Constructive deconstruction: imagining alternative humanitarian action

Christina Bennett

May 2018

ODI

About the author

Christina Bennett is Head of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

This Working Paper is part of the HPG series 'Constructive Deconstruction: Imagining Alternative Humanitarian Action'.

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1 Introduction

When the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) launched 'Constructive Deconstruction', a two-year research project to reimagine the humanitarian system, it was borne of frustration and promise in equal parts. Frustration that changes in the nature of crises and declining political support for international laws, asylum regimes and humanitarian operations meant that the international humanitarian system had neither the resources nor the political backing to do much about the problems confronting it. Frustration that, despite exponential levels of organisational and financial growth, the fundamentals of the international humanitarian system had changed very little since its origins. And frustration that the significant resourcefulness and drive of individual aid workers continued to fall prey to a system that co-opts their ingenuity to suit its own purposes. HPG's contribution to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, *Time to Let Go: Remaking Humanitarian Action for the Modern Era*, was our articulation of that frustration, supported by four years of research on the humanitarian 'system': its Western origins, its non-Western interpretations and the workings of the large organisations that make up its core today.

But in developing this research, we also found promise. Promise that these frustrations were shared by humanitarian practitioners and senior aid officials, host and donor governments and even the stalwarts of the sector, who were finding it more difficult to do their jobs, amid inadequate funding and political support, inadequate political support and public scepticism about the purpose and point of aid. Promise that, perhaps, the WHS, in its run-up and its follow-up, had amplified uncommon voices, brought together 'coalitions of the willing' among both aid insiders and outsiders and generated momentum for change. Promise that many living in and around crises were be sufficiently inspired, resourced and networked to be engaged and supported as responders on their own behalf.

The aim of the project was not to suggest that reorganisation or system change would automatically lead to better humanitarian outcomes. Any reform of humanitarian action would still be confronted with external politics and patterns of power, military imperatives and the brutishness of war, and would remain constrained by a lack of power to control or influence these dynamics. But we thought that, by imagining a more adaptable, flexible and transparent form of humanitarian action, and doing more to capitalise on the skills, capacities and ingenuity of those outside the formal system, the sector would be better equipped to confront the exigencies of today's crises.

The international humanitarian system needed a rethink, a modernisation, an upgrade, an honest conversation with itself. This project could help catalyse that thinking. Even the name, Constructive Deconstruction, was intended to suggest that reimagining and rebuilding a more transparent system required dismantling what currently exists – at least intellectually – and challenging the values, assumptions and incentives that underpin humanitarian action today.

The research itself was based on the twin methods of deconstruction, using a combination of social science theory and previous analysis of the sector's architecture, performance and political economy; and reconstruction, reimagining what a more effective humanitarian system would look and act like if we truly 'put people at the centre' and designed the system from the perspective of its users up and down the humanitarian value chain. For this we used Design Thinking, a collaborative tool that mixes empathy with systems design to develop more user-friendly human systems.

What we found throughout the process was that, when you put yourself in other people's shoes and judge problems from their perspectives, the results can surprise you. In place of politics, mandates and bureaucratic processes emerges compassion, ingenuity and good sense. When viewing the humanitarian system through the lens of its users' experience – whether a refugee, a local official, a donor, a country director from an international organisation or the head of a local NGO, or a volunteer – its requirements, functions and configurations change. Our research suggested that before reforming the architecture of the humanitarian system, we must first address what lies beneath.

2 Deconstruction

In *Constructive Deconstruction: Understanding the Global Humanitarian Architecture* (Collinson, 2016), Sarah Collinson reminds us that, although 'the problems with the humanitarian sector are well-rehearsed', the diagnosis of its weaknesses has been limited to how the system operates, rather than how its architecture is informed by key economic, political and power relationships among its key players. Collinson paints a picture of the 'sector's' political economy – its incentive structures, power dynamics and relationships – and the implications of that political economy for the way the system behaves, including:

1. *As a configuration or architecture operating according to a distinct type of governance, at once formal and hierarchical, with an institutional and cultural DNA that determines how the sector functions and operates, bolstered by international networks, global alliances, federations or confederations and an expanding web of affiliates, contractors and sub-contractors.*
2. *As a social and political arena with distinctive and well-worn power relations within and between organisations and between humanitarian organisations and people affected by crisis, which have formed particular patterns and processes of interaction among key actors within the sector.*
3. *As an industry, profession and set of transactions focused on the marketisation of humanitarian services and vertical contract-based supply chains and highly integrated relationships between buyers and suppliers and subcontractors and end users.*

