Where is the leadership? Where is the imagination? Confronting a humanitarian system in crisis and resistant to change
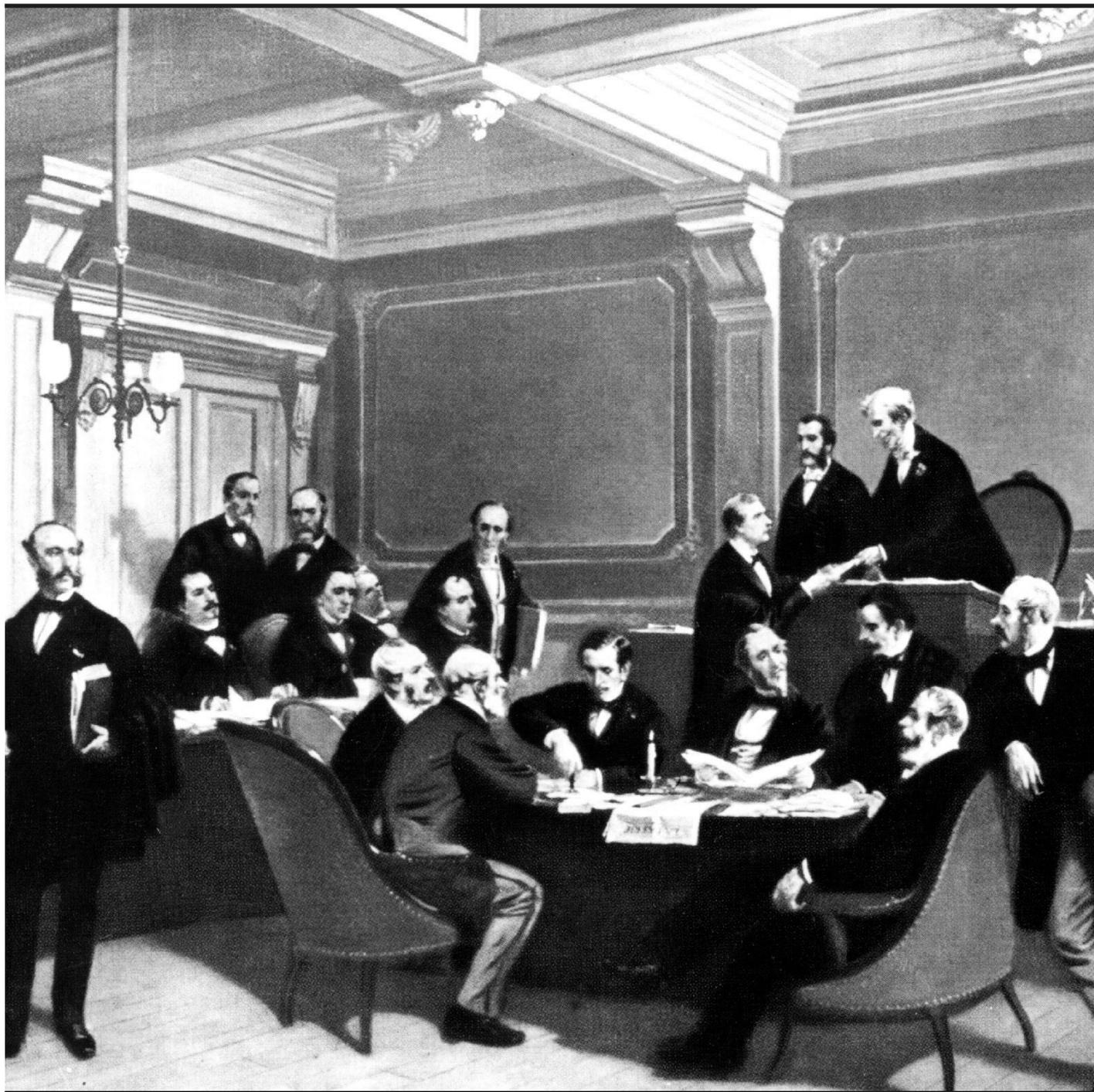
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THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:
Where is the leadership? Where is the imagination? Confronting a humanitarian system in crisis and resistant to change

Author Details

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Dr Balwant Singh has more than 30 years' experience in leading philanthropic, development and humanitarian organisations and has worked and lived in more than 25 countries. He advises, facilitates and mentors on leadership, governance, strategy, international development, humanitarian programs, philanthropy, grant-making, diversity and the power of local communities to lead and sustain impact. Originally trained as a physician, he holds an MBA with top honours and a postgraduate diploma in health services management. Balwant was Executive Director of Sphere until September 2022 and CEO of Kusuma Trust UK, a philanthropic foundation, for eight years. Earlier roles include Global Director of Innovations for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Regional Director for Asia with Save the Children and Executive Director of Doctors of the World in New York. He serves as Board trustee at Oxfam Great Britain, Advisory Board member at Dialogue Action and Executive Committee member at the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership at Deakin University.

