



HPG Working Paper

The new humanitarian basics

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Contents

1	Introduction: prototyping a new humanitarian action	1
<hr/>		
2	Setting the stage	3
	2.1 What do we mean by ‘humanitarian action’?	3
	2.2 Neither a fire department nor a rescue team	3
<hr/>		
3	Rescoping crisis response	5
	3.1 ‘Seeing’ less humanitarian crisis: rescoping the basis for intervention	5
	3.2 Fitting the means to the end: identifying the limits of the humanitarian role	7
<hr/>		
4	Towards a humanity-centred humanitarian action	9
	4.1 A new humanitarian connectivity: rescoping humanitarian productivity	9
	4.2 Going local	10
	4.3 The principles of humanitarian action	11
	4.4 Reorienting humanitarian protection	13
<hr/>		
5	The architecture and mechanics of a new crisis response	17
	5.1 The whole-of-problem approach – a half-step in the right direction	17
	5.2 Architecture and coordination	18
	5.3 The whole-of-society approach	19
	5.4 Funding	20
<hr/>		
6	Concluding analysis	23
	6.1 What do the new humanitarian basics look like?	23
	6.2 Deconstruction and the new humanitarian basics	25
<hr/>		
	Bibliography	29

1 Introduction: prototyping a new humanitarian action

Critical analysis of the international humanitarian aid system has arrived at the conclusion that it is time to let go of power; it is time to rethink humanitarian crisis response and allow a transformation it has simultaneously coveted and stifled. But if not the present system, then what? And how do we get from here to there? This paper confronts these questions as part of HPG's research project on 'Constructive Deconstruction: Rethinking the Humanitarian Architecture'.¹

That analytical process opened with the inconvenient truth that the 'shortcomings of the humanitarian sector are well-rehearsed' (Collinson, 2016: 1). If those shortcomings seem familiar, then the proffered solutions should be notorious, a litany of reforms that have ultimately served the status quo, as reformist energy and intentions have been channelled into doomed attacks on 'the symptoms of dysfunction, with little progress made over the years to properly understand the underlying causes of this dysfunction' (ibid.). Hence the need to dig deeper – to deconstruct.

This paper envisions a future humanitarianism that is responsive, ethical and attainable. Compared to the present system, it is also less paternalistic, bureaucratic and expansive in its ambitions. It is more local and more basic, even if there can be no going back to the basics, no return to a historical golden age of humanitarian action. Rather, we suggest a break from the past, and a reckoning for a sector steeped in its neo-colonial origins. Equally, we do not aim to describe a humanitarianism-lite; the paper suggests how we might develop a scaled-down and rescoped alternative to humanitarianism's dysfunctional exercise in interventionist, international charity. It seeks to overcome the conundrum of humanitarian action that is at once both unsustainable and self-sustaining.

This proposal for moving forward comprises four interlinked components, sketched out in the next

section and then drawn more fully in Sections 3 and 4. These components address four fundamental flaws in the current humanitarian system:

1. The humanitarianisation of a range of crises and problems which are not humanitarian in nature, often resulting in the biased, inappropriate and expansive management of crisis effects rather than causes.
2. Overly siloed rather than whole-of-problem interventions, with an increasingly prominent mismatch between the needs of people in crisis and the assumptions, approaches and skills of humanitarians.
3. A disconnect or separation between the sector's enormous effort and its actual impact in saving lives and alleviating suffering. This stems primarily from the weight and influence of institutions upon strategic plans and operational choices, over operational weight and a direct connection to human need. In consequence, there is a disconnect from crisis-affected populations and a yawning accountability gap.
4. A deep Western bias in the interpretation of the core principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence). In particular, there is a failure to ensure the transformative promise of humanity by placing human beings and human communities at the centre of crisis response, instead of defining people by their victimhood, their poverty or their helplessness.

This proposal offers no silver bullet. From clusters to accountability mechanisms to an emphasis on complementarity, 'fixing' humanitarian action has long trafficked in new initiatives, roles and responsibilities. To move forward, proposals for changing the symptoms and surface must simultaneously address underlying assumptions, incentives and structures. For humanitarian action to be transformed, we need a more sustained focus on the relationship(s) of power and legitimacy to the international system, the system of states, civil society and, ultimately, individual human beings. As such, the paper concludes with suggestions on how to address the causes and power dynamics of current dysfunction.

¹ See <https://www.odi.org/publications/10503-constructive-deconstruction-making-sense-international-humanitarian-system>

2 Setting the stage

2.1 What do we mean by ‘humanitarian action’?

The first step is to recognise the heterogeneity of humanitarianism. The term itself has no agreed definition, and there is no shortage of interpretations that place the interpreter at the centre. So powerful is the label that it now (rather incredibly) defines a subset of international warfare. For our purposes, humanitarianism is at the same time the global embodiment of an ideology of human compassion, and of the hegemonic operations of a Western-oriented crisis relief system.

As for the former, Albert Schweitzer offers perhaps the most eloquently brief definition of humanitarianism writ large: ‘Humanitarianism consists in never sacrificing a human being to a purpose’.² It is from this moral legitimacy or authorising environment, this beautiful ideal of human compassion and integrity, that the formal system deploys, replete with blankets, food, doctors and no small amount of soft power, saviourism and institutional self-interest. Tellingly, ‘the term humanitarianism is perceived by southern states to be moral cover for northern states and humanitarian agencies to secure their political and organisational interests’ (Jindal School, 2014: 4).

This paper applies a limited construction of humanitarianism to define the work of the formal sector. This conceptualisation views humanitarian action as the delivery of emergency relief/assistance and protection in times of crisis. Further modalities of humanitarian action, differentiating it from other relief actors, aid providers and the broad global welfare of Schweitzer, include a commitment to the four core principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, a set of short-term programme methodologies and an operational objective to meet the urgent needs of people, as opposed to building systems that will, over a longer course of time, meet those same needs (i.e. development, resilience etc.). It is, hence, a subset of the larger domain of disaster relief assistance, stabilisation and development.

This definition does not exclude the many views of humanitarianism circulating beyond the sector, including labels that embrace any act of kindness or the crisis relief efforts of states, corporations, armed actors and everyday citizens. The world will have to live with the many faces of humanitarianism. The point of our definition is to forge a shared understanding within the formal system. We recognise that this is not an unproblematic proposition. As a step towards agreement, in this proposal humanitarian action neither invalidates nor outranks broad and inclusive conceptualisations of disaster relief assistance, nor is it more legitimate than disaster relief work aimed at solidarist and developmental objectives. It is simply distinct from them (see Section 4.3).

2.2 Neither a fire department nor a rescue team

Defining a limited vision of humanitarianism is confounded by our own mistaken self-conception. Practitioners and policy-makers alike use similar metaphors: core humanitarian action as an emergency room, an ambulance service or a fire department. The value in deconstruction, in pulling humanitarian action apart, comes in realising that these metaphors (often employed by this author as well) are not simply incorrect, but that their inaccuracy is a product of the power of our own false truths.

These metaphors have two things in common. First, they conjure up images of rescue, of direct action, of saving lives in a modern-day version of Henri Dunant, or Florence Nightingale ministering to wounded soldiers. In contemporary humanitarian crises, however, such directness of intervention would be rare, for example in the flotilla of boats plucking asylum-seekers from the Mediterranean. So while more than ‘80 per cent of humanitarian funding requested by the United Nations goes towards meeting life-saving needs in conflict settings’ (Ban Ki-moon, 2016: ¶25), in fact the system works more commonly in countries at peace (e.g. often, in the neighbouring countries to which war-

² See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanitarianism>.

affected people flee).³ Second, they reinforce an image of humanitarian action as exceptional, separate and neatly delineated in the immediacy of its functions. The difference between the emergency room and the rest of the hospital is relatively clear; patients do not reside in the ER for years, as they do in refugee camps, healthcare programmes in South Sudan or ‘emergency’ shelters in Haiti.

It is now far more common that formal humanitarian action functions less in a distinct role and more as a

3 See SAVE (Save Access in Volatile Environments) research: <http://www.saveresearch.net>.

surrogate when state services or community structures fail to cope with immediate needs. In conflict situations, humanitarians deal less with the direct consequences of warfare than with the often-combined consequences of displacement, loss of livelihoods or the retraction of government services. Viewed as a surrogate or replacement, as primarily a parallel service provider rather than a guarantor, rescuer or saviour, humanitarian action thus becomes much less able to justify its exceptionalism. It also makes it more difficult for the system as a whole or for individual agencies to justify their operational siloes and ‘sovereignty’, or for system/agency coordination mechanisms to function as if they were coordinating a stand-alone service such as a fire department.

3 Rescoping crisis response

For years, in determining [aid spending], the needs of poor Americans (or poor Europeans) have received little priority relative to the needs of Africans or Asians ... I have long accepted this practical and ethical framework ... [Recently] I have come to doubt both the reasoning and the empirical support. There are millions of Americans whose suffering is as bad or worse than that of the people in Africa or in Asia. Angus Deaton, 2015 Nobel Laureate in economics (Deaton, 2018).

Contemporary analysis of the formal humanitarian sector is consistently unkind. Many reach the conclusion that ‘the humanitarian system as presently constituted is not fit for purpose’ (Kent et al., 2016: 41). The result is a burgeoning ‘mismatch between aspirations and achievable results’ (Bennett et al., 2016: 4). At over \$22 billion, 2015 marked a new high for the funding of humanitarian work. Somewhat paradoxically,⁴ it also marked a new high for unmet humanitarian needs (ALNAP, 2016). Today’s system is thus simultaneously larger than ever before and missing a larger sum of identified needs. Past reforms have tried to correct this mismatch by focusing on the front end of the equation – on enlarging humanitarian action, making it more effective and better funded and expanding its coverage. Logic dictates a second approach, reducing the back end of the equation by rescoping the aspirations or purpose of the enterprise. And experience suggests a third approach – call for help. In other words, look outside of the sector (i.e. integration rather than isolation).

3.1 ‘Seeing’ less humanitarian crisis: rescoping the basis for intervention

A raft of data and research testifies to the expansion – the ‘broadening’ and ‘deepening’ (Leader, 1998)

4 Or perhaps not paradoxically at all. The humanitarian sector has rapidly expanded and humanitarian needs have rapidly grown, the latter always surpassing the former. Correlation is not causation, but this does point to the need to ask some difficult questions. How does the growth of humanitarianism contribute to the disturbing rise in man’s production of the starving, sick, abused, persecuted and bombed?

