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# Humanitarian Leader

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It's time for INGOs to stop living with their parents

THOMAS LAY



# THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

## It's time for INGOs to stop living with their parents

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# Abstract

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Drawing on Michel Foucault's philosophical theory of a power triangle, this paper explores the relational dynamics between International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), the United Nations (UN), and sovereign states. It reflects on the emergence of multilateral aid after World War Two and how aid became institutionalised and professionalised, resulting in a relational dynamic between INGOs, the UN and Western governments that is akin to a parent and child. The paper then considers how different actors in humanitarianism occupy different power types, and the impact this will have on the relevance of INGOs in the future. It concludes with a proposition for repositioning and rethinking INGOs in the next era of aid, as part of a reidentification of their role in humanitarianism.

## Leadership relevance

This paper challenges INGO leaders to reflect on the current positioning and the relational power dynamics between INGOs, the UN and the state, and asks them to consider the future landscape of humanitarianism. It argues that current leaders need to be bold and pivot from current managerialist approaches to a zeitgeist position of eco-systemic leadership frameworks.

## Introduction

Humanitarians from across the world had gathered for a week-long workshop held in one of the grand halls at the National Portrait Gallery in London. The wall that provided our backdrop for the day was dominated by a large painting of some exhausted sailors propping each other up, their clothes sodden and torn. In the background, their ancient ship was descending to the depths of the ocean surrounded by wooden debris and canvas sails. As we took in the majesty of our surroundings, and settled into our chairs, our leader summoned attention by commenting on this painting: “This ship was from the Dutch East India Trading Company at the height of their power. I wonder if they ever predicted their demise? We should remember, nothing is too big to fail”.

Nearly five years later, I’m inspired to write this article to be as much a provocation as it is an analysis. I am taking a moment (albeit brief given the demands practitioners currently face) to reflect on some new perspectives on the relational and power dynamics that exist within multilateral aid and, subsequently, whether these new perspectives could provide a framework for the next era of humanitarianism. I’m prompted to do this at a time when the notion of universal humanity and the structures we’ve established to underpin this are being challenged and stretched in the face of extreme levels of humanitarian need and the transition to a late modern age of “precarious interdependence” (Western, 2023; Slim, 2022; Fiori, Espada, Rigon, Taithe, & Zakaria, 2021).

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The departure point for these arguments presupposes that humanitarianism is a subjective and cosmopolitan notion that transcends history, as opposed to a prescriptive set of universal rules and standards. I am adopting this much broader periodised lens of humanitarianism to allow room for a spectrum of value sets and motivations. I consider humanitarianism an endeavour with which humankind has established multiple distinct, unique and transient relationships. Some examples of the divergences within what we now call humanitarianism can be seen in Confucianism, the Age of Enlightenment, Wilsonianism, and Dunantism, to name just a few.

On the one hand, there are millions of examples every single day of individual humanity being exercised—be it the spontaneous provision of first aid to someone who collapses on the street, the upholding of cultural practices such as the zakat, or the philanthropic investments by corporations and high net worth individuals. However, in the modern world, humanitarianism is also a multi-billion-dollar industry that has attempted to take the spirit behind these individual actions and systematically uphold and embody this as a moral imperative at scale during some of the worst crises in the world.

It is in the latter space that this paper resides, specifically the relational power dynamics humans have applied to three self-made constructs that define the parameters by which the multilateral aid industry operates: 1) the United Nations (UN) and the multitude of agencies, funds, and programs of which Western UN member states are the primary stakeholders; 2) territorial authorities, primarily the governments of sovereign states that are responsible for the provision of basic services, and; 3) the local and international Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs) that have vested interests in both the localised needs of populations but also international norms and the instruments of a rules-based order. It is not a precondition for actors in this category to subscribe to both sets of interests.

My analysis concludes that we have reached the end of the ‘Era of Liberal Humanitarianism’ (Barnett, 2011) and are entering a period which I am characterising as the era of ‘Consolidated Humanitarianism’. This age embraces diverse ecosystems, recognises new and diverse power dynamics and embraces interdependencies. The result is a new portrayal of humanitarianism as the consolidation of multiple heterogeneous approaches as opposed to the unipolarity of contemporary multilateral aid. The provocation my analysis puts forward upholds a conclusion that some INGO leaders have already stated, which is that actors subscribing to current forms of multilateral humanitarianism must ‘unstick’ themselves from the quagmire of bureaucracy, fiscal fragility, heavy compliance machinery and egos focused on personal legacy (Baiden & Book, 2022). INGO Leaders have concluded that the current levels of ‘stuckness’ risk taking us down a path of irrelevance. We need to collectively recognise that what we’ve always done is not what we’ll always do, and just like the international trading companies of the 17th and 18th centuries, understand that nothing and no-one is too big to fail.