Cover image: A painting of the signing of the first Geneva Convention, on 22 August 1864, which cemented the humanitarian principle of 'neutrality'. Charles Édouard Armand-Dumaresq

Abstract

The humanitarian 'system', however defined, has evolved considerably over the last decade. It has become more professional, standards are better understood and applied, there is greater professionalisation of the sector and humanitarians are better qualified and knowledgeable. The 'system' has also become very complex. There are more disasters, and they are more intricate and intractable. New initiatives appear to be set up almost every year to address these challenges, yet failures are often mentioned in passing rather than properly and honestly acknowledged. The sector makes agreements and promises to ensure more funding gets to communities affected by disasters, yet these promises are woefully unmet.

In 2019, Matthew Clarke and Brett Parris proposed new humanitarian principles to tackle the increasing scale, intensity, complexity and intractability of humanitarian crises—equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity. However, given the circumstances outlined above, perhaps it is prudent to question not the principles but their application. In this paper, I reflect on these principles five years' later and contend that they will only complement the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence if they help adjust the humanitarian architecture to be more inclusive and hold itself truly accountable. Rhetoric is no longer enough and requires action within the sector to address its structure, governance, inclusivity and diversity. It requires leadership, imagination and courage.

Leadership relevance

This paper challenges humanitarian leaders and governing bodies to reflect on what stops them from translating humanitarian principles and their own widely publicised demands for greater accountability and increased power and funding for communities affected by humanitarian crises—whether it's called localisation, decolonisation or some other term—into real paradigm shifts and radical changes in their own institutions, organisations and networks. Where is the leadership courage to revamp the humanitarian architecture instead of merely claiming that it is not fit for purpose? Neither the original humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, nor Brett Parris and Matthew Clarke's proposed principles of equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity are irrelevant, but their application in bringing about the radical change required can be questioned.

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Introduction

The humanitarian environment has changed significantly over the last three decades and continues to change—because of dramatic increases in displaced people and conflicts and the significant social, economic, political and environmental consequences of climate change. These, among other factors, continue to change the nature and increase the complexity of humanitarian crises. This paper considers the question of whether the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence are still fit for purpose, whether Matthew Clarke and Brett Parris' proposed principles of equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity are more suitable alternatives, and if the principles are themselves the issue, or whether it is their application in a humanitarian architecture that is deeply flawed and rife with issues of accountability and undistributed power that is problematic.

Humanitarian architecture ... is deeply flawed and rife with issues of accountability and undistributed power

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Original principles

In the very first *Humanitarian Leader* article in 2019, Matthew Clarke and Brett Parris asked valid and informed questions about whether the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence are still fit for purpose, given the increasing scale, intensity, complexity and intractability of natural and human-induced humanitarian crises. Despite inherent challenges, Clarke and Parris believe the general adherence to these principles gives some assurance of their value and resonance within the humanitarian sector. They also suggest that new principles of equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity may be more suitable alternatives for a changing world.

Let's look at the original principles:

Humanity

Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings (OCHA, 2012, p. 1)

Neutrality

Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature (OCHA, 2012, p. 1).

Impartiality

Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions (OCHA, 2012, p. 1).

Independence

Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented (OCHA, 2012, p. 1).

There are challenges in fully adhering to all the principles in their strictest definitions, given the number, scale, complexity, political underpinnings and polarity of most humanitarian crises and some of the settings where these crises unfold. However, as principles to guide humanitarian action they remain relevant and important.

New principles

Clarke and Parris suggested that new principles of equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity may be suitable alternatives to the original principles.