– of both the formal humanitarian system, in terms of the number and capacities of its main actors, its political clout and funding,⁵ and in the scale of its aspirations (Bennett et al., 2016; Kent et al., 2016). Within the humanitarian system, there has been a steady shift since the 1970s from the delivery of emergency relief to long-term developmentalism (Chandler, 2001). This new humanitarianism aimed to reinforce transformative, developmental outcomes, empowerment, the promotion of human rights, protection and peacebuilding (Donini and Gordon, 2015). Ban Ki-moon’s flagship report for the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 turbocharged this expansion by calling for a shift from delivering aid to ‘ending need’, in the process recasting humanitarian aid as a subsidiary of the objective to ‘reduce need and vulnerability’, conceptually dissolving humanitarian work into the overall aims and framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (Ban Ki-moon, 2016).

Reining in these grand ambitions is not a call for the cold-hearted abandonment of people in crisis. It is a call to recognise that ‘the top-down nature of the [humanitarian] enterprise affects not only the response but also, and perhaps more importantly, the conceptualisation of crises: as humanitarians ... we address those vulnerabilities that we recognise ... we impose our mental models, we tend to shape reality in our image’ (Donini, 2012: 187–88). This proposal understands ‘humanitarian crisis’ as possessing two key characteristics: (a) a disequilibrium or set of extraordinary circumstances that marks a significant departure from ‘normalcy’ (the average); and (b) consequences (immediate needs that endanger or diminish life) that surpass existing or customary response capacities. There is, hence, an inherent focus on temporality (on a decisive moment, to track the etymology of ‘crisis’), contrasted with a crisis that is more enduring or structural in its causes and primary needs (e.g. the ‘protracted crisis’, see Section 3.2.2). This definition of crisis thus mirrors the content of

5 One telltale statistic: the UN’s budget appeal for 2016 exceeded \$20 billion, five times greater than just ten years before: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/08/world/un-seeks-more-than-20-billion-for-humanitarian-aid-in-2016.html>.

humanitarian action itself (per the definition above), and hence is conducive to a short-term, assistentialist response to address symptoms.

A second key problem is the extent to which our perception of crisis manifests the deeply engrained inequities of the Western charity model – plastering hierarchies such as rich/poor or developed/needier and giver/receiver or saviour/beggar upon nations, communities and people. This wicked combination of dominant power and engrained bias leaves us unable to see humanitarian work as anything but a universal imperative (see e.g. Bennett et al., 2016, citing research by Davey on the sector's bias towards 'exogenous solutions' to 'indigenous problems'). As such, even when the sector asks itself 'are we doing the right thing?', this inquiry translates as 'have we addressed the right needs?'. While a crucial improvement over the obsession with 'are we doing things the right way?', this is far from questioning whether there is a humanitarian crisis in the first place.

Our analysis views the system's central dissimulation to be the notion of 'humanitarian crisis' itself. The term casts a self-interested veil over what is, at best, a politico-economic crisis, and more accurately should be assigned an acronym like MDD (man-driven destruction),⁶ or Duffield's less emotive term, CPE (complex political emergency) (Duffield, 1994). As Tom Scott-Smith astutely concludes, 'Framing an issue as a distinctly humanitarian one necessarily limits the responses available' (Scott-Smith, 2016: 3). Removing the 'humanitarian' label renders more visible the inadequacy of the humanitarian response, and its attendant externalisation of ownership and responsibility (Harvey, 2013: S156). Smith's point is simple: we send a plumber to fix a plumbing problem and a dentist to fix a dental crisis, so why send humanitarians to fix a political crisis like MDD? This is the problem of the humanitarian alibi, and it is one that the humanitarian sector only half recognises. The assumed wisdom of former UNHCR High Commissioner Sadako Ogata, that 'there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems', stops short of the reality. While it may be true that aid workers and political powers understand the reality behind the alibi, its force lies in its *public* shaping of the debate. At a deeper level, this alibi buttresses the idea that crisis contexts in the geographic periphery – Rakhine, Eastern DRC, Haiti – are 'shitholes' with humanitarian problems to be addressed

6 The use of a more gender-neutral phraseology seems inapposite in this case.

via responses that are humanitarian in nature.⁷ Starving people in Sudan or Somalia? Send food.

Where does that leave us? First, in crisis response, the presence of immediate needs – food, water, shelter, healthcare, protection – should no longer denote a context where short-term methodologies necessarily dominate the response, meaning that the urgent displaces the important (the systemic or structural) in perpetuity. The humanitarian label also eclipses our view of 'a greater spectrum of human aspirations – to secure livelihoods, education for their children or to live in peace' (DuBois, 2016b: 8), and diminishes the pressure on those with the actual power to act. Second, let us be midwife to a humanitarian sector that responds to the suffering of people in crisis out of compassion *tout court*, without paternalism, pity, self-interest or saviourism giving rise to (often invisibly to us) our sighting of crisis. Hurricane Katrina offers a useful (though certainly not perfect) illustration. Humanitarian and disaster relief teams descended on the stricken city of New Orleans and delivered stuff – water, food, blankets, shelter. In other words, a decidedly punctual, modest response aiming to meet basic needs via the delivery of emergency relief (Eikenberry, 2007). Contrary to the way it intervenes in the 'global South', the humanitarian intervention did not conceptualise the crisis in larger terms, and did not see the need (or feel the paternalistic urge?) to engage in rights-based political and social engineering with the goal of 'fixing' New Orleans. As a result, it did not seek to address long-standing structural vulnerabilities and problems of violence,⁸ corrupt governance, substance abuse, racial segregation and discrimination, gender oppression and violence, shockingly poor education and health services and the myriad of other needs the humanitarian system has captured within the scope of the 'humanitarian crisis'.⁹

7 The humanitarian fig-leaf buttresses the 're-division of international political labour such that aid is no longer a substitute for political action. Rather, it is the primary form of international policy at the geopolitical periphery' (Macrae, 2000: 8, original emphasis and citations omitted). Thus, humanitarians are placed at the media and financial forefront; politicians on all sides escape their responsibilities; and armed actors capture aid and profit from the war economy.

8 The numbers speak of a warzone: Fothergill and Peek (2015: 7), in their study of the psychological effects of Hurricane Katrina on children, found that 60% of 700 children surveyed who were displaced post-Katrina had directly witnessed a shooting or murder prior to the hurricane.

9 Another US example of biased perceptions of crisis: why do so many humanitarian actors view gang-related violence in Latin America as a humanitarian crisis, yet have never conceived of the violence on Chicago's South Side in this manner, even after 726 murders in 2016 (see Siegfried, 2016)?

Needless to say, the Katrina intervention ended long before ending need. The differential treatment of Katrina reflects a different mindset, one inextricably tied to the underlying ‘paternalism’ of the Western aid apparatus (see e.g. Bennett et al., 2016). Ten years on, the impact of the hurricane and the problems of New Orleans remain; elsewhere, such impacts and structural problems justify the humanitarian sector’s ongoing presence. As Chandler (2001: 8) concluded nearly two decades ago, in the framing of crisis:

*non-Western governments tended to be seen as ... incapable of rational policy-development and prone to corruption and nepotism. The citizens of non-Western states were seen as easily manipulated by their corrupt and inefficient elites and ill-versed in the skills of political decision-making and economic exchange. [Aid NGOs] ... tended to portray the non-Western subject as needy and incapable of self-government and in need of long-term external assistance.*¹⁰

The process of expanding the operational turf of humanitarianism takes this historical paternalism and combines it with an ahistorical analysis of crisis, whereby its ‘unprecedented’ nature severs it from its past and hence from its political origins (Davey et al., 2013: 1; Fiori et al., 2016). The effect has been ‘to superimpose humanitarian ideals and concepts on situations of human suffering previously thought to exist beyond the realm of humanitarian concern’ (Fiori et al., 2016: 54). Thus, the humanitarianisation of responses means that ‘assistential approaches are normalised to compensate for the persistence of structural problems related to rule of law, democratic accountability, public services and deep-seated social division’ (ibid.: 56). Worse still, given insufficient attention to the principle of humanity, the phenomenon becomes a pathologisation of the world’s people, or more accurately, some of them (e.g. ‘Africans’).

The authorising, universalist, heroic imagery of humanitarianism undermines efforts to rescope humanitarian action away from intervention. How

does one say no to the humanitarian ideal without sounding like Marie Antoinette? Without sparking accusations that we are condemning people to suffer? Perhaps one way forward is to confront the difficulty in ‘repairing’ the system with tweaks and reforms, and the degree to which the ‘humanitarian imperative’ too easily yields a damaging mix of inappropriate technology (short-term non-fixes to long-term problems), perpetuation of causation and the fig-leaving of political negligence or abstention. And perhaps also by changing both the role and the key players of humanitarian action.

3.2 Fitting the means to the end: identifying the limits of the humanitarian role

3.2.1 Humanitarian limits: not a world ministry of welfare

To illustrate the limits of humanitarian action, consider the difference between humanitarianism as a utopian ideal and utopianism as an operational strategy. This proposal considers humanitarian action to embody an act of triage. Viewed as a rallying cry, we can indulge the World Humanitarian Summit’s call to end need. In the praxis of emergency relief, though, our aspirations must be less grandiose, less messianic and less paternalistic, the aim centred squarely on saving lives, alleviating suffering and protecting human dignity. Why? The principles of humanity and impartiality provide guidance. Humanity focuses humanitarian action on the urgency of the immediate needs of *people*, not the needs of a system, even if ultimately it is that system that must deal with those needs in the long term. More deeply, humanity steeps humanitarian action in the dignity of each individual. It teaches that people and communities and states must enjoy the right to determine and address their own needs. Ending need is the work of a society, not a global, multilateral policy intervention, let alone a global, multilateral set of institutions with over half a century’s track record of being relatively unaccomplished in this regard. At the very least, it is not the stuff of buckets and blankets. Humanitarians cannot allow the universality of their compassion to breed delusions as to the universality of their objectives and methodologies.

