

Leadership and humanitarian change – why more collaboration and transformation is needed

March 2023

GELI GLOBAL
EXECUTIVE
LEADERSHIP
INITIATIVE

CHA CENTRE FOR
HUMANITARIAN
ACTION

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This publication is a compilation of papers presented at the “Berlin Thought Leadership Lab“ in November 2022 on the topic “Leadership for an Ever-Changing World: Amplifying Collaboration and Transformation within the Humanitarian Sector”, jointly organised by the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI) and the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA). The event and this publication were kindly funded by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO).



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Preface

We live in very troubling times. According to the Global Humanitarian Overview of the United Nations, at the beginning of the year 339 Mio. people will be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023. And the recent devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria added to this already dire situation.

Germany, together with our partners, is already contributing to help people in need worldwide - as the second largest humanitarian donor, but also in bringing forward innovative ideas to make the system more effective.



Leadership is of the essence in order to steer the humanitarian system through these difficult times.

As the gap between the rising needs and necessary funding continues to grow, the UN and other humanitarian partners are struggling to deliver what is needed, as well as reaching the most vulnerable. In this situation, leadership within humanitarian organizations is of the essence in order to steer the humanitarian system through these difficult times.

The Global Executive Leadership Initiative, GELI, helped with exactly that - initiating a learning programme that is designed exclusively for senior leaders. Several research institutes have gathered evidence of the numerous challenges humanitarian leaders face today, such as implementing humanitarian principles in challenging environments, guaranteeing a local approach as much as possible, or being accountable to people in need and donors alike.

On 22 November 2022, GELI and the Berlin-based Centre for Humanitarian Action, CHA, brought together researchers, experts and humanitarian practitioners in Berlin to discuss new approaches and ways to adapt leadership policies. This publication is a compilation of the findings and take-aways of the discussion above.

I wish you interesting reading and some new ideas on how to ensure good humanitarian leadership.



*Susanne Fries-Gaier
Director Humanitarian Assistance,
German Federal Foreign Office
February 2023*

Introduction



I am delighted to see this publication coming together, presenting some original, evidence-based, field-driven, bottom-up research, conducted by six think tanks/researchers with a sole focus on the role of leadership in the humanitarian sector. It is a subject that is both close to my heart and of particular interest to me as a leader in humanitarian operations most recently in Libya and Syria and as current Executive Director of the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI).

The insights and challenges of leadership in some of the most complex environments in the world have been expertly picked out, dissected, and investigated by leading researchers from some of the most respected research institutions in the world, and they have demonstrated their knowledge and expertise in real world leadership challenges. I was intrigued to read the papers that make up this publication, and I recognized in them the issues and complexities that I have confronted in my own career. It proved to be well-crafted, relevant and an enjoyable read.

The papers in this publication, were presented at the Berlin “Thought Leadership Lab” event, co-hosted by The Global Executive Leadership initiative (GELI) and the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA), with the generous support from the German Federal Foreign Office in November 2022.

The event, under the theme of “Leading in a Changing World: Strengthening Cooperation and Transformation in the Humanitarian Sector”, provided an opportunity for humanitarian practitioners to have an honest discussion on some of the challenges and opportunities faced in the sector. I immediately recognized the challenges from my personal experiences, and reflected on the importance of discussing these issues to help our current leaders operate as effectively as possible. The event and the book are both timely and relevant, and the outputs professionally delivered by some of the most credible humanitarian researchers from international think tanks including HERE, KONU, ALNAP, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, ODI, and CHA.

There is a need for humanitarians to have a safe space, to sit back, reflect and exchange with the view to improve the work we do. This is something we do not do often enough. These critical reflections and discussions are needed, and it is a healthy practice to help us improve our work. The aim is to ultimately inform, influence, and guide global policy discussions, to better help leaders overcome their recurrent challenges, and deliver more effective operations. Being a humanitarian worker is the ultimate privilege, and to deliver with excellence and with compassion requires a special set of skills and an ability to put the people we serve at the center of our work at all times.

There is a need for humanitarians to sit back, reflect and exchange with the view to improve the work we do. The complexity of humanitarian work has increased significantly in the past years.

The humanitarian and development sector has grown exponentially in the past years. The complexity of our work has also increased significantly requiring more refined skills in a system that is not been designed in an optimal way, testing operational leaders to the extreme. The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has grown from around 80 million people in 2014 to 274 million in 2022. But the funding required to run these life-saving and critical operations has not kept pace with the growth, putting more pressure on leaders to innovate and evolve with the world that is changing it a faster pace than the sector. As humanitarians we always tend to do the same movements and we have a one-size-fits-all approach. Hence the importance of these discussions and this publication.

The idea of the leadership research lab derived from the fact there is very little published research on the role of leadership and the challenges faced in the humanitarian sector. Much less than the private sector and the business world, at least.

The need to focus on leadership and soft skills is what led to the creation of the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI) in 2020. GELI is the only leadership development organisation, that brings together senior leaders in a true spirit of collaboration to learn together, develop new skills and co-create solutions to the challenges they face through a range of training courses and support services. The idea of the leadership research lab derived from the fact there is very little published research on the role of leadership and the challenges faced in the humanitarian sector. Much less than the private sector and the business world, at least.

As part of GELI's programs, The Leadership Research Lab was created to utilise the information and evidence collected through local sessions to identify common issues which leadership faces in different operations; and identify trends that are worthy of dedicated research so that we can understand them better and find solutions. The research papers published by all six organisations facilitated the roundtable discussion with the generous support of the German Federal Foreign Office. Through the eyes of six leaders, researchers and practitioners, the chapters delve into each research paper accentuating the emerging leadership challenges and opportunities which were explored in their field-driven research over the year:

Kate Gilmore, from the **Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation**, takes us in her paper through the very important topic of ethical and principled leadership, determining the definition of “daring” leadership, a combination of moral courage and inner strength, qualities on which the exercise of ethical or principled leadership depends. Ethical leadership is vital in our sector, as values and principles present the core foundation of the humanitarian work. They guide us through challenging moments and ground us in ensuring principled action that requires courage by the leadership.

