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# Humanitarian Leader

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**Revolutionary Development: Why Humanitarian  
and Development Aid Need Radical Shifts**

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# The Humanitarian Leader: Revolutionary Development: Why Humanitarian and Development Aid Need Radical Shifts

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Cover image: A woman makes the three-finger salute in front of police officers during a demonstration against the military coup, Yangon, Myanmar, 6 February 2021. Credit: Aung Kyaw Htet/SOPA Images/ZUMA Wire/Alamy Live News.



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.

# Abstract

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A new vision for international development has been called for, and evidence indicates that the industry is experiencing broad fragmentation in terms of identified priorities, challenges, concerns and paths forward. It has most notably struggled to share power with local and national counterparts and truly embody the principles of participatory development. Meanwhile, the rate and intensity of existential crises threaten to overtake humanity's ability to adapt. To replace deeply entrenched, unhelpful patterns (assumptions, behaviours and values) requires a new kind of thinking inspired and informed by transcendent learning processes that simultaneously lead to individual and collaborative action and transformation. This paper provides an argument which stresses the need for a seismic shift, from the still dominant underpinnings of modernism mindsets and patriarchal thought-forms towards a relational or participative consciousness that reflects feminist values and the deeply interconnected world that we live within.

## The world is at a critical point of bifurcation

Humanity is at a crossroads. It will need to determine which approach to take to combat the numerous intractable issues facing the global community. The rate and intensity of existential crises threaten to overtake our ability to adapt. Today's transnational problems such as environmental catastrophe, growing poverty and inequality, unregulated capitalism, human trafficking, widespread tax avoidance, international crime, the arms trade, violent extremism, protracted warfare, nearly 70 million forcibly displaced people and pandemics have overwhelmed our institutions (Donini 2020). Notably, many religious and spiritual traditions have located this era at the heart of a transition point.

Meanwhile, a new vision for international development has been called for, and recent evidence indicates that the industry is experiencing broad fragmentation in terms of identified priorities, challenges, concerns and paths forward. It must reformulate to account for a trend that sees frequent reorganisation of foreign aid bureaucracy, proliferation of development actors, shrinking resources and rigid financing mechanisms, replacing (rather than reinforcing) local expertise and systems, compartmentalisation of projects and lack of systems thinking, and difficulties in keeping pace with technology and data (Ingram and Lord 2019). Unfortunately, the sector's power dynamics, culture, financing mechanisms and perverse incentive structures create compelling reasons to remain centralised and averse to innovation, learning and transformation (Rush et al. 2021). Numerous development analysts have sounded the alarm in recent decades that the process of development work had turned specious and drifted from its intention. Norgaard, for example, rejected modernity's definition of development, describing it as "control over nature through science, material abundance through superior technology, and effective government through rational social organisation", aiming at cultural and ecological homogenisation (Norgaard 1994:1–6). Incontrovertible proof has arisen since Norgaard's indictment nearly three decades ago, in the form of the sixth largest mass extinction; a desire for recognition that there are different forms of knowledge as well as ways of knowing, valuing and interacting with the environment; a cultural resurgence of supra-nationalism and xenophobia; and the inefficacy of the multilateral international order. Alden et al. (2020) incisively summarise the internal excoriation the industry has put itself through in an effort to evolve, from the advent of community development to more scientific, measurable and rigorous measures of "aid effectiveness" to self-flagellation in the wake of corruption in Western multilateral institutions. In summary, the Western-centric aid model is in a flux and disintegrating quickly, as it can no longer defend "the 'fetishes' of modernization—aggregate growth, infrastructure capacity, consumer demand, standard of living" but ignore the inherently contained threats within the model to the environment and humanity itself (Alden et al. 2020:33).