To resolve this glaring mismatch between means and the objectives of responding to those most in need,

¹⁰ The contrast with Hurricane Harvey, which hit Texas in 2017, is telling. Here, the unbreakable spirit and resourcefulness of the locals formed a major media story line (DuBois, 2017). Another example, which could also come from New Orleans: when a white man commits a crime, he is a criminal; when a black man commits a crime, it is all black people who are perceived as possessing criminal tendencies.

humanitarians have the principle of impartiality. Beyond non-discrimination in the delivery of aid at a project level, impartiality needs to be utilised as a management tool in steering both global and crisis-level intervention decisions (see Section 5.2). One of the World Humanitarian Summit's five Core Commitments calls for humanitarian action to 'Leave no one behind' (Ban Ki-moon, 2016). An inspiring political declaration yes, but neither an imperative nor an option for humanitarians. For humanitarians, as Jean Pictet explained, impartiality ensures that the distribution of aid is 'guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress' (Pictet, 1979). Ending need is a fantastical idea, a symptom of hubris and sectoral megalomania that 'risks diluting the resources available to humanitarian action, while simultaneously failing to sufficiently address the challenges posed by long-term development issues' (Bennett et al., 2016: 35). It thus generates programming that ignores the gap between resources and needs that defines humanitarian action's *limited* nature.¹¹

Problematically, the aim to end need undermines impartiality by justifying a response to any need, rather than prioritising the most urgent cases. Humanitarian action implies the necessity of leaving people behind, and hence of triage. Neither personal ideology nor political strategic interests nor organisational preference trumps the immediacy of impartiality. Here is the definition of humanitarian negligence: when the ambulance team ignores your father's heart attack in order to assess the family's diet and deliver a motivational talk on cardio fitness. In effect, too much of the system has long been busy with just that (see e.g. de Castellarnau et al., 2016; Healy and Tiller, 2014). And here is the tragedy of labels that make crisis seem humanitarian in nature: when the ambulance team cures your father's heart attack and then returns him to a house on fire.

3.2.2 Protracted crisis is not humanitarian crisis

To a certain extent, the expansion of humanitarianism has been driven not just by binaries such as the

humanitarian–development divide, but by a binary mindset as well. Binary thinking, binary funding structures and binary operational siloes have been at their most damaging in the category of context we call 'protracted crisis' or 'complex emergency'. This is also where humanitarian action has most need of standing back.

Let's start with the obvious: the term 'protracted crisis' is an oxymoron. Once the crisis – the departure from the norm, the extraordinary circumstance, the break in the equilibrium – itself becomes the norm, then the short-term tools and mindsets of the formal humanitarian community increasingly become a liability. In protracted crises, emergency response creates a 'risk of undermining institutional recovery' (Hilhorst and Pereboom, 2016: 96). This is a case of inappropriate technology, not to be so casually justified on the grounds that something is better than nothing. Remaining within the humanitarian or emergency relief paradigm misses the fundamental reality that the return to normalcy has been replaced by the normalcy of crisis. Are these still humanitarian needs? As is obvious in the medical profession, one does not simply treat a fever – it is the cause rather than the symptom which determines the nature of the need, and hence the nature of the cure.

One driver of this normalcy of crisis is the degree to which those profiting from the crisis (governments, armed actors, humanitarians and those enjoying the revenues generated by worsening structural inequities) are able to maintain the perception that the crisis is 'humanitarian' in nature, and hence amenable to the series of one-year sticking plasters that reflect and mask various degrees of political inaction and self-interest. But it is also true that humanitarian activities – and aspirations – have, by default, 'expanded into recovery and basic service provision, including long-term health, nutrition and education, food assistance, livelihoods support and social protection measures' (Bennett et al., 2016: 35). There is, hence, a challenge for other sectors to fill the gap as humanitarians stand back.¹²

11 By way of example, a major hospital in a large Western city would normally have an annual budget of roughly \$1bn. That means the record-breaking total 2015 humanitarian expenditure could run 22 of such hospitals in the United Kingdom, which would fall far short of ending health needs in a single wealthy nation.

12 We recognise a certain generalisation in this argument. Clearly, even in the South Sudans and DRCs of the world, other efforts are being made – for example peacebuilding, governance and development.

4 Towards a humanity-centred humanitarian action

The way forward does not consist in organigrams or policies. These will arrive in time. This proposal seeks to alter in key ways the environment in which those new organigrams and policies will be shaped. This section highlights four potential areas of focus, all premised on the belief that the principle of humanity should more actively guide the development of humanitarian action in the future.

4.1 A new humanitarian connectivity: rescoping humanitarian productivity

At the root of the principle of humanity is the idea that all human beings are connected to one another. It seems an indefensible violation of that definitive principle for the formal humanitarian sector to have developed such powerful ideologies and practices of separation. The primary consequence and enabler of this disconnect is the above-discussed inequities of the Western charity model, which goes about its business by separating humanity from people affected by crisis, reducing the latter to stereotypes of victimhood devoid of that intensely human trait, agency. Krause takes this even further, to the point where people affected by crisis become a resource to be captured, describing the humanitarian system as one in which INGOs and UN agencies ‘market’ their projects (i.e. the needs of people) to Western donors (Krause, 2014). In turn, this mentality helps justify a lack of community engagement or downward accountability and results in misguided policies, ineffective responses or, in extreme cases, loss of life caused by major design flaws in an international intervention. The West Africa Ebola response marked the latest major example in this longstanding pattern of contextual disconnect, with deadly consequences (DuBois et al., 2015a).

The ‘progress’ and professionalisation of the humanitarian sector, though not without important advantages, also undermines the perceived importance

of context-specific knowledge or approaches, yielding effectiveness-based management regimes of standardisation and projects whose success is separated from meeting the needs of people in crisis by logframes of objectives and targets. Where in all the system’s reporting of ‘successful’ projects can one find the 71% of logframes that match the 71% of beneficiaries who felt the aid they had received was either not relevant (25%) or only partially so (46%) (WHS Secretariat, 2016: 17)? In effect, a structural disconnection opens between the success of the sector and the needs of affected people (Fiori et al., 2016).

Second, this separation manifests itself in a set of physical separations, in particular the separation of individual humanitarians, humanitarian agencies and decision-makers from the communities and people affected by crisis, a process driven by differing levels of wealth, digital communications, the securitisation of the humanitarian field mission and the development of remote management. The Western humanitarian sector works from within ‘a highly visible and separate “island of modernity” that exposes the exclusivity of the international space and its unequal relationship with the surrounding environment – interconnected by exclusive means of transport and representing private spaces that mesh into what, spatially at least, could be likened to a secure archipelago of international aid’ (Collinson and Duffield, 2013: 7, citation omitted).

Finally, there is a widening separation between humanitarian *work* and humanitarian *outcomes*, between the effort produced by the sector and the directness of the connection to saving lives or alleviating suffering: in effect, a growing gap between being busy and being productive, where productivity is assessed in terms of a connection to the core objectives of saving lives and alleviating suffering. In practical terms, too much of the sector is focused exclusively on producing, refining and discussing outputs that have, at best, been produced, refined and discussed multiple times over, and that are removed by multiple degrees of separation from the beneficiary.

It can be more insightfully seen as satisfying *our* needs as humanitarians. This is the problem of a massive, fragmented internal humanitarian service industry dogpaddling through a perpetual tsunami of information about itself, churning out incremental improvements to its vast array of organigrams, policies, job descriptions, guidelines, etc., etc. (see DuBois, 2015b). So despite its enormity and good intentions, we are left with a state of affairs where the ‘current ability of the sector to provide assistance in acute emergencies has proven hugely inadequate in the face of escalating needs’ (de Castellarnau, 2016: 3).

Enhancing humanitarian action’s fundamental effectiveness requires a new metric and a new culture of directness/connectivity. The function of this new metric is to enable analysis, at the level of the work of individuals within the system, of their contribution to saving lives, alleviating suffering and protecting human dignity. The purpose is to enable decision-makers within the system to visualise connectivity, and to produce a quantitative analysis that ‘sees’ the gap between a nurse tending to a patient and a nurse, one among 20 others, drafting an email with suggested changes to a training session’s draft module sheet. Let us be clear – we should not question the legitimacy of the nutritional adviser, fundraiser or accountant or HQ department director versus the frontline borehole digger or nutritional nurse. They are all required for humanitarian action; it is their relative weight within the sector that has to be rebalanced towards a more direct form of productivity, alongside humanitarian management and decision-making that is steeped in the physical reality of the crisis and human need. By way of a change, national charity regulations and UN governance regulations should require substantial humanitarian experience among the members of the management team and board of trustees. Once MTs and boards have complied, their first task will be to develop and implement a strategy to build an organisational culture where the primacy of operations replaces the primacy of headquarters.

4.2 Going local

As a countermeasure to disconnection and distance, this proposal joins calls for greater localisation: to be more efficient and effective, it is necessary to situate a much greater proportion of the apparatus of humanitarian action in greater direct relationship to

the operational project.¹³ But the case for localisation cannot be reduced to efficiency gains and effectiveness. First, the system needs to think of effectiveness and efficiency differently, to acknowledge and value the necessity and advantages of proximity and connectedness versus those of distance and separation. Then, importantly, we need to situate localisation within the ethical framework of humanity.

Broadly speaking, the localisation agenda seeks to progressively shift the power and resources of crisis response to local governments and organisations (and is discussed voluminously elsewhere).¹⁴ The path has been set: “‘local’ actors in all their diversity – including well-informed, tech-savvy and empowered beneficiaries themselves – will increasingly determine the type, source and duration of aid’ (McGoldrick, 2016). Put differently, this is the principle of subsidiarity, where the greater pressure of responding to needs can be felt rather than computed.¹⁵ The aim is to reduce bureaucratisation and proceduralisation in a system designed to gather and transmit northwards reams of information.

While this paper is not the place to review the topic of localisation, it is worth noting that the localisation agenda tends to focus on transferring resources to local NGOs, as discussed in the World Humanitarian Summit’s Grand Bargain, and has largely circumvented localisation’s oldest and clearest directive – the primacy of state responsibility (see UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182, from 1991). Because human beings possess the right to self-determination (again, the principle of humanity), this proposal assumes the de facto primacy of the local state and communities, even if these entities struggle with various aspects of effectiveness or neutrality. As an immediate step, national crisis management teams should replace the cluster system, which dovetails well with the emphasis states place on protecting and exercising their sovereignty.

There is probably no greater challenge to the prevailing humanitarian paradigm and its modes of operation than the need to reinvent the way

13 Hence, where decision-making remains physically close to the field (thus reversing current trends) to ensure the primacy of the needs of populations affected by crisis rather than the needs of desk-bound humanitarians to feel they are still making a difference (e.g. this author).