In my current position as Save the Children’s Regional Humanitarian Director for East and Southern Africa and the co-chair of the Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG)<sup>1</sup>, I have participated in, and sometimes instigated, much pontification in recent weeks and months as to the

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<sup>1</sup> The IAWG is the regional equivalent of a country level NGO Forum without the same degree of formality.

state of multilateral aid's structures and processes as it pertains to the Horn of Africa within the context of a global hunger crisis, and the recent eruption of violence in Sudan and the crippling effect this has had on international multilateral aid structures. I am specifically thinking about why we've been unable to replicate the 2017 Somalia Famine Prevention response which saw 11th hour commitments by donors and a rapid collaborative scale up of aid actors to successfully avert a famine. The inevitable review mechanisms and media commentary in the coming months will provide ample room for naval gazing, and so this paper is not designed to be another space for these reflections and opinions, nor does it aim to apportion blame. Rather, I am recognising this as a catalytic moment to reform and am joining the growing literary corpus of advice stating systemic change is not going far enough, or happening fast enough (ALNAP, 2022; Slim, 2022; Fiori, Espada, Rigon, Taithe, & Zakaria, 2021).

Multilateral aid has proven itself capable of radical change in the past, and its current existence and manifestation is evidence to this. One of my arguments now is that a small cluster of humanitarian crises that include those in northern Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Ukraine, the Horn of Africa and now Sudan could have a transformative affect akin to the events in East Africa during the early 1990s. Taken collectively, these crises present an opportunity for political and humanitarian leaders within the multilateral aid industry to consider whether they are upholding the fundamental morality of the humanitarian endeavour that evolved from Henry Dunant's *Memory of Solferino*—or whether political self-interest and corporate perpetuation has overtaken the drive for positive outcomes? I have recently been challenging my team to ask ourselves the question: "If we're not the solution, who is, and do we have a role in helping them?". Hugo Slim (2022) has also challenged us by highlighting that the world has changed from the period when multilateral aid was conceived, and that as the modern embodiment of Dunant's vision, we need to change too. It is my hope that my analysis will inform and influence the individuals who are, or will be, operating within this constructive space.

## Background

The institutionalised models and mechanisms of aid as we know it are characterised by Michael Barnett as the 'Age of Liberal Humanitarianism' (2011)—and were created during the post-Cold War period when the global order was dominated by the democratic and capitalist models of the Western Hemisphere led by the United States of America. The prominence these powers placed on multilateralism led to UN Resolution 46/182 (United Nations General Assembly, 1991), which positioned United Nations' architectures as the coordinators of humanitarian action along the value chain of aid from

member state Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) contributions through to last mile delivery to affected communities.

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During the early to mid-1990s, the aid responses to a series of events with largescale humanitarian ramifications exposed the then structures as inappropriate or inadequate and provided ratification for resolution 46/182. Specifically, the 1992 Somalia Famine saw the first use of foreign military action in the name of humanitarian response (de Waal, 2018), an approach that was ratified in the Responsibility to Protect commitments in 2005. This crisis, in addition to the 1992-95 Bosnian War, the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and the subsequent refugee responses, witnessed a flood of overseas charitable assistance (Orbinski, 2008). The absence of coordination during this large injection of resources resulted in chaos, the duplication of efforts, and unnecessary suffering, which highlighted the need for further institutionalisation of the sector (Terry, 2002). What emerged from these responses under the mandate of resolution 46/182 was a series of mechanisms that were to become the precursors to the current UN-led response architectures.

Since these events in the early 1990s, multilateral aid has evolved throughout late modernity into a series of structures and processes designed to effectively prioritise, enhance the speed of delivery and avoid duplication of effort, and hold agencies accountable to high standards of programming, financial scrutiny and duties of care to staff and end users of aid. The mechanical managerialist processes that have been established in the pursuit of these objectives have orientated around quantitative aggregation and are presented as the country level Humanitarian Response Plans or Flash Appeals each contributing to the Global Humanitarian Overview. These are fiscally monitored (voluntarily) by the Financial Tracking Service. This process is surrounded by a corpus of coordination structures (e.g., the IASC Cluster system), formal standards (e.g., Sphere and the Core Humanitarian Standards), and ideological frameworks (e.g., the Grand Bargain).