Large, northern-based international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are experiencing a particularly intense period of scrutiny and a crisis of legitimacy. In recent years, INGOs have undergone significant repositioning and restructuring to accommodate concerns that they are losing their grassroots orientation and becoming over-professionalised, depoliticised and less autonomous (Walton et al. 2016). In the journey to deliver large-scale projects globally, the identities of social change organisations have become lost in the milieu of "results-based management, log frames, and 'value for money' theories and tools" (PRIA 2012:9). As a technocratic, mechanistic and reductionist mindset guides society's approach to problem-solving, in line with patriarchal conceptualisations of a "practical rationality" (Harding 1982:238), the "science of delivery has been strangling the art of social transformation" (Sriskandarajah 2015), which has become subsumed by the myriad frameworks, guidelines, forms, toolkits and spreadsheets "nearly all based on logical rational planning models focused on audits and results", sharing "a linear input-output-outcome-impact 'theory of change'" while sidestepping "the vernacular and the local" (Scott 1998 in Wallace 2020:40). The principal aim of this paper is to provide analysis of the internal evolution process within a sector that has not been successful, despite reforms and the introduction of new ways of working, in revitalising itself and meeting its mandate to provide well-coordinated, transparent, relevant and efficient humanitarian (and, more broadly, development) assistance (Bennet and Foley 2016), as well as offer a pathway to reinvigorating that evolution process.

## Revolutionary development respects the primacy of context

It is well documented now that:

legitimacy is automatically conferred on organisations that understand and conform to international rules and standards, that operate in English, that are fluent in industry jargon and that assimilate into existing processes. Legitimacy based on physical proximity, cultural affinity, operational readiness or adaptiveness, sustained access to populations and longevity of operations is undermined at best, and discarded at worst. (Fast and Bennet 2020:17)

True reform that would cede control and prioritise local autonomy, giving power to structures and actors currently at the margins of the formal system, has yet to materialise; the sector is vulnerable to the hyper-capitalistic tendencies of competitiveness and promotion of organisational drivers for greater resources and visibility—an institutional isomorphism that sees the sector behave like corporations, but meanwhile remain risk-averse and closed to innovation (Rush et al. 2021; DuBois 2018).

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***“True reform that would cede control and prioritise local autonomy has yet to materialise”***

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Theories abound as to why the industry has struggled to surrender control to local and national counterparts. Humanitarianism and development organisations have suffered from a Western paternalism and hubris that treat the communities it serves as victims while not addressing the root causes of crises, which would require recognising the primacy of local, affected populations and first responders in having the context and knowledge to help themselves (DuBois 2018). While laudable, goals to eliminate poverty, protect all children and achieve gender equality are best achieved when interpreted and enacted by communities for themselves, and it may come as no surprise to practitioners who have worked in these areas for a long time that development programming is often seen as a condescending panacea to the perceived “pathologies” of lesser developed countries (Alden et al. 2020:27). This is partly because “development fostered a way of conceiving of social life as a technical problem, as a matter of rational decision and management to be entrusted to that group of people—the development professionals” (Escobar 1995:81). For example, funding and influence must flow to community-based women’s groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who have expertise in tackling sexual abuse and live in the communities they serve, rather than relying on often poorly resourced, bureaucratic safeguarding mechanisms in patriarchal systems run by expatriates to prevent the sexual exploitation of recipients of aid by those who provide it (Flummerfelt and Peyton 2020). As Wallace so poignantly stated, “For them development is not a project, it is their life” (2020:46).

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***“Development programming is often seen as a condescending panacea to the perceived ‘pathologies’ of lesser developed countries”***

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Only a fraction of international humanitarian financing reaches local and national responders; in 2018, just 1% of total bilateral aid went to local civil society organisations (CSOs) in developing countries (OECD 2020). We must see them as development actors in their own right, and strengthen their own programs and objectives. The parameters of the humanitarian community or system have been ill-defined (Willits-King et al. 2019; Currión 2018). Besides the usual suspects of national and international non-governmental organisations—UN humanitarian agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, host government authorities and donor agencies—we often fail to acknowledge the significant efforts of religious groups, military actors, the

private sector, diasporas and affected populations and other non-state actors. These parties are increasingly being incorporated into the various coordination and funding mechanisms of the humanitarian system, but continue to be sidelined and ostracised from the majority of international humanitarian financing, only recently being recognised by the ‘traditional’ system as key players in their own right, with their own agency and interests (Willits-King et al. 2019; Bennet and Foley 2016).