14 See e.g. The Charter4Change: <https://charter4change.org>.

15 The principle of subsidiarity implies that matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralised competent authority (Bennett et al., 2016: fn. 17).

humanitarian actors relate to and work with national governments. Flawed as they were, the roles of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea vis-à-vis the international community in the response to Ebola provide an example (and offer many lessons) of how even weak states can assume leadership responsibility.¹⁶ There, the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) supported national crisis mechanisms from behind, rather than the UN leading through its cluster systems, and the main UN/NGO implementing agencies were largely absent from the incident management team (DuBois et al., 2015a). This change will be neither smooth nor without profound complications in conflict settings. One particular challenge lies in stubborn ideologies of isolationism, and in particular adherence to ‘state-avoiding’ methodologies.¹⁷ The need, then, is for humanitarians to overcome a binary approach to the world, yielding us/them, good/evil conceptualisations of states, and replace it with a practice that is able to overcome what Harvey calls the ‘trust deficit’ by engaging with states on a principled basis, rather than avoiding them on the basis of misapplied principles (Harvey, 2013).

In order to develop a new approach to navigating in-country politics, humanitarians will need to better understand and accept a government’s political challenges and constraints. Traditionally, humanitarians have too often viewed such concerns as roadblocks to circumvent in the name of serving humanitarian goals. To better navigate government structures, humanitarian staff will also need to cultivate stronger relationships with people within government who can help them understand political sensitivities and co-develop creative ways forward that work within local political constraints.

Almost by definition, localisation will require financing for greater capacity within crisis contexts, but this does not mean funding extensive capacity-building exercises that risk transforming localisation into an exercise in

exportation (see Lwanga-Ntale, 2017).¹⁸ As the NEAR Network points out, decades of ‘capacity-building’ and ‘partnership principles’ have not resulted in any significant gains (NEAR Leadership Council, 2017). Rather, international financing should aim to create greater ‘redundancy’ within crisis contexts, to enhance preparedness with a standing response capacity, such as through Red Cross/Red Crescent volunteers, civil defence reserves or localised specialist initiatives modelled on Western efforts such as UK-Med.¹⁹ In the same vein, standing pooled funds should be set up for emergency response within crisis contexts, fully within the control of local authorities or civil society.

Finally, localisation seems to frighten much of the formal system with the prospect of irrelevance. In this proposal, the emphasis on improving the directness of the connection to productivity and the primacy of local needs suggests a rejection of recent calls for the vast formal humanitarian machinery (UN agencies and INGOs) to be recast according to the principle of subsidiarity (see Bennett, 2016; Maietta et al., 2017). We reject visions of a future humanitarian system where the main purpose of the international agency is to act as a broker of relationships, provider of funds or repository of expertise. Once removed from direct operational responsibility, international agencies will lose much of their comparative advantage in the exercise of such ‘back office’ roles. The system should not aim to split off an international humanitarian service industry as distinct from a local sector that manages and implements operations. Rather, the vast machinery should contract, maintaining its operational capacity to respond to a narrow (specialised?) range of emergencies, while leaving the emerging institutions of the global South to grow *within* the societies of the global South, capitalising on existing expertise, while also being open to and engaging with a much broader range of actors (private sector, South–South cooperation, etc.).

4.3 The principles of humanitarian action

In order to rescope the legitimacy and objectives of humanitarian intervention, and enlarge the legitimacy

16 Crisis response is difficult – the major flaws in the US government’s response to Hurricane Katrina are not due to it being a weak state.

17 The humanitarian system’s ‘assumption of responsibility’ imposes a flip side, one in which states and societies themselves cede responsibility, expecting the international community to fill enormous gaps in state services and deal with the consequences of violence that purposefully destroys civilian lives. This can stunt the development of the state, undermining the social contract (Chandran and Jones, 2008).

18 Essentially, to ensure that local agencies possess the proper bureaucratic mechanisms to be able to access the risk-averse funding mechanisms of the Western-oriented system.

19 See <https://www.uk-med.org>.

of and opportunities for a broad range of actors to respond to people in crisis, the principles of humanitarian action need to be reinterpreted. They must function as they were originally intended: to define and guide humanitarians in their work, and to distinguish humanitarian actors from other active parties in the context, including others delivering relief.

To some, the humanitarian system presents a muddle of action and actors locked into a single sector, all applying the same label to their work, in the process blurring the distinctions and core principles necessary – at least for some actors – to gain trust, acceptance and access to people in need. As a starting point, then, the sector needs greater honesty and transparency about digressions from the principles (HERE-Geneva, 2016: 5). It would safeguard the principles and improve principled humanitarian action if more aid actors were willing and able to see their work in certain contexts as ‘mere’ disaster relief because of an inability to act in sufficient compliance with the principles. The aim is a sector where ‘ordinary’ relief work is distinguished from humanitarian action, without being judged as inferior to it.

This function contrasts with the use of the principles to reinforce state avoidance and exceptionalism, their undermining by a pervasive Western bias in their interpretation and the double-standard in their application (Bennett et al., 2016; HERE-Geneva, 2015). To be clear, the problem does not lie with the principles. They need to be reaffirmed. They ground humanitarian action in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and their consistent implementation is essential to its effectiveness and integrity. Adherence to the principles helps build the trust and acceptance that is critical to (though no guarantee of) access to people in crisis, particularly in the conflict situations generating the overwhelming majority of humanitarian needs (Donini and Gordon, 2015; Egeland, Harmer and Stoddard, 2011). Principled behaviour is also deeply tied to the moral authority of the sector, the only authority by which it derives its power to intervene, even if the subordination of the principles to the expanded strategic objectives of ‘new humanitarianism’ has left humanitarian actors more prone to manipulation, and hence more likely to become part of the dynamics of conflict (Donini and Gordon, 2015).

The problem lies in the humanitarian system’s scattershot, unexamined operationalisation of the principles, meaning that central to any renovation of the principles is a meaningful discussion of their

implementation.²⁰ ‘In a sector rife with guidelines, it is telling that so little focus has been placed on operationalising principled performance’ (HERE-Geneva, 2016: 5). The sector must begin to articulate best practice or, at least, red lines. Similarly, the principles should feature more prominently in project design and evaluation. Conversely, donors and subcontracting agreements should no longer ‘promote’ the principles by contractually obligating their adherence, as such contracts transform the principles into a bureaucratic requirement, render them divisive and obstructive within the sector and fuel more lip-service than observance.

Instead, we must ensure that programming within the formal, principled humanitarian sector is actively shaped by these core, definitional principles (see HERE-Geneva, 2017). This will require establishing the means by which organisations and agencies can be held accountable to them. We suggest beginning with agency boards and trustees, ensuring that they maintain accountability for principled implementation (or the deliberate decision to engage in ‘mere’ relief). This significant change represents a ‘professionalisation’ of trusteeship within the sector. We view the current state of affairs, where too few trustees of organisations within the sector understand the basics of what it means to be humanitarian (such as the meaning of the principles), as a dereliction of responsibility, as unacceptable as would be a board of trustees with little comprehension of basic accounting. This gap can be remedied by regulation and appropriate training.

The interpretation and implementation of the principles has suffered from the Western dominance of the discourse. Nowhere is this more evident than in the formal humanitarian system’s treatment of the principle of humanity. In short, the ‘sector needs to stop assuming its humanity and instead define its boundaries’ (HERE-Geneva, 2016: 5; see also Section 5.6.4). This assumption of humanity is irrevocably contradicted by the degree to which the formal humanitarian sector is built – financially, narratively, operationally, conceptually – upon a model of helpless victimhood. Further, it is contradicted by the system’s decades of resistance to accountability from below or the inclusion of local stakeholders – local humanity – in the design and decision phases of projects.

20 For an example, see the discussion of the operationalisation of neutrality and independence in Schenkenberg, 2015.

Definitionally, this short-changing of the principle of humanity should throw into question the legitimacy of the sector's humanitarian identity. How then does such a flaw avoid *notice* within the system? This is the power of the humanitarian system's 'truths' to shape its internal discourses, shielding a structural and operational weakness in the application of humanity while producing, for example, a state of 'truth' where the proximity of local NGOs to local people is seen to degrade their humanitarian legitimacy (i.e. accusations that they inherently lack neutrality and impartiality).

The fixable problem lies with the principles' instrumentalisation by the sector itself. Under this proposal, the principles will continue to confer operational advantages, such as access to people in crisis, but they will no longer define access *within* the sector, such as access to funding or to being viewed as a legitimate responder to a crisis. As a result, there will be less necessity to either squeeze diverse forms of aid into the straitjacket of the principles, undermining their integrity in the process, or to exclude certain actors (who then push back against the 'neo-imperialism' of the principles). In an important shift, the principles should be seen as building identity, rather than cascading down from it – they must be seen as defining how humanitarians act, not as emanating from either membership in their club or empty declarations of 'principledness'.

In the end, there are two key implementation errors to overcome: the way in which the principles have reinforced a counter-productive exceptionalism and isolationism within the sector; and the imbalanced power distribution between the Western sector and other stakeholders or crisis responders. Neither of these tensions is inherent to the principles themselves. Born in the specificity of Western humanitarianism, these distortions can be partially overcome by the rescoping described above. They will also have to be overcome by practice and by a much more inclusive dialogue, one that allows for their reinterpretation – their 'universalisation' – by unpacking their antiquated and biased (mis)application (see also Section 6.2.3).

4.4 Reorienting humanitarian protection

An analysis of 'humanitarian protection' leads to a difficult diagnosis: both the term and its practice are

fatally confused (DuBois, 2009). This institutionalised confusion persists despite years of investment in defining, refining and rolling out humanitarian protection. In a damning conclusion, the 2014 *Whole of System Review of Protection in the Context of Humanitarian Action* found that 'the widespread perspective among humanitarians [is] that they do not have a role to play in countering abusive or violent behaviour even when political and military strategies and tactics pose the biggest threat to life' (Niland et al., 2015: 27).

In its simplest form, humanitarian action seeks to protect human life and ensure respect for the dignity of the human being (ICRC, 1991). Harm to human life and the degradation of human dignity can come from disease, hunger, forced displacement or a barrel bomb being dropped on a children's playground. Much has evolved from that simple recognition of the necessity of protection, and today the humanitarian system possesses a sizeable institutionalised protection apparatus. In contrast to the confusion among rank and file humanitarians, a protection expertocracy has developed, and with it much of protection has become heavily specialised, proceduralised and bureaucratic. It too often functions through a preponderance of toolkits and checklists and an attendant inertia. One of our principal concerns is thus its increasing separation from humanitarian operations. At a deeper level, the problem with humanitarian protection is its fitness for purpose within the humanitarian's response to crisis.