John Mitchell, former director and now special advisor at **ALNAP**, and humanitarian strategist **Ben Ramalingam** define humanitarian leadership and the critical role it plays in the learning and reforms that our system needs. The strategic placement behind resource gaps - which range from coordinating aid delivery to improving accountability to advancing localisation - demands the realisation of exceptional leadership. And yet, there does not seem to be a clear sense of what leadership actually is.

Darina Pellowska, a research fellow at **CHA**, investigates how localisation-focused policies and commitments have been abundant, especially since the World Humanitarian Summit, but are less applied in the reality of field operations. The paper identifies ways in how to achieve the collective objective, which was and is to strengthen leadership of local and national NGOs in humanitarian action and treat them as equal partners.

Ed Schenkenberg and **Karin Wendt**, Executive Director and Researcher at **HERE-Geneva**, explore the intersection between collective ambitions and individual agency within the leadership space. The paper looks at some of the factors that accentuate and reward the performance of individual agencies and NGOs, but precisely undermine collective leadership and performance in the system to the detriment of people affected by crises. In fact, evidence suggests that commitments since the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain agreement have not translated into reality.

Gemma Davies, Senior Research Fellow - and **Mark Bowden**, a humanitarian field leader in multiple operations and Senior Associate for the Humanitarian Policy Group at **ODI**, both investigate how leadership plays an essential role in setting the direction to strengthen protection within the humanitarian sector.

Michael Koehler, CEO of **KONU** and adjunct lecturer at Harvard School of Education, launched the 2021 Field Leadership Labs, jointly offered by GELI and the UN Development Coordination Office, to support leadership teams to work more effectively together. Michael’s research brings us stories from the field and explores some of the common challenges of collaborative leadership/systemic leadership that leaders face in different countries. The Leadership Labs took place in Pakistan, Philippines, Bangladesh, and Somalia.

A big thank you to the collaborative work that has been put in together by CHA working closely with GELI, our authors behind the research at HERE, KONU, ALNAP, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, ODI, and CHA and the absolutely generous support from the German Government, particularly Susanne Fries-Gaier, Director Humanitarian Assistance of the German Federal Foreign Office.

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February 2023*



Berlin Thought Leadership Lab

10 November 2022

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Contributing research institutions

ALNAP

Strengthening humanitarian action
through evaluation and learning

ALNAP stands for the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action. It is a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, donors, academics, networks and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve response to humanitarian crises.



The Centre for Humanitarian Action e.V. (CHA) is a think tank founded in 2018 in Berlin, Germany, which engages in independent analysis, initiates debates and spreads the word about humanitarian action and principles amongst the general public. CHA sees itself as a bridge between academia and practice and is funded by membership fees, academic grants, and project assignments.



Dag Hammarskjöld
Foundation

The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation is a non-governmental organisation established in memory of the second Secretary-General of the United Nations. The Foundation aims to advance dialogue and policy for sustainable development, multilateralism and peace.



Founded in 2014, the Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE-Geneva) is an independent organisation that examines the gaps between humanitarian policy and practice. Our Geneva-based team of experienced researchers and analysts is dedicated to building evidence and putting forward constructive analyses of where the gaps are, and where gains can be made for governments and agencies to fulfil their humanitarian responsibilities and commitments.



Dalberg Advisors is a strategic advisory firm focused solely on economic development and social justice. KONU is an international firm focused on leadership development and change management. As mission-driven organizations, KONU and Dalberg have both worked with many of the key players in the humanitarian and development space on issues of systems thinking, strategic planning, leadership coordination, and catalyzing innovation across the development / humanitarian / peace nexus.



The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams working on humanitarian issues. They are dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate. HPG is part of ODI, an independent, global think tank, working to inspire people to act on injustice and inequality. Through research, convening and influencing, ODI generates ideas that matter for people and planet.

How dare you?

by Kate Gilmore

When addressing the 2019 UN Climate Conference, Greta Thunberg demanded of world leaders failing to address the climate crisis decisively, simply: 'How dare you!': '*... People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!*'¹

'How dare you!' stands out. An exclamation of acute frustration, the phrase can also be more interrogative, meaning something akin to: 'How do you dare do what you do?' It's a leading question and a question for all leaders.

Thunberg's pungent assessments give words to what millions feel, yet few dare articulate. Her summation that, in response to the climate crisis, world leadership is just so much '*blah blah blah*'² is perhaps her best known, but '*how dare you!*' is a clarion call, striking an alarm bell whose peal should resound far and wide.

Greta Thunberg herself is a global leader. As yet she holds neither high-level office nor post-graduate credentials. She oversees no institution and has no institutional resources to deploy. Nonetheless, she dares to lead. Initially, she did so by the sheer moral force of her example. Then it grew and spread from there into what is now a global platform of action - 'Fridays for the Future'.³ As a result of her daring, Thunberg has inspired and mobilised hundreds of thousands of her peers, and others, the world over.

If her gaze was to turn to leaders' efforts to address other global threats, would her assessment, or that of her peers, be any different? Their assessment of leaders' efforts for poverty eradication, or to end vaccine nationalism? Of efforts to eradicate inequalities, eliminate discrimination, end impunity, reject armed conflict or to establish effective governance of new technologies and of new weaponry?