When analysed in this way, sharp tensions can be seen between the intended and the actual workings of a system, which both embodies an imperative of global compassion and mobilises a highly political and technical Western-based crisis relief system. A set of patterned behaviours and dynamics are hard-wired into the culture and mechanics of the system, behaviours and dynamics that many argue are a significant source of the sector's dysfunction and poor performance (HPG, 2018; Collinson, 2016; Carbonnier, 2015; Krause, 2014). It is these deeper 'pathologies' – not simply the more visible design and performance of its institutions, processes and tools – that must be properly identified and remedied if system-level change is to ever take root.

2.1 Pathologies

The people most affected by crisis have the least involvement in the international relief system. That is to say, despite numerous calls for an increased focus on people and their needs, aid recipients have little say as to what type of assistance they receive, when and how. This is not for lack of problem recognition, good intentions and even funds on the part of individuals and organisations, but a function of the power relations between aid organisations, governments hosting humanitarian crises and aid recipients themselves.

In the contexts in which it operates, the international system is afforded not actual but symbolic power. Authority and power emanate from organisations' direct control over resources and from the legitimacy they are endowed as owners of expertise, information and the means of production on a size and scale not immediately available to host governments, local organisations or individuals. As a result, international organisations take on 'state-like' functions, such as providing public goods and services and serving as de facto service ministries, often operating without the checks and balances or public scrutiny that would be expected in the states from which those organisations come.

An increased focus on 'end users' has manifested in the form of standards and accountability initiatives, but these are generally unenforced and aspirational, fail to reflect the complexity of humanitarian response and mirror the power imbalances between those at the top and the bottom of the humanitarian chain. Citing Krause's 2015 analysis of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), Collinson (2016: 27) notes that it is effectively a 'process standard' to reassure donors, who have the option of selecting between different suppliers, without shifting consumer power to affected people. Similar process standards in

humanitarian responses to refugee education may help improve quality, but they rarely provide refugees with more decision-making power regarding the schools their children can attend, the fees they pay (if any) or the curriculum studied.

The aid given often isn't aligned with what people actually need. More specifically, unlike the business world, the end users of the humanitarian supply chain – affected people – are not its primary consumers. Its primary consumers are instead the large international organisations that buy humanitarian services provided by the smaller or local NGOs they subcontract, and the donors, who 'buy' a good conscience with the money and political weight they supply to the humanitarian endeavour (Weiss, 2013). This puts significant power in the hands of these 'suppliers' and 'buyers', who then control both the goods and the terms of trade (Collinson, 2003). What flows along the aid chain is both money and power which diminish the further down the chain you get (Collinson, 2016). This creates a tendency to think in terms of what goods and services can be supplied, rather than what people actually need, and leaves the sector highly vulnerable to the interests of donor governments and international aid organisations, or more simply to the stereotyped views of what Western donor publics believe 'those people' need. And, while they may have fewer resources and less direct control over humanitarian assistance, affected states themselves wield significant power in dictating terms of access, the distribution of aid across sectors and regions and beneficiary targeting.

A highly concentrated and competitive funding environment that promotes self-interested growth, restricts collective action and creates powerful disincentives against handing over responsibility and control to other organisations that could serve as competition for funding. Although analysing the humanitarian sector as a 'market' sits uncomfortably with its mission mythology, it is now well documented and understood that the multi-billion-dollar humanitarian industry operates on the basis of supply, demand, competition, monopolies and investor bias (Slim, 2013). Principal-agent problems, competitive contract tendering and the lack of differentiation in the sector all contribute to organisational insecurities among NGOs, which in turn promote self-interested behaviour. Market pressures simultaneously stimulate cohesion and fragmentation across the system. Game

theory sums it up well: although actors want to collaborate, they are incentivised to defect to pursue more materialistic gains (Ramalingam, 2014).

Conversely, most humanitarian chains do not function like standard consumer-driven markets. That is, there is no real market for vaccines, WASH or education in the sense of an open and transparent system in which supply and demand determine the best value and price and give 'consumers' – affected people or even donors – any real choice as to who provides humanitarian services and how. Rather, the processes determining the targeting, timing and nature of aid are often arbitrary and opaque; prices vary widely and may be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Lack of financial transparency, can make it difficult to assess cost-effectiveness or value for money. An analysis of funding flows through the humanitarian system undertaken by HPG in 2016 reported difficulties determining project costs and expenditures up and down the supply chain based on a lack of clear project data and unclear subcontracting arrangements (Mowjee, et al., 2017).