Aside from the internal confusion, humanitarian protection faces formidable external challenges in both theory and practice as respect plummets for international law and the institutions or conventions that embody it. The power of multilateral approaches to international governance is in decline as national sovereignty and self-interest ascend, trumping the ideals of human rights and IHL (Donini, 2017; Ban Ki-moon, 2016). In parallel, the face of humanitarianism is changing. The theory and practice of humanitarian protection is emblematic of the system's Western origins, and with the internationalisation of the humanitarian ecosystem. With the increasing frequency of major state-led humanitarian efforts by countries such as China and Turkey and the shift of humanitarian action to a more pluralistic set of actors, the future of this Western-centric model of humanitarian protection will come under increasing pressure.

Although this argument is often (and here) oversimplified, the public advocacy associated with humanitarian protection – its vocal denunciations and defence of legal obligations – increasingly jeopardises the delivery of assistance given these changing political winds. Many states and many people today reject the universalist imposition of and governance through human rights or IHL, and increasingly enforce sovereignty by regulating the activities of foreign UN/ NGO actors or denying access to those who will advocate in public on sensitive issues such as the death of civilians or violations of rights. Protection work has rightly decried the plight of the ‘well-fed dead’. It has also declared with conviction that ‘silence kills’ (Orbinski, 1999). The problem in today’s world is that speaking out by a humanitarian actor increasingly results in costs borne by the people it is meant to help, in the form of denied access to assistance.

What does that mean in terms of people’s protection? Who gets to decide whether an agency raises its voice, but risks its access? Are we approaching a tipping point between the ‘well-fed dead’ and the ‘unfed dead’? Difficult questions, not of right and wrong but of balance. Our approach does not seek to strip protection objectives away from the delivery of aid, but to reengage the two: humanitarian protection must be recentred in the operational response, using humanitarian rather than human rights methodologies.²¹ Aid actors should refocus protection by designing programmes to protect people and human dignity within the delivery of aid, as opposed to non-operational protection efforts (e.g. public advocacy), and by emphasising direct, principled engagement with state and non-state (armed) actors (i.e. pushing for change via diplomatic rather than media channels).

By way of example, when IDP women in Darfur were repeatedly attacked as they left camps to collect firewood, the humanitarian system produced a plethora of public reports decrying this violence.²² What they did not produce was firewood so that these same women could cook food without endangering their lives (DuBois, 2009). This proposal would, for example,

21 Key categories of humanitarian protection, such as ensuring that humanitarian operations do not themselves place people at risk (e.g. locks on latrine doors, security-aware food distributions) remain vital and are not affected by this proposal.

22 The system benefited from the well-hyped ‘Save Darfur’ theme, giving rise to the accusation among Sudanese officials that much public advocacy was in fact a form of fundraising and promotion.

first see and act upon the delivery of wood to IDP women, as a direct operational response that protects either the individual or their dignity. This manner of operationalising protection is what pushed the ICRC to develop and call for greater rigour and systematic effort in identifying missing migrants in the Mediterranean, with the aim of rectifying the indignity and pain caused by the deaths of unknowns (ICRC, 2017).

Note that, in both of these examples, the starting point is the human need, and the ending point is the development of a new operational response to protect the dignity and security of people. More generically, the emphasis would be on programming that reduces people’s vulnerability, mitigates threats to their security or strengthens their capacity to cope with or contest these threats and risks. It requires becoming more innovative in our delivery, not more strident in our denunciation. Additionally, we would propose that humanitarians engage with protection issues at the preventative stage, pressing much harder for political solutions at the early stages of violations, before sporadic clashes, violence and abuse calcify into intractable situations of destruction.

This proposal would result in a significant reduction in the protection and campaigning bureaucracy of the humanitarian system, moving protection away from the experts and into field teams, or into other sectors and communities. Such a proposal is rooted in complementarity – leaving denunciation, pressure/shame and other polarising us/them or good/evil discourses (at an international level) to the human rights community and journalists.²³ It also shifts protection work to the local sphere. To begin with, the 1990s have passed, and less of the world accepts the idea that the Western INGO community articulates a world conscience, a global finger-pointer-in-chief. Second, there is a growing realisation that people, not human rights reports, hold power over bad actors (see e.g. Chenoweth, 2013). Furthermore, community-based research has shown that people are capable of taking the lead in protecting themselves. People ‘make arrangements with belligerents, work on preventing violence against their communities, document violations, train communities in where to find refuge during attacks and teach armed groups the basics of IHL’ (Bennett et al., 2016: 32).

23 This approach does not apply to agencies that possess a specifically mandated protection role, such as ICRC and UNHCR.

This proposal's apparent downsizing of humanitarian protection is not permanent. The narrowing of its scope and machinery is made in the belief that, in a rapidly evolving humanitarian ecosystem, the necessity of protection will result in its rebirth. Protecting people is inherent in humanity and unavoidable in crisis response, but the act of protection must be much more reflective of a less Western and more localised humanitarianism,

with much of its frontline work situated in local civil society. This will not result from an expensive process of internal engineering or from the years of conferences and position papers produced by the existing protection apparatus. Rebirth will hopefully generate a different apparatus, situating protection in people's own responsibility and power to act, rather than expecting UN or INGO press releases to end abuses.

5 The architecture and mechanics of a new crisis response

This proposal is not concerned with new water pumps or innovative digital health platforms. At a programming level, the humanitarian response of the future as defined here will look very similar to today's. Humanitarians will still deliver food and cash to Somalis displaced by conflict and drought, clean water and medical treatment to Yemenis suffering with cholera and services to Rohingyas driven across the Naf river into Bangladesh. This proposal is concerned with the underlying architecture and dynamics of humanitarian action, with shifting its conceptualisation of crisis and its treatment of the oft-assumed but insufficiently effected principle of humanity. Putting aside the metaphysical, however, there will be obvious differences in the sector's relationship to other sectors, in the positioning of humanitarian action within national/local efforts and in its architecture and coordination.

5.1 The whole-of-problem approach – a half-step in the right direction

Ignoring for the moment the impact of national coordination (discussed immediately below), perhaps the greatest difference being proposed here lies in how humanitarians relate to one another and to the world beyond: they must leave their siloes of specialisation/cluster (WATSAN, health, shelter) and, more broadly, the silo of the sector itself. Frontline work in a crisis will still comprise emergency relief, but will also encompass a wider range of actors responding to the full range of people's needs.

In this vein, our vision echoes numerous calls and existing initiatives for a more inclusive, operationally diverse response to crisis. As a first step, this proposal builds on HPG's position as described in *Time to Let Go*, and reflects ongoing efforts in the sector

to improve complementarity, work on the basis of comparative advantage, transform the humanitarian–development divide into a humanitarian–development relationship, or roll out policies and practices under the New Way of Working (NWOW).²⁴ The present proposal sits within a new envelope of complementarity and comparative advantage that joins not the different cluster themes within humanitarian action, but the different sectors outside it: hence, humanitarian action in conjunction with recovery, resilience, development, human rights, democratisation, good governance, rule of law, securitisation and peace-building, to name but a few. The humanitarian–development divide is but one institutional divide to overcome.

This is the whole-of-problem approach, under which numerous schemes might be placed. Some address more directly the relief-to-development transition, such as the World Food Programme (WFP)'s PRRO (Protracted Relief and Recovery Operations), or are in the process of escaping from siloes, such as the World Bank funding relief efforts in Somalia (Parker, 2017). Others fall under the hopeful initiative of the NWOW, with a focus on 'working over multiple years, based on the comparative advantage of a diverse range of actors, including those outside the UN system, towards collective outcomes' (OCHA, 2017: 6).

The move towards a whole-of-problem approach or NWOW requires pragmatic adaptation. A number of advances are already under way, but need more urgent adoption in order to arrive at an approach to humanitarian action that:

²⁴ See, for example, 'High-Level Workshop on the New Way of Working – Advancing Implementation', 13–14 March 2017, Copenhagen (<http://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/Copenhagen%20New%20Way%20of%20Working%20Outcome%20Note%20Final%20version.pdf>).

- Builds relationships between thematic sectors that yield more comprehensive approaches to programming. See for example the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, which melds a direct response to the immediate needs of refugees with a much more penetrating plan of action to deal with issues such as social cohesion and natural resource management (Scott, 2015). Ultimately, though, our proposal results in those thematic siloes being replaced at an operational level (though thematic siloes may be effective in maintaining ‘back office’ expertise/support).
- Eschews defining the effectiveness of its work by short-term project goals, with insufficient regard to its potential to build upon or reduce negative consequences for development efforts, and embraces the centrality of ‘smart’ relief, which reflects the structural causes of crisis and which seeks opportunities to capitalise on local capacity (Hilhorst and Pereboom, 2016: 98).
- Emulates, in specific operational terms, the ICRC’s policy of improving the future-friendliness of its response to crisis. This includes the development of multi-year approaches, deepening engagement with affected populations and securing ‘development holds’ against the backslide caused by conflict or disaster (ICRC, 2016: 6).
- Accelerates commitments to the inverse of development-friendly humanitarianism: relief-friendly development. Research by Save the Children in Niger highlights the necessity of aid supporting communities both ‘*in time and over time*’ (Matyas, 2016). The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has also done significant work in this direction (UNDP, 2009). The ‘repetitive, foreseeable nature of these shocks provides a rare opportunity to normalise adaptive development systems that can then seamlessly accommodate humanitarian support in terms of exceptional case-load or need’ (Matyas, 2016: 77): so, for example, dedicated budget lines that allow development projects to respond to known/common emergencies in a given context (see e.g. USAID, 2015). This approach can be labelled ‘developmental relief’ (Hilhorst and Pereboom, 2016), which is pre-emptive, as opposed to the approach of LRRD, which tends to link relief back to development after the fact.
- And, while beyond the scope of this paper, we note that if development programming is going to enter areas of crisis, it must relearn how to work in those environments, including managing security threats,

negotiating with armed actors and dealing with highly dynamic environments (Mosel and Levine, 2014: 18).

Let us be clear (and employ a caricature in order to make the point): having a weekly meeting between the humanitarian team and the development team is the least ambitious ‘new’ way of working, both a concession to the power of siloes and a reinforcement of them. Siloed programming is indeed a problem. But the greater problem may not lie in the organigrams of coordination and inter-disciplinary target-setting, but in the need to break down existing mentalities. Like the architecture of our institutions (from filing cabinets to global clusters), the compartmentalisation of our thinking reflects the primacy of disaggregated themes – health, nutrition, WATSAN, etc. – and nothing remotely resembling a whole-of-problem perspective.