The net result has been the institutionalisation and professionalisation of the sector, facilitated by the growth in humanitarian assistance channelled through, and programmed by, its sympathising actors. This

growth can be financially measured: \$1.4b in 2001 to \$5.7b in 2011 to \$29.8b in 2022. Taken as an objective measure of success it is undeniably impressive and has undoubtedly saved the lives of millions of people around the world. However, need has been increasing year on year and the 2022 gap of \$21.9b is more than the entire humanitarian need from as recently ago as 2016 (OCHA, 2022). The funding vs requirements trend analysis is reaching degrees of separation that are cause for significant concern. The corridors of aid are echoing with uncomfortable, emotional, defensive, and polarised discussions around how many layers of prioritisation we've reached when discussing resource allocation and whether the current system is fit for purpose. As nothing is too big to fail, it begs the question: "What's next?" (Slim, 2022).

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It is the search for an answer to this wicked problem that has led me to the analysis in this paper. The British political scientist Mary Kaldor's (2018) recent thinking suggests that the West's promotion of "Liberal Peace" has transitioned from being a latent passivist approach designed to create, enhance, and maintain global stability into an aggressive defensive strategy. She uses the Global War on Terror as the moment this agenda pivoted. Multilateral aid was initially a welcome recipient of the Liberal Peace agenda as it was the facilitatory backdrop behind the institutionalisation and professionalisation mentioned earlier. However, when the Wilsonian approach to humanitarian action was utilised by then Secretary of State Colin Powell as a "force multiplier" in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan (Powell, 2001), it thrust the foundational tensions that existed between the nominally American attitude of Wilsonian principles and the European Classical, or Dunantist approach into stark relief (Gordon & Donini, 2016). I would suggest that the utility of ODA by many members of the OECD to pursue a foreign policy agenda has become multilateral aid's 'elephant in the room', and one with which actors, especially INGOs with an ideological drive, are overdue a reckoning with if we are to sustain relevance and independence in the postmodern world. The rest of this paper is my exploration into this dilemma, first through a parent child analogy of the relationship between INGOs and their 'home' donors, followed by a discussion about the power tripod and the sovereignty dynamic.

## The parent child dynamic

The business model of multilateral aid inextricably links the majority of INGOs with the Western world through their dependency on OECD ODA for financial stability. I posit that this creates a relationship that corresponds to that of a parent and a child.

A primary parental responsibility is to protect and maintain the child's safety (British Government, n.d.). Throughout the last century, the legislative environment protecting freedoms within democratically ruled nations and the emergence of the rights-based agenda following the Age of Enlightenment has intersected with the secularisation of Christian charitable values. This allowed the European middle class to establish themselves as the primary constituent of overseas aid (Barnett & Stein, 2012). Over the decades this became part of the 'Third Sector' or 'non-profit' industry across the Western Hemisphere.

Western governments championed and upheld the emergence of the non-profit industry through the financial freedoms granted by market capitalism, direct government financial support and open political lobbying access for organisations headquartered in European or North American capitals, ensuring assimilated protection for NGOs and charities. This stood in contrast to the lack of any equivalent institutionalised and professionalised industries in authoritarian regimes. In the West, INGOs were able to occupy an international space through the freedoms and safety afforded them by the domestic environment where they were headquartered. In addition, the duty of care that Western governments have afforded to their citizen aid workers acted as a safety blanket by providing these humanitarians with an immediate exit strategy from trouble in parts of the world where humanitarian need is in the bow wave and/or wake of a crisis. I'm arguing that these acts and legal frameworks of both institutional and individual guardianship echo protective parental responsibilities over a child, therefore establishing a familial relationship between a Western Government (parent) and an INGO headquartered there (child).