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***“The industry continues to operate in a regressive fashion despite grandiose strategic plans calling for internal transformation”***

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Opening up the system’s funding structure to others creates obvious threats to its current members, and, within most development organisations, the quest for these resources has become an objective in itself. The pressure for institutional growth often results in organisations creating programs in which they lack the competence or connections to deliver (Bennet and Foley 2016:59). One avant-garde idea posits a “global public investment fund”, a system of fixed and multi-directional international fiscal allocations which support global public goods and tackle transnational issues (Glennie 2019). Funding would be deposited to local and national organisations more quickly, bypassing the convoluted international humanitarian finance bureaucracy, and reaching first responders when they need it most. Among many consequences, one impact of funding arriving too late is to miss the window for meeting critical needs, which contributes to a deteriorating situation by leaving local authorities to provide immediate relief with inadequate resources, and often results in an influx of resources when the absorption capacity of the state and affected communities is at the lowest (Willits-King et al. 2019:15). As importantly, a global public investment fund would be considerably less patronising and propose greater equality by requiring all countries to contribute an equal share towards funding common goals. This intrinsically recognises that all nations have unfulfilled development goals.

The industry continues to operate in a regressive fashion despite grandiose strategic plans calling for internal transformation. It has been shown that “relief programs are most effective when they are integrated, locally owned, and demand driven... humanitarian action in the 21st century remains constrained by a 20th-century aid model: siloed, supply driven, and centered on the individual mandates and sectors of major international aid agencies” (Konyndyk 2019:1), which often operate within the frameworks of former imperial powers, hinting at a colonial ‘residue’ which the sector cannot seem to shake. McQuade asserts that “colonialism left deep scars on the Global South and for those genuinely interested in the welfare of non-Western countries, the first step is acknowledging this” (2017). We need to name and examine the issues that emerged from the

exploitative actions of colonialist practices. We need to be self-critical and actively dismantle sometimes subtle colonial habits, challenging dichotomies of 'us and them' through language such as 'local and expat' and 'donor and beneficiary'; disrupt concepts of 'here and there' through language such as 'home and in-the-field'; and to question why our 'implementing partners' are not our 'decision-making partners'. Significant changes are needed in the way the industry approaches frontline staff, including fairer recruitment and promotion practices, equal pay for equal jobs, investment in training and support, inclusion in decision-making processes and bodies, or the nurturing of an organisational culture that recognises varied forms of expertise and knowledge.

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***“We need to name and examine the issues that emerged from the exploitative actions of colonialist practices”***

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### **Revolutionary development acts in solidarity**

We must strive for a new architecture and culture that places the international community under the control of national coordination. The first step in showing solidarity with first responders could mean making a shift to “context-based (rather than expertise- or theme/sector-based) teams that are integrated across disciplines” resulting in significant changes in how development agencies organise themselves within a country, “moving away from a system of siloes reporting back to Geneva, Rome and New York, rather than to the Humanitarian Coordinator or to the leader of the government’s crisis management team” (DuBois 2018:18). This includes pressuring donors to harmonise their approaches for performance management, evaluation and audits, which would reflect their shared responsibility in making the humanitarian system more effective (Konyndyk 2019:4). Concurrently, the funding we invest in research must raise the profile of and legitimate the use of local knowledge, traditions, values and social processes which are a “critical resource in development policy making, and ... local actors should be the primary agents of diagnosis and prescription” (Girvan 2007:32). In doing so, we may encounter new (and very old but overlooked) truth-seeking traditions.

The sector must further show true solidarity with the communities they serve. Where humanitarian assistance has morphed into long-term development work, affected populations have criticised the quality and relevance of aid in recent years (OECD 2019). It is unclear, however, whether the multitude of community feedback mechanisms deployed around the globe have resulted in genuine adaptation and improvement of programming. It is imperative that ‘participatory development’ does not mask the liberation and redistribution of power with lofty rhetoric and techniques, because, in

