexivity, coloniality and Do No Harm: Thoughts on the subjectivity of aid workers

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Image: Sudanese women who have been internally displaced pose with dignity kits in 2023 © Save the Children

Abstract

This working paper is a reflection on how fostering the practices of individual and institutional positionality and reflexivity could improve the effectiveness of the Do No Harm approach, and act as a trigger for a reflection on the coloniality embedded in aid work. More specifically, it looks at the impact that the recognition of aid workers' subjectivity is having on the application of the Do No Harm approach and how this could lead to deeper questioning of colonial practices, dynamics, and principles. In the first part I introduce the concepts of positionality, reflexivity and coloniality, and I clarify my standpoint. I then recall the story of Do No Harm, dig through its various interpretations, and identify the main streams, pausing on the intersection between the present reflection on aid workers' subjectivity and the use of the Do No Harm approach. In the following section I explore positionality and reflexivity as tools that can help to challenge some of the colonial assumptions which are at the foundation of our sector, giving an example through the analysis of the principle of neutrality. Finally, I give suggestions for the application of positionality and reflexivity in humanitarian and development settings.

Leadership relevance

This paper is directly addressing humanitarian leaders in three ways. Firstly, it introduces practices of positionality and reflexivity as relevant tools for leadership in the sector. Secondly, it proposes a connection between the recognition of the subjectivity of aid workers and the practice of Do No Harm. Finally, it wishes to contribute to the current debate on coloniality in the sector by giving practical examples and suggestion. Through this paper, humanitarian leaders will have the possibility to refresh concepts that are essential to navigate the changes sweeping the sector, and to question their own leadership practices through an analysis of power dynamics.

Yo soy un hombre común. De la misma forma pienso que, en realidad, los individuos, por muy peculiares que sean, nunca son algo especial o excepcional, puesto que, básicamente, son sólo eso: personas.

(...) Hablo de los demás a través de mí. Mis autorretratos no son una reafirmación de mi personalidad, no son el reflejo de un sujeto de características narcisista. Son sólo un pretexto para hablar de los otros, de esos seres, comunes y corrientes, de los cuales yo me siento paradigma.[1] —Peña González, 1996

Positionality, reflexivity and the colonial matrix of power

I am a humanitarian and development worker. I identify as a queer woman, and a migrant. I grew up in one of the 'underdeveloped' and stigmatised areas of my country, Italy. I became a humanitarian and development worker after a youth spent as an activist and campaigner for social justice. When people ask me how and why I decided on such a change, I reply that it was obvious for me, as I have always been interested in how power is shared in the world, in how this share is often unfair, and in how I can contribute to a positive change. It is exactly for this reason that I have always been willing to understand how humanitarian and development actions could contribute to reinforcing or changing power dynamics.

I am also convinced that there are many more similarities among human beings than differences (Peña González, 1996), even though the individualistic system of values I grew up in taught me the opposite. For this reason, I share my reflections and thoughts: not because I consider them unique, but rather because I think they could belong to many others.

My early years as a humanitarian taught me that humanitarian assistance and development cooperation (in this paper I'll use the umbrella term 'aid sector') can harm populations, increase conflicts and inequality, and contribute to consolidating, rather than eradicating, uneven power structures and coloniality. I use the word "coloniality"—short for Colonial Matrix of Power—borrowing it from the Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano (2000) and by many after him. According to this framework, during the colonial time, occupiers imposed not only their rules on the occupied, but their social norms and structures, and their ways of categorising knowledge, the human being, and the world. They brought and imposed their ways of seeing and living in the world, often trying to violently cancel every possible alternative.

[1] I am a common man. And I think that, in reality, individuals are never something special or exceptional, regardless of how peculiar they are, because basically this is what they are: people. (...) I speak about others through myself. My self-portraits are not a reaffirmation of my personality, they are not the mirror of a narcissistic subject. They are simply a pretext to speak about the others, about these other beings, common and ordinaries, whom I feel a sample of. (Author's translation)

With the struggle for freedom and decolonisation, most of the land was liberated, but that way of seeing the world and living in it persisted. This is coloniality, and we witness it every day in our private and public life.

With the struggle for freedom and decolonisation, most of the land was liberated, but that way of seeing the world and living in it persisted. This is coloniality, and we witness it every day in our private and public life.

The aid sector is steeped in coloniality. It was born on the ruins of colonialism, and many have said it is a form of neo-colonialism (Nkrumah, 1965; Ingiyimbere, 2017).

Because I wanted to find tools that could trigger different dynamics and challenge the coloniality of the sector, I turned to the Do No Harm approach, which became a pillar of my practice as a researcher, a practitioner, a leader, and a mentor. I was and I am convinced that the Do No Harm approach, if correctly put in practice, can act as a mitigating factor for coloniality and even lead to interesting exercises of decoloniality.

But to do so, it needs to include practices of individual and institutional positionality and reflexivity.

The concepts of positionality and reflexivity are widely adopted by feminist, critical and decolonial scholarship, but they are virtually absent in humanitarian practices.

Positionality "(...) refers to where one is located in relation to their various social identities (gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, geographical location etc.); the combination of these identities and their intersections shape how we understand and engage with the world" (Queens University, 2024). Positionality stems from the acknowledgement of intersectionality. Our complex identities and the power and disadvantage that derive from them place us in a specific location in the world, and it is from this location that we observe and act. Positionality is complex and we don't have complete control of it.

Not all our identities are visible to others. In my case for example, I could identify as a person who experienced oppression and stigmatisation because of her belonging to a subaltern culture in her country, and for this reason I could feel entitled to some 'closeness' with some of the participants of the projects I coordinate. However, while facilitating the delivery of non-food items in the country where I currently live and work, Cuba, I would be perceived as an external and distant being, a white woman, holding a privileged passport and the power of deciding who will receive aid, and who won't.

Positionality, therefore, is not simply and conveniently the way one positions oneself. Nor can it be limited to the oversimplified binary insider/outsider traditionally used by many INGOs when looking at the different access that national and international staff can have during operations. Positionality has a lot to do with the way one is positioned by others. Some identify at least three kinds of positionality: "ascribed positionality (as is generally the case with gender); selective positionality (as in the case of those who opt for a particular position) and enforced positionality (where others forcibly define the position whether it meets with subjective criteria or not)" (Franks, 2002, p.43). It also needs to be mentioned that positionality changes according to the context.

Reflexivity is what one does with one's own positionality. It is the process of awareness that we undergo while trying to understand how our positionality impacts our actions and the context we are in. Through reflexivity, we unpack and understand the effects of our positionality on what we are doing as humanitarians. Some scholarship considers positionality and reflexivity as synonymous (Massoud, 2022), but I believe that the distinction of the two concepts makes their practice easier for aid workers.

> *Reflexivity is what one does with one's own positionality. It is the process of awareness that we undergo while trying to understand how our positionality impacts our actions and the context we are in.*

Do no harm, from medicine to aid

In book one of *Epidemics*, written about 400 years B.C., Hippocrates—considered the father of medicine in the Global North[2] —says: "make a habit of two things: to help, or at least to Do No Harm".

This mention of the "Do No Harm" approach is traditionally considered the first in Western history. Nowadays the Do No Harm approach is widely used in transnational contexts, including in the aid sector.

But it has not always been like this.

From the end of the Second World War, the creation of the United Nations (UN) and the setup of the system of international aid[3], whole generations of humanitarian and development workers grew up full of good intentions and internationalism, but with little awareness of their impact. They thought it was enough to aim for 'The Good',

in order to produce what was good in reality. Those generations were often unconsciously upholding the all-Eurocentric and colonial idea that concepts such as 'development' are universally true, and that there is only one way to get to such development—the way undertaken by countries of the Global North. They thought they had the (often white) burden of saving those who lived in 'underdeveloped' countries by bringing them what they perceived as 'progress'. Such progress was embodied by societal and economic models located in Western Europe and North America[4].

> *There is one unspoken yet central assumption at the foundation of the way of living and acting in the aid sector—this belief that there is only one universal knowledge—the one produced in the Global North.*

There is one unspoken yet central assumption at the foundation of the way of living and acting in the aid sector—this belief that there is only one universal knowledge—the one produced in the Global North. According to this narrative, people in the Global North are the natural holders of such knowledge. Through international aid they can share what belongs to them and is absent in countries of the Global South.[5] As knowledge is universal, the concrete condition of the body that hosts the brain producing ideas such as 'development' does not matter.

This belief meant generations of aid workers believed that while providing humanitarian assistance or fostering development projects they could consider themselves external to the context, and their presence uninfluential. Such an assumption is implicitly embedded in one of the principles that is at the core of the Western humanitarian narrative: the principle of neutrality.

But all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1989). What we are, and the relation we have with the environment, has an influence on what we think, on how we share it, and on how the world around us perceives it. Delivering aid without taking into consideration the power deriving from our identities can negatively affect aid practices, as one runs the risk of confusing the effort of practicing neutrality with the alleged innate quality of being neutral.

These considerations, and reports of how aid had been instrumentalised and manipulated by actors in context, led to the creation of the Local Capacities for Peace Process. Hosted by the Collaborative for Development Action, the project was created "(...) to learn how aid and

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[2] I am conscious of the many limitations of the binary 'Global North/Global South'. However, I will use them for readability purposes. With Global North I refer to those countries traditionally delivering aid, and with Global South I refer to those countries traditionally receiving aid.
[3] Others date the creation of the international humanitarian system to the end of WWI and the treaty of Versailles (Davey et al, 2013).

[4] The history of international aid begins after the Second World War; when the world was divided in two by the Iron Curtain, and the model exported was mainly the Western one.
[5] This has been defined by many as the 'white man's burden'.

conflict interact in order to help aid workers find a way to address human needs in conflict situations without feeding conflict" (Wallace, 2002, p. 480). It started in 1994, funded by donors and implementing agencies, and consisted of four phases: analysis of case studies (1994 – 1996), feedback workshops (1996 – 1998), implementation (1998 – 2000) and mainstreaming (2001). The process was documented through a series of booklets written by Mary B. Anderson from 1996 onwards and gave life to an evolving tool called the "Do No Harm Framework". Agencies working in aid have since incorporated this framework at different levels. Today, Do No Harm is mentioned by UNHCR as one of its core principles, while the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IFRC) published a manual named *Operationalizing better program initiatives—Do No Harm* in 2016.