Equity

The authors posit equity as multidimensional. The term can refer to equity in opportunity, equity in outcomes, equity across genders, regions or socio-economic classes, intergenerational equity, or even equity that affects vulnerability and resilience to disasters, for example education, health, employment, and geographic location. It is multidimensional and dynamic.

Solidarity

This principle refers to the obligation we have to collectively address the needs of others in humanitarian settings. The principle of solidarity is about removing judgement about circumstances and focusing on needs. While some may argue that this can be problematic, as it requires us to act without holding those who transgress the rights of others to account—for example in a conflict—another view is that you can do both: act in solidarity and also hold people accountable for their transgressions. They don't need to be mutually exclusive.

Compassion

Compassion is part of humanity. It compels one to act, as we understand the pain and suffering of others. It is linked to solidarity and yet a very individual response. I agree with Clarke and Parris that without compassion, the humanitarian response is weakened. Compassion cuts across various dimensions of gender, socioeconomic status, education, qualifications, race, professions, faith, politics and more. It complements the professionalisation of the humanitarian sector and the standards that now exist to respond effectively to disasters.

Diversity

This refers to the many differences across and between people and communities—including gender, sexuality, physical abilities, mental health, age, nationality, language, ethnicity, religion, employment and other differences. Considering diversity supports how we respond in different situations. It helps us understand the differences that exist so that our actions take account of these differences and contexts. It requires nuanced approaches to responding to humanitarian events which are best understood by people experiencing them.

These new principles are complementary to the original ones, adding a richer dimension and reflecting a better understanding of how humanitarian responses can be better guided in different contexts. The original humanitarian principles provide operational guidance. They are not meant to be value statements or virtue-signalling but rather practical means to ensure that everyone in need of life-saving assistance receives it. There is no question of abandoning the original principles, which remain as relevant as ever.

The changing humanitarian context

However you define it, the humanitarian 'system' has evolved considerably over the last few decades. It has become more professional, standards are better understood and applied, and humanitarians are better qualified and knowledgeable. The 'system' has also become very complex. New initiatives appear to be set up almost every year to address the same challenges. The language changes around the actions that are required to effectively respond to humanitarian challenges, but it is questionable if the actions are adapted to be more effective. Failures are often mentioned in passing rather than properly and honestly acknowledged. The sector makes agreements and promises to ensure more funding gets to communities affected by disasters, yet these promises are woefully unmet. Often, it is not seriously acknowledged why these promises have failed. Many of the same humanitarians move from one initiative to another and take the same actions, and perhaps even repeat the same unacknowledged mistakes. It all raises serious questions about power, accountability and the humanitarian architecture.

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Some also feel there is a growing threat from the corporatisation of the search for solutions to global problems, including humanitarian crises. Anand

Giridharadas (2019) offers an insightful critique of the global elite's role as providers of the solutions to the problems which they themselves have created. With states increasingly shifting responsibility to wealthy elites and philanthropists, it appears that market solutions are preferred, and that governments and regulators are incompetent. Many public goods such as humanitarian assistance are now being delivered through private markets, and increasingly viewed as a market responsibility. This raises worrying questions about power and privilege and the role of governments, global institutions, UN agencies and citizen democracy in this context.

Given these circumstances, perhaps it is prudent to question not the humanitarian principles but rather their application. The principles remain valid, but more important are the questions of whether and how the humanitarian architecture, power and accountability are fit for purpose.

Humanitarian architecture

This paper does not question the huge amount of invaluable work and funding mobilised to respond to an ever-increasing number, scale and complexity of humanitarian crises by a vast humanitarian architecture that includes the UN, governments, NGOs and others. It does not question the dedication and commitment of humanitarians and humanitarian organisations and networks trying to make a difference where they respond. It questions whether these well-intentioned efforts are underpinned by the real and radical changes that are required to place the power in the hands of those most affected. It questions whether calls for action and demands for change from these very same humanitarians and humanitarian organisations and networks are matched with changes they themselves need to make.

But in order to begin answering these questions, it is important to take a closer look at the framework that supports this system.

The UN

In 1991, the UN General Assembly established the role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator[1] (ERC), as well as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Consolidated Appeals Process and the Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF). These were envisioned as key coordination mechanisms and tools of the ERC. In addition to these mechanisms, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), works to bring the world together to tackle humanitarian emergencies and save the lives of people caught in crises[2].