practice, we must be prepared to “completely overhaul the system” and its very configuration (Brown et al. 2014:23). Solidarity continues to be built with individuals of diverse backgrounds, and practitioners routinely consider a variety of characteristics that has relevance to an individual’s experience, but they struggle to ensure people are valued for their particular talents, abilities and cultural differences and that unity is found within this diversity. Although many organisations take great pains to ensure a ‘strengths-based approach’, systems require that practitioners emphasise the vulnerability of populations. We forget that when we’re not looking, refugees in Uganda deftly resolve disputes without the help of professionals (Vancluysen and Ingelare 2020); others are human rights activists from an early age, and have started their own organisations to provide essential services to other refugees (Bahre 2021). Perhaps reflecting our capitalistic tendency, we have commodified the people we are ultimately most accountable to, and made them into a resource and a fundraising tool. Fletcher (2020:3) argued that “humanitarian leadership is in need of a major paradigm shift: one requiring agencies to actually learn from people’s lived reality, rather than trying to fit that lived reality into pre-existing international systems and procedures”. Indicative of the challenges of applying an intersectional lens across all workstreams, interagency coordination groups responsible for distilling and dispersing technical guidelines and minimum standards struggle to locate responsibility for particular issues and to see structural social constructs such as gender, class and race as underpinning all that they do as opposed to addressing them each in parallel.

Solidarity may be found in Yuval-Davis’ notion of a “politics of belonging”, which embodies a feminist “ethics of care” that “relates more to the ways people should relate and belong to each other rather than to what should be the boundaries of belonging” and pushes a “morality [that] does not ground its ontological base in membership in specific national, ethnic or religious communities but on transcending familial relationships into a universal principle of interpersonal relationships” (Yuval-Davis 2011:372–76). The industry is not to be belittled for its attempts at internal growth, but commended for its collective efforts in self-awareness in a Protean sector. However, its internal evolution journey is a costly one, with countless resources expended for development actors to traverse the vicissitudes of their sector and reach the epiphany that the only heuristic it needs is to side with those who hold less power and lack the freedom to choose their paths.

We also need to consider our own context, more often.

For those of us who live within the dominant culture of the West, our context often prevents us from understanding the consequences of our way of living. We are infantilized when it comes to basic knowledge like how money is created, where our waste goes, where our energy and resources are extracted from, where and how our food is grown, the history of our nations, and the origins of our sources of wealth. (Ladha 2020)

If we are to embody the values and principles we hold so dear as humanitarians, we will have to confront our position within a racially structured political economy underpinned by its colonial past. The development industry benefits from the large institutional bureaucracies left behind by the colonisers, which were not only unfamiliar to all these cultures but had been created to serve colonial goals, quite different from their own (Becker 2020; Kothari 2005:427). As Stibral found, “a critical examination of humanitarian aid and holistic critique of the entire humanitarian sector seem to only be an emerging phenomenon in [humanitarian masters] course curricula” (2021:10). Current education and training cannot be relied upon to nurture inquisitive, reflexive practitioners.

### Revolutionary development is often politicised

The assumed neutrality of aid, a fundamental principle, is once again in question, with the concession that “it is often non-neutral community-based humanitarianism that is best placed to save lives and courageous enough to do so” (Slim 2020). Cronin-Furman et al. take aim specifically at the sector’s much-touted “modern empowerment paradigm, which takes an ostensibly apolitical, technical approach to improving the lives of women in the developing world” by substituting “marginal improvements to the material conditions of women’s lives for the capacity to mobilise to shift the conditions of their repression” (2017:9, 16). They point out that livelihoods support, as well intentioned as it may be, “provides a temporary salve for emotional trauma ... Instead of conscientization about the structures of oppression, skills training. And instead of agency, the choice between raising chickens or cows” (Cronin-Furman et al. 2017:11). Genuine empowerment strives to emancipate not assuage and it is necessary to ascertain and address the “structures of repression” which are often the result of “States in the developing world [being] constructed in the image of their colonial predecessors” and acknowledging that while we speak often of the “inclusion” of those “left behind” (UNGA 2015) we do not have the courage to scrutinise the forces that are doing the exclusion (Cronin-Furman et al. 2017:10). Constitutional and legal reform around gender and power hierarchies invariably is the product of sustained advocacy by gender activists and their allies (O’Neill et al. 2014:9), thereby giving credence to the argument of supporting first responders who must fight for often incendiary political solutions.

