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# Humanitarian Leader

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**Brain drain in the aid sector: Unpacking  
the barriers of the dual-salary system**

MANFREDI MICELI



# THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER: Brain drain in the aid sector: Unpacking the barriers of the dual-salary system

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# Abstract

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The existence of a dual-salary system in the aid sector creates structural barriers and impediments to the development of localised and sustainable responses. During the recruitment process, professionals are not evaluated according to their previous experience and titles. Instead, their nationality weighs on their application more than their expertise. In this paper, I have conducted qualitative research through a Key Informant Interview (KII) methodology, aiming to identify trends of thought among aid professionals, particularly those in senior leadership positions working as expatriates from Least Developed Countries (LDCs). I will firstly introduce the topic, then analyse the advantages and disadvantages of creating a fairer system that encourages the return of aid professionals to their home countries. Finally, I will compare my assumptions through KIIs to identify the trends of thought among interested parties. In the conclusion, I review these ideas, hoping to foster further research on the topic and inform global aid leadership.

## Leadership relevance

In recent years, aid sector professionals have been openly vocal about the need for additional localisation and sustainability in aid responses. In this paper I aim to inform aid leadership regarding the inherent inequality of the dual-salary system, specifically for returning aid workers from LDCs. Returning aid specialists are an invaluable leadership resource for aid responses in LDCs, able to understand the context, the language and implement global knowledge acquired in international contexts. Human resources policies that encourage their return through fair treatment will help provide long-term and localised leadership to aid responses in LDCs.

## Introduction

How would you feel if you had a job where your nationality weighed more than your expertise when calculating your salary? Imagine working in a sector where you'd need to reduce your pay three to five times to work in your own country, no matter your previous experience and skillset. You would likely define this sector as classist and discriminatory. Unfortunately, this is the sad reality for thousands of aid workers from developing and conflict-ridden countries, even those with several years of experience as expatriates. This remuneration policy has been labelled the dual-salary system (Project FAIR, 2022) and means that staff working in their own country compete on a national scale (synonymous with lower salaries and fewer benefits), while expatriate workers receive additional benefits and higher salaries.

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In recent years, academics such as Ishbel McWha-Hermann and Stuart C. Carr have explored the consequences of the salary gap, noting that expatriate wages can be up to 900% higher than national ones (Carr & McWha-Hermann, 2016a). To address the issue, the University of Edinburgh, the CHS Alliance, the Birches Group, Massey University, and the Economic and Social Research Council designed and implemented Project FAIR (Fairness in Aid Remuneration). The objective of the project is to contribute to addressing UN Sustainable Development Goal 8.5—Full Employment and Decent Work with Equal Pay. In fact, it is not a coincidence that during the FAIR project, the majority of the stakeholders interviewed mentioned that “the current dual-salary system is inherently unfair” (McWha-Hermann et al, 2017). While the scope of previous research and of Project FAIR is highly relevant to my research, the sample of individuals I refer to is slightly different. In this paper I am not going to object to the salary gap between national workers and international ones, instead I aim to challenge the salary differences between returning aid workers from LDCs and expatriates, assuming that both groups can count on long-standing international experience in their work.

The objective of this paper is to question the lack of human resource policies aimed at encouraging aid workers from LDCs with international experience from returning home to contribute to aid responses in their countries of origin. The direct result of this current policy lack is a so-called ‘brain drain’—a social phenomenon characterised by the emigration of highly

trained and qualified people from a particular country to get a better wage. In this article I aim to highlight how the salary gap and the lack of fair human resource policies directly contributes to the brain drain of aid workers from LDCs. My hypothesis is that the salary and benefit gap impede the return of aid workers on a structural level, leading to less sustainable and non-localised responses. In the following sections, I will analyse the benefits of hiring returning aid workers and examine the common counterclaims used to justify the salary gap. In the third section, I use qualitative research to identify thought trends and compare my hypothesis with informed professionals through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Finally, I conclude my paper with the aim of both fostering additional research on the topic and informing senior leaders from aid agencies.