With the Doom's Day Clock set at just 100 seconds to midnight, Thunberg's challenge should already be heeded more broadly beyond the few seated at the UN's top decision-making tables, important as those leaders are.

Those are interconnected global concerns too of course, and increasingly so: interconnected one with the other, and entangled now with the global climate crisis also. And all their warning signs are flashing red-hot. With the Doom's Day Clock⁴ set at just 100 seconds to midnight, Thunberg's challenge should already be heeded more broadly beyond the few seated at the UN's top decision-making tables, important as those leaders are.

How dare we?

How dare we lead? During accelerating global crises exacting awful local costs? When, thanks to man-made exploitation, natural resources are rapidly shrinking⁵ yet evidence mounts daily of our interdependence with other species and their habitats?⁶ When commitments to resolve historical and structural injustices - between and within countries - are evaporating⁷, yet public and private funding for new arms races, even newer space-races, escalate?⁸ When UN goals for sustainable development are trumped by national goals for economic growth - for inequality-deepening, unsustainable growth?⁹

How dare UN leaders do what is needed now and for tomorrow? How dare they lead in the interests of generations to follow, not merely for the generation to which they belong?

What makes for 'daring' leadership of the kind that our world of accelerating change needs, but is so often left



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Rather, as a positive state, daring is the combination of moral courage and inner strength

wanting? The research suggests that leadership *daring* is not about more risk-taking; it's not more dare-devilry. Rather, as a positive state, *daring* is the combination of *moral courage* and *inner strength*; qualities on which the exercise of *ethical* or *principled* leadership depends¹⁰; qualities in high demand when uncertainty is high too.¹¹

Daring should be a quality for which UN leaders are selected and elevated and that UN organisations should foster, encourage, and reward. It raises a fundamental question: Is *daring* embedded sufficiently in the UN's human resources, management, and leadership systems? Is *daring* discernibly part and parcel of the operational policies and practices that govern leader selection, performance assessment, professional development, reward and advance? It should be. After all, in essence, that's what the 'UN System Leadership Framework' promises.¹²

But *daring* is not just some esoteric characteristic. Guideposts for its exercise can be quite practical. Daring leaders will go wherever evidence-based assessment of critical issues and their contributory factors leads. Apply up-to-date technical knowledge and pay close attention to applicable values and standards, policies, regulations as well as the law. Refer to, but don't mindlessly defer to, relevant precedents. Identify and consult with groups most affected by the decisions to be made. Be frank about the available options and their various likely consequences. In *daring*, leadership and self-examination is key. Honestly probe inner fears and desires to guard against distortions out of ego and self-interest. Sustain your energy and maintain the focus needed to stay the course. Take responsibility for whatever actions you take and be prepared to be held accountable for that. Monitor implementation and evaluate it transparently, so that any distances between the actual, as compared to the intended, outcomes are revealed and examined.¹³

In other words, opportunities for UN leaders to be more *daring* present daily. But the reality is that leading is rarely that systematic. It is frequently an amorphous and fragmented business. Often dispersed across issues, forums, systems and colleagues, and then exercised in sequences that all combine to undermine systematic approaches. This can work to drive a leader away from loyalty to the best outcomes. On top of that, often leaders' decisions must be taken quickly without the time to process them in more ideal ways. Frequently, decisions must be made without sufficient, or even despite conflicting, information and under stressful and pressurised organisational and political circumstances.

That's why the personal and professional idiosyncrasies of the individual leader matter.¹⁴ Indeed, fostering *daring* in leaders may be less about decision-making logic

or frameworks and more about a leader's moral posture and demeanour or, what the research calls, their *moral courage* and *inner strength*.

The exercise of *daring* requires *moral courage*. That in turn depends on *inner strength*, which is the fuel of leaders who dare.

[the CEO] was a hard man not to like. His deliberately ... modest manner... built a deep reservoir of goodwill among those who worked for him. He remembered names, listened earnestly, seemed to care about what you thought. But ... he cared deeply about appearances, he wanted people to like him, and he avoided the sort of tough decisions that were certain to make others mad. His top executives ... knew that as long as they steered clear of a few sacred cows, they could do whatever they wanted. And as we all know, many of them did.

An account of leadership by the CEO of US energy giant, Enron, the subject in 2001 of the world's largest ever bankruptcy case. (Mclean, B., Elkind, P.; *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron*; Penguin, 2013, pg. 3).

Moral courage

Moral courage is not a calculus of the danger to be faced, nor is it feeling less fear. It is not reduced to one's own moral code, or personal judgement as to the *morality* of an issue. Rather, it involves a leader's *moral clarity* about the depths of the wrongs they are to right - such as the wrongs of rights abused or betrayed. The deeper those wrongs, the more *daring* the leadership should be.

For UN leaders, courage thus is both taking the UN's moral code to heart, and speaking up clearly for it.

The word '*courage*' has its root in '*cor*', the Latin for '*heart*'. Its original meaning was not a rallying cry to heroics, but an invocation to '*speak one's mind by telling one's heart*'.¹⁵ For UN leaders, *courage* thus is both taking the UN's moral code to heart, and speaking up clearly for it.

That code is made explicit by the UN Charter, set out in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and has been elaborated upon, over decades, in human rights treaties, declarations, and countless resolutions of the General Assembly. *Daring* UN leaders are those that can not only clearly see the crossroads between right(s) and wrong(s), as defined by that code. They are those who have the courage to turn always towards right(s), even if doing so is against their own comfort, preference or self-interest, e.g., their popularity or future prospects for elevation.

‘Thou shall not be a perpetrator, thou shall not be a victim, and thou shall never, but never, be a bystander’.

Concluding passage, address to the German Bundestag, Yehuda Bauer, 27 January 1998.