Each country’s development can only be sustained through engaged citizens and accountable governments; therefore, the energy, talents, resources and focus of development assistance could predominantly be focused on supporting a thriving civil society, so that nations are supported in their autopoietic development. It may be time to recognise the role of INGOs in overtly strengthening civil society movements and groups. The CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks civic space in 196 countries, revealed that only 3% of the world’s population lived in countries where the core civic freedoms

of association, peaceful assembly and expression were widely respected (CIVICUS 2020:6). One way of characterising revolutionary development is to define it as, ultimately, the enhancement of freedom and choice for the individual, as Sen memorably argued many decades ago (1999). If we equate development practice with supporting individuals in the journey of progressing toward a higher state of self-awareness, self-control and self-directed will, then it follows that it must support grassroots movements and the civil societies of nations as a matter of priority; however, it may be beneficial to delineate collective freedom from individual freedom. O’Hearn (2009) qualifies Sen’s impassioned plea for greater investment in individual freedom and capabilities, noting that this view “remains on the safe ground of Western individualism and avoids critical analysis of major western states and institutions”, most of whom attained their levels of freedom, having “enjoyed pluralist democracy ... because the rest of the world starved”.

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### *“Investing in the non-violent fight for collective rights has historical efficacy”*

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Investing in the non-violent fight for collective rights has historical efficacy. Looking at hundreds of campaigns over the last century, researchers found that non-violent campaigns are twice as likely to achieve their goals as violent campaigns, and, although the exact dynamics will depend on many factors, it takes around 3.5% of the population actively participating in the protests to ensure serious political change (Chenoweth 2008). Perhaps a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize should have been considered for the courageous people of Iraq and Lebanon who protested peacefully against endemic corruption in government; for the women of Nigeria who rallied to stop police abuse; for the people of Hong Kong who fought for democracy and for their civil liberties, at great risk to their own safety; and, today, for the women of Myanmar who are at the forefront of today’s pro-democracy movement.

That social service organisations (such as INGOs) work to change individuals and social movement organisations work to change systems (Kramer 1981) may be an axiom in need of revisiting. Glasius and Ishkanian ascertained that, in recent years, during anti-capitalism/anti-austerity/pro-democracy protests, there was significant involvement of NGOs in street activism through what they term “surreptitious symbiosis”, such as through the provision of non-monetary resources and the participation of NGO staff in a personal capacity (2014:2622), avoiding imperilling donor relationships (2014:2641). Many of the strategies employed by civil society organisations, such as amplifying the participation of the most marginalised and facilitating spaces to build solidarity, are similar to those of social movements, and although there are thus “common causal pathways ... [to] insurgent citizenship”, a nuanced and measured perspective must be applied when analysing the extent to which international NGOs

especially are contributing to systemic change (Karriem and Benjamin 2005). The professionalisation of the sector has undoubtedly meant an increasing disconnection with citizen action, and the focus on projects over movements may have come at the detriment of genuine structural shifts in our realities. Global civil society now functions, in a sense, to normalise and stabilise the dysfunction of a liberal political economy, which through its very design threatens the welfare of populations by fulfilling its goal to contest, regulate and marginally modify the system of governmentality that subjectifies it but not challenge its core principles (Rowe and Lipschutz 2005:15). NGOs are an institutional form of civil society through which “class relations are contested and reworked” and, until now, they have straddled the “imperialist and neoliberal ambitions of the aid regime and the popular mobilisations... in opposition to them”. At this juncture of human evolution, it may be opportune to boldly determine whether the third sector “will advance or undermine this struggle” (Ismail and Kamat 2018:573). Indeed, a revolutionary agenda such as gender justice cannot be achieved unless NGOs, especially transnational feminist ones, challenge the very conditions under which they operate, engage in contentious spaces and oppositional politics, and dispel the ambiguities surrounding their positions to date (Liinason 2021).

### Revolutionary development will offer alternate (feminist) realities

Perhaps decolonisation is about much more than self-determination for local and national agencies working in development. It is also about releasing the entire sector from the grip of a patriarchal mindset. Aotearoa New Zealand activist Makere Stewart-Harawira (Waitaha) eloquently outlines the paths before us in a world “hovering on the brink of self-destruction” and implores us to consider bringing “the feminine principle and in the process, right balance and the compassionate mind, to the centre of our political ontologies” (2007:1). Humanity has the colossal task of undoing much of the damage done by 5000 years of patriarchy, 500 years of capitalism and 50 years of neoliberalism. It is necessary to incentivise the world to cast off its collective *wetiko* – a term used by Native Americans for the individualistic and selfish mindset of the British colonists in North America (Ladha and Kirk 2016). This is not possible so long as the industry continues to participate in a dysfunctional, parasitic capitalist system, believing that with minor organisational policy tweaks and adjustments it can be made more ethical, more bearable. Over a decade ago, Kothari cogently outlined the paradox of an industry embracing participatory approaches to development while concomitantly being co-opted by the hegemony of the neoliberal agenda (2005:438), and it appears to remain true today.