Exceptionalism and symbolic differentiation that prevents humanitarian actors from working together with others. Here, both Collinson (2016) and Krause (2015) describe what has also been known as the concept of 'humanitarian space': a differentiation of legitimacy which is deemed to give humanitarian action a distinct form of authority, a well-defined market niche and distinct political and operational space. There is often good reason for keeping humanitarian action and humanitarian space separate from other forms of international engagement. But even in settings where there is value in bringing the full weight of the international system to bear in situations of conflict, crisis and 'fragility' to sustain peaceful and prosperous societies, the way the system works makes it difficult to square the circle between independent humanitarian action, government-aligned development support and politically informed peace activities.

Such distinctions drive pervasive institutional cultures within the humanitarian sector that attach unhelpful labels to people and activities in crisis settings. The system both defines and is defined by an array of binary oppositions: humanitarian–development, international–local, state-centric–state-avoiding, refugee–migrant, host–guest. Despite the fact that people affected by crisis, conflict and displacement neither conceive of nor require such differentiation,

such labels continue to reinforce an aid narrative framed in terms of how aid givers see the world of people affected by crisis as distinct and separate from their own.

2.2 Towards a more modern humanitarian system

These pathologies suggest that what is needed is not a redesign of the humanitarian system but a reinvention of its interpretive frame:

- A reinterpretation of the humanitarian ethos as one of solidarity, empathy and human connection, with incentives based on self-determination supported by accountability mechanisms that strengthen the links between aid and its recipients.
- The creation of a more ethical and sustainable humanitarian value chain where the buyers of transactions not only have an interest in but a responsibility for a humanitarian industry that is responsive, effective, inclusive and needs-based (Bair, unpublished); where national and local organisations are more fairly represented in the chain; and where behaviours are more aligned with the sector's rhetoric and ethos. Insights from political economy studies of ethical trade movements are potentially instructive models.
- The divorcing of humanitarian funding, leadership and operations from Western ideologies and values as an operational imperative to gain trust, legitimacy and access to areas of need in places wary of Western influence.
- The implementation of external ('market') or internal (organisational) incentives that foster more hybrid 'co-opetition' (Osarenkhoe, 2010, cited in Collinson, 2016) between organisations, through functional differentiation and the development of niche areas of expertise to encourage global rivals to work together to collectively enhance performance by sharing resources and committing to common goals.
- A more honest application of humanitarian principles that recognises their value as foundational guides, their imperfect application in operations and the inherent bias that disqualifies 'non-humanitarian' individuals and organisations as legitimate providers of relief.

3 Reconstruction

The 'deconstruction' portion of the research reinforced not only the need for change, but also a desire to see and effect change. At the same time, however, it also pointed to a notable lack of incentives to support the type of shifts people said they wanted to see, and a lack of ideas about where to start among individuals and organisations positioned to make that change. In the 'reconstruction' portion of the project, we challenged ourselves to imagine a more accountable, adaptable and inclusive humanitarian sector and how that system might look and act.

For this, we employed Design Thinking, a method that departs from traditional scientific and hypothesis-led problem-solving through immersion in, empathy with and discovery of patterns of human behaviour and the development of human systems. For a sector that routinely commits to putting affected people at the heart of its energy and efforts – but has spectacularly failed to do so in practice – we thought Design Thinking offered a good place to start. We mapped the various actors and functions of the formal humanitarian system and 'personified' the various users of the system, using a tool called journey mapping to trace their experiences of humanitarian aid – from the long-term refugee to the frustrated municipal mayor to the progressive donor and the methodical HQ staffer. Throughout the process, we spoke to refugees and other recipients of international aid, experienced humanitarian practitioners from both local and international organisations, local officials, policy-makers, academics, systems design experts, professionals working outside the sector – in finance, academia, technology and the media – some of them disruptors, all of them change agents, to guide us through the process. We came together in large and smaller groups in Asia, Africa, North and South America and Europe to test the validity of our conclusions and the viability of our prototypes. The experiment found a strong desire from within the humanitarian sector to remake itself as a more adaptable, accountable system that recognises people affected by crisis as agents of change in their own lives. What follows are three visions for humanitarian action, based on the pathologies described above.