When UN leaders are not *daring*, dissonance is created with the organisation’s values and, arguably, its aims and purposes. When such contradiction is visible to others, the risks of damage to the UN’s credibility, and thus its effectiveness, further mounts. That said, it is the *immoral* leader alone who wreaks havoc. As high-profile cases elsewhere demonstrate, an immoral leader’s misconduct or mendaciousness may even unite others in clearer opposition to just that.

However, if as they navigate complexity, leaders opt to remain silent or avoid communicating about values, norms, and standards, are they indirect or inconsistent in their application of those principles in their daily work? While they may not be *immoral* as such, they are likely to be seen to be *amoral*.¹⁶

Amoral leaders do more than discourage principled, courageous efforts by others.

Amoral leaders - those not anchored discernibly in values, who act with indifference to core principles or who invent their own to suit themselves, so more than discourage principled, courageous efforts by others.¹⁷ In other settings, such leaders have been found to act as vectors for the spread of unprincipled conduct.¹⁸ Particularly, in workplaces where values are core to their organisation’s identity, as is the case for the UN, leaders whose posture or approach is devoid of, or ambiguous about, their organisation’s values are likely to be detrimental to staff, systems, and results.¹⁹

When the war in Vietnam was going badly, many people did not resign or speak out in public, because preserving their ‘effectiveness’ — ‘a mysterious combination of training, style, and connections’ — as Thomson defined it — was an all-consuming concern. He called this ‘the effectiveness trap’.

Thomson, C.J., ‘How Could Vietnam Happen? An Autopsy’, *The Atlantic*, April 1968, as cited in Applebaum, A., ‘History Will Judge The Complicit’, *The Atlantic*, July/August 2020.

That’s a challenge for the UN, and specifically for its civil service. The UN cannot afford to have leaders treat its values as accessories: adorned for special occasions but discarded in operations’ daily settings. Values don’t work only performatively: displayed if convenient to do so, but then muted, distorted, or betrayed when politics or circumstances so entice. For the sake of the system’s in-

herent integrity, to better limit a broader seep and reach of unethical conduct, UN leaders - without exception - should *dare* to demonstrate - quotidian and in word and deed - an unambiguous and unwavering adherence to the values and norms on which the UN, by Charter, is founded. That is not some lofty, idealistic expectation; it is a signpost towards greater impact.

How does - how might - the UN better foster, encourage, and reward *moral courage* in its leaders; the courage to dare to adhere fully to its core values? How is ‘*speaking one’s mind by telling one’s heart*’ valued among and by UN leaders?

Inner strength

Moral courage is not enough on its own.²⁰ For *daring* in leadership, *inner strength* is also essential. If both moral courage and inner strength coexist in a leader, the research suggests that, not only is a leader’s own behaviour likely to be more ethical, but so too is that of those they lead. Furthermore, a leader’s ‘in-role’ performance is found to improve and, intriguingly, it also helps foster ‘*greater psychological flourishing*’ for all.²¹

The inner strength to resist opting for the merely popular or conventional, to speak up where others are silent, to stand up when even superiors fail to, to confront rather than concede to the system’s sponsors - to its funders or political partners; to resist those who by power of their influence would purchase compromise of principles: in such times, for UN leaders, *moral courage* is a GPS²² by which to chart principled pathways, but *inner strength* is the fuel for the journey.

‘It’s a deeply personal question ... The longest journey is the journey inwards. Of him who has chosen his destiny, who has started upon his quest, for the source of his being’.

Dag Hammarskjöld as cited in Erling B., *A Reader’s Guide to Dag Hammarskjöld’s Waymarks*; Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2011, pg. 58.

The courage to perform - consistently and visibly - to standards requires the capacity (and the effort) to stay strong within oneself - to attain, maintain, and sustain for the duration, well-being, including mental well-being. If a leader’s well-being depletes, their inner strength or resolve is more likely to weaken. A weakened resolve means a weakened ability to ‘*resist ... temptation and to stand up and take action against ... the wrong thing*’.²³ That’s a timely reminder of the relatively untapped contribution that well-being (and its absence) makes to workplaces, and a pointed message about the importance of leaders taking (and being seen to take) active personal responsibility also for their own well-being, no matter the level at which they serve.

This is a long-neglected dimension of leadership, nonetheless research now concludes that the key to the personal well-being on which inner strength depends, is self-care. Training and coaching can help a leader develop the required self-care skills to prevent depletion and renew inner strength; to build up *'moral muscle'*.²⁴ Taking a practical approach to self-care also matters. Such as getting enough rest, maintaining fitness and building a quality of lifestyle. Even sustaining blood glucose levels have been found *'to help preserve reserves of self-control for ethical leaders'*.²⁵ Support systems play an important part too. Working with the help of *'Aides, associates, friends or family members who will save us from ourselves'*.²⁶

Daring again can be quite a practical matter. It involves the desire or the will *'to generate responsibility and motivation to take moral action in the face of adversity and persevere through challenges'*.²⁷ Thus, it is not only a question of the *courage* to follow wherever UN principles lead, but of perseverance in doing so by sustaining the *inner strength* for the tough journey's *daring* demands.