Experience tells us that it is not possible to challenge the conditions which abet rampant gender-based violence, abject poverty, ecological destruction and inequality by working within existing legal, regulatory, political and bureaucratic structures. The solution lies in our ability

to “reclaim our intuition, stop casting blame, see the system as the source of its own problems, and find the courage and wisdom to restructure it” (Meadows 2008:4). Feminist scholars have for some time sought to identify, critique and challenge systems of injustice, oppression, and abuse supported by a patriarchal system (Becker 1999), identifying principles along the way to achieve such a monumental task such as collaboration, compassion, reflection and self-awareness, a focus on the collective not the individual, on the relational not the technical, integration not fragmentation, holism not reductionism and, of course, that the personal is, in fact, political.

While feminists are not agreed on a singular way of achieving this new reality, they concur that the process must be valued, and that organisations must always question putative norms, embedding a culture of non-hierarchy and non-duality, and an inquisitiveness and heterogeneity in praxis, in order to be continuously growing and learning. Many agencies recognise the coherence between human rights values and feminist ideals as well as the deontological approach to change that feminism takes. Some have begun the process of decentralising their decision-making structures as well as incorporating feminist principles of collaboration, emotional intelligence and empathy into their leadership training (Harper and Albrechtsen 2020). Yet the long-term work of political action to collectively change the lives of the powerless and to consider feminist alternatives cannot be accomplished within the tight timeframes and budgets and overwhelming bureaucratic demands made by donors (Wallace 2020:45)—and this will need to change.

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***“INGOs will then need to systematically campaign with governments for the structural changes that are required to transform our global economy from one that extracts to one that gives life”***

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INGOs will then need to systematically campaign with governments for the structural changes that are required to transform our global economy from one that extracts to one that gives life. It has become apparent that our free-market ideology no longer represents progress, and many seminal thinkers and activists have put forward viable alternatives, including universal basic income, a global wealth tax and doughnut economics. Inspiring are the alternative visions like those embodied in feminist economics, which emphasises provision and distribution in the service of sustaining and producing life (Rodriguez Enriquez 2015) and rejects neoclassical economic theory, which characterises humans as rational, cost-benefit-calculating, interest-pursuing subjects. What we have witnessed is that neoliberalism is not just a manner of governing states or economies, but is intimately tied to the government of the individual, to a particular manner of living, and must be confronted (Read 2009).

Eisler's (1987) work resonates here: drawing on pre-historic data as old as Palaeolithic art in modern-day France to more recent inscriptions in Sumerian tablets, Eisler inferred that we once had societies in which masculine and feminine principles were equally valued and operated in partnership, resulting in cultural and technological advances which enhanced life. Societal models which were based on the 'dominator' model, in which masculine properties prevailed, tended to use advances to further domination and to marginalise and quell life. The latter tended to characterise life in dualities, the 'superior-inferior' or the 'in-group versus out-group' and this is "a key component in the construction of the enemy mentality so central to the maintenance of dominator systems" (Eisler 1987:207). The ultimate goal is not to stamp out conflict between all people and to homogenise them; rather, it is to ensure conflict is productive rather than destructive and to appreciate and elevate differences (Eisler 1987:192).

Okech proposes:

the purpose of this generation of feminists is clearly defined by the global political constellation, which demonstrates that the next frontier of struggle is not about reforming laws and seeking participation in flawed global systems of power but that the struggle rather lays in dismantling these systems. (2017:16)

Structural changes we are already witnessing include embracing a dissolution of traditional hierarchies and modes of authority, and a greater respect for the natural world as an entity with the same rights as sentient beings. Three decades ago, Eisler sanguinely predicted that our "gylanic prehistory" foreshadowed the decentralising and distribution of governance, a shift away from "technologies of destruction" making room for "as yet undreamed (and presently undreamable) enterprises" and "an economic order in which amassing more and more property as a means of protecting oneself from, as well as controlling, others will be seen for what it is: a form of sickness or aberration" (1987:200-01).