Current uses of Do No Harm

The *Do No Harm Handbook* is a practical and readable product available online at no cost, which introduces the Do No Harm approach through seven steps. Its structure, and the examples that are given through the handbook, show how those who worked on it tried to examine, as exhaustively as possible and from a Do No Harm perspective, all aspects and phases of aid: from relationships, to context, to the nature of the programs and the interactions. The methodology proposed digs into factors that might not be evident at a first glance, such as choices related to human resources, or implementation modalities. At the same time, authors acknowledge that this tool is evolving according to a context which is changing fast.

In the past 20 years agencies involved in aid have adapted the framework, and today its application could be summarised into two streams:

The first stream mainly concerns donors, which are increasingly using Do No Harm as a mechanism to hold their grantees accountable: aid should not harm communities, not only direct project participants, but the land and environment they inhabit. For the scope of this article, it is worth noticing that the beneficiary of such accountability is not the community that participates in the project, but the donor itself—or, in case of public donors, taxpayers. Grantees should not do harm, first and foremost because this is against the donor's policies.

Some organisations, for example, USAID, have made it compulsory for staff working in certain sectors to support LGBTIQ+ communities and actions, while others, like the European Commission, also apply Do No Harm frameworks to their environmental commitments. Donors are also including the Do No Harm principle in their conflict analysis requests, asking organisations that are willing to implement projects to analyse how the planned action might interact with social, political, economic, and environmental factors, and trigger potential unintended harm. They also expect the creation of mitigation mechanisms and measures to offset these factors.

This approach has considerable advantages, including the fact that donors require clear indicators measuring the capacity to avoid doing harm. However, simply focusing on existing rules and procedures, rather than on the value of each individual, presents a big risk—the perpetuation of paternalistic beliefs and behaviours through the project cycle.

The second stream of Do No Harm implementation is mainly linked to practitioners, who are looking at Do No Harm from an ethics perspective. This stream includes both reflections on safeguarding and protecting project participants from sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse (PSHEA), and efforts to look at how aid changes power relations within communities and therefore might trigger new conflicts if not provided in the correct way.

This interpretation of Do No Harm gained strength after 2016, when an enormous scandal involving several INGOs and UN agencies, shed light on widespread practices of sexual abuse and exploitation from NGO and UN staff among project participants. This event focused more attention on the power dynamics triggered by aid programs at an individual level, and many organisations put in place measures such as compulsory training sessions for all staff and feedback and complaint mechanisms for project participants.

Positionality, reflexivity and Do No Harm: opportunities

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partially and not universally is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity (Haraway, 1989, p.589).

A third stream is emerging with relation to Do No Harm and it intersects with the first two. A growing number of practitioners and scholars see in the Do No Harm approach something more than just the mere analysis of conflict sensitivities, or the tools that agencies demand for accountability purposes. Instead, they see this approach as a lived, guiding principle for each professional, even before the organisation of operations begins. The original question that triggered the work of the Local Capacities for Peace Process: "how can one provide aid in the context of conflict without exacerbating the conflict?" (Wallace, 2002, p. 480), gains new strength and nuance, and embraces a reflection on the subjectivity of aid workers. The question then becomes: how can aid workers do their job, taking into consideration the weight of their

subjectivity in relation to team members, communities and project participants?

Before moving forward and proposing a way to address this question, I feel the need to clarify my purpose and point of view. When addressing topics related to ethics and to identity, one inevitably runs the risk of falling into prescriptive conclusions, such as saying that certain subjectivities are, or are not, adequate to work in the sector. This is not the aim of this working paper. I am not interested in dichotomies, or binary categories (Vitantonio, 2021), as I consider that they are only useful when one needs to simplify and reduce reality in order to apply the law, or begin a medical treatment. I feel that using binary categories to understand our reality is part of our colonial heritage. It is the development of the colonisers' point of view. Considering themselves the centre of the world and ignoring that their position was just one among many, colonisers identified themselves as the only legitimate beings on this earth. They were the 'subject', while the rest were identified as the 'other', something they could dispose of, for their wealth and pleasure. They therefore categorised the world through this fictitious juxtaposition between concepts, qualities and beings that are deeply interconnected, such as good/evil, rational/primitive, male/female, humanity/nature.

The question then becomes: how can aid workers do their job, taking into consideration the weight of their subjectivity in relation to team members, communities and project participants?

Reality is to me much more diverse, complex and intricate than these dichotomies. That is why I don't want to propose a new division between 'good' aid workers and 'bad' aid workers in this paper. Rather, I am interested in a process that unveils and embraces such complexity, with the purpose of contributing to collective reflection and understanding. I believe that, by recognising our subjectivities and the impact that they have on our work, we could learn something new about our profession and how to do it in a respectful way. The aim of the practices I am now going to propose is not about creating aid workers that are perfect. The aim is to be transparent about our humanity and imperfections, and use this transparency to create bridges.

We can now return to the question. How can practitioners reflect on their subjectivity, and on its impact on their work and actions? A powerful yet simple tool is provided by practices of reflexivity. Exercises of reflexivity are usually composed of two parts. In the first one, each participant takes the time, individually and within teams, to identify, unpack, and bring to the surface their positionality in the context of work. This is a first, important step, that helps

each aid worker to gain awareness of the fact that they are not invisible. However, limiting ourselves to recognising positionality inevitably invokes some form of essentialism.

For this reason, exercises of reflexivity should include a second phase. Once people have clarity on their own positionality, participants should look at how it interacts with the context and the program one is going to implement. To paraphrase Donna Haraway (1989), performing this kind of exercise means acknowledging one's point of view and how this influences the action one is going to take.

Exercises of reflexivity are becoming increasingly popular in the academia (Harrington, 2022), and positionality statements are often included among good practices recommended to teachers and professors. Simple research through search engines and academic libraries[6] brings to the surface the existence of numerous articles, essays and papers focused on the need to introduce these kinds of reflections in development and humanitarian actions in order to unveil and better understand power dynamics.

However, references to positionality and reflexivity are virtually absent from documents available online produced by actors working in the sector, and are not a common praxis in this working environment. This does not mean that the sector persists in the naïve belief that all workers carry the same power and have the same access. It appears however, that when differences, privileges and vulnerabilities of aid workers are acknowledged, they are usually simplified and reduced to the North/South dichotomy and increasingly, within the growing debate on decolonising aid, to National versus International staff, insider versus outsider.

References to positionality and reflexivity are virtually absent from documents available online produced by actors working in the sector, and are not a common praxis in this working environment.

These simplifications risk ignoring at least two elements. The first is that aid workers are, as are all other human beings, subjects of intersectional factors that cannot be reduced to their passports. The second is the colonial matrix of power, which pervades the sector and the contexts where aid is provided. Colonial patterns permeate societies beyond geographic divisions, and are sometimes so embedded in habits, processes, education and culture that only in-depth analysis can unveil them. Even when they are unveiled, these mechanisms cannot easily be destroyed, as they are part of our way of being

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[6] For this purpose, I used the library of the European University Institute.

in the world. In other words, the conscious subaltern experience of coloniality is not a spontaneous event that happens simply because one is born within a subaltern culture. It is something that needs to be awakened and ignited through a process (Mignolo, 2000), something that an increasing number of practitioners, activists and scholars call "decolonising the mind" (Van Dyke, in Vitantonio, 2024). A simple and clear analogy can be drawn from feminism. Experience has taught us that it is not enough to be a biological female in order to be a feminist and to stand for gender justice—a clear example of this is the increasing number of female leaders that promote policies against women's rights.[7]

Reflexivity as an exercise of decoloniality

In this paper, I am suggesting that looking at aid workers and at their subjectivity could be an important ingredient in the application of the Do No Harm approach, and I am proposing reflexivity as a useful and accessible tool for such a purpose.

But I am also suggesting that exercises of reflexivity hold a disruptive power. If we start to admit that our position in the world changes the way we can provide aid, we are implicitly challenging one of the pillars of humanitarianism as it is conceived by the mainstream, colonial narrative of the Global North, that is, the principle of neutrality. Stating that humanitarian assistance is neutral entails the assumption that we, humanitarian workers, can extract ourselves from the context, that we look at the world on fire from somewhere above. This embodies the Eurocentric and colonial belief that 'we' don't belong here, that we belong somewhere 'better', and this somewhere 'better' is far from the conflict, the disaster, the humanitarian crisis we are trying to address. It is the place from where 'we' (according to this narrative) exercise legitimate control, and the place we depart from to make an allegedly 'better' world. But really, as soon as we step into the context, we are the context, we have an impact on the context, and we change the context. Our actions don't occur in a vacuum, they interact with the lives of other humans that have thoughts, beliefs, and agency.

If we start to admit that our position in the world changes the way we can provide aid, we are implicitly challenging one of the pillars of humanitarianism as it is conceived by the mainstream, colonial narrative of the Global North, that is, the principle of neutrality.

Including exercises of reflexivity in our Do No Harm practices is certainly not the final solution to the coloniality of the sector, but it does bring about some important outputs. Firstly, as explained above, it challenges the colonial narrative at the foundation of the sector. It does so by problematising the beliefs and practices of too many aid professionals and agencies, who still naively approach our work with the conviction of being neutral. Secondly, it helps us recognise that the people in front of us are not passive objects of assistance. We are all of us subjects with our own fears and hopes.

If it is true that a decolonial turn in aid is only possible by decolonising the minds of aid workers, this is certainly a meaningful step in that direction.

Exercises of reflexivity should take into consideration all factors that might have an impact on power dynamics, including gender, ability, age, religion, ethnicity, and class. But they should also dwell on identities from the perspective of the colonial matrix of power. Useful questions to ask ourselves (and this is a non-exhaustive list) are: where does my knowledge come from? Which models of leadership am I following? Where does my formal education derive from and how much of this education is working in an unconscious/automatic manner to shape my actions and points of view? Do any of my identities give me power over others through the legacy of colonial practices?

Leaders in the aid sector can approach reflexivity from at least three perspectives, and one does not exclude the other. Firstly, they can practice reflexivity as a tool that can improve their self-awareness: this can help their understanding of power dynamics, their reading of complex situations, and the prevention of actions that can cause harm to other workers and project participants. It can also support their research of decolonial and non-patriarchal models of leadership. Secondly, exercises of reflexivity can be proposed to team members as an individual practice—something that can improve their self-awareness and their reading of the space they move in. Thirdly, reflexivity can become a common practice within teams for the purpose of building trust and cohesion. In this case, it should be accompanied by moments of collective reflection, and occur in its own safe space, separate from the space for performance appraisal, so that team members feel that this practice is not impacting their performance. Team members should also know that they are free to share only what they are comfortable with: that working on positionality unveils our vulnerability.