That said, *daring* is also 'ecological'. It's not just about individual leaders alone. The fuller challenge, to generate UN leadership better suited to our times, involves the organisation itself and the expectations it has of its leadership. As Gifford et al put it, leadership is not merely about the quality of the 'apples', but of the 'barrels' that hold them and the contexts or 'situations' they are expected to confront.²⁸ To paraphrase: Is an absence of *daring* the result of:

- *Bad apples?* i.e., individuals making bad choices, OR
- *A bad barrel?* i.e., a systemic or organisation-wide failure or culture of ingrained behaviour? OR
- *Sticky situations?* i.e., the difficult, often compromising, nature of decisions that leaders so frequently face?²⁹

In leadership - the barrel matters, not just the apples

The 'barrel' matters. If the organisation's policies, instructions, and technical guidance are ambiguous about the application of values or otherwise undermines their exercise, then the UN 's leaders' and its staff's loyalty to those principles is set adrift. If the organisation's culture is to encourage and reward only 'yes-people' rather than the *daring*, or fails to signal clearly that it 'has the back' of its leaders when they stand up for principles, or fails to provide clear and accessible protections if leaders face threats, intimidation and bullying of the kind for which some Member States are infamous, then again it is *daring* that will be among the first casualties.³⁰ As will be the case where the informal culture frowns on or belittles efforts to promote well-being, or it means a lack of disciplined action by leaders and all staff to sustain their well-being.

If the organisation's culture is to encourage and reward only 'yes-people' rather than the daring, then again it is daring that will be among the first casualties.

Furthermore, UN leaders are, of course, also the led. What they see when they look 'up' is important to what they demand when they look 'down' the hierarchy. To propel all leaders to greater *daring*, a visibly strong and constant alignment, and cascade of expectation consistent with *daring*, is needed across all levels, from the top executives to front-line staff.³¹ And for that, it would be wise to ramp up investment in selecting, training and commissioning both the led and their leaders to speak up about the organisation's values confidently and not selectively. To find ways to engage consistently with the organisation's values and norms and to apply them coherently, particularly in the 'sticky situations' - the sensitive or complex or controversial situations - that so often fall under the purview of UN leaders. It would also be smart to strengthen integration of affirmative expectations of and support for mental and physical well-being among all leaders across the system and at all duty stations.

Sticky situations are no excuse; they are why we need daring leaders

However, it is situational complexity - or the 'stickiness' of situations that UN leaders confront - which frequently is offered in excuse for their compromises on values. Human rights concerns, for example, may be deemed too 'sensitive' or 'controversial' to raise with those in power. Upholding UN values in the messages of formal demarche may be deemed too confronting. That a Member State or development partner will be open to advice based on core principles, rather than expediency, may be dismissed as unrealistic. But are those moments more a question of smart tactics or strategy, rather than unassailable grounds on which to justify a betrayal of principles? When is self-censorship just self-comforting?

Simple and routine situations do not need leaders. Once the technical guidance is in place and the priority has been set, most good people can lead themselves perfectly well. However, it is precisely in the 'stickiest situations' that leadership moments emerge - moments requiring *daring* leadership that is.

Look out for the leadership moments that sticky situations offer. Be alert to and create and expand those spaces to make a difference; spaces to be prised open wherever cracks are found in dense walls of resistance and *'There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in, where the light gets in.'*³²

For whom are we daring to lead?

For moral courage there must be moral purpose. For moral purpose to propel forward, it must be rooted in a moral consequence or, in other words, in moral accountability. It is here that the UN has, if you like, a 'superpower': a powerful energy to be handled with care. That superpower is contained in the answer to a tough question: *To whom are UN leaders ultimately accountable?*

Most organisations accept the need for financial accountability to donors or investors; programme accountability to partners; the accountability of the subordinate to the bosses. Audited accounts, annual reports, executive boards, 360-degree performance appraisals: all play their part at the UN, but none addresses that deeper question. To whom are the UN leaders morally answerable for their legacy – that which they create, those whom their decisions affect, what they leave behind? How is that answerability manifested, managed, and adjudicated in the UN?

The UN's Charter opens, of course, with 'We the Peoples'.

The UN's Charter opens not with *'We the Member States'* or *'We the Donors'*. It does not open with *'We the Development Partners'* or *'We the Leaders'* or *'We the International Civil Servants'*. It opens, of course, with *'We the Peoples'*. How is their distinctive authority - the authority of the peoples of the world - as voiced by the UN Charter - distinctively manifested?

The UN's politicians may consider it redundant, if not outright problematic, to attempt to channel the organisation's accountability directly to the world's peoples rather than only through Member States' representatives, e.g., the diplomats or national ministers of the governments of the day. But *daring* UN leaders should understand their ultimate accountability to be rooted differently.

Programmatically, for example, ultimate accountability starts and ends with intensive efforts to ask, listen, and take on board as mission-critical, the opinions, preferences, and choices of the beneficiaries whom UN programmes serve. In both humanitarian and development settings, appreciating that targeted populations are rights-holders is thus an obligation of the first order. The UN is a duty-bearer, for whom adherence to norms, standards, evidence, and transparency of action to those whose lives it affects must surely be its bread and butter.

When a doctor loses sight of their patients' needs, and answers first or only to income? When a lawyer cares less for the rights of their client and more about their billable hours? When a journalist worries more about social media hits than about authoring factual copy? When a UN leader lobbies for the award of a more senior post in answer for long service, seeking to bypass competitive and impartial selection? When a UN leader is elevated to higher leadership, not on

merit, but because their home country or a regional grouping insisted upon it? Does each scenario not reveal a similar troubling failing: a failure to remain loyal foremost to those whom leaders are duty bound to serve first?

The driving force that can most powerfully congeal a courageous ecology for daring in UN leadership is surely to be found in a clear, unambiguous answer to the question of *'On whose behalf do we dare to lead?'* Its practical tests should be rooted in such as *'Whose assessment of us matters the most?'* A much-needed development within UN practice and methodologies is just that. The placement of more investment of resources, time, and effort in direct and material accountability to those whom it serves as expressed in *'We the Peoples'*. In addition, far greater use should be made of the results of those efforts as tangible evidence of the moral authority that the UN can then choose to wield authentically as a 'superpower' - the UN's unmatched moral accountability which converts to true authority, if fulfilled.