## Thesis

Most aid sector professionals have had the chance to collaborate with highly qualified colleagues from LDCs and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) who have long-standing expertise in their fields. Expatriate colleagues from developing and/or conflict-ridden areas often travel to support the aid response in other countries, usually counting on several years of experience in their respective national responses. However, when they plan to return to their countries of origin, they face structural and economic barriers which discourage them from returning to lead their ‘home’ interventions.

The salary differentiation between national and expatriate aid workers contributes to an unfair aid sector, where nationality weighs more on the CV than experience and expertise. National colleagues get paid far less than internationals, regardless of whether they have been involved in aid responses abroad or have similar, or more experience in the sector.

Academic experts and professionals often refer to this salary divide as “Economic Apartheid”, which is highly ironical considering the humanitarian aim to address inequalities in the targeted communities (Carr & McWha-Hermann, 2016b). Indeed, how can we reduce inequalities among other people if we aren't able to address it within our own sector?

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Aid workers from LDCs with long-standing international experience offer several advantages for aid agencies should they wish to return home. First, they do not

need to be trained about a new context and they have a clear linguistic and cultural advantage. Second, they are likely to be long-term employees who favour a sustainable approach in terms of human resources and strategic development in their home countries. Finally, they tend to be outstanding talents able to compete on the international market. They bring invaluable local and international expertise to their roles.

The humanitarian community often voice concerns about the decolonisation of aid and the importance of localisation (Aloudat, 2021). However, many efforts to make this a reality on the ground and overcome impediments are stalling. The salary divide has been identified as one of the key challenges in addressing localisation gaps. Internally, some agencies are starting to discuss mitigation measures to overcome the gap, nonetheless there is still a lot of room for improvement.

In many job applications open to both expatriates and nationals, agencies clearly specify that if a national wins the role, their salary will be based on the national scale. However, this is clearly unappealing for workers from the targeted nation who have many years of international experience since they will need to drastically reduce their incomes. These policies contradict the global effort towards sustainability and localisation, creating a barrier for highly qualified individuals with long-standing experience who are competitive on the international market.

An equal salary scale for expatriates and returning aid workers would play a pivotal role in addressing inequalities. The dual-salary system is the 'elephant in the room' of the aid sector and shows the extreme need for fairer human resource policies that focus on merit rather than nationality. In addition, localised expertise will certainly contribute to innovative multi-sectoral responses, tailored to the needs of the communities, and based on international standards. Returning aid workers from LDCs covering leading roles in their countries of origin would bring clear and straightforward direction and global expertise.

Finally, according to McWha-Hermann and other academics, there is a direct correlation between the psychological wellbeing of expatriate and national employees and the dual-salary system.

"Dual salaries undermine host colleagues' sense of wage justice, work motivation, and team relations. At organisational levels, they fuel turnover, increase brain drain, and reduce mental well-being of workers. Higher ratios fuel a 'double demotivation'—extending to international staff who overrate their own abilities and reduce their effort at work" (McWha-Hermann et al, 2021).

This research shows that the dual-salary system has devastating effects on the aid sector, directly undermining the capacity of agencies to boost staff morale and productivity. I assume that these negative effects would be even more disruptive for returning aid workers from LDCs, since in this case their previous experience and titles are not considered during the recruitment process.

## Anti-Thesis

An equal salary for equal work should be a universal right. However, there are several key stakeholders within the aid sector who tend to justify the dual-salary system. In this section, I am going to analyse the main counterarguments to equal pay used by agencies, professionals and academics.

According to Koch and Schulpen, the current salary system for aid jobs in developing countries is adequate for four main reasons. First, wages are adequate and competitive on national markets. Second, the aid sector generates half a million jobs worldwide per year. Third, according to one case study, salaries in the aid sector are generally higher than in the public one. Finally, between 3% to 25% of Dutch aid programs are spent on national staff remuneration (Koch & Schulpen, 2018). While the findings of this research are accurate and show how international cooperation and assistance contribute to market stability and job development in LDCs, it does not take into account the inherent inequalities of the dual-salary system, especially between returning aid workers and expatriates. The aid sector should be pivotal in leading the reduction of inequalities and the issue is not merely economic, but moral.