Positionality is not something set in stone or decided at birth: it changes according to the context where we live and act. For this reason, reflexivity is an exercise that should be practiced regularly and frequently—at least at the beginning of every project or when a team undergoes changes.

[7] See, for example, the election of Giorgia Meloni in Italy: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/giorgia-meloni-far-right-brothers-of-italy-election-prime-minister-racism-gender/

Conclusions

This working paper is the result of my personal research and practice. I believe that the aid sector can still play a role in making this world a better place, but I also think that we, humanitarian professionals, need to systematically promote a change through our daily practices and behaviours if we want to live up to the values that we theoretically uphold and not to be the perpetrators of an unjust system that replicates oppressive and colonial patterns.

The aid sector can still play a role in making this world a better place, but I also think that we, humanitarian professionals, need to systematically promote a change through our daily practices and behaviours if we want to live up to the values that we theoretically uphold and not to be the perpetrators of an unjust system that replicates oppressive and colonial patterns.

One of the practices I propose links the Do No Harm approach to exercises of positionality and reflexivity. I consider that in practicing these exercises, we could not only introduce in our work some important reflection on power relations, but also bring to the surface the coloniality that is at the foundation of our sector.

I also acknowledge that awareness is not enough to achieve change, but believe that it is an essential trigger. Practicing reflexivity will allow us to act with different awareness and different expectations. It will allow us to recognise the many intersectional factors that determine the power and disadvantage of each of the actors who play a role in our projects and programs. Moreover, it will also ignite a process of critical analysis of some of the core principles that inform and shape our system.

By learning from feminist and decolonial scholars who moved away from the presumption of objectivity by embracing the reality of different and unique points of view, we can step away from the naïve assumption that everybody is equal, simply because it is not so. On the contrary, everyone is different, and accepting the possibility of these differences co-existing is part of the decolonial turn of the sector. Only by identifying and recognising these differences can we manage to promote a sector based on respect and justice, and perhaps, shake off some of the coloniality which permeates it.

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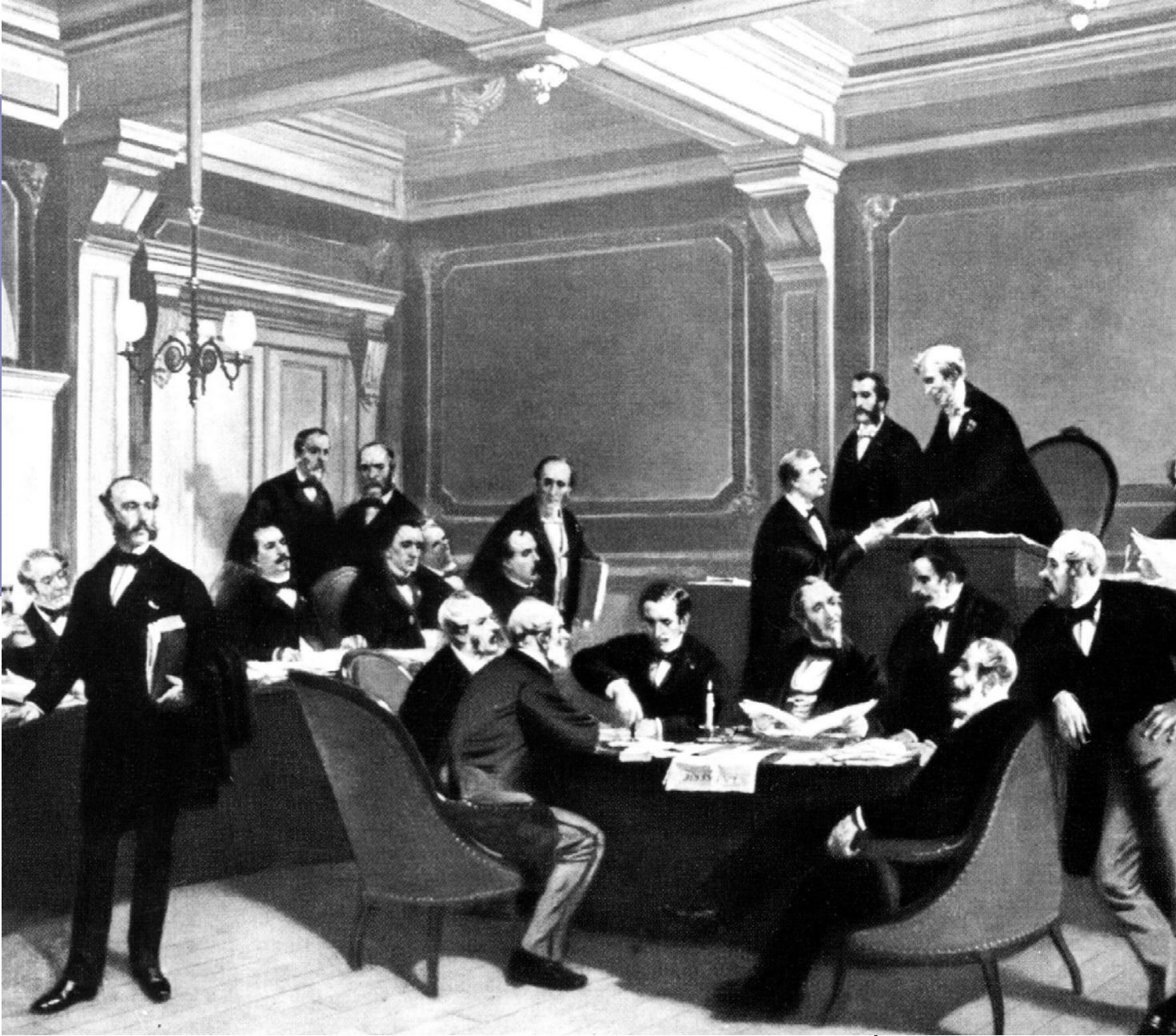
Where is the leadership? Where is the imagination? Confronting a humanitarian system in crisis and resistant to change

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Image: A painting of the signing of the first Geneva Convention, on 22 August 1864, which cemented the humanitarian principle of 'neutrality'. Charles Édouard Armand-Dumaresq/Wikicommons

Abstract

The humanitarian 'system', however defined, has evolved considerably over the last decade. It has become more professional, standards are better understood and applied, there is greater professionalisation of the sector and humanitarians are better qualified and knowledgeable. The 'system' has also become very complex. There are more disasters, and they are more intricate and intractable. New initiatives appear to be set up almost every year to address these challenges, yet failures are often mentioned in passing rather than properly and honestly acknowledged. The sector makes agreements and promises to ensure more funding gets to communities affected by disasters, yet these promises are woefully unmet.

In 2019, Matthew Clarke and Brett Parris proposed new humanitarian principles to tackle the increasing scale, intensity, complexity and intractability of humanitarian crises—equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity. However, given the circumstances outlined above, perhaps it is prudent to question not the principles but their application. In this paper, I reflect on these principles five years later and contend that they will only complement the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence if they help adjust the humanitarian architecture to be more inclusive and hold itself truly accountable. Rhetoric is no longer enough and requires action within the sector to address its structure, governance, inclusivity and diversity. It requires leadership, imagination and courage.

Leadership relevance

This paper challenges humanitarian leaders and governing bodies to reflect on what stops them from translating humanitarian principles and their own widely publicised demands for greater accountability and increased power and funding for communities affected by humanitarian crises—whether it's called localisation, decolonisation or some other term—into real paradigm shifts and radical changes in their own institutions, organisations and networks. Where is the leadership courage to revamp the humanitarian architecture instead of merely claiming that it is not fit for purpose? Neither the original humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, nor Brett Parris and Matthew Clarke's proposed principles of equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity are irrelevant, but their application in bringing about the radical change required can be questioned.

Introduction

The humanitarian environment has changed significantly over the last three decades and continues to change—because of dramatic increases in displaced people and conflicts and the significant social, economic, political and environmental consequences of climate change. These, among other factors, continue to change the nature and increase the complexity of humanitarian crises. This paper considers the question of whether the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence are still fit for purpose, whether Matthew Clarke and Brett Parris' proposed principles of equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity are more suitable alternatives, and if the principles are themselves the issue, or whether it is their application in a humanitarian architecture that is deeply flawed and rife with issues of accountability and undistributed power that is problematic.

Humanitarian architecture ... is deeply flawed and rife with issues of accountability and undistributed power

Original principles

In the very first *Humanitarian Leader* article in 2019, Matthew Clarke and Brett Parris asked valid and informed questions about whether the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence are still fit for purpose, given the increasing scale, intensity, complexity and intractability of natural and human-induced humanitarian crises. Despite inherent challenges, Clarke and Parris believe the general adherence to these principles gives some assurance of their value and resonance within the humanitarian sector. They also suggest that new principles of equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity may be more suitable alternatives for a changing world.

Let's look at the original principles:

Humanity

Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings (OCHA, 2012, p. 1)

Neutrality

Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature (OCHA, 2012, p. 1).

Impartiality

Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions (OCHA, 2012, p. 1).

Independence

Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented (OCHA, 2012, p. 1).

There are challenges in fully adhering to all the principles in their strictest definitions, given the number, scale, complexity, political underpinnings and polarity of most humanitarian crises and some of the settings where these crises unfold. However, as principles to guide humanitarian action they remain relevant and important.

New principles

Clarke and Parris suggested that new principles of equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity may be suitable alternatives to the original principles.

Equity

The authors posit equity as multidimensional. The term can refer to equity in opportunity, equity in outcomes, equity across genders, regions or socio-economic classes, intergenerational equity, or even equity that affects vulnerability and resilience to disasters, for example education, health, employment, and geographic location. It is multidimensional and dynamic.

Solidarity

This principle refers to the obligation we have to collectively address the needs of others in humanitarian settings. The principle of solidarity is about removing judgement about circumstances and focusing on needs. While some may argue that this can be problematic, as it requires us to act without holding those who transgress the rights of others to account—for example in a conflict—another view is that you can do both: act in solidarity and also hold people accountable for their transgressions. They don't need to be mutually exclusive.

Compassion

Compassion is part of humanity. It compels one to act, as we understand the pain and suffering of others. It is linked to solidarity and yet a very individual response. I agree with Clarke and Parris that without compassion, the humanitarian response is weakened. Compassion cuts across various dimensions of gender, socioeconomic status, education, qualifications, race, professions, faith, politics and more. It complements the professionalisation of the humanitarian sector and the standards that now exist to respond effectively to disasters.