Conclusion

When among the world's 'top' leaders, and their pretenders waiting in the wings, there are so many willing to treat universal norms and legal standards, fact and science, not as guide-stars, but like poker-chips in a populist power game; when global decision-making tables are intentionally enfeebled and, in every region, nativist nationalism is on the rise: How dare we lead?

We should not forget that the UN was forged in tough, not prosperous, times. It was forged amidst global chaos and under the shadow of the very worst that human beings can do to one another. Its authors were not realistic, they were *daring*. Which realist would have ever drafted the UDHR?

In our times - crisis and anxiety ridden, unpredictable times - it is time to repurpose UN leadership more coherently and comprehensively to do exactly as the UN Charter promises - to be daring. In fulfilment of that mission, leadership is not rank, it is responsibility.

But take heart. In darkest of hours, at the worst of times, with the future threatened more than inspired and although self-interest has pulled hard away towards self-comfort, there are still those who chose to dare. How dared they?

... If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own—which it is—and render impassable with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber. For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.

Baldwin, J., 7 January 1971, An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis, The New York Review

In South Africa, medical student and anti-Apartheid activist Steve Biko dared lead. He was repeatedly imprisoned

and ultimately killed in detention for organising resistance to his country's racially segregated healthcare system; a segregation that can be traced back to the 1900s outbreak of the bubonic plague³³: Biko dared leading and lost his life nearly two decades before the world saw a post-Apartheid South Africa.³⁴

British physician Judith Mackay dared lead. Among the first to speak up against the dangers of smoking, she was publicly branded '*psychotic human garbage*' and a '*power-lusting piece of meat*' by those multinational tobacco companies who helped to fund multi-million dollar campaigns to discredit her and her research.³⁵ She dared lead us to understand that public health for all matters so much more than profits for the few.

In February of 2021, a Russian police captain dared to resign rather than obey orders to restrain and detain those peacefully protesting state corruption and impunity: '*I am ashamed to wear this uniform because I realize it is covered in blood,*' he said, tossing it into a dumpster. He dared lead us to appreciate the rule of law as protection of the rights of the people, not protection of the interests of the powerful.³⁶

A little later on, but many miles away, a solitary nun in Myanmar dared kneel down in front of the raised guns of

approaching police, imploring them to shoot her rather than mow down the children among protestors assembled behind her. Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng dared lead us to comprehend, with urgency, that the future belongs to those who are its children today.³⁷

They all used what little power they had and, against great odds, in the toughest of situations, dared to lead. So we can't say that we didn't know. For they have shown us. If, for all the reasons that Greta Thunberg and other youth leaders implore us to, we dare to lead courageously, and sustain our strength to do so, we too will lay down daring footsteps that others can follow. But it's okay not to be daring. Not everyone has what it takes. But if you know you are not made for daring, please don't dare lead.

This article was first published in the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation report *The art of Leadership in the United Nations: Painting perspectives, staying true to principles, 2022.*

The views and opinions expressed in this contribution are the author's personal reflections and do not necessarily represent the United Nations nor the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation's view.

The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation is a non-governmental organisation established in memory of the second Secretary-General of the United Nations. The Foundation aims to advance dialogue and policy for sustainable development, multilateralism and peace.

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Learning for humanitarian leadership: What it is, how it works and future priorities

by Ben Ramalingam and John Mitchell

Introduction and aims

In the humanitarian sector, leadership is cited as one of the most important factors underpinning performance and effectiveness. Every major strategic and operational ambition – from addressing resource gaps to coordinating aid delivery to improving accountability to advancing localisation – demands the realisation of better leadership.

And yet, at the same time, there does not seem to be a clear sense of what leadership actually is. Like the infamous judicial decision on obscenity, we only seem to know it when we see it.

This discussion paper sets out to answer three simple questions:

1. What is humanitarian leadership?
2. When it is effective, how does it work?
3. What should the future priorities for humanitarian leadership be?

We aim to address these questions by drawing on available evidence from different sources across the sector, together with our own reflections as long-time observers and analysts of humanitarian performance and effectiveness. The aim is to apply a learning lens to this critical issue and highlight what we see as some of the future priorities for humanitarian leadership.

What is humanitarian leadership? From command and control to facilitation and feedback

In the time since ALNAP was formed in 1997, it was the Humanitarian Response Review of 2005, commissioned by Jan Egeland, then-UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, that put the issue of leadership at the centre of policy debates and reform efforts.

The Review both identified critical shortcomings in UN leadership and flagged this as a priority area for action. However, despite commitments from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to strengthen leadership capacity at all levels of the system, challenges and barriers to effecting positive change were widespread and difficult to overcome.

Five years later, aid workers working in responses around the world identified poor leadership and coordination as

the single most important barrier to effective operations (ALNAP, 2010). Numerous evaluations pointed to inadequate leadership at the level of humanitarian coordinators and clusters. Following the two biggest crises of 2010, some even went as far as to say that ‘the responses in Haiti and Pakistan were *defined by poor leadership*’ (ALNAP, 2012: 64, *emphasis added*).

Moreover, leadership gaps and challenges were not limited to operational responses. They were also observed at the head and regional office levels of many humanitarian organisations: in the words of one senior aid worker, ‘We have issues around leadership everywhere’ (Walker and Webster, 2009).

Some humanitarian organisations responded to these criticisms with increased investments in training, mentoring and support to leaders. However, underlying these



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mission to improve global performance of humanitarian aid. Prior to this John worked for donor organisations, UN agencies, NGOs and has been involved in/led several important inter-agency initiatives to improve the accountability of aid.