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[1] A global champion for people affected by emergencies.
[2] Similarly, OCHA's Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG) supports the strengthening of country-level cluster and inter-cluster coordination with the aim of improving the quality of humanitarian response.

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OCHA and its various structures undoubtedly undertake significant work each year to respond to the many humanitarian crises and do make a difference. But there are many questions around whether this organisation is still fit for purpose, the transparency of the process around appointing the ERC, and the inclusivity of OCHA of communities and local citizens who are affected by humanitarian crises. In its *Annual Report* (2023), OCHA details considerable achievements and progress against targets. But while many targets have been achieved and celebrated, little is known about why some targets have not been reached, or any mistakes, any learning or reflection, or any action on these latter results. The report does not have a section about what failed and what would be different as a result.

According to the report, the OHCA contributed US$668 million to the Central Emergency Response Fund and US$1.11 billion to the Country-Based Pooled Funds, and assisted 62% of the more than 128 million people it aimed to assist. This is impressive. But only 45% of its humanitarian coordinators were from non-Western and European countries. OHCA reports that 24% (US$76.1m) of its extrabudgetary budget was spent on its headquarters and 76% in the field, and that 33% (US$49.9m) of unearmarked funds were spent on its headquarters. Is this balance of funding between field and headquarters the best that we can manage in the face of huge funding needs locally? The field funds that are reaching local communities, and how allocation decisions are made and by whom is unclear.

The IASC's full members are from various UN agencies, and it has standing invitees from some large INGOs, however there are no local groups or Global South organisations in the IASC. It is undoubtedly a top-down architecture contrasted with the rhetoric of bottom-up decision-making and accountability to affected communities, rhetoric which is evident throughout the IASC website.

The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response[3] (SCHR) is a voluntary alliance of nine of the world's leading humanitarian organisations, which come together to support quality, accountability and learning in humanitarian action. It is also a standing invitee of the IASC. As leading international humanitarian organisations, they claim to put disaster-affected people at the centre of their responses. Yet there are no Global South members in the SCHR, and no local voices of those directly affected by crises. The nine organisations have grown in size and financial resources since the commitments to local action they made in the Grand Bargain of 2016. Have they adequately shifted power and resources to affected communities?

The Grand Bargain was launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016 as a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations. They committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. Initially conceived as a deal between the five biggest donors and the six largest UN Agencies, the Grand Bargain now includes 67 Signatories (25 Member States, 26 NGOs, 12 UN agencies, two Red Cross/Red Crescent movements, and two inter-governmental organisations). The number of signatories is encouraging but still has limited representation of voices from the Global South, in the form of two networks predominantly made of organisations from Global South countries.

An independent review of The Grand Bargain by Metcalfe-Hough et al in 2022[4] showed some progress but also huge gaps. Despite the progress, there was little analysis to understand the gaps and problems. The review stated that the potential of the Grand Bargain to address political barriers to change is still to be realised. There has been no concrete progress towards a more demand-led rather than supply-driven humanitarian response; there is an ongoing failure to substantively increase funding to local and national actors; and quality funding is still insufficient to enable the desired step-change in efficiencies and effectiveness. The signatories will need to further refine their focus and approach if this mechanism is to help them realise the transformation of the international humanitarian system originally envisaged in the Grand Bargain.

The potential of the Grand Bargain to address political barriers to change is still to be realised.

The Grand Bargain is now in its second iteration as The Grand Bargain 2.0. Many of the new core commitments in The Grand Bargain 2.0 have no targets or deadlines. How will they be held accountable and by whom? It begs the question: should The Grand Bargain have been continued or should there have been recognition that it has failed and disbanded.

There are many other examples of initiatives that have been set up to address the challenges of the current humanitarian system. They are often set up to shift power to local actors, shift more funds locally, support local actors to make locally appropriate decisions and to challenge donors and funding flows. Objectives are often well intentioned but not specific, measurable or time-bound, and therefore, largely unaccountable. They are meant to be collective mechanisms to promote a more democratic humanitarian system. Often, they end up

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[3] SCHR aspires to, and actively promotes, a world in which local communities, civil society, governments and regional institutions can respond effectively to humanitarian emergencies, based on the universally accepted humanitarian principles described earlier.

[4] It was based mostly on self-reports by signatories and also drew on the findings of a survey of local actors by the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) and data from field perception surveys conducted by Ground Truth Solutions (GTS), as well as publicly available literature.