Diversity

This refers to the many differences across and between people and communities—including gender, sexuality, physical abilities, mental health, age, nationality, language, ethnicity, religion, employment and other differences. Considering diversity supports how we respond in different situations. It helps us understand the differences that exist so that our actions take account of these differences and contexts. It requires nuanced approaches to responding to humanitarian events which are best understood by people experiencing them.

These new principles are complementary to the original ones, adding a richer dimension and reflecting a better understanding of how humanitarian responses can be better guided in different contexts. The original humanitarian principles provide operational guidance. They are not meant to be value statements or virtue-signalling but rather practical means to ensure that everyone in need of life-saving assistance receives it. There is no question of abandoning the original principles, which remain as relevant as ever.

The changing humanitarian context

However you define it, the humanitarian 'system' has evolved considerably over the last few decades. It has become more professional, standards are better understood and applied, and humanitarians are better qualified and knowledgeable. The 'system' has also become very complex. New initiatives appear to be set up almost every year to address the same challenges. The language changes around the actions that are required to effectively respond to humanitarian challenges, but it is questionable if the actions are adapted to be more effective. Failures are often mentioned in passing rather than properly and honestly acknowledged. The sector makes agreements and promises to ensure more funding gets to communities affected by disasters, yet these promises are woefully unmet. Often, it is not seriously acknowledged why these promises have failed. Many of the same humanitarians move from one initiative to another and take the same actions, and perhaps even repeat the same unacknowledged mistakes. It all raises serious questions about power, accountability and the humanitarian architecture.

The sector makes agreements and promises to ensure more funding gets to communities affected by disasters, yet these promises are woefully unmet. Often, it is not seriously acknowledged why these promises have failed.

Some also feel there is a growing threat from the corporatisation of the search for solutions to global problems, including humanitarian crises. Anand

Giridharadas (2019) offers an insightful critique of the global elite's role as providers of the solutions to the problems which they themselves have created. With states increasingly shifting responsibility to wealthy elites and philanthropists, it appears that market solutions are preferred, and that governments and regulators are incompetent. Many public goods such as humanitarian assistance are now being delivered through private markets, and increasingly viewed as a market responsibility. This raises worrying questions about power and privilege and the role of governments, global institutions, UN agencies and citizen democracy in this context.

Given these circumstances, perhaps it is prudent to question not the humanitarian principles but rather their application. The principles remain valid, but more important are the questions of whether and how the humanitarian architecture, power and accountability are fit for purpose.

Humanitarian architecture

This paper does not question the huge amount of invaluable work and funding mobilised to respond to an ever-increasing number, scale and complexity of humanitarian crises by a vast humanitarian architecture that includes the UN, governments, NGOs and others. It does not question the dedication and commitment of humanitarians and humanitarian organisations and networks trying to make a difference where they respond. It questions whether these well-intentioned efforts are underpinned by the real and radical changes that are required to place the power in the hands of those most affected. It questions whether calls for action and demands for change from these very same humanitarians and humanitarian organisations and networks are matched with changes they themselves need to make.

But in order to begin answering these questions, it is important to take a closer look at the framework that supports this system.

The UN

In 1991, the UN General Assembly established the role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator[1] (ERC), as well as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Consolidated Appeals Process and the Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF). These were envisioned as key coordination mechanisms and tools of the ERC. In addition to these mechanisms, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), works to bring the world together to tackle humanitarian emergencies and save the lives of people caught in crises[2].

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[1] A global champion for people affected by emergencies.
[2] Similarly, OCHA's Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG) supports the strengthening of country-level cluster and inter-cluster coordination with the aim of improving the quality of humanitarian response.

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OCHA and its various structures undoubtedly undertake significant work each year to respond to the many humanitarian crises and do make a difference. But there are many questions around whether this organisation is still fit for purpose, the transparency of the process around appointing the ERC, and the inclusivity of OCHA of communities and local citizens who are affected by humanitarian crises. In its *Annual Report* (2023), OCHA details considerable achievements and progress against targets. But while many targets have been achieved and celebrated, little is known about why some targets have not been reached, or any mistakes, any learning or reflection, or any action on these latter results. The report does not have a section about what failed and what would be different as a result.

According to the report, the OHCA contributed US$668 million to the Central Emergency Response Fund and US$1.11 billion to the Country-Based Pooled Funds, and assisted 62% of the more than 128 million people it aimed to assist. This is impressive. But only 45% of its humanitarian coordinators were from non-Western and European countries. OHCA reports that 24% (US$76.1m) of its extrabudgetary budget was spent on its headquarters and 76% in the field, and that 33% (US$49.9m) of unearmarked funds were spent on its headquarters. Is this balance of funding between field and headquarters the best that we can manage in the face of huge funding needs locally? The field funds that are reaching local communities, and how allocation decisions are made and by whom are unclear.

The IASC's full members are from various UN agencies, and it has standing invitees from some large INGOs, however there are no local groups or Global South organisations in the IASC. It is undoubtedly a top-down architecture contrasted with the rhetoric of bottom-up decision-making and accountability to affected communities, rhetoric which is evident throughout the IASC website.

The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response[3] (SCHR) is a voluntary alliance of nine of the world's leading humanitarian organisations, which come together to support quality, accountability and learning in humanitarian action. It is also a standing invitee of the IASC. As leading international humanitarian organisations, they claim to put disaster-affected people at the centre of their responses. Yet there are no Global South members in the SCHR, and no local voices of those directly affected by crises. The nine organisations have grown in size and financial resources since the commitments to local action they made in the Grand Bargain of 2016. Have they adequately shifted power and resources to affected communities?

The Grand Bargain was launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016 as a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations. They committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. Initially conceived as a deal between the five biggest donors and the six largest UN Agencies, the Grand Bargain now includes 67 Signatories (25 Member States, 26 NGOs, 12 UN agencies, two Red Cross/Red Crescent movements, and two inter-governmental organisations). The number of signatories is encouraging but still has limited representation of voices from the Global South, in the form of two networks predominantly made of organisations from Global South countries.

An independent review of The Grand Bargain by Metcalfe-Hough et al in 2022[4] showed some progress but also huge gaps. Despite the progress, there was little analysis to understand the gaps and problems. The review stated that the potential of the Grand Bargain to address political barriers to change is still to be realised. There has been no concrete progress towards a more demand-led rather than supply-driven humanitarian response; there is an ongoing failure to substantively increase funding to local and national actors; and quality funding is still insufficient to enable the desired step-change in efficiencies and effectiveness. The signatories will need to further refine their focus and approach if this mechanism is to help them realise the transformation of the international humanitarian system originally envisaged in the Grand Bargain.

The potential of the Grand Bargain to address political barriers to change is still to be realised.

The Grand Bargain is now in its second iteration as The Grand Bargain 2.0. Many of the new core commitments in The Grand Bargain 2.0 have no targets or deadlines. How will they be held accountable and by whom? It begs the question: should The Grand Bargain have been continued or should there have been recognition that it has failed and disbanded.

There are many other examples of initiatives that have been set up to address the challenges of the current humanitarian system. They are often set up to shift power to local actors, shift more funds locally, support local actors to make locally appropriate decisions and to challenge donors and funding flows. Objectives are often well intentioned but not specific, measurable or time-bound, and therefore, largely unaccountable. They are meant to be collective mechanisms to promote a more democratic humanitarian system. Often, they end up as a closed and elite group of the larger actors, be they

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[3] SCHR aspires to, and actively promotes, a world in which local communities, civil society, governments and regional institutions can respond effectively to humanitarian emergencies, based on the universally accepted humanitarian principles described earlier.

[4] It was based mostly on self-reports by signatories and also drew on the findings of a survey of local actors by the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) and data from field perception surveys conducted by Ground Truth Solutions (GTS), as well as publicly available literature.

donors, INGOs or others who claim to be humanitarian experts, excluding the voices of local actors or distancing their voices many-fold.

[New initiatives] are meant to be collective mechanisms to promote a more democratic humanitarian system. Often, they end up as a closed and elite group of the larger actors, be they donors, INGOs or others who claim to be humanitarian experts, excluding the voices of local actors or distancing their voices many-fold.

Some initiatives end up being reinvented and are reinstated in different guises, often with the same people leading them. New champions are identified, and it is often unclear how they have been appointed or what radical difference they seek to achieve. Different language is often used to describe similar initiatives from the past which have not achieved their goals, and the new terminology takes on a life of its own—be this 'localisation', 'decolonisation' or 'locally-led responses'. Mistakes and failings are not openly and clearly acknowledged, but these are powerful elements of real learning and change. Accountability is mentioned but not adequately addressed. It means that recommendations are often made but clear lessons are not articulated, or implemented.

Let's take a look at the annual gathering organised by OCHA in Geneva for thousands of humanitarian actors at the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW). Hundreds of sessions are organised by a huge number of humanitarian networks and partnerships, and a vast majority of participants are from INGOs. Of course, lots of invaluable and stimulating discussions take place but it is never clear what the outcomes are or what difference these gatherings make to the state of the humanitarian world. Why not organise such gatherings at or near major crises-affected areas instead of Geneva and bring minds together, especially local voices, to listen to what will make a difference locally and what these networks and partnerships can do to support local action to address these crises?

NGOs and networks

There are a growing number and complexity of networks and membership organisations in humanitarianism, many of which are predominantly based and led from the Global North. Some of these include Sphere, the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP), the CHS Alliance, H2H Network, the Start Fund and other membership organisations (including SCHR).

They face major challenges to their business models, yet there are few, if any, public conversations of what changes these networks will make and how. I don't question the huge amount of work they do and their value, but I question whether their structures are fit for purpose, how they are led and governed, their duplication, their costs and their rhetoric about localisation and decolonisation.

Let's look at the NGOs and NGO networks that operate in the humanitarian system.

Sphere's[5] standards have been invaluable in guiding humanitarian responses worldwide and are very widely used across the globe by humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors. Having led Sphere from 2019 to 2022, I have firsthand experience of its work, structure, strengths, weaknesses and opportunities.

While it supposedly serves the global humanitarian community, it is a paid membership organisation with around 50 members, which raises questions as to how inclusive it is of this community, and if the voices of the thousands of local organisations which use the standards are being heard. Equally, it is perplexing that paid membership is a prerequisite when humanitarian standards are supposedly a public good.