Numerous evaluations pointed to inadequate leadership at the level of humanitarian coordinators and clusters.

humanitarians needed to be 'heroic leaders', akin to the charismatic examples derived from military history or successful businesses. These 'heroes' were to work as prominent individuals who determine goals, direct resources and drive motivations and actions. This 'command and control' model not only seemed to fit certain individuals within the sector but also aligned well with the life-saving, time-intensive ethos of humanitarianism.

This model and its assumptions were challenged by one of the first in-depth studies on humanitarian leadership at the operational level (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011). This work pointedly concluded that in many humanitarian contexts such a highly individualised model of heroic leadership was not effective. This helped to set the research agenda on humanitarian leadership for the next few years, and partly as a result of this work, a deeper and more contextualised understanding of humanitarian leadership has emerged.

This newer understanding was based on experiences both from parallel sectors and from in-depth interviews with humanitarian practitioners and leaders. What emerged was an acknowledgement that, rather than an individual leader who determines goals, resources and actions, operational leadership was best achieved through interactions between the formal leader and a broader group of individuals, regulated by a series of structures, processes and procedures (Knox Clarke, 2014). These leaders were better described as 'hosts' as opposed to 'heroes'.

The 'facilitation and feedback' approach is to be clearly distinguished from the 'command and control' model.

openness and mutual support. This made a lot of sense to humanitarian practitioners working in multi-agency clusters where there was no single line of command. One of the strongest findings was that humanitarian workers were most likely to support decisions they were involved in making, and strong collaboration and consensus-building were seen to be key to this. This is what we refer to as the 'facilitation and feedback' approach, so as to clearly distinguish it from the 'command and control' model.

Research began to endorse the value of quieter, humbler, less charismatic leaders committed to strengthening and being part of a broader team. This rang bells with many,

efforts was the uncomfortable but largely unvoiced feeling that no-one was sure what good humanitarian leadership actually looked like in practice. The predominant assumption seems to have been that

humanitarians needed to be 'heroic leaders', akin to the charismatic examples derived from military history or successful businesses. These 'heroes' were to work as prominent individuals who determine goals, direct resources and drive motivations and actions. This 'command and control' model not only seemed to fit certain individuals within the sector but also aligned well with the life-saving, time-intensive ethos of humanitarianism.

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Host leadership was less about following the commands of exceptional individuals and more about *distributing leadership* among the group, sharing the load and creating a culture of

openness and mutual support. This made a lot of sense to humanitarian practitioners working in multi-agency clusters where there was no single line of command. One of the strongest findings was that humanitarian workers were most likely to support decisions they were involved in making, and strong collaboration and consensus-building were seen to be key to this. This is what we refer to as the 'facilitation and feedback' approach, so as to clearly distinguish it from the 'command and control' model.

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and it was no surprise that the most visited page on the ALNAP website at the time was an animation entitled 'Goodbye super-hero'.

Alongside this new notion of distributed leadership, the use of standard operating procedures was deemed to be crucial. Effective leadership needed simple processes for dealing with routine as well as 'triggers' that could help in identifying when a situation was becoming exceptional. The latter had to be built in so that the leadership group would know when to adapt and divert from normal procedures and try something new. The trick was to use procedures when relevant – say, 80% of the time – but also to be flexible enough to change and innovate when circumstances changed – say, 20% of the time (Knox Clarke, 2014).

This chimed greatly with other work being carried out on designing different operational models to complement the existing model of responding to humanitarian crises (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014) and work on operational flexibility at the programme level (Obrecht, 2019).

Taking all of this together, the most effective operational leadership emerged when all three elements mentioned above – the individual, the group and the structures – combined to bring about positive outcomes, particularly to enable flexibility and adaptation.

This is not to say that the individual leader was not important – or that we had been looking for instances of humanitarian leadership in the wrong places. Far from it. Although the heroic model had rightly been challenged, it was also the case that, particularly in the initial stages of a rapid-onset crisis, individual leaders had stepped up to make strategic decisions first and build consensus afterwards. A documented example is from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where, as a result of his high level of personal credibility (based largely on experience), Ross Mountain, UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator, was able to lead the response from the front and turn around the international response to be more effective and accountable (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011: 18).

Thus, leadership takes many forms and operates at different levels in the system. For example, 'collective leadership' might come into play across organisations of the overall system, whereas 'adaptive leadership' is needed to operate effectively at the level of affected populations. Within particular international responses, it was increasingly understood that the best business models for action would be determined by leaders who were able to judge prevailing context and the operational structures – for example, whether the intervention was taking place across a group of agencies where there was no single line of command or whether it was an individual agency. What this growing body of work suggested was that there was no 'best practice' for humanitarian leadership. Rather, the emerging sense was that what was most needed was an approach that understood the crisis context, including

the social, economic, political and institutional landscape and the specific operational enablers and barriers, and used these to develop and apply a 'best fit' approach to leadership.

How humanitarian leadership currently works: short-term human fixes to long-term systemic issues

Let's take a step back from leadership at this point and reflect on the broader issues of humanitarian performance. From at least the 1980s onward, there has been a widely held view that the humanitarian system is condemned to repeat its operational mistakes and unable to genuinely change and improve.

Lessons from the Kosovo crisis (2000) demonstrated that problems associated with the Great Lakes crisis in 1994 were still very much present, as if they were somehow hard-wired into the system, leading to what some described as the 'once again factor'. The same issues arose again after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2010 Haiti earthquake

For a lot of people, the system was not just broken but permanently and irrevocably so – and any attempts to make genuine progress were daunting and problematic as a result.

and many of the major crises that followed. And the World Humanitarian Summit process highlighted the same issues yet again (Knox Clarke, 2017: 19). For a lot of people, the system was not just broken but permanently and irrevocably so – and any attempts to make genuine progress were daunting and problematic as a result.