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[New initiatives] are meant to be collective mechanisms to promote a more democratic humanitarian system. Often, they end up as a closed and elite group of the larger actors, be they donors, INGOs or others who claim to be humanitarian experts, excluding the voices of local actors or distancing their voices many-fold.

Some initiatives end up being reinvented and are reinstated in different guises, often with the same people leading them. New champions are identified, and it is often unclear how they have been appointed or what radical difference they seek to achieve. Different language is often used to describe similar initiatives from the past which have not achieved their goals, and the new terminology takes on a life of its own—be this 'localisation', 'decolonisation' or 'locally-led responses'. Mistakes and failings are not openly and clearly acknowledged, but these are powerful elements of real learning and change. Accountability is mentioned but not adequately addressed. It means that recommendations are often made but clear lessons are not articulated, or implemented.

Let's take a look at the annual gathering organised by OCHA in Geneva for thousands of humanitarian actors at the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW). Hundreds of sessions are organised by a huge number of humanitarian networks and partnerships, and a vast majority of participants are from INGOs. Of course, lots of invaluable and stimulating discussions take place but it is never clear what the outcomes are or what difference these gatherings make to the state of the humanitarian world. Why not organise such gatherings at or near major crises-affected areas instead of Geneva and bring minds together, especially local voices, to listen to what will make a difference locally and what these networks and partnerships can do to support local action to address these crises?

NGOs and networks

There are a growing number and complexity of networks and membership organisations in humanitarianism, many of which are predominantly based and led from the Global North. Some of these include Sphere, the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP), the CHS Alliance, H2H Network, the Start Fund and other membership organisations (including SCHR).

They face major challenges to their business models, yet there are few, if any, public conversations of what changes these networks will make and how. I don't question the huge amount of work they do and their value, but I question whether their structures are fit for purpose, how they are led and governed, their duplication, their costs and their rhetoric about localisation and decolonisation.

Let's look at the NGOs and NGO networks that operate in the humanitarian system.

Sphere's[5] standards have been invaluable in guiding humanitarian responses worldwide and are very widely used across the globe by humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors. Having led Sphere from 2019 to 2022, I have firsthand experience of its work, structure, strengths, weaknesses and opportunities.

While it supposedly serves the global humanitarian community, it is a paid membership organisation with around 50 members, which raises questions as to how inclusive it is of this community, and if the voices of the thousands of local organisations which use the standards are being heard. Equally, it is perplexing that paid membership is a prerequisite when humanitarian standards are supposedly a public good.

In 2019, I was brought in to develop and lead Sphere into a new strategic phase. I consulted internal and external stakeholders widely in the strategy development process. There were calls for localisation and the promotion of nationally and locally led processes to adapt Sphere standards. Questions were asked about the value of membership compared to embracing the broader community; whether the membership model and membership fees are relevant and viable; diversity was questioned; and there were calls to expand membership and make it truly global, reaching out to the Global South. Why think narrowly if Sphere truly wanted to be the go-to organisation for standards? Why not welcome new types of members—academia, National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMAs), civil-military agencies—and engage actively with non-humanitarian civil society actors in fragile settings?

Based on the findings of the consultations and my own experience of the sector, I questioned the legitimacy of Sphere being a paid membership organisation governed by a small group of mostly large INGOs while wishing to be of service to a global humanitarian community. I recommended abolishing membership fees, albeit in a phased manner, and opening up membership. I also recommended external representation on the Board. These recommendations were rejected. Sphere remains a paid membership organisation with around 50 member organisations and is still governed by its members without any external perspectives on the board. It made me question the courage in the sector to swiftly bring about real and radical change rather than tinkering at the edges.

Five years on from when I made my recommendations, I understand Sphere is now rethinking its paid membership model. Heba Aly (then CEO of The New Humanitarian) also concluded that the new strategy seemed to be building on the legacy of the past rather than opening up new strategic directions for Sphere.

Hosted by Sphere, the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP)[6] has nine other member networks, most of which are led from the Global North. The networking and coordination are to be commended, along with the quality they have brought to humanitarianism. There is a lot of value in the harmonisation of standards, de-bureaucratising the sector and removing barriers for local actors. However, there is duplication on many levels and questions of where the local voices are. I do not recommend a superstructure with its inherent bureaucracy, added costs and complexity. And I question the lack of imagination, vision and leadership courage to consider radical options to make a reality of shifting power from the Global North to locally led initiatives.