In 2019, I was brought in to develop and lead Sphere into a new strategic phase. I consulted internal and external stakeholders widely in the strategy development process. There were calls for localisation and the promotion of nationally and locally led processes to adapt Sphere standards. Questions were asked about the value of membership compared to embracing the broader community; whether the membership model and membership fees are relevant and viable; diversity was questioned; and there were calls to expand membership and make it truly global, reaching out to the Global South. Why think narrowly if Sphere truly wanted to be the go-to organisation for standards? Why not welcome new types of members—academia, National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMAs), civil-military agencies—and engage actively with non-humanitarian civil society actors in fragile settings?

Based on the findings of the consultations and my own experience of the sector, I questioned the legitimacy of Sphere being a paid membership organisation governed by a small group of mostly large INGOs while wishing to be of service to a global humanitarian community. I recommended abolishing membership fees, albeit in a phased manner, and opening up membership. I also recommended external representation on the Board. These recommendations were rejected. Sphere remains a paid membership organisation with around 50 member organisations and is still governed by its members without any external perspectives on the board. It made me

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[5] Sphere sets standards for humanitarian action and is a worldwide network of people and organisations committed to principled, accountable and quality humanitarian assistance.

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question the courage in the sector to swiftly bring about real and radical change rather than tinkering at the edges. Five years on from when I made my recommendations, I understand Sphere is now rethinking its paid membership model. Heba Aly (then CEO of The New Humanitarian) also concluded that the new strategy seemed to be building on the legacy of the past rather than opening up new strategic directions for Sphere.

Hosted by Sphere, the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP)[6] has nine other member networks, most of which are led from the Global North. The networking and coordination are to be commended, along with the quality they have brought to humanitarianism. There is a lot of value in the harmonisation of standards, de-bureaucratising the sector and removing barriers for local actors. However, there is duplication on many levels and questions of where the local voices are. I do not recommend a superstructure with its inherent bureaucracy, added costs and complexity. And I question the lack of imagination, vision and leadership courage to consider radical options to make a reality of shifting power from the Global North to locally led initiatives.

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Alliance[7] is a global alliance of humanitarian and development organisations committed to making aid work better for people. Like Sphere, the CHS Alliance is a paid membership organisation. While it has more members than Sphere, it still begs the question as to why paid membership is a requirement for what should be a public good.

The H2H Network[8] claims that the existing humanitarian system simply wasn't built to cope and that it envisages a new humanitarian system capable of meeting today's challenges, preparing for and developing resilience to those on the horizon. Their mission is to enable and catalyse change in the humanitarian system, driving efficiency, accountability and impact. They claim to support, strengthen and challenge major players and traditional ways of working. Yet they fund only their own members, most of which are the major players in the sector, rather than local actors.

This year marks a decade for Start Network's Start Fund[9]. They have many local member organisations and are shifting power, resources and decision making to locally led networks and organisations. But membership is still a requirement, and they are yet to articulate their vision for a different global humanitarian financing system.

The RINGO Project[10] is a globally coordinated cross-sectoral effort to revolutionise the sector by interrogating the purpose, structures, power, and positioning of INGOs. It is a systems change initiative that seeks to transform global civil society by convening a 'Social Lab' of global innovators who represent 'the system' of INGOs (including Global South partners, funders and INGO leaders). In its second phase, RINGO has also targeted the governing bodies of INGOs, launching some prototypes that could transform INGOs and the systems in which they function. We await what impact these may have in transforming INGOs' structures, their funding and accountability models, and what this means for local organisations.

Many large INGOs engaged in humanitarian responses have developed 'localisation' and 'decolonisation' policies and strategies to shift power, decision making and funding from the Global North to the Global South. It comes after years of reflection and realisation that the system is broken and isn't working, along with years of repeated calls from local communities and organisations to trust them, recognise their knowledge about the realities of their local contexts, and to let them make decisions about how they spend funds. This is very welcome indeed.

Why is there so little leadership, imagination and courage to implement paradigm shifts and radical change? Are the people who established these policies and strategies afraid of what real change could mean for them, their roles and their institutions?

But why has it taken so long to recognise this? Why is there still limited action to back these policies and strategies? Small incremental shifts make little difference and, on the contrary, reinforce the power imbalance. Why is there so little leadership, imagination and courage to implement paradigm shifts and radical change? Are the people who established these policies and strategies afraid of what real change could mean for them, their roles and their institutions? There is exhaustion about such rhetoric and declining trust that actions will follow such policies.

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[6] The Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP) aims to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian action through the promotion of humanitarian standards. The HSP offers training, tools, and policy and practical guidance for a harmonised approach to working with standards.

[7] They believe that organisations deliver higher quality, more effective aid when they are accountable to the people they serve. Together, they claim to be a movement to strengthen accountability and to put people affected by crisis at the heart of what we do by applying the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).

[8] The H2H Network is a network of humanitarian organisations set up to provide support and services directly to humanitarians working on the ground. Its aim is to drive change across the humanitarian system, getting more to people in need, by coordinating and convening humanitarian-to-humanitarian support and services.

[9] Launched in 2014, the Start Fund has become a vital mechanism, empowering their 100 or so member organisations to deliver swift and anticipatory humanitarian action around the world. Its vision is for a locally led humanitarian system that is accountable to people affected by and at risk of crises.

[10] https://rightscolab.org/ringo/

Governance and growth

At Sphere, the Board is dominated by large NGOs from the Global North. Member organisations elect its Board from members who then make decisions. It has also resisted attempts to bring in external voices, including those of citizens, private sector organisations and others who are not humanitarian specialists but are affected by humanitarian crises.

The CHS Alliance has done a little better with two independent board members who are not required to be members. However, they are yet to draw on a wider range of citizens who are affected by humanitarian crises and have valid perspectives to offer.

It seems that humanitarians are fearful of external perspectives which would enrich their organisations, strengthen their work and hold them more accountable. There is so much rhetoric about diversity and transparency and so little convincing evidence of either.

Given the limited, slow and infinitesimal changes that many Global North institutions, their leaders and governing bodies have shown willingness to make thus far, it sometimes feels impossible to try to significantly change the existing system. Almost all the dominant, powerful Global North actors are so bound by the legal and financial regulatory frameworks of Global North countries where they are based and the large donors from whom they receive money, that it seems that change may be unattainable.

It is also not unusual for governing bodies to expect their leaders to grow their charities in size, funding and other resources instead of divesting to where they can truly make a difference. Yes, there are scattered examples of a few charity mergers in the past decades, but it is rare to see the voluntary closure of charities. On the contrary, new NGOs and initiatives spring up regularly.

Worley (2024) reviewed the staff cuts and financial turbulence at Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee reported by The New Humanitarian following years of aggressive growth by INGOs. The World Food Programme and the International Committee of the Red Cross are among other big agencies where substantial cuts have been made following a global humanitarian funding squeeze. Worley highlights that this has shone a light on the highly corporate, aggressive growth models followed by many INGOs, which are largely funded through government aid budgets. Donors appear to favour funding these larger agencies, thereby entrenching their domination instead of supporting and strengthening local civil society organisations. Why not use this crisis of funding as an opportunity for change instead? Doane (2024) similarly questions why the money isn't going to local organisations where it would make the biggest difference. The expansionism of many INGOs requires that they urgently take a close look at their role, their purpose, their size and how they can strengthen local actors, while playing a backroom role of advocacy and public awareness building for local actors. There needs to be incentivisation around solidarity and localisation.

The expansionism of many INGOs requires that they urgently take a close look at their role, their purpose, their size and how they can strengthen local actors, while playing a backroom role of advocacy and public awareness building for local actors.

Superstructures, single platforms or complementarity

One issue that is regularly encountered—particularly in countries where disaster management systems are under development—is that there is competition over the 'best' global standards. There is confusion over the UN cluster system and the various standards of Sphere and the HSP. I do not advocate creating any more superstructures which absorb huge funds and time. I advocate for removal of duplication and better complementarity of existing systems in the promotion of global standards, and giving real voice, power, decision making and funding to local actors at national, sub-national and community level.

The failure of the humanitarian system in places like Syria, Sudan and elsewhere is not linked to principles and standards—it's linked to politics. Yet too often we see the system bound up in meeting technical criteria that is divorced from the real causes of failed humanitarian responses. Part of the reason that the many reforms in the sector have failed to meaningfully change the result for affected people is that they focus on technical changes—like how many litres of water each refugee gets—rather than deeper reforms linked to things like power. The professionalisation of the sector has been positive, but has not tackled the more deep-rooted problems underpinning aid, such as its neocolonial foundations. These issues that have been addressed in multiple places, including the New Humanitarian's fascinating 2020 conversation series, *Rethinking Humanitarianism*.

Slim (2022) makes a powerful case about the importance and the need for greater recognition of humanitarian resistance. In countries affected by conflict, civilian rescue and relief is being organised by resistance groups that are struggling for victory and humanity in equal measure, and so simultaneously taking sides for human life and human freedom. They are not neutral, but they are humanitarian, and often reach people faster and better than conventional humanitarians from international agencies. Resistance

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humanitarians' two-pronged struggle for justice and humanity is firmly grounded in ethics and law, making them just as legitimate as conventional humanitarians.

Kamal (2023) and Seiff (2022) advocate for External Humanitarians and this resonates with what is much needed in the humanitarian world. Smaller and more nimble international actors who provide backroom support, specialist expertise to navigate complex funding structures, international policy advocacy, and awareness raising around forgotten crises, would support local actors to take the lead.

> *Smaller and more nimble international actors who provide backroom support, specialist expertise to navigate complex funding structures, international policy advocacy, and awareness raising around forgotten crises, would support local actors to take the lead.*

There is a need to shift our gaze, less on the existing and mostly external humanitarians and much more on the *Internal Humanitarians*, the local actors who should be supported by the external humanitarians. That would signal decolonisation in humanitarianism beyond the rhetoric.

This does not have to be one massive global change that will take decades to implement but a change that is acknowledged and enacted by each institution, organisation and humanitarian leader with conviction and courage. Examples from my experience working with women's movements offer some insights into how these changes can be driven.

Feminist leadership

In 2009, I led an initiative called 'Innovations for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health',[11] funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to find solutions to maternal and child mortality. We tested a hypothesis of whether we could centre marginalised voices, particularly people who have never been heard but who live with these challenges, and crowdsource ground-breaking solutions. We sought and funded ideas from the public, many from women and mothers who knew what would make a real difference. We took risks, funded the work generously, evaluated rigorously and accepted that not every innovation would succeed. 12,762 ideas were received in Malawi, Sierra Leone, and India. At the end of the project, nine projects proposed by local citizens had been successfully implemented.