5.2 Architecture and coordination

The whole-of-problem approach implies a shift to context-based (rather than expertise- or theme/sector-based) teams that are integrated across disciplines, where hammers who see a world of nails sit with wrenches who see a world of bolts, and where neither a hammer nor a wrench decides strategic priorities. This same architecture should be reflected in agencies themselves, reorganised in such a way as to give primacy to the contextualisation of an intervention, rather than to professional areas of expertise.²⁵ This implies, for example, a major (and long-resisted) change in how the United Nations organises itself within a country, moving away from a system of siloes reporting back to Geneva, Rome and New York, rather than to the Humanitarian Coordinator or to the leader of the government’s crisis management team. Ditto at project level. This focus on context also removes the blind spot in our interventions, which should be based as much on an assessment of needs as an assessment of the capacities of states and societies, rather than an assumption of their irrelevance.

This discussion of how the international community organises and coordinates its intervention should become almost irrelevant as localisation gains prominence, placing the international community under the control of national

²⁵ This arrangement need not apply to back offices and technical support, which could still fall into thematic departments where this is effective.

coordination. To the extent that the state will assume a position of leadership, it is then not within the dominion of the humanitarian system to decide on the coordination structures of its intervention, and we can leave behind coordination structures that rest on the misconception of humanitarian relief as an independent emergency services team. We envision the direct involvement of authorities/actors responsible for sectors such as the environment, development, peacebuilding and governance, national and, where necessary, international. In line with the aforesaid rescoping of humanitarian crisis, this crisis management structure will help us shift away from decades of foreign intervention to crisis response that is led and implemented by national and local actors, first within a crisis management structure and then reverting to government ministries. This follows from viewing needs in less pathological terms, prioritising a response to the causes of protracted crisis and placing greater emphasis on the humanity, legitimacy and accountability of a response controlled by local governments and communities.

This proposal should not be read as an endorsement of systemic attempts to enforce coherence and coordination. As suggested above, in developing a more basic, direct humanitarian action, coordination is a hurdle rather than a solution (see DuBois, 2016b). Notwithstanding the expectation that local states will follow the international model and establish centralised crisis management structures, this proposal sees as bankrupt the sector's repeated restructuring initiatives to further centralise planning and responsibility for outcomes. The perennial fantasy of a single, coherent intervention diverts time, money and people away from responsiveness and amounts to an exercise of inappropriate technology when applied to an ecosystem of independent actors; all the more so if enlarged to include other sectors. It is hence hamstrung by, rather than able to capitalise on, the diversity of the sector (ibid.: 19–20).

To be clear, this proposal regards the independence of the humanitarian system as crucial to its effectiveness – planning and coordination with peacebuilders and development institutions and efforts at good governance do not imply being subordinated to these other objectives and efforts. The specificity of humanitarian action – essential to the ability to negotiate with belligerent actors on the basis of the principles – can be preserved, while jettisoning 'misguided claims to exclusivity or superiority', with 'action defined through praxis, with specific,

pragmatic and principled adaptations to operations within a given context' (ibid.: 4).²⁶

The way forward also involves strengthening needs-based drivers and incentives so that such bureaucracies become unnecessary, as the underlying function of coordination and coherence is to 'compel' humanitarians to do what they are already obligated to do – address the most urgent needs. Localisation is one way to increase the direct influence of needs upon the system, and direct accountability to people affected by crisis. Rigorous accountability to impartiality by aid actors – to national governments and to agency boards of trustees – is another. This would obviate the need for a cumbersome coordination bureaucracy to identify and then direct agencies towards those most in need. In other words, impartiality, if implemented, acts as a 'market force' able to effect proper coverage of needs by a range of independent actors (in effect, an ecosystem). We support even more militant ideas to place financial control directly in the hands of affected communities, such as *A Design Experiment's* mutualisation of community choice (HPG, 2018: 100).

It goes without saying that this proposal has pros and cons. By placing greater emphasis on national leadership and implementation, by organising the system around contexts rather than themes/sectors, and by creating greater connectivity between decision-makers and the context, this proposal marks a choice for the advantages and disadvantages of contextualisation over the advantages and disadvantages of siloed approaches and disconnection; and hence to the weight of the crisis supplanting the weight of Geneva- or London-based institutional interest. That states will be in charge of crisis response even where they are a belligerent actor is intractably problematic, but is a less worse option than international governance. The requirement is for fresh thinking rather than knee-jerk isolationism and protection of the status quo.

5.3 The whole-of-society approach

In his analysis of the US healthcare system's response to the problems of an ageing population, Atul

26 ICRC President Peter Maurer: 'Pluralism has taken its toll on the humanitarian sector ... We are standing at the crossroads, between integration of the international response on one hand and the integrity of a principled humanitarian response on the other' (NRC, 2012: 12).

Gawande explains the absurdity – the heavy expense and poor outcomes/effectiveness – of responding to the elderly through a series of independent medical specialists (cardiologists, oncologists and so forth) (Gawande, 2014). At the heart of his analysis is the conviction that disjointed, separate interventions cannot successfully treat a complex organism. Put simply, the interconnectedness of a human body is not the interconnectedness of a house or an aircraft. And that is the first problem with the whole-of-problem approach or the NWOW: human society, even more than the human body, is massively complex. It may be superior to current approaches, but it nonetheless offers only a (more sophisticated) mechanical solution to the problems of wickedly complex adaptive systems.

The second problem with the NWOW is that it is only half new: new methods and relationships; same old siloes. We believe that it will yield better inter-disciplinary programming and a more effective response to crisis. Yet it leaves in place the sectoral siloes that constitute the central structural logic of the humanitarian and development systems (siloes not typically found in the more polyglot community NGOs of the global South). The system is organised around professional specialisation: hence a departmentalisation structured upon the personal power of aid givers will have to reorganise itself around the contexts and needs of aid recipients. Within operations, the ultimate goal of this proposal is to move from better-linked siloes to no siloes at all.

Importantly, localisation inherently favours an approach where context becomes the central building-block of the humanitarian system's operational architecture and decision-making structures. But localisation will prove insufficient in the absence of more fundamental changes. For example, building a whole-of-society approach means that the urgency of immediate needs cannot perpetually trump the importance of addressing their causes. This requires leadership to trump management, and restraint in the pursuit of short-term gain. It will require both vision and self-control to overcome the power of the immediate, to reject the deluded value system in which the imperative of immediate action trumps building development, development-friendly relief or engaging with local authorities, agencies and communities.

The humanitarian community and international media would do well to interrogate their roles in ensuring that the urgent obliterates the important – with advocacy/

media campaigns designed to shock, raise funds and push for urgent action, it is unsurprising that long-term objectives will be deprioritised or ignored by national governments and/or the international community. We question whether states would have the freedom to implement difficult resource allocations that 'sacrifice' the urgent for the sake of long-term goals without (unelected) humanitarian agencies loudly exerting pressure to counter such decisions and maintain their dominant position.

There are also ethical problems in the whole-of-problem approach: using the problems of a society as the filter through which to comprehend it forms the first step on the road towards excepting societal problems from a more complete picture. This humanitarianisation reduces people to their victimhood, and is hence a step away from the principle of humanity (see the discussion of happiness in Somalia in DuBois et al., 2018: 39). Lastly, the whole-of-problem approach described above marks a significant improvement over the status quo, but how do we celebrate its enormity of effort without losing sight of its insufficiency? Political and economic crises or MDD cannot be addressed by firefighters responding to a house on fire, not even well-coordinated ones who also work in ensemble with the police and ambulance services. If it takes an entire village to raise a child, it takes an entire society to respond to a crisis. Consider, for example, the complexity of Public Health England's plan for responding to a heatwave.²⁷ The plan involves businesses, care homes, housing authorities, environmental planners, community centres, religious institutions, non-governmental organisations and others, in addition to the National Health Service. In thinking about changing humanitarian action, Knox-Clarke astutely observes that we 'have much less control over change than we think' (Knox-Clarke, 2017). A whole-of-problem approach, then, should be designed as a way-station on the road to whole-of-society crisis response.

5.4 Funding

One key challenge to a whole-of-problem approach lies with the political bodies that fund the majority of humanitarian assistance.²⁸ Political pressure impedes

²⁷ See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/429384/Heatwave_Main_Plan_2015.pdf.

²⁸ This paper is not the place to address the sector's weak financial independence, nor is there value in reviewing here existing work on alternative funding mechanisms. Nor do we take the opportunity to argue that in the 'poor' countries of the world there is often ample wealth to finance crisis response.

institutional donor support for aid to unsavoury regimes or for non-strategic contexts, other than for urgent life-saving assistance.²⁹ In some ways, this proposal will require states to receive the great majority of donor funds. Can the major Western donors adequately fund development, disaster prevention or peacebuilding? Can they do this under a logic of development, rather than within a framework driven by stabilisation and security? Can they address prevention/causation rather than crisis/symptoms? The flip-side of the question is whether non-Western donors and, in particular, South–South donor funding can sustain the necessary programming, or whether states themselves can take up their responsibilities.

In light of the above, and building on the Grand Bargain, we call for a Grander Bargain. There are three components. First, and admittedly this is unrealistic, government aid donors eliminate the restrictions on non-emergency relief programming in so-called humanitarian crisis contexts, with the aim of broadening the response in terms of actors and programme content, while also ensuring that responders possess the appropriate skills and are meeting the full range of needs. Financially speaking, this proposal requires far less money to be placed into humanitarian action. The windfall can be shifted into the efforts of states and other actors to address underlying structural problems.

Second, a designated (and significant) proportion of institutional funding must go to multi-sectoral consortiums of aid responders acting in a given context and, preferably, build on the Grand Bargain

²⁹ Perhaps humanitarians and human rights agencies must engage in a dialogue on how pressure by human rights agencies against funding by Western governments to rights-violating regimes has led to the instrumentalisation of non-emergency aid.

through the direct inclusion of local authorities (i.e. consortiums that bring humanitarian action, development, peacebuilding etc. together). The purpose of this joint funding is not to create a single integrated intervention or to dictate a coherent plan of implementation (see the critique of coherence above), but to compel siloes to learn from one another at the planning and analysis stage, rather than coordinating later on implementation. Third, local organisations must be supported in developing private funding sources to build their financial independence and avoid their co-option and bureaucratisation by Western donor demands. In this, local agencies will have to capitalise on their home markets, winning the market share currently being colonised by ‘local’ branches of Western agencies (Usher, 2017), as well as entering the sophisticated markets of the West.