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Alliance[7] is a global alliance of humanitarian and development organisations committed to making aid work better for people. Like Sphere, the CHS Alliance is a paid membership organisation. While it has more members than Sphere, it still begs the question as to why paid membership is a requirement for what should be a public good.

The H2H Network[8] claims that the existing humanitarian system simply wasn't built to cope and that it envisages a new humanitarian system capable of meeting today's challenges, preparing for and developing resilience to those on the horizon. Their mission is to enable and catalyse change in the humanitarian system, driving efficiency, accountability and impact. They claim to support, strengthen and challenge major players and traditional ways of working. Yet they fund only their own members, most of which are the major players in the sector, rather than local actors.

This year marks a decade for Start Network's Start Fund[9]. They have many local member organisations and are shifting power, resources and decision making to locally led networks and organisations. But membership is still a requirement, and they are yet to articulate their vision for a different global humanitarian financing system.

The RINGO Project[10] is a globally coordinated cross-sectoral effort to revolutionise the sector by interrogating the purpose, structures, power, and positioning of INGOs. It is a systems change initiative that seeks to transform global civil society by convening a 'Social Lab' of global innovators who represent 'the system' of INGOs (including Global South partners, funders and INGO leaders). In its second phase, RINGO has also targeted the governing bodies of INGOs, launching some prototypes that could transform INGOs and the systems in which they function. We await what impact these may have in transforming INGOs' structures, their funding and accountability models, and what this means for local organisations.

Many large INGOs engaged in humanitarian responses have developed 'localisation' and 'decolonisation' policies and strategies to shift power, decision making and funding from the Global North to the Global South. It comes after years of reflection and realisation that the system is broken and isn't working, along with years of repeated calls from local communities and organisations to trust them, recognise their knowledge about the realities of their local contexts, and to let them make decisions about how they spend funds. This is very welcome indeed.

Why is there so little leadership, imagination and courage to implement paradigm shifts and radical change? Are the people who established these policies and strategies afraid of what real change could mean for them, their roles and their institutions?

But why has it taken so long to recognise this? Why is there still limited action to back these policies and strategies? Small incremental shifts make little difference and, on the contrary, reinforce the power imbalance. Why is there so little leadership, imagination and courage to implement paradigm shifts and radical change? Are the people who established these policies and strategies afraid of what real change could mean for them, their roles and their institutions? There is exhaustion about such rhetoric and declining trust that actions will follow such policies.

Governance and growth

At Sphere, the Board is dominated by large NGOs from the Global North. Member organisations elect its Board from members who then make decisions. It has also resisted attempts to bring in external voices, including those of citizens, private sector organisations and others

[6] The Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP) aims to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian action through the promotion of humanitarian standards. The HSP offers training, tools, and policy and practical guidance for a harmonised approach to working with standards.

[7] They believe that organisations deliver higher quality, more effective aid when they are accountable to the people they serve. Together, they claim to be a movement to strengthen accountability and to put people affected by crisis at the heart of what we do by applying the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).

[8] The H2H Network is a network of humanitarian organisations set up to provide support and services directly to humanitarians working on the ground. Its aim is to drive change across the humanitarian system, getting more to people in need, by coordinating and convening humanitarian-to-humanitarian support and services.

[9] Launched in 2014, the Start Fund has become a vital mechanism, empowering their 100 or so member organisations to deliver swift and anticipatory humanitarian action around the world. Its vision is for a locally led humanitarian system that is accountable to people affected by and at risk of crises.

[10] https://rightscolab.org/ringo/

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who are not humanitarian specialists but are affected by humanitarian crises.

The CHS Alliance has done a little better with two independent board members who are not required to be members. However, they are yet to draw on a wider range of citizens who are affected by humanitarian crises and have valid perspectives to offer.

It seems that humanitarians are fearful of external perspectives which would enrich their organisations, strengthen their work and hold them more accountable. There is so much rhetoric about diversity and transparency and so little convincing evidence of either.

Given the limited, slow and infinitesimal changes that many Global North institutions, their leaders and governing bodies have shown willingness to make thus far, is sometimes feels impossible to try to significantly change the existing system. Almost all the dominant, powerful Global North actors are so bound by the legal and financial regulatory frameworks of Global North countries where they are based and the large donors from whom they receive money, that it seems that change may be unattainable.