As a Board Trustee at Oxfam, I saw first-hand the work done locally in the Philippines to prepare for and respond to the cyclone prone areas in 2023. The programme B-READY[12] delivers significant impact via accurate weather forecasting technology, mobile banking in partnership with Maya Bank, support from local government and cash transfers to credit cards given to women in households to prepare for and respond to disasters in their communities. Women made local decisions on what was needed and where the money would be spent, leading and helping to institutionalise anticipatory action to sustain and build resilient communities.

Recently, I asked an Oxfam Regional Director what she would consider a concrete example of decolonisation in humanitarian action. She is from the Middle East and has lived there and deeply understands the context, from the conflict in Gaza and Israel to the crises in Syria, Sudan and elsewhere in the region. She said the biggest difference we could make was to give direct funding to informal (and women's) groups who are well placed to respond to crises, instead of always funding the larger and/or established organisations.

In 2023, OCHA's Humanitarian Country Teams met their target of 50% engagement with women-led organisations. Is that the best we can do when there is abundant evidence that women and mothers are often best placed to decide on what works best for their families and communities? Humanitarian organisations keep on debating issues of sustainability without seriously giving power to those who know what works best. Why is there still reluctance from the humanitarian world to further and faster embrace feminist leadership and the role of women in humanitarianism?

A crisis of imagination and leadership

There is a crisis of imagination and leadership in humanitarianism. Our institutions, political and democratic, are failing us, yet our capacity to think boldly, differently and quickly is frozen. Overcoming deeply entrenched power dynamics that maintain the status quo is possible, but there is little movement towards this change.

> *There is a crisis of imagination and leadership in humanitarianism. Our institutions, political and democratic, are failing us, yet our capacity to think boldly, differently and quickly is frozen.*

It is possible to democratise almost everything. The costs and barriers to participation are decreasing. Yet that is not how things have gone, with advanced democracies

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[11] https://www.jsi.com/project/innovations-for-maternal-newborn-and-child-health-global-research-partner/

[12] https://philippines.oxfam.org/tags/b-ready

sliding towards autocracy and conflict everywhere. This applies to humanitarianism. Democratising humanitarian assistance requires us to focus on more than just the humanitarian system, it needs us to focus on all systems that provide assistance to people affected by crisis.

We need models of change, either looking outside to the world or backwards to the past, but we also need to be part of a collective that imagines differently, that includes many voices that remain unheard or have been far removed from where power and money is held and decisions are made. These models of change need to do something positive, tangible and at some pace.

Sriskandarajah's 2024 book, *Power to the People*, gives many great examples of how increasing democratic participation could lead to ambitious change. He writes:

> Around the time of the 2015 Paris climate negotiations, there was a beautiful example of focus groups done with representative groups of people in 70-odd countries on the same day, so it started in the Pacific and ended in the Americas. People were asked very similar questions to what the diplomats and politicians were negotiating in Paris. Amazingly, they came out, on the whole, with far more ambitious policies… It's an example where I think that creating more global mechanisms for democratic participation will help create more ambition.

What can humanitarian institutions, their leaders and governing bodies imagine differently for humanitarianism and how fast? Are they willing and able to hand over power and resources to enable communities of people to collectively dream and take action that makes sense to them faster, more effectively, more efficiently and more sustainably than the lumbering pace at which many of the global structures work?

There needs to be forward-looking change, a rethinking of the roles of INGOs and UN agencies as much smaller and nimble backroom supporters and facilitators, rather than the power brokers, resource holders and gatekeepers they are now. The immunity to change in the humanitarian architecture at present needs to be replaced with imagination and courage from leaders so that it has a ripple effect over the next few years and not over another few decades.

Equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity will complement the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, but only if they help radically adjust the humanitarian architecture to be more inclusive, locally led and accountable.

Equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity will complement the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, but only if they help radically adjust the humanitarian architecture to be more inclusive, locally led and accountable. Rhetoric about principles is no longer enough. Action is needed within the sector to address its structure, governance, inclusivity and diversity.

In the same vein, should the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership consider transforming into the Centre for Leadership in Humanitarianism and adjusting its offerings and role accordingly? Or even take a lead role in convening humanitarian leaders, their organisations and networks to challenge the status quo and rhetoric, and fire up their imagination, courage and leadership to do what is required now?

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Innovatively addressing localisation: Pakistan's Sarhad Rural Support Programme

MASOOD UL MULK

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Image: A Sarhad Rural Support Programme Women Friendly Health Space in North Waziristan © SRSP library / with particular thanks to late Karim Jan and Tausif Ahmad.

Abstract

The humanitarian work of the Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP) in turbulent north-western Pakistan is an interesting example of how local organisations evolve, adapt, build their capacities and go to scale. SRSP has tackled the limitations of existing humanitarian architecture in implementing localisation by addressing issues like organisational capability, risk, capacity building, trust and best fit approach. This paper explores how SRSP's management, systems, policies and community outreach show a deep commitment to the marginalised segments of its population and demonstrate downward accountability, while also being upwardly accountable as registrants under Pakistan's company law, which sets stringent, internationally acceptable standards for financial accountability and protects the organisation's autonomy against predation from the government and politicians. Its approach to capacity building has been incremental, and built around hands on problem solving, and its program design has been based on iteration, learning and adaption. The SRSP's work also highlights how good local intermediaries can link the international system to a vast outreach of communities.

Leadership relevance

One of the reasons advanced for the slow pace of localisation is said to be the weakness of local organisations—their lack of capacity and organisational capability, their inability to take risks, issues around accountability, their small scale, etc. This study demonstrates to humanitarian leaders how strong local organisations can be built, using the Sarhad Rural Support Programme as an example. In this organisation, the process of capacity building is centred around problem solving and is incremental in nature. In the 35 years of its organisational life, SRSP has not used any expatriate staff or consultants. By adopting a 'best fit' approach, SRSP humanitarian programs fit easily into their environment and can grow in size and scale. SRSP smoothly fills gaps when international organisations withdraw. There is lot of rhetoric around helping to build local organisations, but there is a lack of attention paid to those that build their own, and SRSP deserves its achievements to be recognised, celebrated and replicated.

Introduction

The humanitarian work of Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP)—a non-profit NGO operating in the turbulent north-western regions of Pakistan—is an exemplary case study of how local organisations evolve, adapt, build their capacity and take their programs to scale. Founded in 1989, SRSP worked as a community development organisation for the first 16 years of its life, before it was compelled to add humanitarian work to its portfolio after the repeated humanitarian crises in the region.

Over the next 19 years, SRSP tackled the limitations of the existing humanitarian architecture in implementing localisation, by addressing issues like organisational capability, risk management, capacity building, adherence to humanitarian values, upward and downward accountability systems and building trust with the communities. SRSP has adopted a 'best fit' approach to humanitarian work, which measures contexts within their social and cultural environments and has resulted in remarkable success for the organisation, as expressed by the results on the ground.

The scale, diversity and outreach of SRSP's humanitarian programs in addressing the 2005 earthquake, the 2007-16 Internally Displaced Person crisis, the 2010, 2015 and 2022 floods and COVID-19 in 2021 can be glimpsed in the following figures. It has helped build about 60,000 houses and 23,000 shelters; undertaken registration of 621,000 families; provided non-food items to 869,000 individuals; built and improvised 2,808 infrastructure projects in drinking water, irrigation and communication; rehabilitated 719 schools; reached 61,000 women and adolescent girls through protection programs, gender-based violence, and women empowerment interventions; distributed 28,000 metric tons of food; and undertaken advocacy at the national and international level (See SRSP website, 2024; Bureau of Statistics Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2024; Asian Development Bank, 2022).

> *[SRSP is a] demonstration model for other local and national organisations engaging with the international humanitarian architecture, and a case study for global organisations looking to support their local counterparts.*

This paper explains the history, context and achievements of SRSP as a humanitarian organisation and accounts for factors that have contributed towards this success, both as a demonstration model for other local and national organisations engaging with the international humanitarian architecture, and a case study for global organisations looking to support their local counterparts.

The context: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)

SRSP works in the turbulent Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The province stretches along the northwest frontier of the country, and shares a porous, 2,640 km long border with Afghanistan. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is 74,521sq km and has a predominantly Muslim population of 40.8 million.

The people are mostly Pashtuns, with a sprinkling of other smaller ethnic and linguistic groups. KP is basically a tribal society, and conservative tribal values dominate the way of life, affording very little public space to women. The region has seen conflict since 1979, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, leading to mass migration into Pakistan. The American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 led to serious outbreak of conflict, with Taliban intrusion into the area. Bombs blasts, suicide attacks, kidnapping, and population displacements have been a regular feature of life here since then. The border regions see a lot of smuggling and livelihoods are subsistence oriented. There is seasonal migration to cities and the Middle East, which generates remittance income—a big source of livelihood in the region. There is potential for tourism in the mountains as well as mining minerals.

Out of the 38 administrative districts of the province, eight lie in the tribal region. These districts have been the centre of the regional war and have very poor economic and social indicators—the result of long historical neglect. The literacy rates in the province are 53%, with literacy rates for men being 73%, and 37% for females. Infant and maternal mortality rates are high and access to hospitals is very poor.

The unemployment rate is among the highest in the country and the overall poverty in the province stands at 40.7% (Bureau of Statistics Khyber Pakhtunkhwa website, 2024; Asian Development Bank, 2022).

The organisation: Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP)

The organisation was established as a nonprofit NGO to undertake community driven development work in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan in 1989. It was registered under Pakistan's Company's Act.

The idea for SRSP was inspired by the community driven work of Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) in the northern mountain regions of Pakistan, and the leadership of SRSP at the Board level was provided by Mr Shoaib Sultan Khan, the founding General Manager of AKRSP. He was joined by some eminent civil servants, members from the media, and civil society.

The program was based on the idea that the communities had the capacity for self-help which could be tapped for

their development. It was believed that could be catalysed by an organisation that was people centred, and had flexible, adaptive learning and accountable systems to tap into social capital and generate trust. SRSP planned to do this by mobilising communities into groups and training their leaders to take on leadership responsibilities, while providing technical and economic assistance to the organised communities to address their common problems.

In its 35 years of life, SRSP has grown from a small organisation to a large, respected and credible organisation. Its journey has been an emergent one, taking the opportunities as they came along to further its mission.