Another primary parental responsibility is to provide a home to a child. The institutionalisation of the sector provided INGOs a natural, if not contentious, home within the UN's multilateral aid structures. Mark Duffield (2014) discusses how the various organs that comprise multilateral aid have formed an organic system of dependency. The architectures of multilateral aid referenced earlier as the facilitators of growth are attempts to wrangle this system of (semi)autonomous actors into a single mechanical structure. Whether your vision of aid is of a hierarchical mechanical structure or an organic system, there is a commonly agreed set of

actors who subscribe to multilateral aid set against those who do not—that is, ‘the insiders’ versus ‘the outsiders’. While recognising that there are some divergences in opinion over how multilateral aid manifests itself, there is nonetheless a sense of belonging and acceptance if you’re on the inside. Here I am describing multilateral aid as the equivalent to the INGO ‘home’.

INGOs have become comfortable and entrenched within a relational dynamic between themselves and their ‘home’ government and, likely inadvertently, formed this parent child relationship. As the same governments have also been the primary sponsors of multilateralism, the UN has become a natural home for INGOs through their financial dependency on ODA contributions, leading to an alignment to the globally aggregated UN system. While multilateral aid has done well, these roots remain dominated by Western political influence, dictating a Global North orientation to aid.

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## The power tripod

The above section speaks to the link between two of the three entities I want to use in my power analysis—the UN and their primary supporters, and the INGOs. This section introduces a third actor and maps out the dynamics within a tripod of multilateral aid protagonists. I want to frame the discussion around the French theorist Michel Foucault’s (1978) power triangle: Bio, Sovereign and Discipline Power. This is a philosophical, human-centred analysis of the intersect between social dynamics and institutional structures. However, Mitchell Dean (2010) has also used it to describe the different powers of the various functions of government. I will extend Dean’s application by using this power triangle to delineate between the primary influential constituents of multilateral aid. These are: 1) the authority in the theatres of operations (usually but not limited to the state, including their control over the military), 2) NGOs as delivery agents of humanitarian assistance, including a discussion around the disruptive effect of local and national actors as it pertains to the International NGO dominance, and 3) the UN as a manifestation of the Western global order and the mechanism the main protagonists of multilateralism use to channel aid budgets.

## Sovereign power

Sovereign power is defined as the rule of law over a given territory and exercised by the highest governing body or individual within its jurisdiction. It can be characterised as hierarchical, and rules based. Subsequently, authoritarian governments tend to manifest this power dynamic most acutely (ibid) and are probably the most illustrative example, however the premise is exercised regularly across the spectrum of governance models. Sovereign power was a cornerstone of the Liberal Peace agenda throughout the second half of the 20th century due to the Westphalian influence on the establishment of the United Nations (Peters, 2015), primarily captured in the founding charter as the “principle of [...] sovereign equality of all its members” (United Nations, 1945), closely followed by the balancing statement that “all members shall refrain [...] from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state” (ibid). In this discussion, the Head of State and the State apparatus within whose territory the humanitarian needs exist would be exercising sovereign power through the rights extended to them through the United Nations Charter and the Westphalian legacy (Peters, 2015).

## Discipline Power

Discipline Power is not an entitlement nor is it provided—it is claimed or assumed through the normalisation of practice. As such, it is also not necessarily considered a ‘legitimate’ power (Dean, 2010). In this instance we are assigning INGOs with discipline power, as their role within the multilateral system has evolved organically through the institutionalisation of aid.

The origins of INGOs’ discipline power can be linked chronologically to the secular explosion of INGOs in the 1980s (Barnett & Stein, 2012) and conceptually to the ‘gaze’ theory which academic Hikaru Yamashita (2004) uses to describe how a humanitarian’s perspective is shaped by their values, background and biases. This forms the vantage point by which they view the world, their ‘gaze’. It is the gaze of founders and “Messiah leaders” (Western, 2019) that define the notions by which a system, like multilateral aid, creates the policy and processes that evolve into rules and standards. If you’re a subscriber to these approaches, as INGOs are, you exercise discipline power. This power is exerted, re-enforced, and normalised through the perpetuation of an inside / outside model. Those who subscribe to the practices and systems are insiders and those who challenge, resist, or provide alternatives are outsiders and usually treated with hostility.

The ‘seizure’ of discipline power by INGOs within multilateral aid occurred within a vacuum of sovereign power in pivotal contexts during the institutionalisation

of aid. As mentioned above, Somalia and Rwanda in the 1990s are examples of these pivotal contexts, as they had vacuums of sovereign power at the time. INGOs, perhaps sensing they were on the cusp of the golden era of aid and buoyed by the legitimacy of institutionalisation and unified coordination, set about establishing, with OCHA, the processes and policies that would shape the next three decades of aid (Sandvik, 2017), and, as discussed in the previous section, inadvertently established their 'home' within the UN.