These proposals are not pieces of research, but think pieces intended to explore, provoke and interrogate ideas. They are intended to start conversations; 'prototypes' to be adapted and redesigned as a method of improvement, rather than a final, agreed blueprint. They are also not aimed at 'fixing' humanitarian action or providing instant remedies for the sector's long-standing ills. They are neither stand-alone solutions nor pieces of a puzzle that fit neatly together, though they could be combined in a particular protracted crisis context. What they do represent are alternative visions for humanitarian action that aim to transform underlying assumptions, incentives structures and power relations.

Throughout the process, we recognised that the ambition we had for change in the humanitarian sector was a tall order, and that internal and exogenous factors would be hard to work around. These ideas are more about the desired end-points of transformation than the processes of transformation itself. So, while the seeds of these ideas are already operational in many crisis contexts, the papers do not address the significant challenges in incentivising and kick-starting these changes on a broader scale, many of which strike at the heart of the sector's centres of power and core interests.

In *The New Humanitarian Basics*, Marc DuBois (2018) calls for a rescoping of the concept of humanitarian crisis and the humanitarian sector's role in it. He answers calls for a more narrowly focused back-to-basics approach to humanitarian work (Donini 2017, De Castellarnau and Stoianova, 2016) by envisioning humanitarian action as smaller, informed directly by the views and needs of crisis-affected people and focused on responding to urgent needs and saving and protecting lives in the here and now. Humanitarian protection is refocused on the operational response, using humanitarian rather than human rights approaches and initiatives that protect people and human dignity within the delivery of aid. DuBois challenges the notion of a more expansive form of humanitarian action into prevention, peacebuilding and development work, and the loss of expertise and focus that such a shift has entailed. He calls this 'the definition of humanitarian

negligence: when the ambulance team ignores your father's heart attack in order to assess the family's diet and deliver a motivational talk on cardio fitness'.

At the same time, DuBois eschews traditional metaphors of fire brigades and saviours in favour of a more modern image of a humanitarian 'surrogate', and situates humanitarian response – a more discrete set of actions in a more circumscribed set of circumstances – within a broader spectrum of 'relief' based on a whole-of-problem approach. In this version of the humanitarian imperative, humanitarian action remains committed to its four key principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, but is less paternalistic, bureaucratic and exclusionary, recognising that a more inclusive, devolved and decentralised humanitarianism will ultimately be better able to serve people in crisis.

In *Network Humanitarianism*, Paul Currion (2018) asks us to imagine that, if humanitarian action 1.0 – humanitarian assistance at its Western origins – was about hierarchies, bureaucracies and a funding and operations chain that sets those who have apart from those who receive; and if humanitarianism 2.0 – today's humanitarian action – is market-led, the professional, competitive extension of the neoliberal economies that have dominated the post-Cold War era; then humanitarianism 3.0 – humanitarian action in the twenty-first century – must be about networks, whether a social network in Sweden, a volunteer network in Greece, a phone network in Kenya or a clan network in rural Somalia. Networks are how our societies connect, communicate, self-organise and self-help, with or without the blessing or backing of the formal humanitarian system. Like others, Currion challenges the notion of a humanitarian 'system' as a structured architecture led by the UN, and instead envisions it as a system of distributed governance, 'a set of things – people, cells, molecules, or whatever – interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behaviour over time' (Meadows 2008, cited in Currion, 2018).

Importantly, Currion differentiates a future Network Humanitarianism from the future of the formal humanitarian system, which might do well to retain some aspects of its current bureaucratic functions, but which must recognise itself as one node in a more distributed network that is more resilient, more responsive, where power is determined not by the assumed centrality, but legitimacy determined by the breadth of the platform and the strength of the

Box 1: United Beyond Nations

A humanitarian network and platform where people affected by crisis can connect with responders and service providers who have a matching supply for their demand

In his proposal for 'United Beyond Nations', Currion suggests a direct form of coordination that puts those who need and those who can give in direct contact without intermediary: a network where local organisations and community groups have access to a local, regional and global network of people with skills and resources that are pre-vetted, and can be mobilised in a decentralised way to solve specific and defined humanitarian problems. Using a digital platform, people affected by crisis and first responders needing support make requests and interact with a bot (an artificial intelligence) to help 'diagnose' the problem and determine needs. The platform then produces a list of certified and nearby providers that have resources or expertise to deliver customised, needs-based solutions. Money can be contributed into the network through private individuals, web-based crowd-sourcing platforms, or as institutional donors funding certified NGO initiatives/requests. For more complicated problems, requests are escalated to the platform secretariat, composed of representatives from national government, NGOs, and international experts, to determine operational and technical needs. Vetting of providers and members of the network is accomplished through the platform's secretariat. Quality assurance is ensured through franchising, peer-review or a public ratings system. United Beyond Nations would support both online and offline transactions.