Academics opposing my thesis might argue that nationals from developed countries should also be included and considered in the study. I would tend to disagree with this argument for several reasons. Firstly, most agency headquarters and governance offices are based in developed countries. Hence, aid professionals from developed countries who decide to return home generally cover global positions at the highest levels. In addition, in many vacancies for leadership positions, native knowledge of the national language of the INGO is considered an asset. This clearly benefits aid workers from developed countries in the recruitment processes. Even outside of senior roles, the salary gap between a national aid worker from a developed country and an international one is far lower in comparison to the salary gap between an international aid worker and an aid worker from an LDC. Moreover, INGO salaries refer to labour laws in their own countries that are designed through market surveys. In the aid sector, the national salary scale used by INGOs at the HQ level is generally used as the basis to design scales in field missions. It is

not the case that French and Italian INGOs pay lower salaries than Scandinavian ones, as they pay international wages which are in line with their national economy (The Humanitarian Insider, 2022). The situation is very different for aid workers with international experience from LDCs who work for INGOs or UN agencies. If they plan to relocate to their home country, they will need to drastically reduce their salary.

Some may argue that there is an expertise gap between international and national aid workers, especially in countries that have suffered instability for decades. While this might be true for aid workers who have not worked outside their home countries, it is not the case for aid workers from LDCs who have international experience. In the latter case, there is no justification for the existence of the salary and benefit gap between expatriates and returning aid workers from LDCs.

Human resource specialists and legal advisors could counter-claim that the salary divide is mainly based on national labour laws that restrain organisational capacity to pay the same salary to returning national workers from LDCs and foreign specialists. While such legislation certainly plays a role in creating impediments, it is not a strong justification for the substantial differences in salary and benefits. Most national labour laws do not specify the maximum wage which you need to pay your employees, only a minimum wage (Yglesias, 2014). Agencies very often pay slightly more than the minimum wage in order to be competitive with private companies operating on the national market, however, national workers at INGOs who have worked as expatriates should receive wages and benefits equivalent to their international counterparts.

Aid professionals, often from the Global North, also identify relocation costs as a valid justification to provide a dual-salary scale for national and international workers. The relocation costs certainly weigh in the salary divide between staff who've never left their countries of origin and expatriate aid workers; however, it does not justify the salary difference for aid workers from LDC and LLDC nations with several years of international experience. In fact, people who have been working for several years in international missions should also be eligible to receive relocation costs to come back to their countries of origin since they will need to move their lives back home.

In the Project Fair Report (McWha-Hermann et al, 2017), the respondents of the KIIs identified four main barriers in changing the dual salary system: fear of recruiting, wanting to be competitive, consistency across different situations, and high-risk settings and emergency locations. Hiring more returning aid workers from LDCs would address all issues. They would be highly competitive on the market and desire to return home, there would be total consistency in their remuneration

as they would compete on the international market, and they would already be familiar with high risk and emergency settings.

Another common argument used by some aid workers to justify the benefit gap is based upon the mandatory contribution of national workers to the national welfare system. Workers who perform their duties in their respective countries of origin are entitled to all the benefits of the local welfare state, while expatriates are not. I strongly disagree with this argument, and I believe that it does not take into account several key factors. While it is certain that national workers contribute to the welfare state and are entitled to its benefits, it is also true that national aid workers constitute 98% of the casualties among aid workers killed every year (Aid Worker Security Report, 2022). Hence, since they run such high risks, it would make sense to attract them through competitive salaries rather than discouraging them through a rigid and inflexible recruiting system. Moreover, returning aid workers from LDCs are not always owners of property in their own country, and even if they own a property it is not a certainty that they are going to perform their duties in their place of origin. Therefore, relocation costs, life insurance and similar benefits should be included when they are returning to work in their countries of origin.

Finally, some might counterclaim that aid workers from LDCs are outstanding individuals who compete on the international market. Therefore, they assume that these workers will be able to negotiate their salary and benefits. In fact, there are several INGOs in LDCs who have national aid workers in senior positions. While these bilateral arrangements are certainly a step toward sustainability, we cannot assume that all workers have the same contractual power to negotiate their compensation. This is why systemic human resources policies need to be revised. Policies are designed to address common issues to create a fairer and more transparent system and the lack of human resource policy on this topic remains an unresolved and unaddressed inequality.

## Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

To test my assumptions about aid workers from LDCs and the dual-salary system, I decided to contact aid professionals from the Middle East, South-East Asia and Central Africa operating internationally and covering senior leadership roles with INGOs and UN agencies. Through the KIIs I conducted, I aimed to investigate if the structural salary and benefit divide is an impediment for them in returning to lead the humanitarian interventions in their countries of origin. Moreover, I sought to identify general trends of thought on the topic. I agreed to share the respondents' answers in an anonymous form to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. While the responses do

not constitute a statistical proof, they can contribute to the identification of trends among professionals in senior leadership roles. Additionally, the results of the interviews will hopefully contribute to initiating further studies on this topic. The expected outcome is to inform aid agencies in addressing this issue through the revision of their human resource policies.

As previously mentioned, the sample used for the interviews focused on aid workers from LDCs with international experience covering senior leadership roles. I contacted 12 interviewees. Among those, six participated in the study. The sample of the respondents is various in terms of age, gender and provenance and includes aid workers from South-East Asia, Africa and the Middle East who are in senior leadership positions with INGOs and UN agencies. The age of the respondents is between 30 and 55 years old.

I undertook semi-structured interviews through LinkedIn and Skype. One of the interviewees requested to answer the questions via chat due to an unstable internet connection. Interviewees were introduced to the scope of the paper. Later, I had an open conversation based on five general questions with each interviewee.

I considered a qualitative method as the most congenial to this type of research due to the scarcity of academic documentation on the topic. The aim of the interviews was to delineate general opinion according to their experience, and to enhance a critical discussion of one of the most controversial topics in the aid sector. Finally, I read and reread their answers to identify trends and share general assumptions and individual ideas. In the paragraphs below, I am going to share the findings for each question.

#### What are the main impediments for returning LDC aid workers in leading humanitarian responses in their country of origin?

All the respondents mentioned that the classification of the response is an impediment to their return. Aid workers from LDCs have different professional backgrounds and switching from a developmental to a humanitarian response is regarded as challenging.

Salary and benefits were also identified as a key challenge for returning, with five out of six respondents mentioning that they are less willing to return to their countries of origin due to this gap. Among those five respondents, one mentioned that when they returned, they were able to negotiate their salary but not the benefits. Another mentioned that they would not be willing to return to their country of origin due to political concerns. One of the respondents said that when they returned, salary was not an issue, rather, the main challenge was the amount of work. Another remarked:

“Salary will certainly play a role in impeding me to come back in my country, plus I would face limited job opportunities”—Interviewee Three

Four respondents out of six assumed that the aid sector was structurally afflicted by unconscious classism, in which expatriate aid workers are believed to be more skilled and competent in the workspace. They feared that returning home would be considered as a demotion of their status and profile in the international aid job market. The other two respondents held different views. One mentioned that there are certain positions of power that are subject to corruption and should be covered by expatriates to ensure transparency. The other discussed the difficulty of managing all the decision-making responsibility at the expense of expatriates who had less understanding of the local context.

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“Working for an expat your opinions are considered irrelevant. As a national staff you always cover less influential roles, as the majority of senior positions are for internationals”—Interviewee Five

#### What are the main disadvantages and benefits for aid agencies in hiring returning aid workers from LDCs to lead humanitarian responses in their countries of origin?

The respondents were in almost full agreement on the benefits of hiring returning aid workers. In fact, five respondents out of six believed that aid agencies would secure long-term employees, with pre-existing understanding of context and language. In addition, the respondents believed that the academic knowledge and international experience acquired in foreign countries would play a crucial role in supporting responses in their countries of origin. Networks and connections with international colleagues were also mentioned as key benefits that returning aid workers from LDCs would bring to agencies. Many respondents also noticed the friction between nationals and expatriate staff, as there is sometimes a huge gap in terms of experience, and expatriate staff struggle to understand local contexts.