It is also not unusual for governing bodies to expect their leaders to grow their charities in size, funding and other resources instead of divesting to where they can truly make a difference. Yes, there are scattered examples of a few charity mergers in the past decades, but it is rare to see the voluntary closure of charities. On the contrary, new NGOs and initiatives spring up regularly.

Worley (2024) reviewed the staff cuts and financial turbulence at Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee reported by The New Humanitarian following years of aggressive growth by INGOs. The World Food Programme and the International Committee of the Red Cross are among other big agencies where substantial cuts have been made following a global humanitarian funding squeeze. Worley highlights that this has shone a light on the highly corporate, aggressive growth models followed by many INGOs, which are largely funded through government aid budgets. Donors appear to favour funding these larger agencies, thereby entrenching their domination instead of supporting and strengthening local civil society organisations. Why not use this crisis of funding as an opportunity for change instead? Doane (2024) similarly questions why the money isn't going to local organisations where it would make the biggest difference. The expansionism of many INGOs requires that they urgently take a close look at their role, their purpose, their size and how they can strengthen local actors, while playing a backroom role of advocacy and public awareness building for local actors. There needs to be incentivisation around solidarity and localisation.

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Superstructures, single platforms or complementarity

One issue that is regularly encountered—particularly in countries where disaster management systems are under development—is that there is competition over the 'best' global standards. There is confusion over the UN cluster system and the various standards of Sphere and the HSP. I do not advocate creating any more superstructures which absorb huge funds and time. I advocate for removal of duplication and better complementarity of existing systems in the promotion of global standards, and giving real voice, power, decision making and funding to local actors at national, sub-national and community level.

The failure of the humanitarian system in places like Syria, Sudan and elsewhere is not linked to principles and standards—it's linked to politics. Yet too often we see the system bound up in meeting technical criteria that is divorced from the real causes of failed humanitarian responses. Part of the reason that the many reforms in the sector have failed to meaningfully change the result for affected people is that they focus on technical changes—like how many litres of water each refugee gets—rather than deeper reforms linked to things like power. The professionalisation of the sector has been positive, but has not tackled the more deep-rooted problems underpinning aid, such as its neocolonial foundations. These issues that have been addressed in multiple places, including the New Humanitarian's fascinating 2020 conversation series, *Rethinking Humanitarianism*.

Slim (2022) makes a powerful case about the importance and the need for greater recognition of humanitarian resistance. In countries affected by conflict, civilian rescue and relief is being organised by resistance groups that are struggling for victory and humanity in equal measure, and so simultaneously taking sides for human life and human freedom. They are not neutral, but they are humanitarian, and often reach people faster and better than conventional humanitarians from international agencies. Resistance humanitarians' two-pronged struggle for justice and humanity is firmly grounded in ethics and law, making them just as legitimate as conventional humanitarians.

Kamal (2023) and Seiff (2022) advocate for External Humanitarians and this resonates with what is much

needed in the humanitarian world. Smaller and more nimble international actors who provide backroom support, specialist expertise to navigate complex funding structures, international policy advocacy, and awareness raising around forgotten crises, would support local actors to take the lead.

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There is a need to shift our gaze, less on the existing and mostly external humanitarians and much more on the *Internal Humanitarians*, the local actors who should be supported by the external humanitarians. That would signal decolonisation in humanitarianism beyond the rhetoric.

This does not have to be one massive global change that will take decades to implement but a change that is acknowledged and enacted by each institution, organisation and humanitarian leader with conviction and courage. Examples from my experience working with women's movements offer some insights into how these changes can be driven.

Feminist leadership

In 2009, I led an initiative called 'Innovations for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health',[11] funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to find solutions to maternal and child mortality. We tested a hypothesis of whether we could centre marginalised voices, particularly people who have never been heard but who live with these challenges, and crowdsource ground-breaking solutions. We sought and funded ideas from the public, many from women and mothers who knew what would make a real difference. We took risks, funded the work generously, evaluated rigorously and accepted that not every innovation would succeed. 12,762 ideas were received in Malawi, Sierra Leone, and India. At the end of the project, nine projects proposed by local citizens had been successfully implemented.