Over the years, SRSP has developed competencies in community mobilisation (44,500 community organisations, with one third of these women-oriented), and community infrastructure development (10,955 infrastructure projects benefitting 2.5 billion people built at the cost of Rs 10 billion). Its infrastructure work has covered areas like drinking water, irrigation, roads, bridges, sanitation, schools, and micro hydro electricity generation. An additional 524,000 people have been trained under its human resource and vocational training programs; and it has distributed micro finance and community banking funds amounting to Rs 2 billion to 135,000 households. It has also established programs in small enterprise development, value chains, gender-based violence and female empowerment. At the policy level, SRSP has advocated for community institution building and poverty alleviation through the Rural Support Network, which brings together sister organisations working across Pakistan.

SRSP has had 6,400 staff, including 4,313 professionals. It has worked with 73 international and national donors on 293 projects and raised total funds amounting to Rs 47.1-billion.

Its [SRSP's] flexible systems, multiplicity of organisational structures and emergent policies have helped the organisation adapt to changing political governments, and to many diverse humanitarian crises in different regions of great physical, cultural and political diversity.

Long term survival and sustainability has been seen as an important capacity for the organisation. A fund for this purpose has been built up through contributions by the government, institutional costs and services. This has enabled SRSP to retain good staff, build their capacities and preserve institutional memory and organisational stability over a long period of time. It has also used the fund to leverage over 25 billion rupees of humanitarian assistance from international sources. Its flexible systems, multiplicity of organisational structures and emergent policies have helped the organisation adapt to changing political governments, and to many diverse humanitarian crises in different regions of great physical, cultural and political diversity. It has coherently dealt with a highly complex and uncertain environment, winning space to operate and filling gaps where both national and international organisations failed to work. After 16 years as a community driven development program, it readily adapted its work to incorporate humanitarian work after the earthquake of 2005 (SRSP publications, 2006-23).

Humanitarian crises in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has undergone humanitarian crises of different types for the last three decades. These are briefly described as follows.

2005 earthquake
In the earthquake of 2005, the official death toll was 87,380, including 19,000 children. Around 38,000 people were injured. 3.5 million people were rendered homeless. 780,000 buildings, including housing, schools and hospitals were destroyed, as was drinking water and irrigation infrastructure and roads. 250,000 farm animals died. SRSP's program area in Abbotabad, Mansehra, Battagram and Kohistan were badly hit (Relief Web, 2006).

IDP crisis
From 2008-9 to 2017, military operations against insurgents led to the displacement of 6.8 million people. 2.8 million of these were displaced from Malakand Division districts of Swat, Buner, Dir and Shangla, while four million were displaced from the tribal districts of Mohmand, Bajaur, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram, North and South Waziristan. It is estimated that 15% of the people decided to reside in camps, while the other 85% went to reside with host communities or with relatives or in rented houses. 95% of infrastructure, including schools, health facilities and roads were damaged. Women and children suffered the most at the start of the displacement and during the displaced period they were more prone to protection, health and education issues. Livelihoods were totally disrupted. Most families returned to their homes by 2017 when the operations wound up (Human Rights Commission, 2010; *The Guardian*, May 2009).

2010 floods
In 2010, monsoon floods hit Pakistan, killing 1,700 people, affecting 20% of the land area and impacting 20 million people. The floods caused billions of rupees' worth of damage to infrastructure, housing, agriculture and livestock. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, 1,068 people died, and 912,999 people were displaced. In the 13 most severely affected districts, over 52,000 cattle died, over 5,000 acres of crops were destroyed, and 191,215 houses were damaged (Government of Pakistan, 2011).

COVID-19

In Pakistan, 1.6 million cases of COVID-19 were reported, leading to 30,000 deaths. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province had 140,000 cases and 4,400 deaths. There was vast unemployment as businesses shut down and in households there was a higher incidence of gender-based violence. School shutdowns and pressure on health centres all contributed to the misery of the people (www.worldometers.info, 2024).

2022 floods

The summer floods of 2022 led to the death of 1,739 individuals. 2.1 million people became homeless in Pakistan and over 897,000 houses were destroyed. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 18 districts were affected, leading to 600,000 households being displaced and 320,877 houses being destroyed. 7,742 cattle were killed. There was massive destruction of small infrastructure at the community level (World Bank, 2022).

Afghan refugees

Between 1979 and 1988, between 4-5 million Afghans sought refuge in Pakistan because of the Soviet War. By 2002, 5.2 million had returned to their homeland. Pakistan still hosts 2.8 million refugees of different status, and 58% of these live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There are 800,000 individuals with proof of registration and 500,000 unregistered Afghans. Another 600,000 Afghans moved to Pakistan after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Initially, Afghan refugees moved to rural areas and settled in villages. There are 43 Afghan Refugee villages in the province throughout 18 districts. Over time, they have increasingly moved to urban areas in search of better livelihood opportunities. The influx of Afghans has overburdened the already meagre services and facilities in the host communities and caused friction between the locals. Living conditions are poor, with limited WASH facilities and poor hygiene practices leading to waterborne disease and infections among children and women (Commissionerate of Afghan Refugees/Safron, 2024).

Pakistan still hosts 2.8 million refugees of different status, and 58% of these live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

SRSP's humanitarian programs

The devastation caused by the earthquake of 2005 convinced the SRSP Board that it had to move into humanitarian work to address the needs of its community members. Since then, the organisation's humanitarian portfolio has continued to expand, reaching almost half of its development portfolio.

The scale, diversity and outreach of SRSP's humanitarian program can be judged by the following summary of its work:

- SRSP has worked with 31 international and four national donors to deliver humanitarian programs. The financial portfolio of this program is over Rs 26.5 billion.
- Reconstructed or built 2,808 infrastructure projects in irrigation, drinking water, sanitation, bridges, and mini-hydros to benefit 1.6 billion individuals at the cost of Rs 3 billion in humanitarian crisis hit areas
- Reconstructed 83,908 houses and shelters at a cost of Rs 8.5 billion. This included rebuilding over 60,000 houses to World Bank standards after the earthquake in 2005 under funding by Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund
- Assisted 42,724 individuals with training in heavy machinery, solar panels, electrics, plumbing, mobile, tailoring, motor mechanics, hand embroidery, cooking etc.
- Provided 224,233 individuals with health care facilities through medical camps and the rehabilitation of 109 Health Care Facilities
- Provided 869,666 Non Food Items during relief phases
- Registered 621,651 families during IDP crises to enable them to access humanitarian assistance
- Distributed 28,943 metric tons of food among 317,781 families to ensure food security
- Distributed Rs 1.6 billion among 509,351 individuals under Cash for Work programs
- Provided 1.2 million individuals with WASH interventions with a financial outlay of over Rs 1 billion
- Reached 61,000 women and adolescent girls through protection, GBV and female empowerment programs.
- Targeted Afghan Refugees with WASH, education and health programs

SRSP has also advocated for humanitarian causes at national forums and high-level meetings, including at the IVCA conference at Geneva in 2007; at the Cambridge Humanitarian Forum in 2010 and at the 2022 International Humanitarian Leadership Conference at Deakin University in Melbourne (SRSP publications, 2006-23).

The strength strong local organisations bring to humanitarian work

Over the first 16 years of operation, SRSP incrementally developed considerable outreach and trust in the communities where it was working, and had put in place management, financial, human resource, procurement, audit and organisational value systems that were trusted by international and national donors and other stakeholders. When called upon to undertake humanitarian work, these systems were already at the disposal of management.

SRSP keeps in view the perceptions and needs of its communities. It does not divide its work into two neat

and rigidly divided parcels, one called 'humanitarian' and the other 'development'. It sees them as overlapping. For most communities, reconstruction begins on the day the disaster hits them. An irrigation channel or a drinking water pipe or a mini hydro power project that was destroyed cannot wait for the relief phase to be over before work begins on it.

For most communities, reconstruction begins on the day the disaster hits them. An irrigation channel or a drinking water pipe or a mini hydro power project that was destroyed cannot wait for the relief phase to be over before work begins on it.

In the earthquake of 2005, 15 out of the 18 union councils requiring housing reconstruction in the Mansehra/Battagram/Abbotabad districts were assigned to SRSP. These union councils had serious landlord-tenant and housing ownership problems complicating the compensation issues. SRSP managed these issues successfully because of the credibility it enjoyed in the communities. It helped communities rebuild over 60,000 houses in a program funded by the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) and World Bank.

SRSP has also demonstrated that the best way to reach grassroots community groups is to access them through strong local intermediaries, who play a role in nurturing them and linking them with service providers. Studies have shown that small local NGOs lack the capacity to reach a large number of community groups, while large and strong intermediary organisations such as SRSP reach thousands of community groups. It's a myth that community groups come up on their own and do not need the support and nurturing of intermediaries. While there were hundreds of small NGOs working in the earthquake area, the reconstruction of houses had to be undertaken by SRSP in 15 out of 18 union councils because it had the competencies and outreach within the communities to do it (Caroll, 1992 and Mulk, 2006).

International experience said that those hit by the earthquake should be moved into large camps established by aid giving organisations, but SRSP could see very early that conservative values and a desire to be near their homes would prevent people from moving to these camps. It therefore took the initiative of establishing 27 local community camps for over 28,000 people near the villages, which were more culturally acceptable to the communities (Mulk, 2006).

After floods in Chitral District in 2015, SRSP found that several hundred community-maintained irrigation channels had been severely damaged in the floods. Since these channels were built by the communities, they did not show up on figures for damaged infrastructure and were denied help; but SRSP found them critical for the livelihoods of the people in the region. It was able to convince the government to use the funds available under the European Union (EU) funded Community Driven Local Development Project to address the issue promptly. EU agreed with this suggestion because addressing people's immediate needs and finding a local solution to a local problem was the spirit behind the program. Strict adherence to the development-humanitarian divide would have been at the cost of the communities.

The IDP crisis began in 2007-08 and lasted till 2017. The serious threats to the lives of aid workers compelled international and national organisations to move out of KP. SRSP decided to stay and fill the gap created by this withdrawal, ensuring that services would reach millions of displaced people, handling a very large UNHCR operations warehouse for almost two years. SRSP also had to undertake the registration process of millions of IDPs when a helpless government requested it to do so. All this was possible because of SRSP's deep commitment to helping people in distress, its competencies and its ability to better understand and handle risks.