What’s in it for the donors? First, the Grander Bargain offers a rescoped humanitarian understanding of crisis, a more limited operational role and an emphasis on the directness of action. This will reduce considerably the total humanitarian budget at a time when prevailing political winds are blowing in the direction of cuts to aid budgets. Second, financial savings will be realised over time, through the greater attention paid to addressing causes. Government donors also gain because they are released from their historical role as world saviour (even if this also means a loss of soft power). Finally, based on an analysis of local markets, the support to local private fundraising and hence independence will increase long-term savings. We also note that this Grander Bargain, plus the main contours of this proposal, play to the strengths of the bulk of the formal humanitarian system’s key actors, as organisations such as World Vision, Save the Children, Oxfam and UNICEF are multi-mandate agencies, able to deliver a broad range of programmes beyond emergency relief.

6 Concluding analysis

6.1 What do the new humanitarian basics look like?

It would be unsurprising if the reader arrived at this point with a better idea of what this proposal is not, as opposed to what it is. To those inured to pages of concrete recommendations, this paper might seem empty. That is by design. The humanitarian enterprise has produced endless tables of recommendations. This proposal believes that a great deal of thinking and deconstruction must take place before we can move forward towards a new set of mechanics or programmes. That said, the question remains: what does this proposal look like?

6.1.1 Focused on a limited scope of crisis

On a global scale, humanitarian action will respond to a more circumscribed set of crises, cases where there is a substantial breach of national/communal response capacities and where humanitarian approaches (short-termist, assistential) are best-suited to address needs. It will, hence, have reined in its expansion into development, human rights, livelihoods, good governance etc. It will no longer dream of becoming a world ministry of welfare and social engineering, creating instead an ecosystem that capitalises on the idealists and campaigners who would save the world without building a culture of individual saviourism. To be more self-limiting, the sector will need to recognise and act upon the humanitarianisation of problems and its Western-centric pathologisation of the ways in which the ‘global South’ is not meeting standards set by the ‘global North’. Where it does respond, it does so not as an alibi under the misnomer of a ‘humanitarian crisis’, but as an overtly (insufficient) response to crisis.

6.1.2 Limited rather than expansive in its role

Alongside a less expansive view of crisis, the sector must also shrink its own role. Humanitarian action properly plays a temporary surrogate role in the place of the state or community. It must recognise its comparative disadvantages and stand back in situations of protracted crisis. To deal with the impact of localisation and the impact of standing

back in situations of protracted crisis, a system steeped in a sense of its own superiority and superhero status will have to discover humility.³⁰ As local and as developmental as possible, and as international and as humanitarian as possible makes for a perfect slogan, but much dismantling will be needed to make it a reality.

This proposal rejects the utopian vision of the World Humanitarian Summit, in which humanitarian action aims to end need. Rather, it grounds its intervention in triage, ensuring that its scarce resources respond to the most urgent cases of need. Even in periods of crisis, this means working towards inclusion, particularly at an operational level, such that addressing the needs of basic existence has become sensitive and complementary to the responsibility of the state and the greater range of needs related to community, wellbeing and human dignity. This constitutes the whole-of-problem approach, pushing local and international focus towards the political and economic crisis and away from its symptoms.³¹

6.1.3 An architecture based on the centrality of context and whole-of-problem response

This rescoped humanitarian action could benefit from many of the proposals currently under discussion across the aid world. In particular, this vision is inherent to and reinforcing of ambitions to ‘localise’ the leadership and management of the formal system’s crisis response. Consequently, it depends on states exercising ownership and expanding their investment in their institutional and human capacity; it depends upon local aid organisations becoming more effective, while not falling into the trap of reproducing the current system at a more local level. In terms of programmatic design, we argue for a default option of ‘smart relief’ that is development-sensitive, and that undertakes ‘development holds’ without adopting the objectives of development.

³⁰ See the Sidekick Manifesto, from the development side of things: <http://sidekickmanifesto.org/>.

³¹ That other domains (peacebuilding, development, etc.) may not be able to occupy the turf ceded by humanitarians – that the development gap will continue to generate humanitarian needs – is beyond the scope of this paper.

With regard to institutional funding, and building on the Grand Bargain, we call for a change to financing via the establishment of a Grand Bargain, whereby government aid donors will:

- open up funding streams (actually, transform siloed streams to open pools) for substantial non-emergency relief programming in crisis contexts (development, rule of law etc.);
- designate the majority of institutional funding to multi-sectoral consortiums of aid responders, with direct inclusion of local agencies and authorities; and
- support long-range strategic fundraising planning by local organisations, aimed at building self-sufficiency in terms of private donations.

Rather than suggest a new coordination structure, this proposal adopts the logic of existing international declarations (e.g. the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction) and new thinking (e.g. NWOW) in calling for coordination by national authorities, with the UN and other international agencies playing a supportive role. We call for a shift in the architecture of the system, from the primacy of themes/sectors to the primacy of context, to support a whole-of-problem approach in situations such as complex emergencies, and for coordination mechanisms that include a greater range of actors (e.g. development, governance, peacebuilding, environment).³² However, this proposal calls for abandoning the dream of centralised whole-of-intervention planning and coordination (i.e. the integrated framework), placing the emphasis instead on ensuring that the independence of the ecosystem's actors works as an advantage, with 'market forces' such as accountability and impartiality driving effectiveness and replacing bureaucratic approaches to coherence.

6.1.4 Direct and connected

This proposal champions a multidimensional directness of action that overcomes the increasing disconnection between the crisis response enterprise and crises themselves. As described above (Section 4.1), applying a metrics of directness to analyse the productivity of the output/work of the sector, we foresee a shrinking of the current system's machinery. We assume that much of the current Western-based

apparatus will be reborn in crisis-affected contexts, and in a manner more connected and accountable to the needs of crisis-affected people. We thus foresee current institutions being disabled as they cede from operations, replaced in part by local structures and in part by temporary profit/non-profit/government/community networks of expertise, support and responders. We therefore argue against what appears to be a prevailing assumption that the great bulk of the existing formal system should or will shift to support functions (e.g. development of guidelines, norms and standards, brokerage between actors, thematic expertise) (see e.g. Maietta et al., 2017).

Elevating the primacy of operations within the various headquarters of the system requires structures that promote productivity towards humanitarian aims, not bureaucratic ones. By way of a technical solution, a new 'best practice' in the selection of board trustees is necessary, ensuring that a robust majority of trustees possess experience in humanitarian action, replacing the all-too-common dominance of expertise in marketing or fundraising and appointments based on political or treasury connections.

6.1.5 Distinct, local (and international), principled

The principles exist to guide the decisions of humanitarian actors, and remain of paramount importance to the challenging process of negotiating access in contested contexts. They do not exist to ringfence access to institutional funding or maintain exceptionalism in crisis response. This proposal sees principled humanitarian action as a subset of broader relief aid efforts that complements the objectives of other sectors (peace, development, etc.) yet maintains a distinction based on the core principles and relief/emergency aid. Humanitarian action is thus not of greater value or legitimacy than other forms of intervention.

The principles need to be operationalised across the sector, bridging the gap between their definition and their impact. What do humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence look like in practice? How do we ensure that a reinterpretation of the principles takes place within a less inequitable balance of dogma and bias? This proposal draws much of its ethical impetus in the reinterpretation of the principle of humanity, such that it ceases to form a fundamental, un-lived assumption of a sector that emphasises victimhood and helplessness rather than human agency (see Section 6.2.4).

³² This proposal does not underestimate the complexities associated with such a set-up in a conflict situation, yet does not see a separated international intervention leadership and architecture as a viable model.

6.1.6 Humanitarian protection recentred around operations

Is assistance without protection inhumane? We believe it is. But we also believe that the changing humanitarian system and the changing political environment force us to rethink humanitarian protection. This proposal envisions capitalising on complementarity, and leaving much current public denunciation to the human rights workers and journalists, to local groups and a limited number of mandated agencies such as UNHCR, on refugee rights, and the ICRC, on specific issues of IHL such as the treatment of detainees. For other aid actors, the primary outlet for advocacy should be shifted to operations teams, and to a strategy/methodology of humanitarian engagement (rather than legalistic or journalistic engagement) with the actors responsible.

Building two-way (diplomatic) relationships with host governments, armed actors and local civil society requires appropriate human resources and commitment. Institutional donors will have to support these changes. That represents a change: ‘In order to combat political opposition to foreign aid, major donors have placed greater emphasis on concrete results, making it harder to fund processes aimed at dialogue and engagement, rather than outputs’ (HERE-Geneva, 2015: 7). It is precisely these resources for engagement that recent research in Iraq has shown are essential investments in understanding the context and understanding and changing local perceptions, two preconditions for agency security, access via negotiation and principled positioning (HERE-Geneva, 2017). It is at this level that we define the basics of humanitarian protection.

6.2 Deconstruction and the new humanitarian basics

This proposal seeks to initiate a dialogue on policy and practice aimed at changing the way the humanitarian system thinks about itself and its role, as well as the way the broader international community and crisis-affected people think about relief assistance and protection. Wisdom from the past is instructive.

[W]e are well aware that relief, which does no more than help the beneficiaries subsist, is at best a limited, short-term measure. At worst, it may even exacerbate the negative effects

(passivity, dependence, etc.) of present or future disasters. We must therefore reconsider the meaning and scope of our humanitarian activities. (ICRC, 1996).

To do that properly requires working at the level of the underlying structure and culture of the system. But what does that look like? Design theory suggests immersing oneself in the user experience. From the user standpoint, shifting the power dynamics of the humanitarian system might be a step towards ensuring that crisis-affected people become not just users but also ‘owners’ of the system. There is an urgent need to deconstruct a system in which the nominal beneficiaries of humanitarian aid can be viewed not even as users, but as products whose human misery is captured and ‘sold’ to donors in the form of project proposals. It is hence neither the time nor the task to make the status quo more effective. Even this proposal for a radical restructuring around the whole-of-problem approach retains too much of the status quo, and offers too incomplete a lens by which to intervene. There is no ‘fix’ or solution by which a society in crisis becomes problem-free, but rather we move forward by aiming towards a whole-of-society approach as the default. As one study pointedly concludes, ‘there are no incentives and few structural mechanisms for implementing the measures that humanitarian and development actors know would improve their effectiveness’ (Mowjee, 2015: 44). This exercise therefore began in the conviction that change consists in pairing a ‘solution’ with the weakening or deconstruction of the underlying dynamics that have blocked similar reforms in the past. So what does deconstruction look like?