INGOs then assumed a position of power through the repetition of action in crisis after crisis (Rieff, 2002). They developed organisational infrastructures that perpetuated an insider's club of INGOs working to facilitate ODA funding, thus ensuring financial security (and dependency) and adopting an understanding of *espace humanitaire* (humanitarian space) as "a space of freedom in which we are free to evaluate needs, free to monitor the distribution and use of relief goods, and free to have a dialogue with the people" (Brauman, 1995). The freedom ideals captured in this definition have been colloquially adopted within INGO cultures, and I would argue have entrenched a sense of entitlement to access by international actors. However, international humanitarian law doesn't provide international actors with a right to access—it attempts to ensure populations have access to assistance, a subtle yet important distinction.

While the institutionalisation period in the 1990s recognised a risk of preventing local engagement from the outset, the humanitarian imperative to save lives prevailed (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). The later evolution from pure life-saving operational delivery in the immediate aftermath of crisis into the broader spectrum referenced above provided an opportunity to engage more local actors. Instead, INGOs engaged in what some considered "mission creep" (Anonymous, 2017) and seized the opportunity to become 'dual mandate'—becoming the primary delivery agency for all forms of aid and development. The well-established power dynamics of the insider / outsider club through the familial parent child relationship that was forged between the 'home' donor ODA, the UN architecture and the INGOs left minimal room for 'outsiders' to join.

In critically reflecting on this history, it is important to note that it is unlikely that any malicious conspiracy existed within the 'Messiah Leaders' of INGOs to purposefully dominate and consciously establish discipline power, and many would defend their actions as being in the pursuit of solidarity. And so, the question to ask as we attempt to redress and course correct is—through which gaze are we searching for a solution? What biases exist within discipline power decision makers and how willing are we to counter them?

## Biopower

The UN's humanitarian agencies, funds and programs benefit and harness discipline power to uphold influence and boost their stature within the UN system. Crucially though, they are not reliant on this dynamic in the way that INGOs are because of the nominal power they assume from the UN's appointment as the world's arbiter. The member states (largely influenced by the Western powers), positioned the UN in this manner but stopped short of providing actual authority over sovereignty. Therefore, the UN is exerting biopower by default. Biopower, in both Dean's (2010) image and Foucault's original analysis, is the responsibility for coordinating, monitoring, and facilitating a whole population's wellbeing. Biopower has natural affiliation to sovereign power, and as Dean (ibid) describes, can form a fundamental part of a sovereign power's governance strategy. However, the absence of a strict hierarchical authority suggests that biopower exists within eco-systemic webs and networks of actors (ibid), as opposed to a command-and-control mechanism that would be associated with sovereign power. Interestingly here, the top-down nature of power within sovereign and discipline structures suggests that subjects of that power holder are devoid of choice, while the networked and systemic requirements of biopower requires the subjects to be elective subscribers and significantly limits the influence of biopower over nonsubscribers.

An example of how biopower manifests itself, and the relational tension it is trapped in with sovereign power, can be seen in the role of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in mediating conflicts. The majority of the Security Council members are seated at the table with a biopower authority, except for the five permanent members who hold a sovereign power that extends beyond their territorial domains. The resultant tensions and inequalities established by this convergence of power dynamics within the Council are a demonstration of the required, yet subservient relationship biopower has with sovereign power.

## The unstable power tripod

The affiliation of sovereign and biopower, combined with the questionable legitimacy of discipline power, poses some risks for INGOs. Foucault (1982) is clear that biopower needs sovereign power, and similarly, strong sovereign power has a biopower flavour to it to negate repressive authoritarianism. OCHA, as an entity within the UN integrated missions and the nominated coordinator of multilateral aid under the direct leadership of the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, carries biopower status and is mandated through its founding resolution to uphold the sovereign power entities of the state as the primary duty bearer where there is a humanitarian need (United Nations General Assembly, 1991).

Concurrently, the discipline power of INGOs is being challenged through the localisation agenda and the strength of local civil society. The parental responsibilities that OECD nations have assumed over 'their' respective INGOs does not come with sufficient protections or obligations to uphold. Consequentially, as the West grapples with a pivot to global power plurality, we could be observing some emergent patterns that suggest sovereign and biopower relationships will trump INGOs' inherently illegitimate discipline power and lead towards the disruption of the parent child dynamic.

