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# Humanitarian Leader

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**Rethinking aid system narratives:  
The case for collaborative leadership**

**NIGEL TIMMINS AND JOSHUA HALLWRIGHT**



# THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

## Rethinking aid system narratives: The case for collaborative leadership

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# Abstract

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

## Leadership relevance

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

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



## The system we have is not effective enough

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

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

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

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

- a) Reductionist problem solving approaches and path dependency have led to the establishment of discrete areas of study and work which then develop and accrue their own language, reinforcing the boundaries between the different areas of work.
- b) Institutions—or teams or departments within institutions—and funding mechanisms evolve to support these different areas of work.

- c) Leaders are incentivised to be successful within institutional and financial terms and so perpetuate the narratives and ways of working that keep the system as it is—even while espousing the need for change.
- d) The normal ‘brakes’ on any system of accountability are oddly skewed in the aid sector because it is generally not the recipient of the services who is paying for them.

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

## Disasters are normal

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

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

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

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

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

### Siloing is not the solution

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

From the point of view of policymakers, such institutional and funding instrument creation is necessary, as they need to make choices about resource allocation across different priorities, have fit-for-purpose processes, clarity of governance and the ability to measure progress. In some cases, funds or institutions have distinct legal protections. For example, in order for humanitarian funds to be used quickly and in line with humanitarian principles, independent of politics and according to need, humanitarian financing often has a separate legal foundation to protect that independence from broader

development funding. However, these legal separations make joined-up work harder. Discussions around the humanitarian-development-peace nexus are seeking to conquer such a siloed approach, but the incentives to demonstrate specific impacts with specific funds make overcoming such silos difficult. As Andrew Natsios states, “those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable” (Natsios, 2010, p3).

### Evolving niches and defining value

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

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

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

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

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

The agents in the aid and development systems are people, and every person has their own personal vision and career goals. Yet staff and policy makers working in international organisations also operate within a political and socio-technical context, their behaviour both influencing and influenced by the institutions, policy debates and financial instruments within which they work—creating an agent-structure co-evolutionary process.

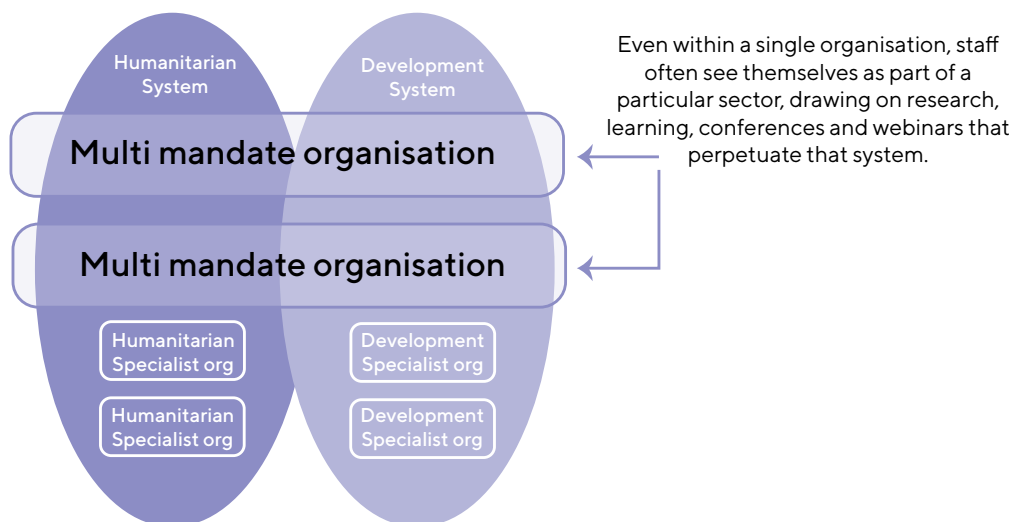
For example, an officer within a government donor agency with responsibility for funding and maintaining the partnership with a specific multilateral institution will navigate incentives, rewards and blockers with the donor to compete for allocations to their partner; they will also interact directly with staff of the agency they fund seeking to improve performance to help them make the necessary internal justifications to the donor as to why ‘their’ partner should have a funding uplift or preservation. The multilateral staff member will also be navigating the internal complexity of their organisation and likely coordinating with and attempting to satisfy multiple external donors. All the agents are both constrained by the system as well as pushing for change based on their ideas of what success would look like.