This concept aims to automate the transactional activities that humanitarian actors currently spend a large amount of time on. It will mainly address low-cost, lower complexity problems, and is not a substitute for state action. Nor will it cover the full range of needs in a crisis. As state capacity improves, the need for the platform will likely decrease. This concept accommodates and can work concurrently and weave in with the coordination mechanisms of the international humanitarian system.

connections between them and others. In other words, the formal humanitarian system does not stand apart from the world, but interacts with many other systems at global and local levels.

Like DuBois, Currion's vision for Network Humanitarianism is about problems not mandates; it is more modular, more specialised and more nimble in its approach to problem-solving, and more distributed and horizontal in its communication and interaction. The humanitarian identity shifts from one defined by its principles to one based on self-organisation and the peer production of assets. Applying innovations such as 3-D printing and telemedicine fundamentally reshapes the relationship between givers and receivers of aid by inserting aid recipients as part of the means of production. Decisions are made as close to the ground as possible, enabled by a corps of local responders empowered by the data, information and relationships to make decisions.

In *The 'Humanitarian Anchor'*, Tahir Zaman (2018) outlines a social economy approach to humanitarian

action that addresses the urgent and growing need for meaningful solutions in protracted crises. Zaman sets the shortcomings of current closed and competitive market-led responses against cooperative models of business ownership and humanitarian supply chains that encourage the development of local entrepreneurship. His approach rejects the binary opposition between 'humanitarian' and 'development' and 'host' and 'guest' that predicates contemporary humanitarian responses and moves away from an extractive, projectised form of humanitarian action derived from notions of charity. Instead, humanitarian organisations act as 'anchor institutions', capitalising on the skills of both displaced people and local residents to build up worker cooperatives, and then procuring goods and services from these cooperatives instead of from the international market. A proportion of the profits from these procurement contracts is channelled into a community investment fund owned and operated by the community, to be spent on projects of their choice. By acting as anchors, humanitarian organisations advance economic opportunity, skills development and entrepreneurship

Box 2: The humanitarian social economy

Connecting procurement supply chains of humanitarian actors with displacement-affected community-owned cooperatives for a sustainable social economy

A humanitarian social economy reimagines the relationship between humanitarian actors and displacement-affected communities in protracted situations as a sustainable, cooperative economy made up of crisis-affected people engaged in reimagined economic relationships. Here, international humanitarian actors forego their function as direct providers of aid in favour of two new roles. First, they partner with local authorities and public institutions, and/or community-based organisations and local NGOs to enable a cluster of community-owned enterprises that form the backbone of the humanitarian social economy. Second, as a procuring organisation or 'anchor institution', humanitarian response organisations become clients of displacement-affected communities through their 'worker-owned cooperatives'.

Refugees, internally displaced people and host community members can connect through these worker-owned cooperatives to produce goods and services that meet the procurement needs of humanitarian anchor organisations working in the area.

Alongside this, a certain portion of profit from each cooperative is reinvested in a community investment fund. The money from the community investment fund can be directed towards community needs, such as supporting community-owned schools and health clinics. This all builds greater integration between the local population and refugees, who are all potential worker-owners. The humanitarian social economy concept has a multiplier effect by allowing displacement-affected people to reinvest their money into dignified, self-determined opportunities that significantly expand the size of displacement-affected economies. The beginnings of such cooperatives are already under way in Syria.

and create and incubate a local economy that can be sustained once these organisations have left. And by seeding community investment funds, the humanitarian supply chain helps to finance community projects and services that are community priorities, building community support and ownership for its own recovery and rehabilitation. A corollary effect is the resulting positive interactions between displaced people and the societies that surround them; by building investment in local communities and businesses into humanitarian supply chains, the humanitarian presence becomes less extractive, and also helps to counter negative perceptions and anxieties around displacement.

4 What needs to change?

What would these three approaches to the humanitarian sector mean for the formal international humanitarian system in practical terms? Although each vision for future humanitarian action introduces particular changes, when taken together all point to a common set of strategic shifts across humanitarian operations and coordination, funding and accountability and behaviour.