This analysis is an introspective reflection on INGOs and the relational power dynamic risks we currently face. I am arguing that the latent parental protections we've enjoyed from the UN and Western governments will not survive 'as is' under the political pressures of late modernity. We can see evidence of this in the recent financial allocations to the Horn of Africa. The United States' Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance allocated more than 50% of the 2022 Ukraine supplemental allocation to their annual budget into the United Nations system due to the sovereign / biopower relational dynamics that demanded the UN be the primary recipient because of established structural efficiencies (Anonymous source, personal communication, October 2022). The same is likely to be true for a recent top-up the EU's Humanitarian Department (ECHO) received (Slim, 2022), which also went into the UN system in its entirety (Anonymous source, personal communication, October 2022). From personal experience in the Horn of Africa response, I can state that INGOs are sensing our own vulnerability and are expressing frustration about being side-lined.

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*It's time for INGO's to 'fly the nest' and control our own destiny through a re-imagining of who we are and what our offering to a postmodern world can be.*

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The purpose of this analysis is not to be a crying child asking their parents not to cut off their allowance but is an attempt to challenge ourselves as INGOs to focus on change that is within our control. It's time for INGO's to 'fly the nest' and control our own destiny through a re-imagining of who we are and what our offering to a postmodern world can be.

## Consolidated Humanitarianism

Rather than stumbling clumsily into postmodernity, now is the moment to recognise the end of Liberal Humanitarianism. Just as previous eras have ended and

begun, so this age will end and a new one will emerge. My provocation here is for INGOs to embrace an alternate future landscape.

I would like to make an offering as to what this could look like. I'm predicting the next era will be an age of Consolidated Humanitarianism—an era that would endeavour to recognise diverse and eco-systemic manifestations of humanitarianism. Transitioning into this space will be a fraught and uncertain journey, but one that I hope to provide an explanation of, and a pathway for, below.

Due to the political nature of the entities that currently occupy sovereign and biopower spaces, it seems appropriate to use the political science model 'Consolidology' to be the namesake for, and to potentially chart a voyage into, Consolidated Humanitarianism.

Consolidology is a modernisation of transitology, the linear process from autocratic regime to fully institutionalised democracy popularised in the 1970s by the German political scientist Dankwart Rustow. However, in recognition that the transitology process to a British Parliamentary or American Presidential democratic model is a rarity and not the path chosen by most, the concept fell out of favour within the political sciences. Rather than dismiss the notion of modelling the journey to democracy, Philippe Schmitter (2017), a consolidologist, embraced the notion that the democratic journey had matured into a vast array of individual approaches and set about objectively assessing these process and measuring the resulting democratic achievements against their own merits, rather than a single goal. In doing so, he outlined a collection of democratic models, each with their own virtues and challenges related to their spatial and periodised requirements and capabilities, and in doing so established Consolidology.

Importantly for its utilisation here, one of the key elements of consolidology is an acknowledgment that embarking on an individual journey towards democracy is profoundly uncertain from the outset (Ould Mohamedou & Sisk, 2017), especially if one is attempting to objectively measure that journey with a clear goal. Schmitter identified the necessity for "enabling conditions" to be present to trigger the start of the journey and provide a requisite degree of confidence in adopting a mentality of consolidology. Enabling conditions provide clarity, direction and ultimately certainty that changing course, or embarking on a new one, is the responsible action. In Schmitter's research it was the contextualised journey towards democracy, but for humanitarian discipline and biopower holders it is the recognition that multilateral aid doesn't 'own' the term humanitarianism and that in any given context the eco-system of humanitarian

actors will be unique, transient, and ultimately beholden to sovereign power's, not multilateralism's, gaze.

While I would hope that the biopower of the UN will reform, this paper is concluding with a suggestion to INGO leaders holding discipline power to embrace Consolidated Humanitarianism. This journey starts with an acceptance that the UN will prioritise their own biopower status and dependency on sovereign power over a perpetuation of discipline power and that Western governments will prioritise multilateral biopower over their parental responsibilities to INGOs. My recommendation therefore is to find a new home outside, but connected to, multilateral aid. One that doesn't require large operational presence, and subsequent heavy architectures, but is a nimble set of diverse experts that can provide a bespoke offer to the localised and unique humanitarian eco-system. Hugo Slim (2022) has suggested that "A new generation of international humanitarians should learn to become, and see themselves, as subtle spiders weaving a web of humanitarian networks, instead of heroic leaders commanding operations directly from on high"—and I couldn't agree more.