We believe that the formal humanitarian system is neither dying nor being pushed towards irrelevance, but it is passing through a critical juncture in its evolution. Reformist agendas once again abound. And yet it is a complex adaptive system, meaning it changes through evolution rather than through planned manipulation. That is why internal efforts to control or engineer its own future have proven and will prove far less valuable than clearing the space into which a new humanitarian action can emerge, hence the emphasis on deconstructing the underlying architecture. Here are some ideas.

6.2.1 Shift the public narrative

The public narrative on foreign aid is inappropriate on any number of levels. Wrapped in appeals for money, it emphasises the heroism of the (Western)

aid giver organisations and whitewashed tales of life-saving programmes; an overly KISSed³³ explanation of crisis and of aid work, reduced to black/white contexts, good/evil political dynamics and problem/solution mechanics; a moralistic finger of accusation from the self-anointed guardians of global good, pointing at leaders, armies and the United Nations; an elitist, moralising dismissal of all those too 'selfish' or 'stupid' to understand the virtues of foreign aid as they struggle to find care for Aunt Agatha's cancer; and imagery that degrades humanity in the shocking depictions of suffering (or the newer trend of grateful, smiling aid recipients) combined with the invisibility of local crisis response ingenuity, dedication and skill. That may well be a caricature, but it is not a fiction.

Worse even than this narrative is the degree to which the formal system is hostage to the myth of its own nobility. News stories of aid mistakes, programme failures or unethical behaviour come as shocks to support for aid in the democracies responsible for much of its funding. The system needs a new narrative because it needs a new partnership with the public, one in which the difficulty of aid work is clear enough to expect and excuse failure, where help is given to people in crisis who are actively engaged in saving themselves, yet are still overwhelmed,³⁴ and where the moral authority of the sector comes from our compassion, humility and respect, rather than a hypocritical piety. We need a new narrative, for the public and for ourselves.

There are a number of ways forward, all of which involve short-term sacrifice in the name of long-term gain. Note that the narrative needs to shift, or it will be shifted for us by external forces. Across the sector, strategies of communications should promote aid rather than fundraising, with a clear response to aid scepticism. This means creating a dominant narrative that is faithful to the complexity of humanitarian action, its regular shortcomings (and successes) and the remarkable human agency that we find everywhere in the world. A new narrative requires engaging with the full range of public opinion, not just the aid choir. Aid agencies must leave the comfortable ground of

33 KISS – a common design principle turned guide for public messaging: Keep It Simple, Stupid.

34 Why have charities been able to raise major funds for the treatment of cancer and heart disease by emphasising the determination and agency of the sufferer, while humanitarian appeals seem stuck, one way or another, in the motif of the westerner as saviour?

like-minded media (e.g. *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*) and engage rather than dismiss those critical of foreign aid (e.g. *The Daily Mail* and Fox News). Building such an engagement has become increasingly problematic in some western countries, as the sector seems less politically and economically diverse, more a part of the liberal educated elite and perhaps lacking the credentials or sensitivity to engage with the broader public. Perhaps inroads can be made by identifying and engaging with the faith-based aid community, as they share our belief in aid and yet belong to 'their' communities. Another measure: funding and development of an agency whose sole function is to deploy teams to major crises and document, promote and communicate (interviews, film footage, reports, celebrity visits) on the efforts, activities and successes of local crisis responders, from ordinary citizens to local NGOs to the state.

6.2.2 How do we arrive at a new humanitarian mentality?

Internally, the main obstacle is essentially the mental fabric and self-interest of the formal humanitarian system. That suggests the need for prototyping some sort of collective therapy, or at least placing the heretofore *academic* deconstruction of the aid system into a more direct confrontation with the actual thinking and culture of humanitarian agencies. It is time for a translation, one that involves moving the research, analysis and reflection of deconstruction to the centre of the training, strategic planning and, ultimately, mindset of the sector's operations. Along with the shift in power dynamics discussed in preceding sections, replacing the Western top-down system with a more bottom-up one will require continued research and analysis into the implicit biases of the system, and then the development of approaches that can change attitudes (we assume that simple training cannot change mindsets). And given the contours of this proposal, the system needs to invest in and inculcate a commitment to triage. It also needs to produce leadership capable of articulating a vision that is pragmatic rather than utopian, and inclusive rather than exceptionalist.

We believe in the humanitarian equivalent of shock therapy. As a major policy initiative to address underlying power dynamics, we call for the development and implementation of South-to-North development aid, humanitarian action and capacity-building support. In effect, we call for a well-publicised humanitarianisation (problematism) of

the many crises in the global North. Such policies and programmes also begin to shift the prevailing charity model to one of an exchange among equals, where the North and South partner in ‘saving’ one another.

- Operations. Establishment of a Filipino medical and protection mission to address the pharmacalisation of American childhood,³⁵ complete with a lobbying campaign to establish a new emergency threshold for the percentage of children permitted to be on psychiatric drugs? Emergency psychosocial care teams deployed to combat youth suicide in New Zealand?³⁶ Cuban doctors to meet healthcare gaps among undocumented workers and migrants in Southern Europe? Indian teams to ensure dignified, qualified community care for the elderly in the United Kingdom?
- Capacity-building. Southern agencies to develop and offer accredited training programmes to the system’s core ‘Northern’ agencies, with a particular emphasis on experiential learning activities to decrease bias, paternalism and the impulse to cling to power. International agencies working in a country should be required to undergo capacity-building by local NGOs in terms of cultural, political and contextual awareness.
- Contextualisation. To address the gap in contextual understanding, this proposal suggests mandating a certain level of capacity and capitalising upon local organisations to ensure it. For example, national regulations that require key categories of foreign aid workers to demonstrate a grasp of the basic history, economics, politics and culture of that society.

6.2.3 A more global interpretation of the principles

In regard to the principles, the most critical component of their implementation is to reinterpret them in a less biased fashion. More scrutiny is needed of the beliefs – often presented as truths – within the formal sector regarding the principles: for example, the facile conclusion that the humanitarian principles are best preserved by state-avoiding methodologies, or the assumption that most local organisations (or staff) cannot be neutral or independent.³⁷ A preliminary

35 See e.g. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/big-pharmas-manufactured-epidemic-the-misdiagnosis-of-adhd/>.

36 See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-40284130>.

37 For an illustrative discussion of this issue, see Schenkenberg, 2016: 12ff.

question: are neutrality or independence required to establish trust and gain access for actors *already present* among crisis-affected populations? And then there is the irony, or perhaps straightforward bigotry, in the sector’s belief in its own civilised, rational objectivity, as contrasted with the easily influenced biases of local organisations – a belief that remains unshaken even as many Western INGOs and UN agencies position themselves as auxiliaries and partners of Western donor governments, even where the latter are belligerents in a given conflict.

At a deeper level, how do we address the power relations that generate the system’s heavy interpretive bias? For example, the very value (let alone *ideal*) placed on the ‘neutral’ foreigner would seem nonsensical if applied in reverse, to humanitarian relief in the west. Imagine a proposition that teams of Indians or Ghanaians should replace local councils in organising flood relief in, say, England. Yet we know that the decisions of English local authorities will likely be political rather than impartial, influenced by important local businesses, wealthy landowners and party politics. Nor did anyone suggest a need for ‘neutral’ Indian or Ghanaian managers of aid efforts during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Again, for a crisis occurring in *our* societies we hold the truth that a comprehensive understanding of the context is a prerequisite for aid work. For a crisis in *their* societies, contextualisation of programming remains aspirational, and a veritable contextual illiteracy often sits beneath programme decision-making, hence the reliance upon standardised processes. How do we arrive at a ‘truth’, for example, that operational neutrality is consistently unattainable without a deep (native?) understanding of the context? That neutrality requires the adroit navigation of a foreign entity in a complex environment, not foreignness?

6.2.4 Humanity defines humanitarian action, not the other way around

At the very least, this proposal will raise fundamental questions as to its consequences. Vested interests will see it as comprising a form of humanitarian austerity, a denial of the human compassion to respond to the suffering of others. And if issues related to the humanitarianisation of the problems of ‘Other’ societies (as opposed to our own and those like it) sit in our blind spot, how do we begin to think of them differently? By way of a simple illustration, how did the term ‘localisation’ come to define an initiative aiming to combat the sector’s *existing* localisation (i.e.

the greatly disproportional localisation of power in the West)? Those questions suggest the complexity of the discussions to come. Those discussions, however, will have to avoid being hijacked by technocratic detail or narrowed to logframe-fitting notions of effectiveness. Humanity may help.

As Andrew Thomson points out, the humanitarian principle of humanity is the only one with the power to decolonise (Thompson, 2015). That may help explain why it remains assumed rather than interrogated in a top-down, highly inequitable humanitarian system. It is not a coincidence that Larissa Fast identifies three ‘transformational practices and everyday actions’ to operationalise humanity: ‘affirming local context and capacity; adopting vertical and horizontal accountability; and valuing proximity and presence’ (Fast, 2015: 124), and that these almost perfectly reflect calls for the localisation (read: decolonisation) of humanitarian action. That is necessarily first and foremost a discussion of ethics and power, not effectiveness. Put differently, and as was the case with political decolonisation, the sector needs a different framework through which to ask if it is doing the right things.

The principle of humanity also grounds this alternative vision in an ethic of the fundamental human dignity residing within each individual, and therefore bearing

the right to self-determination and the ability to possess at least some degree of power over the forces affecting life itself. Enter the humanitarian machine at a time of crisis, wielding its monopoly power over decision-making as to who will live or die. That is an inherently abusive power when it remains unaccountable for its decisions, such as its determination of who will and (especially) who will not receive aid. This is sovereign power being held by a non-sovereign body. Localisation thus represents a choice for identity and humanity over a heavily institutionalised internationalism.

By rescoping the conceptualisation of crisis, by locating crisis response much more within an affected population and within programming designed to address the causes of their suffering, the sector comes closer to a ‘decolonisation’ – a transfer of power not merely from international to local agencies, but also from a ‘global’ to a home society. This is the root of the whole-of-society approach. Effectiveness and efficiency are thus subordinated to the ethical principle by which people should not just hold power over the crisis response in their community (or have accountability for the lack thereof), but hold the power to get it wrong and the right to struggle to improve. That power rejects the toxic paternalism seeking to protect foreign people from their own failings, and yet allows no recourse for its own.

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