4.1 Operations

In his proposal, DuBois rescopes the role of the international humanitarian sector as one of surrogate, not saviour, of stop-gap support rather than first or perennial response. Currion's networked humanitarianism depends on a shift from an exclusionary, hierarchical and isomorphic international humanitarian system to a highly diverse and distributed system that evolves, adapts and synchronises with others working towards common goals. Zaman proposes repositioning large international organisations in protracted crisis settings as 'anchor institutions' whose role includes providing large procurement contracts for the community, and facilitating learning, innovation and catalytic investment in the localities where they operate. Taken together, these proposals point to the following shifts:

- Nudging international aid organisations away from the logic of project delivery and reimagining their role as one of support: enablers of local responses, cultivators of talent, incubators of organisations and partners for governments, national Red Cross/ Crescent societies and local organisations when they ask for help.
- Incentivising organisations to be smaller and more agile, differentiated by specific areas of technical expertise and encouraged to operate and collaborate on the basis of core competency, and to stand back when their support is not needed.
- Investing in local organisations and communities as responders in their own right, including by catalysing private sector response.

All three visions acknowledge the continued need for a reliable, scalable global response capacity providing timely and impartial assistance and protection in situations where needs are too great for any one government or group to take on, where International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is under threat, where the government or local actors are unable to unwilling to respond or where certain groups are actively excluded or marginalised from aid. While this implies that the part of the current system providing global response capacity will continue to be organised much as it is today, DuBois' 'new humanitarian basics' proposal adjusts the current set-up by deliberately situating it as a smaller component within a larger constellation of relief and support. In other words, in such situations, the international humanitarian community would set up major response operations, but would not occupy the space in such a way as to exclude a wider response.

4.2 Coordination

Across the three visions, the coordination of humanitarian activities shifts from a highly centralised, directive and mandate-driven approach to a disintermediated set of relationships, governed by networks, supported by technology and dominated by peer collaboration and scrutiny. Across all three, coordination focuses on more direct forms of interaction among those who give and those who need, and sees aid recipients as actors and agents in their own assistance. Within this frame, the humanitarianism of the future acts as one node in a wider, more distributed network. This would mean:

- Adopting a more differentiated and distributed way of working that operates based on specialised areas of expertise.
- Shifting to a more modular and time-bound form of collaboration, based on coordination around problems in a given context rather than mandates and the assumed legitimacy and presence in crisis settings these mandates imply.
- Replacing subcontracting with disintermediation, in other words directly connecting those who have goods, skills, proximity and time with those who need their help.

- Resolving the tensions arising from the repositioning of the formal and hierarchical global emergency response capacity as one of many nodes in a specialised and differentiated response model.

'Localisation', as Currion points out, has the potential to become one manifestation of a networked approach, but only if we shed the assumption that the main offices of international organisations will remain the dominant nodes in a decentralised network, and instead recognise the role of a range of organisations as collaborators in their own right. Blockchain technology, which powers distributed peer-to-peer networks such as the ones Currion describes, is one harbinger of what a fully distributed system might look like.

4.3 Financing

It is now accepted and well documented that the humanitarian funding provided by donor governments is inadequate to cover escalating needs, and increasingly unpopular among core donor constituencies. It is also generally accepted that the current financing system also lacks diversity, making large amounts of finance susceptible to potential allocations or reductions based on political priorities and decisions made in a small number of donor countries. International humanitarian action is also not the most significant factor in how people in crisis receive support.

What the three visions for humanitarian action suggest is that a modern humanitarianism requires new models of financial support and a wider range of funding instruments, with a much stronger firewall against the interests and agendas of the sector's main players. Networked humanitarianism sees funders and recipients connected much more directly through cash transfers, truncated transaction chains and crowdfunding. DuBois argues that, while humanitarian action will always require donor money as a source of reliable support in crisis contexts, part of rescoping humanitarian action as life-saving and with an emphasis on directness of action will require a greater proportion of private funds, pooled funds, independently managed funds to make such limited funding earlier, faster and more impervious to manipulation. In Zaman's proposal, donors' purchase of humanitarian goods and services through project-based charity is replaced with investments in local enterprise and community infrastructure. This entails:

- A strategic shift from a charity system dominated and controlled by institutional donors to a financing architecture where official development assistance (ODA) plays a more specialised role. ODA is focused on supporting the formal global response capacity, on filling gaps in under-resourced crises or areas of support, on providing seed funding to help local organisations grow and scale up their own fund raising capacities and as catalytic investments and buffers for private investors in risky conflict situations. The ICRC humanitarian impact bond is one such example.[1]
- Funds for prevention, early action, response and recovery come from a mixing of alternative institutional and individual investments and capital flows. This would mean looking outside the traditional humanitarian financing architecture for alternative funding sources.
- Shifting from 'funding to financing, from charity to investment' (Scott and Poole, 2018), from bilateral grants for specific time-bound projects, programmes or functions to a wider array of partnerships and financial products (loans, bonds, insurance, guarantees) tailored to particular investment needs and financial capabilities. Although this shift is acknowledged and under way, it requires more proof of concept as a reliable means of finance in crisis settings. The African Risk Capacity is an example where this is in practice.[2]
- Making the limited donor funding faster, better targeted, less dependent on domestic politics and more impervious to manipulation. Discussions around assessed contributions (in other words, a mandatory UN-managed dues for humanitarian operations), while politically fraught, should be kept on the table. An independently managed public–private–civil society fund should also be considered. The experience of the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria could be instructive here.

4.4 Accountability

The safeguarding scandals that have recently engulfed the sector demonstrate that, even with strict accountability measures in place, they are focused 'upwards' from subcontractors to main contractors and from main

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1 https://www.icrc.org/en/document/worlds-first-humanitarian-impact-bond-launched-transform-financing-aid-conflict-hit.

2 www.africanriskcapacity.org.

contractors to donors, rather than downward to people affected by crisis. There is also little incentive to invest in them, comply with them and engage in remedial actions. Previous attempts at oversight, self-regulation and complaints mechanisms have been poorly designed. To remedy this, Currion envisions more direct involvement of and feedback from aid recipients and direct access to information. In the case of protracted displacement situations, Zaman's social economy approach to humanitarian action builds such accountability into its model by encouraging crisis-affected communities to develop jointly owned businesses or cooperatives that enable direct ownership over the humanitarian product. No one solution will close the accountability gap completely, and fraud and corruption are likely to find new forms. But what these visions point to is a move from self-regulation to peer accountability, which aligns governments, organisations and people around ownership and a common cause. This entails:

- For donors: a strategic shift in defining success and partner requirements not solely in terms of financial compliance, but also in terms of positive outcomes and improvements for affected people and high levels of performance by aid organisations themselves.
- For UN agencies: decoupling needs assessments from funding, subcontracting from service delivery, programme implementation from programme monitoring, and handing over many of these responsibilities to third parties.
- Using networks to promote peer accountability, direct feedback loops and access to information among aid recipients and aid providers.
- Where a more hierarchical form of accountability is required, agency boards and trustees should take a more professional accountability role. The long-standing idea of a humanitarian ombudsman should be revisited as an alternative to self-regulation.
- A proposal emerging from this project, called Relief Watch, marries both upward and peer accountability and could serve as an anonymous way for recipients to rate the aid they are getting and lodge complaints. Such improved accountability could also help create a safer environment within the aid sector for reporting abuse.

4.5 Behaviour

The humanitarian sector's rules, rituals and beliefs are derived from its Western origins and are so embedded

Box 3: Relief Watch

An independent watchdog evaluating the impact of humanitarian aid using peer-to-peer and top-down approaches

This concept aims to produce standardised frameworks to identify areas of success and failure, contribute to increased quality and value for money and encourage debate and scrutiny of aid and how it is used.

Relief Watch would be managed as an independent body and governed by an independent board composed of individuals from outside the humanitarian sector, such as journalists, and experienced leaders and representatives appointed by traditional humanitarian organisations, who are periodically rotated out/replaced. Analytical experts gather and analyse data, for instance from community surveys and media reports, and compare their findings with information from independent needs assessments and evaluations to determine the impact of crisis responses and the effectiveness of international and local agencies. A parallel online and offline peer review system documents 'user' experiences and generates 'user' ratings. Based on the expert analysis and peer ratings, the Relief Watch board generates accountability ratings for organisations, similar to financial credit ratings. Such ratings could be used by agency boards and funders to enforce remedial action.

Relief Watch would also train journalists, activists and civil society members in conducting community perception surveys, and engage in media monitoring, rumour tracking of aid responses and public advocacy. Findings would be published in the media, and reports would give detailed accounts of the failings and successes of aid efforts.