## Enabling conditions for Consolidated Humanitarianism

As Schmitter identified, enabling conditions are key for considering a consolidological approach to humanitarianism. Here are three suggestions for current enabling conditions that could be explored further by INGOs hoping to pursue a progressive and proactive approach to future relevance.

### Legacy

INGOs have a long history of disruption and are often characterised as disruptors. While the recent report *The Long Humanitarian Century* (Baiden & Book, 2022) highlights a current sense of "stuckness", the legacy of bold, risk taking organisational cultures is not too distant a memory (Fiori, Espada, Rigon, Taithe, & Zakaria, 2021). I concede that there are very real considerations to be taken into account vis a vis fiscal fragility, donor compliance, and a more robust requirement for safeguarding processes, however I still see the ideological drive and moral compass of leaders across INGO circles. If these leaders within the INGO world can recognise the liabilities of the parent child dynamic and the vulnerability of the power tripod, then building off the courageous leaders of the past could provide an opportunity for first mover advantage.

### Globalised networks

As international actors, INGOs enjoy the privilege of being part of globalised networks that have been established over time. While it is a fine line between harnessing these networks and abusing the access and knowledge they offer, they nevertheless provide a phenomenal way to facilitate flows of information, best practice and skill sharing. In an increasingly networked and technologically interconnected society, these global networks are an influential enabling condition.

I would encourage us to cast aside the mechanical thinking that originated from the factories of industrialisation that underpin many of our top-down command-and-control decision making structures. This would provide an opportunity to embrace an eco-systemic leadership approach. Progressive thinker Simon Western (2019) describes eco-systemic leaders as "unleashing the trapped talent of their employees that is traditionally suppressed by hierarchical structures and power dynamics... They achieve this by creating internal networks, distributing leadership widely throughout the organisation by reducing top-down control and maximising participation in decision making". Most INGOs are already networked, and as mentioned earlier, Duffield's (2014) modelling of multilateral aid suggests an organic system exists already, we've simply been fighting to mechanise it for decades. The opportunity to reimagine ourselves as a collection of interdependent parts making a whole as opposed to a single hierarchy is the zeitgeist leadership discourse of our time and INGOs have the chance to embrace this now (Western, 2019).

### Global South staffing dominance

The recent ALNAP *State of the Humanitarian System* suggests that more than 92% of INGO in-country staff are national. This is a phenomenally rich data set of perspectives to inform and populate the distributed leadership prescribed by an eco-systemic approach. Greater empowerment of this talent pool could have a catalytic effect on the re-imagining of INGO relevance in the sector. Just as the current situation and INGO discipline power was established through the repetition of Eurocentric gazes, the repetition of diverse gazes would reimagine INGO identities to be fit for purpose in the postmodern world.

## Conclusion

The current period of late modernity is signalling the end of the Age of Liberal Humanitarianism, and the end of the environment that enabled INGOs and Western donor governments to establish a relational dynamic akin to that of a parent and child. The same governments prioritised multilateralism and used the United

Nations architecture as the coordinating authority for humanitarianism, thereby providing a 'home' for INGOs.

While the parent child relationship has strong historical connections, when considered against the power tripod of UN's appointed biopower, the state's entitled sovereign power and the INGOs' assumed discipline power, the familial relationship becomes strained. Biopower's dependency on sovereign power equates to the UN prioritising its relationship with states over that of INGOs. I am characterising this as the moment in human development when the child leaves home and is no longer dependent on the parent.

To help provide a pathway to this point and avoid separation anxiety for INGOs, I am positing an era of Consolidated Humanitarianism in which INGOs are uniquely placed to obtain first mover advantage and reimagine their role in the sector as eco-systemic actors that practice distributed leadership, harness the

convening power of existing networks and empower the current talent pool.

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The boldness of past INGO leaders could be the inspirational legacy current leaders need to take a step into the unknown. If we do not take this step, if we refuse to admit that we are not too big to fail, then one day soon we'll be propping each other up on the beach, adrift, and lost, just as the Dutch East India Trading Company sailors were in the 18th century.

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