“Less language barrier would lead to program empowerment and better accountability systems within the organisations. Agencies would be able to use interactive methodologies with beneficiaries”—Interviewee Five

There was a mixed response among the respondents concerning the relationship between local authorities and senior positions. Half of the respondents considered the hiring of an aid worker from an LDC as a great benefit for agencies. Nationals would be able to speak the language/s, they would be more aware of cultural and local norms, and better understand the context. The other half of the respondents highlighted the risks of hiring returning talents in operational and government liaison positions. They believed that there is an unconscious racism in LDCs according to which authorities, and even national staff, accord more respect to expatriates. In addition, some of the respondents highlighted the associated risks in terms of corruption and political influence, specifying that in some contexts there are similar risks with expatriates.

“I acknowledge that in senior management roles you will need to be independent, especially when dealing with authorities, as it might be dangerous for the safety and security of the colleagues. You might be under risk and under pressure yourself”—Interviewee Two

**According to your experience, do you believe that there is a rooted conception of colonial aid which influences the lack of a human resource policies aimed at supporting aid workers from LDCs to return to their countries of origin?**

Unsurprisingly, all the respondents agreed that there is a rooted conception of colonialism within aid and that the lack of human resource policies on this topic might be related. All the respondents showed very critical views of the way aid is designed and of the political influence within it. The general perception is that expatriates are more respected than nationals, regardless of previous experience. This is indeed considered colonial by the respondents that recognised the fragility of the system. Two of the respondents specifically recognised the age gap between aid workers from DCs and aid workers from LDCs. The former will enter the international market soon after completing university, while the latter must count on both academic qualifications and long-standing experience at the national level before receiving job opportunities overseas.

“There is a clear division in the salary and benefits remuneration which has colonial roots. The aid sector is much more forgiving and accessible for westerners. Senior positions are way more accessible for DCs’ aid workers with less experience as it works on prejudice and assumptions. These arguments are not spoken, but it looks like a hidden rule”—Interviewee Two

There is also a funding component that contributes to staff stratification. One respondent mentioned that donors, usually Western-based, often prefer to provide funding to projects led by expatriates. Another respondent highlighted how donors such as USAID tend to hire Yemeni and Iraqi individuals who studied in the US as staff, and delineated the different advantages of this policy in terms of understanding context. Another respondent assumed that donor agencies tend to only hire nationals of the donor country in senior management positions, undermining the growth of localised expertise.

“... donors, just like businesses, are more inclined to give funding if they are sure it will be overseen by technically qualified expats”—Interviewee Six

**Do you identify national labour laws, expertise gaps and relocation costs as reasonable justifications for the salary and benefits gap between returning aid workers from LDCs and expatriates?**

All the respondents agreed that there is no reasonable justification for the inequality in remuneration between returning aid workers from LDCs and expatriates. Among the interviewees, five out of six believe that national labour laws only identify a minimum wage, while there is no limit in any country for a maximum one. Relocation costs are also not considered as a reasonable justification, in fact returning aid workers from LDCs will face the same relocation costs and might also require accommodation. In addition, three of the respondents mentioned that nationals could face additional safety and security concerns.

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**All the respondents agreed that there is no reasonable justification for the inequality in remuneration between returning aid workers from LDCs and expatriates.**

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“It will be fair to receive relocation and other benefits, since I’ve been living in the foreign [country] for a long time. Whatever another expat is entitled [to], I should be entitled [to] too”—Interviewee Five

Discussion around expertise is more challenging. Respondents tended to differentiate between aid responses in developing or relatively stable countries and responses in fragile or failed states. Half of the respondents believed that having an expatriate in leadership and government liaison positions is an advantage in fragile countries because of the profile, capacity to handle pressure and status. The other half of the interviewees believed that the expertise gap



does not stand as a reasonable excuse because the competition would be between workers that both count on international experience.

“When you have a staff who has access to lots of funds and cover the same role for an extended period of time, there is a general lack of check and balance which favours violations of codes of conduct (CoC). One way to mitigate this issue is to recruit expatriates as the most senior position. This will likely maintain the checks and balances and ensure accountability”—Interviewee One

### Do you have any suggestions for humanitarian policy makers regarding this issue? Is a review of existing human resource policies needed?