Stewart-Harawira linked feminine principles for living and an innate spirituality which acted as the foundation for our interaction with others and the environment:

As a race of beings, we have lost touch with the sacred ... More and more women are remembering that there was a time when the societies of human beings that lived on this planet our home, were much more matriarchal in nature, when the values by which existence was ordered were based on a spirituality which connected us to Mother Earth, to each other and to the universe. (1999)

What modern philosophy is now ruminating, ancient indigenous cultures have known for some time. Aboriginal Australians have long considered themselves integrated with and part of the natural world. For instance, the Nhunggabarra people from Nhunggal Country, northwestern NSW, believe that everything – animate (human, animal, plant) and inanimate (land

forms) – has its own consciousness, rather than holding gods or spirits in high regard (Sveiby 2009). This knowledge has been dismissed, perhaps because modern industrialised societies do not give the same credence to non-textual information such as those shared through oral stories, dances and ceremonies by the Nhunggabarra people "to fulfil a mission to keep all alive" (Sveiby 2009:8). Karl Sveiby reconstructs the governance principles and model of Nhunggabarra society, which he surmises:

looks like a holistic structure, where every element supports the whole. With a spiritual belief that 'all are connected', the core value 'respect' follows naturally and ecosystem care is hence not only a matter of immediate survival, but also the reason for existence – the mission to 'keep all alive' ... the rules emphasise respect, individual responsibility and non-competitive behaviours and enforce behaviours such as collaboration, community building and care. (2009:15)

## Revolutionary development can instigate the systems change we need

That a metamorphosis for the sector is required is not in question, but in which direction and to what extent remains to be decided. The industry will need to consider the "great, big unstated assumptions" that constitute its way of working (Meadows 2008:162). The sector has oscillated between holism and compartmentalisation in its approach, from the creation of the humanitarian cluster system, which relegated areas of relief to specialists in various themes (water and sanitation, protection, food and nutrition and so on), to the acknowledgement that we require a seamless bond (the preferred jargon being "nexus") between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work. Calls for better coordination reflect our ongoing struggle to incorporate a whole-of-problem perspective.

We know that we live within a complex system, which often has a number of attributes including nonlinearity, uncertainty, interconnectedness, interdependence, emergence, scale and self-organisation. Using concepts relating to the nature of complex systems, the nature of change and the behaviour of intelligent actors, complexity theory provides a basis for guiding this thinking. Feedback loops and dynamic uncertainties that are very difficult or impossible to understand and predict have often made designing effective development programming challenging, to say the least. To navigate such a byzantine world, we need to be able to use both deduction and induction processes of critical thinking, and to understand their limitations; the real value in better understanding complexity concepts for the development and humanitarian community may lie in its implicit suggestions about how we think about problems (Ramalingam et al. 2008). Meadows concurs: "I don't think the systems way of seeing is better than the reductionist way of thinking.

I think it's complementary, and therefore revealing ... Each way of seeing allows our knowledge of the wondrous world in which we live to become a little more complete" (2008:5).

The way a system reacts to outside forces that lambast and pummel, constrain, trigger or drive it is most revealing; Western society's response most often reflects its reliance on science, logic and reductionism over intuition and holism: "Psychologically and politically we would much rather assume that the cause of a problem is 'out there', rather than 'in here.'" (Meadows 2008:4). Indeed, the development sector's inability to abide by commitments made in The Grand Bargain at the World Humanitarian Summit, several years on, may be a result of an unwillingness to admit that our paralysis is the direct result of internalised privilege and power. This would require consistently interrogating our governments on their foreign and trade policies, which create the very deleterious situations development programming then seeks to redress. As governments purport to advance the policy commitments to gender equality and peace, global military spending, chiefly driven by OECD nations, tops \$1.9 trillion per annum (SIPRI 2020). These same nations often host corporate actors who are responsible for land-grabbing and natural resource destruction in the same countries they provide development assistance. This is compounded by the awareness of many development practitioners that they must espouse values-change and policy shifts which haven't yet occurred in their own societies, or have only partially been met in their own contexts.