The authors' experience is that the legal frameworks, institutions and people within the development and humanitarian systems interpret the world differently, measure success differently and perpetuate their own system because they are incentivised so to do. The incentives between individual and institution

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

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

Figure 1: Perpetuating organisational silos



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

### **A lack of accountability**

Issues of political economy are not unique to the humanitarian sector. But what is perhaps different is that the recipients of the services—the affected and at-risk

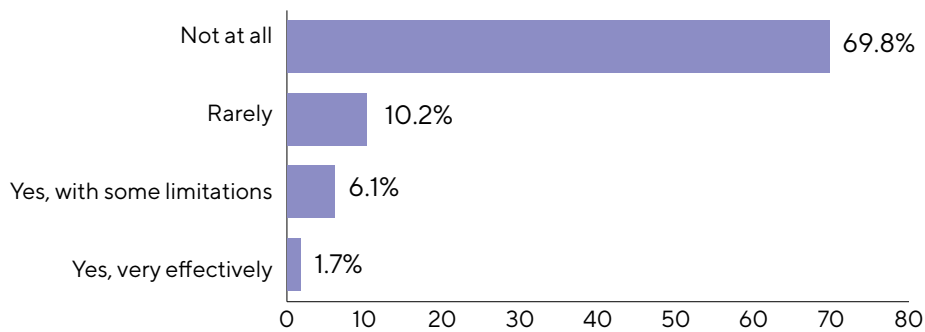
communities—are often not seen as the primary clients, rather, those who pay for the services are. Normal service transactions see a client commission a service or buy a product and then pay for it. If they are not happy, they have control over the resources to exert their influence. But in the humanitarian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

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

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



**Figure 2: Responses to the question – “Are displaced persons sufficiently consulted in the design of policies, plans and activities to reduce disasters?”**



Source: Making Displacement Safer, 2022, GNDR.

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

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

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

## Recommendations

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

### Redefine our understanding of disasters

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

- **Hazards and vulnerabilities exist in every development paradigm:** high-, middle- and low-income countries and fragile states. These need to be considered in the mainstream of development strategies and planning as they impact all policy areas from health to educational outcomes and economic performance.
- The emphasis of any disaster response system, whether national to local, or international to national, needs to be on **supporting those impacted by the crisis to be the primary agents of their recovery.** Externally imposed solutions are rarely sustainable and fail to adequately build capacity to manage future crises.

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

### Change the political incentives

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

- **Educate media houses on the predictability of 'natural' disasters** and encourage them to report in a way that reflects the failure to plan and invest, rather than celebrating responses.
- **Support a better understanding of the links between environment, development, governance and crises within educational systems.** Engage in civic education and public awareness, working with trusted interlocutors.
- International and national NGOs' **fundraising campaigns should avoid perpetuating an 'exceptionalist' and charity-based approach to crises.** Rather, the opportunity should be used to create supporter awareness and greater space for funds raised during emergency appeals to be used for future risk reduction and preparedness.
- Donors (including philanthropists, trusts and NGOs in grants making), boards and philanthropists need

to be more robust in requiring grantees to **report on their accountability** to project participants.

- Greater investment is needed in third party organisations to **undertake independent accountability exercises**, to meet with communities and understand their perspectives, to have a more holistic view of the situation and the impact of interventions.
- Greater investment is needed in agencies and local government to **educate communities on their rights and legal protections**, including relevant disaster management legislation or international humanitarian law, as appropriate, to equip them with the ability to demand their rights.

### Establish common outcomes to achieve the sustainable development goals

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

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

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

### Support leaders who collaborate

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

1. Motivated and strategic leaders with the incentives, values, interests and opportunity to push for change.
2. Leaders able to overcome barriers to cooperation and form coalitions with sufficient power, legitimacy and influence.

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

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

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

- The relationships between people, organisations, and systems—to better understand which connections need nurturing, promoting, and renewing.
- The value of boundary spanning, of working across organisations and sectors to find commonalities, opportunities, and additional connections to create “systems of interests”.
- That “leadership is a condition of an organisation not an individual” (Pangaro, 2002).

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

## Conclusion

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

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