The security situation and stringent rules for operations greatly reduced the space for civil society operations in conflict areas. From its experience, SRSP saw that one factor that went against the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) was their failure to balance the hardware (or brick and mortar) and software components of their programs in these regions. For example, most international organisations focused on the software components of WASH programming—like hygiene and washing hands—while SRSP stressed addressing drinking water constraints alongside a handwashing program. Security agencies examining the work through a security lens would usually attribute agendas to organisations that did not balance the two components, because they failed to comprehend why washing hands was a priority when drinking water was not available. By balancing the two, SRSP found its acceptability higher among security organisations and it demonstrated to the humanitarian organisations how to win operational space in difficult areas. SRSP handled the civil-military relationships in the region without compromising its integrity.

Most international organisations focused on the software components of WASH programming—like hygiene and washing hands—while SRSP stressed addressing drinking water constraints alongside a handwashing program.

SRSP has also been able to address Gender Based Violence issues by changing project terminologies and processes

to make them culturally sensitive while dealing with displacement in North Waziristan tribal areas.

Similarly, while SRSP was able to pinpoint that the poorest communities had no hesitation about standing in long queues to receive tents during the displacement crisis, some of the classes that stood slightly higher in the social hierarchy found it very difficult to do so because of 'shame culture'. They would only turn up late at night to receive their tents and a more humane way had to be found to help them.

These instances demonstrate how SRSP's localised background and approach helped find innovative solutions to poorly understood humanitarian issues and how it filled gaps that international organisations could not (SRSP publications, 2005-2024).

Organisational capability and values

The organisational capability for a mission driven and purposeful organisation comes from its commitment and ability to implement this mission. SRSP was fortunate to find a highly committed, respected and credible Board of Directors, motivated by a desire to help the poorest in the society. These were eminent men and women from civil society, academia, media and government (who joined in their individual capacity).

Together, they brought experienced leadership to the Board and balanced the need for good governance with a willingness to give sufficient autonomy to the management to enable it to build up a program in a highly complex and uncertain environment. Their deep commitment to marginalised groups ensured that the organisation never lost focus. The value of giving primacy to the needs, opinions and views of the communities remained paramount for the organisation. The Board was deeply committed to the philosophy of community development and disallowed any deviation from it. But when the earthquake hit the program areas in 2005 and conflict and floods subsequently devastated the region, the Board agreed to allow the management to initiate humanitarian programs. The humanitarian imperative to help fellow human beings in distress moved them. Over the next two decades, as the program area continued to be hit by the IDP crisis, floods, COVID-19 and the refugee crisis, humanitarian programs became an important part of SRSP's work.

While the humanitarian imperative drove SRSP's Board to undertake humanitarian programs, it must also be noted that the ideals of impartiality, neutrality and independence were already part of SRSP's value system. The organisation operates in societies that are deeply riven by social hierarchies, caste, ethnic and linguistic divisions and political polarisation and it was practical to remain impartial, neutral and independent (SRSP publications, 2005-24).

Long term capacity for survival and sustainability

One of the challenges that faces CSOs in the 'Global South' is the absence of a critical capacity, which we call "the long-term capacity for survival and sustainability" (Banerjee, 2006). Most organisations live from project to project and fail to retain staff, build up their systems and policies, and readily lose institutional memory. Donors rarely provide institutional support to build this capacity. The SRSP Board of Directors understood that this weakness was a major stumbling block in building up organisational capacity. For this reason, from the first day the Board focused on building a 'long term survival and sustainability fund' for the organisation that would bridge the financial gap between projects and also enable the organisation to think long term. In 2007, SRSP's Board of Directors was able to convince the government to provide a fund of Rs 700 million rupees for exactly this purpose. The fund was provided as a grant and created much-needed institutional stability. The terms of the fund ensured that the autonomy of the organisation was not compromised, and enabled SRSP to leverage more resources. It also enabled it to retain staff and institutional memory for long periods of time. The Board also took the decision that international organisations would be charged institutional costs for projects SRSP implemented on their behalf. The Board did this because it thought that international and multilateral organisations discriminated against local organisations by not paying such costs to them. It also understood that international organisations were not in a position to refuse this because of their dependence on SRSP for delivery of humanitarian aid in difficult conditions (Bannerji, 2006).

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Laws under which civil society operates

In Pakistan, CSOs are mostly registered under three laws: the Societies Act; the Cooperative Act; and the Company Act. Most small organisations register under the first two laws because the registration process is simple and the accountability requirements few and weak. SRSP decided to register as a not-profit company under the Company Act. The process of registration under this

Act is cumbersome and the accountability requirements both expensive and stringent. Internationally acceptable standards of financial accountability have to be maintained. But registration under the Company Act has its advantages too. It protects the organisation against traditional predation by the government and politicians and organisational autonomy is protected under the law. Repeated attempt by vested interests to reduce its autonomy have failed because of the laws that govern it (SRSP publications, 2005-2024).

Relationship with government

The SRSP Board of Directors decided to invite the government to sit on its Board to help build trust and to ensure that the government is fully in the picture about the work it is undertaking. The Board thought this was important because the size and spread of SRSP's program was such that it could evoke suspicion, jealousy or envy. The presence of the government on the Board also gives the Board credibility with donors. The government therefore sends ex officio representatives to the Board (although it remains in the minority). This has ensured that the autonomy of the organisation is protected, and policies and staff appointments are not controlled by the government. It has also meant that SRSP has successfully worked with 10 different provincial governments over 35 years, which is not normal in a region where organisational relationships with the authorities can break down with every change in government.

Adaptive policies

The Board is comprised of people who have had long experience of management and public service. While they focus on governance, they also ensure that management has considerable autonomy to handle very difficult, uncertain and complex environments. One good example of this is that the Board understands that human resources policies should be made with awareness of the context in which the organisation is operating. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a deal-based, rather than rule-based society. Individual relationships, networks and ties are important in making or breaking organisations and programs. While working in some of the tribal areas, a balance had to be found in addressing local sensitivities around tribes and communal issues when selecting and placing staff. Failure to do that has resulted in some good international organisations being forced to withdraw from the area. While the goal remains to create a rational merit-based organisation, the importance of incorporating local sensitivities into the process is kept in mind and organisational policies reflected this.

Another example is that SRSP is not the best paying organisation in town. Its salaries are on the lower side when compared with international organisations and many national organisations. In the early years,

international organisations would rush in after each crisis and start poaching SRSP staff by paying them higher salaries, disrupting the work of the organisation. To overcome this, the SRSP Board developed a flexible policy of remunerating staff. When faced with a crisis situation, SRSP management is allowed to change its compensation policies to protect it against poaching until things return to normal (SRSP publications, 2005-24).

Human resources policies should be made with awareness of the context in which the organisation is operating. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a deal-based, rather than rule-based society. Individual relationships, networks and ties are important in making or breaking organisations and programs.

Retaining institutional memory

SRSP's donors have described one of the strengths of the organisation as its ability to win the loyalty of its staff. This is because of its institutional stability, as well as its policy of retaining staff and reassigning them to new projects. While it is not the best paid organisation in town, it compensates for this by creating an organisational environment where staff are intrinsically motivated. This ability to retain staff for a long time has also helped preserve institutional memory and retain local and regional knowledge about the different areas that staff have worked in, which has given SRSP an advantage when it comes to implementing programs. On a number of occasions, SRSP has been asked to implement large projects in a short timeframe when donor projects fail to take off. This capacity comes from SRSP's deep knowledge of the local environment, and of different contractors and communities and stakeholders. It has helped the organisation manage risk in a better and more efficient way, because implementation is not done in abstract, but is based on ground realities.

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Unlike international organisations, SRSP's competencies are multidisciplinary and extend across a broad spectrum. This enables it to work with communities through an

entire humanitarian life cycle—whether it is providing relief, undertaking registration, arranging transportation, or helping with reconstruction. Social mobilisers are at the interface of the organisation and the communities, and are always present, creating a sense of trust and ownership for the organisation. In Alai region of Mansehra, dozens of offices of international and national NGOs were burnt down by tribesmen after a dispute in 2006 while reconstruction efforts for the earthquake victims were ongoing. SRSP teams were allowed to come back within days because of the trust they enjoyed.

Iteration, adaption and learning in the field

In view of the complex and uncertain political and social environment in which SRSP operates, the diverse needs of the communities it serves, its multi-disciplinary competencies, and the numerous donors and projects it works with, SRSP adopts highly flexible systems and a multiplicity of organisational structures and emergent policies to deal with various situations. The principle of subsidiarity is widely practiced in the organisation, which allows the staff who are nearest to the problem being addressed to make decisions. Program designs are based on the principles of iteration, adaptation and learning, which has allowed SRSP to totally avoid the use of international and national consultants. Instead, organisational capacities are built through innovation and problem solving in the field.

A good example of this practice was when SRSP found that the large tents provided for earthquake, IDP and flood hit areas (which were considered international best practice for schooling) were not suitable for the harsh climatic conditions. The SRSP Engineering Section was then asked to come up with prefabricated structures that would use local materials and skill sets, be able to handle the harsh climatic conditions, be built within a short time, meet education department standards, and last for at least ten years. Over the next ten years, SRSP piloted, built and advocated building of these improvised prefabricated schools, improving the models through iteration and adaptation, incrementally changing them at each stage in each different crisis according to local requirements, and winning recognition and funding from international donors and the Pakistan Education Department for taking the model to scale. In due course, the designs of the schools were improved with supervision from the

Engineering University and international firm, Halcrow. The first schools built under this experiment have now lasted 17 years and are still being used. More than 50 schools were built under this program.

Another good example is when SRSP built cable cars capable of assisting people to cross rivers in flood hit areas, helping thousands of people before longer-term arrangements were made. In one area, it was found that the cars were still being used by hundreds of school children, because six years after the floods, a damaged bridge had not been rebuilt.

Similarly, in Khyber, SRSP has encouraged communities to use cash for work programs to build and sustain agriculture and forest nurseries which would help the communities in climate adaptation—92 nurseries have been established here (SRSP publications, 2005-24).

Conclusion

The experience of the Sarhad Rural Support Programme demonstrates how local organisations can grow in the humanitarian field, and how many of the perceived shortcomings of localisation, such as organisational capability, capacities, systems and mechanisms, can be built through an incremental process of problem solving, innovation and learning.

The experience of the Sarhad Rural Support Programme demonstrates how local organisations can grow in the humanitarian field, and how many of the perceived shortcomings of localisation, such as organisational capability, capacities, systems and mechanisms, can be built through an incremental process of problem solving, innovation and learning. The lack of these competencies is no excuse for not furthering the localisation agenda, but instead an opportunity to nurture and support organisations willing to develop them. SRSP shows how a win-win situation can be created for donors, local organisations and communities through new ways of thinking.

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