As a Board Trustee at Oxfam, I saw first-hand the work done locally in the Philippines to prepare for and respond to the cyclone prone areas in 2023. The programme B-READY[12] delivers significant impact via accurate weather

[11] https://www.jsi.com/project/innovations-for-maternal-newborn-and-child-health-global-research-partner/
[12] https://philippines.oxfam.org/tags/b-ready

forecasting technology, mobile banking in partnerships with Maya Bank, support from local government and cash transfers to credit cards given to women in households to prepare for and respond to disasters in their communities. Women made local decisions on what was needed and where the money would be spent, leading and helping to institutionalise anticipatory action to sustain and build resilient communities.

Recently, I asked an Oxfam Regional Director what she would consider a concrete example of decolonisation in humanitarian action. She is from the Middle East and has lived there and deeply understands the context, from the conflict in Gaza and Israel to the crises in Syria, Sudan and elsewhere in the region. She said the biggest difference we could make was to give direct funding to informal (and women's) groups who are well placed to respond to crises, instead of always funding the larger and/or established organisations.

In 2023, OCHA's Humanitarian Country Teams met their target of 50% engagement with women-led organisations. Is that the best we can do when there is abundant evidence that women and mothers are often best placed to decide on what works best for their families and communities? Humanitarian organisations keep on debating issues of sustainability without seriously giving power to those who know what works best. Why is there still reluctance from the humanitarian world to further and faster embrace feminist leadership and the role of women in humanitarianism?

A crisis of imagination and leadership

There is a crisis of imagination and leadership in humanitarianism. Our institutions, political and democratic, are failing us, yet our capacity to think boldly, differently and quickly is frozen. Overcoming deeply entrenched power dynamics that maintain the status quo is possible, but there is little movement towards this change.

There is a crisis of imagination and leadership in humanitarianism. Our institutions, political and democratic, are failing us, yet our capacity to think boldly, differently and quickly is frozen.

It is possible to democratise almost everything. The costs and barriers to participation are decreasing. Yet that is not how things have gone, with advanced democracies sliding towards autocracy and conflict everywhere. This applies to humanitarianism. Democratising humanitarian assistance requires us to focus on more than just the humanitarian system, it needs us to focus on all systems that provide assistance to people affected by crisis.

We need models of change, either looking outside to the world or backwards to the past, but we also need to be part of a collective that imagines differently, that includes many voices that remain unheard or have been far removed from where power and money is held and decisions are made. These models of change need to do something positive, tangible and at some pace.

Sriskandarajah's 2024 book, *Power to the People*, gives many great examples of how increasing democratic participation could lead to ambitious change. He writes:

> Around the time of the 2015 Paris climate negotiations, there was a beautiful example of focus groups done with representative groups of people in 70-odd countries on the same day, so it started in the Pacific and ended in the Americas. People were asked very similar questions to what the diplomats and politicians were negotiating in Paris. Amazingly, they came out, on the whole, with far more ambitious policies… It's an example where I think that creating more global mechanisms for democratic participation will help create more ambition.

What can humanitarian institutions, their leaders and governing bodies imagine differently for humanitarianism and how fast? Are they willing and able to hand over power and resources to enable communities of people to collectively dream and take action that makes sense to them faster, more effectively, more efficiently and more sustainably than the lumbering pace at which many of the global structures work?

There needs to be forward-looking change, a rethinking of the roles of INGOs and UN agencies as much smaller and nimble backroom supporters and facilitators, rather than the power brokers, resource holders and gatekeepers they are now. The immunity to change in the humanitarian architecture at present needs to be replaced with imagination and courage from leaders so that it has a ripple effect over the next few years and not over another few decades.

Equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity will complement the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, but only if they help radically adjust the humanitarian architecture to be more inclusive, locally led and accountable.

Equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity will complement the original principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, but only if they help radically adjust the humanitarian architecture to be more inclusive, locally led and accountable. Rhetoric about principles is no longer enough. Action is needed within the sector to address its structure, governance, inclusivity and diversity.

In the same vein, should the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership consider transforming into the Centre for Leadership in Humanitarianism and adjusting its offerings and role accordingly? Or even take a lead role in convening humanitarian leaders, their organisations and networks to challenge the status quo and rhetoric, and fire up their imagination, courage and leadership to do what is required now?

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