Every respondent believed that a review of existing recruitment policies concerning the selection of returning aid workers from LDCs is critical. Five out of six interviewees suggested creating a hybrid recruitment system which encourages the return of outstanding talent through the offer of competitive salary and benefits packages in line with their previous roles. The creation of such policies will certainly enhance more sustainable and localised responses, which would be beneficial for aid agencies, and for aid responses in targeted countries. It is interesting to note that one interviewee did not believe that all roles can be nationalised. In fact, they suggested piloting this hybrid policy mainly for programming roles and in development contexts rather than humanitarian ones.

“Counting on same experiences, all candidates shall have the same opportunities. It is a paradox to offer a strict dual-salary without considering the background of a professional”—Interviewee Four

“Agencies shall strengthen the system to analyse the risks of the adaptation of human resource policies while enhancing the benefits”—Interviewee Two

Another important aspect that three out of six respondents identified is engagement with national workers and returning aid workers from LDCs. These interviewees believe that agencies fail to properly engage with their staff, having a hierarchical approach that is not in line with their mandate. Direct consultation with staff will help design a bottom-up approach where human resources are actively listened to and involved in decision making. In addition, two out of six respondents suggested focusing on staff empowerment programs, especially for junior staff from LDCs. The aim of this type of policy would be to foster inclusion and early career development for professionals from LDCs to help them be more competitive on the international stage.

“Workers from LDCs are not listened [to], as they do not often cover positions of power. Agencies need to be more inclusive if they aim to reform and change the way the aid sector works as a whole”—Interviewee Three

## Conclusions

The KIIs showed different trends that tended to confirm my hypothesis and support my thesis. The dual-salary system is an impediment for the development of sustainable and localised responses, creating a discriminatory system that does not take into account previous titles and expertise. The lack of a hybrid recruitment system is not in line with the mandate of aid agencies, and it must be addressed if we want to develop a transparent system in which experience has more weight than nationality. Moreover, aid agencies would have substantial benefits in hiring a returning specialist. Firstly, these workers will be able to provide a long-term commitment to an aid response. In addition, they will have local context and language understanding, as well as the knowledge acquired during their international experiences. Benefit packages must also be matched between expatriates and returning aid workers from LDCs. In fact, returning workers face the same relocation costs. Returning professionals may also be subject to higher safety risks in light of the alarming statistics that show the higher instance of security incidents for national aid workers (Aid Worker Security Report, 2022).

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***The dual-salary system is an impediment for the development of sustainable and localised responses, creating a discriminatory system that does not take into account previous titles and expertise.***

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There are also concerns that agencies should take into consideration when reviewing these policies. In fragile countries, there are safety and security risks in hiring returning professionals. National specialists are more likely to be targeted or pressured by armed actors and influential stakeholders, and there is a risk that returning professionals in leadership positions might take advantage of their power, leading to corruption.

In conclusion, there is a general need for aid agencies and donors to be more inclusive concerning their recruitment policies. Organisations must engage with staff if they plan to address the inequalities within the system to design more localised responses. There are organisations that are already working towards this. An interesting hybrid method has been implemented

by the International Rescue Committee (IRC)—a US-based INGO operating worldwide. IRC Middle East and Northern Africa (IRC MENA) have developed a policy aimed at encouraging returning aid workers with international experience. IRC MENA offers a competitive package which includes a middle salary scale between expatriates and returning nationals. Returning professionals receive the same benefits packages and a higher salary in comparison to other nationals, in line with their previous titles and experiences. While this is certainly a positive step toward sustainability, there is still a lot of room for improvement.

The results of this study do not constitute any statistical proof but might be evaluated in the future through quantitative research. Nonetheless, the trends of thought showed by the participants is consistent and could be useful for aid agencies when reviewing their existing human resource and recruitment policies. It is crucial for aid agencies to identify mitigation measures to minimise the barriers and increase the incentives for returning aid workers from LDCs. A review of the dual-salary system will lead to more accountability and transparency and signify that aid agencies are drivers of positive change not just externally, but also internally.

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