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***"To foster cooperative success in human organisations, some believe that we should look to nature for inspiration"***

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If humanity wants to survive and thrive indefinitely into the future, perhaps it must align its internal evolution with the trajectory of biological evolution. To foster cooperative success in human organisations, some believe that we should look to nature for inspiration. Nature nurtures life through communities, and cooperation appears to be at the core of all life creation, beginning at a cellular level with symbiogenesis (Capra and Luisi 2018). From these biological blocks, cooperation prevails at every level of the animal kingdom. Research confirms that the first instinct for humans is to cooperate rather than react selfishly (Rand et al. 2012). The days of competitive neo-liberal behaviour may be gone for the development sector if we emulate the practice of biomimicry, which fosters social support, collaboration and respect for intuition as much as objective data to support innovation (Neumann 2007). The development industry will need to evolve into a cooperative social organisation that nurtures networks of communication, encourages sharing and experimentation, and cultivates a climate of mutual support.

There is much written about the behaviour of organisations due to their "collective unconscious", which is created and preserved by the stories told regarding the processes and relationships of the organisation as well as the metaphors, symbols and archetypes generated to develop and enhance meaning and common language (Koçoğlu et al. 2016). The industry is already expanding its language to be commensurate with levels of complexity, which is important because "our mental models are mostly verbal" (Meadows 2008:174). Our mental models are also largely influenced by what is written, not just by the content but by the way the medium shapes our interpretations. In modern Western culture, with the advent of movable type, we have come to rely on the visual, what we can see. In primarily oral cultures, there is a kind of magic that media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) proposes, resulting from an ability to simultaneously hear and touch to perceive reality, and thus a disregard for linear cause-and-effect explanations. It is time for the sector to awaken to all its limitations, cultural and otherwise, and transition from acolytes of Western ways of conceptualising to purveyors of metamodern approaches to thinking and problem-solving.

Meta-modernism acknowledges that we have entered a stage where one can hold the possibility or experience of multiple realities simultaneously, a sort of "pragmatic idealism", which "oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2019). It is the emergence of a new way of feeling and thinking, one where "we can simultaneously critique the system, live within the contradiction of being complicit in that system, while working towards changing the system itself. We don't have to define ourselves by what we stand against, although we do have to know what we stand against and why" (Ladha 2020). We can be pro-trust rather than risk averse and pro-belonging rather than anti-racist.

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***"The challenges of being an agent for social change includes an inertia that has stymied any potential for real revolution within the industry"***

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The challenges of being an agent for social change today includes an inertia—an inexorable pull toward doing things the way they've always been done—that has stymied any potential for real revolution within the industry. Activists, "in their striving to do 'the good', if they did not maintain a very intentional wakefulness, almost always end up strengthening the very patterns and behaviours that they have set out to change" (Steiner 1986 in Kaplan and Davidoff 2014:4).

Activists begin by questioning many of the norms which have come to characterise their social world, yet often end up endorsing one of the most normative current practices in our culture—the tendency towards management ... to focus on the shortest way to quantifiable results, to hold to a centre, to insist on bureaucratic forms of accountability ... the process of bureaucratisation, the normative procedures that assume and thereby lead to mistrust between people, to a culture of fear and conformity—all this becomes part of the world of social activism as well. And it signals the onset of what is really an assumption—that if we strategise and plan carefully enough we will be able to turn the world in the direction we wish it to go. (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014:6)

It is time to reconfigure the language around ‘international development’ to be about ‘global development’ and then to further stretch the imagination to what might constitute ‘revolutionary

development’. In essence, development practice might expand to include a revisitation of human identity and sense of self. If development work is in the business of creating alternative visions of reality—a better world—then what we require is “a truly radical activism” which recognises that “the very way we think affects and changes the world that we see” (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014:28). A phenomenological approach, which respects the primacy of conscious experience from basic sensory perception to imagination, emotion, volition and action, “suggests that we recognise that our concepts illuminate what we see, inform what we see, but equally that what we see then further elucidates our concepts” (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014:11) and through this process of reflection and inquiry we can reach an agreement, an intersubjectivity, if only one that recognises complete openness and receptivity is required of the mind before it can begin to espouse what kind of world it wants to live within (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014:29).

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