The concept is funded through an automatic 1% tax levied on all participating humanitarian actors, supplemented by private and/or pooled funds.

in its institutions and culture that they frame the very nature of humanitarian work (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983, in Collinson, 2016). Changing these foundational characteristics depends on changes in the culture and behaviours of the sector's main players.

Zaman asks us to reject binaries such as refugee/ host that exclude people from assistance based on pre-determined labels. DuBois calls for a new public and personal narrative where the moral authority of the sector comes from our demonstrated compassion, humility and respect, rather than an assumed piety. For Currion, network humanitarianism is not about technologies, but about the new types of relationships made possible by that technology, and which are already emerging at the margins of the humanitarian system.

Living the ethos of a more modern humanitarian action means adopting different ways of thinking, speaking and doing, as what we say and how we behave has a force, an influence, on the world around us. Thinking differently means:

- Recognising affected people as agents of their own change.
- Working more collaboratively with and with more accountability to local populations receiving support.
- Making transparency obligatory even when it's not convenient.
- Being committed in ethos but humble in delivery, based on power that is shared and neither assumed nor imposed.
- Building trust and belief in aid providers not because they come with credentials, but because they have earned them.
- Engaging in accountability that flows both

upward and downward, and first to people and communities receiving support.
- Opening up pathways to opportunity so that people affected by crisis can lead a healthy and productive life.

Speaking differently means:

- Eliminating the term 'beneficiary'.
- Reframing 'coordination' as 'synchronisation' and 'sector' as 'network'. Doing away with terms such as 'localisation' and 'capacity-building', which reinforce the very dynamics they are meant to be changing.

Behaving differently means:

- Applying the principle of 'not about us without us,' in other words, no more meetings, conferences or forums convened about people who are not present, or at least represented.
- Hold meetings in local languages and translate extensively.
- Use local organisations and staff wherever possible.
- When the situation requires international staff, make them take a general knowledge test about the country before deployment.
- Build an organisational culture where the primacy of operations replaces the primacy of headquarters, and the the one-sided activities of subcontracting and capacity-building are replaced with an openness to working with others and becoming accessible and attractive to partners.

5 Change the leopards or change the trees?

Change? Why bother? Change is political and humanitarians have little real influence on politics or government interests. And is it even feasible to think about redesigning a system that was never intentionally designed in the first place, and which is so contextual, complex and ungovernable? And given the current political climate, should we not be focused on protecting what we have instead of reframing what we do and how we do it? Is there enough energy, ambition and will to compel the current humanitarian system to make any of the changes proposed here? Without it, won't these ideas remain at the level of abstraction, where many attempts at reform have stalled in the past?

These questions came up again and again throughout this project. Mechanistic changes designed to improve processes and tools have come easily to the sector, but have failed to generate genuine, fundamental reform (Knox-Clarke, 2017). Moreover, changes to incentive structures that would redistribute power and accountability and encourage co-opetition and functional specialisation might be more effective at chipping away at the pathologies of the sector's fundamental behaviours, but rely on core funders to make the first move (Collinson, 2016).

At the same time, a succession of analysts remind us that the humanitarian system is a paradox, at once hierarchical, bureaucratic and tightly controlled, but at the same time non-linear, self-organising and highly fluid: in other words, a complex adaptive system that can neither be tinkered with nor redesigned, but one that will change and evolve in the face of disruption or internal or external pressures in order to regain its steady state. And it is in these pressures where levers of change might lie.

When thinking of change in the humanitarian sector, we might use the metaphor of the leopard and the trees. As DuBois points out – and as evolution would have it – a leopard cannot change its spots: they are a product of its environment, and have evolved so that it can survive and thrive in its surroundings. The humanitarian sector is similarly constrained – not the products of design, its systems, tools and behaviours are products of the values, histories and lived experiences of the institutions and people that make it up. But change the leopard's environment – change the trees – and the spots will, over time, adapt to fit the changed surroundings to ensure its survival. So, rather than focus on changing the components of the humanitarian system – its institutions, mandates and tools – as we have done for decades, perhaps we should be changing the external environment – disrupting current ways of working with alternative approaches – at which point the system itself will have to adjust and adapt in order to survive. The Constructive Deconstruction design experiment was an attempt to inspire new thinking about the way humanitarian aid is conceived and to help launch new concepts and ideas to spark that disruption: in other words, to change the trees. The three alternative visions for more modern humanitarian action set out here should be read in that spirit.

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