Despite these deep-seated frustrations, evidence was emerging that the system was changing (Ferris, 2014; Barnett and Walker, 2015), at both a more strategic/structural level and an operational level. ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System series has provided longitudinal monitoring of international humanitarian performance for over a decade, and shows that improvements have occurred, largely in the form of corrections or improvements to existing practices. However, it is also true that such improvements have been slow and incremental, and have not happened in a smooth or consistent manner. Indeed, in some cases, changes that emerged were both unexpected and unplanned, and they were often hard to sustain.

One notable example of an improvement was Jan Ege-land's 2005 humanitarian reform agenda, mentioned earlier, which aimed to bring a more unified approach to leadership, coordination, financing and accountability by establishing more predictable coordination structures (the Cluster system) and a new global contingency fund (the Central Emergency Response Fund). These structures and their subsequent improvements have helped improve the effectiveness of the international response.

In light of the leadership discussion above, it is interesting to note that, when recently describing how these reforms came about, Jan Ege-land spoke of the importance of 'leading from the saddle' – a statement resonating greatly with the idea of an effective heroic leader operating at a system-wide level (ALNAP, 2021: 46).

This does give us pause for thought, specifically with regard to why the lack of change is so easily attributed to a 'lack of leadership'. The automatic response of many in the sector seems to be to refer to the need for a combination of political motivations, institutional space, clarity of intent and collective action necessary to effect change. And, typically, there is not the leadership in place to effect such change. Every now and again, an exceptional individual or group will emerge to do so. However, as much as their success is lauded, it also serves to highlight the relative lack of such capabilities in the 'business as usual' of the sector.

Over time, and in different situations, this has become something of a repeated motif when talking about different aspects of humanitarian performance. Take a given issue – say, humanitarian coordination. The reality is that the system is not set up or structured in such a way as to facilitate such coordination: donors fund vertically, competition is rife and conflicts over operational mandates and space run deep. But somehow the expectation has become that leadership, if it were good enough, would be able to make coordination work. A few notable names will spring to the minds of everyone reading this of certain individuals who have been able to make coordination work, in tough situations like Afghanistan, DRC, Sudan. These are held up as the exemplars – but, unfortunately, almost everyone else then comes up short. This inability to somehow magically 'clone' these exceptional individuals is then referred to as 'lack of leadership' – while nothing is actually changed structurally to enable others to be able to follow in their footsteps.

In our view, this almost habitual response of the sector to locate failures in the domain of leadership is unfortunate for everyone concerned. It is unfortunate for the leaders who perform these feats of system fixing; it is unfortunate for those leaders who don't or can't repeat their successes and are doomed to operate in their shadows; and it is unfortunate for the system as a whole because it sets most leaders up to fail – because only the most extraordinary of individuals can succeed. And it means that the systemic failures can – through a linguistic twist – be located with those individuals who do not fix the system, rather than in the lack of genuine structural change. What we are seeing, in effect, is more and more effort to strengthen individual leadership capabilities and not enough to institutionalise leadership within the way the sector operates.

So what might be done about this state of affairs? This is what we turn to next.

Major priorities for humanitarian leadership

The research and evidence we reviewed for this discussion paper suggest three main overarching challenges giving rise to the 'lack of leadership' motif. Each of them tells a story and contains a set of assumptions about what it takes for humanitarian aid to work well.

Challenge 1: Can the international system work collectively and cooperatively – both horizontally within different layers of the system (donors, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations, government departments, community organisations, etc.) and vertically across these layers?

Challenge 2: Can the system adapt its business model to suit particular contexts (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014), taking account of the capacities, needs and specific drivers of crises and vulnerability?

Challenge 3: Are operational responses flexible enough to adapt activities, interventions and responses to different socio-cultural and economic contexts, stakeholder interests (including those of affected communities), evolving operational circumstances and different institutional architectures (Obrecht, 2018)?

In this section, we go through each of these in turn.

Challenge 1: Collective leadership

Most people would agree that the kind of collective leadership needed to make the system genuinely work as a system has not yet been forthcoming or sufficient.

When we were designing the very first State of the Humanitarian System report in 2008, to pilot the concept of overall systemic performance, one of the most common responses we received in our consultations with aid leaders and experts was a rather colourful 'What ****ing system?'

This is both a capacity issue and a procedural one. There are many examples of agencies that lack the capacity and/or know-how to coordinate even when it is necessary and vital to do so. It is clearly the case that some agencies are more equipped than others in this regard. Moreover, evaluations have reported particular organisational resistance to changes that seek to affect the relationships and power dynamics between international agencies, regional and local agencies, host governments and affected populations. The status quo exerts a heavy counterbalance to potential improvements.

For example, some saw the Ukraine crisis as a potential tipping point for collective coordination reforms, by accelerating new ways of working and innovations (Alexander, 2022). Given the high level of funding and the pres-

ence of 1,700 newly formed aid groups, the operating environment seemed well suited to directly funding and working through the new informal aid sector. But recent reports suggest that international organisations have been unable and unwilling to provide rapid infusions of resources to strengthen local efforts. There are no doubt many reasons why this has not happened, but currently there is a feeling that compliance requirements have been too heavy and attitudes too conservative: agencies should have had a greater tolerance of risk and should have taken a 'no regrets approach' (Stoddard et al., 2022).

Collective leadership in this regard requires not just remarkable individuals but also changes to the behaviours and incentives that underpin the relationships between different groups and organisations. Collaboration is necessary across different agencies, different sectors and different kinds of professionals and between international, national and local levels. This is easy to imagine in theory but vanishingly rare in practice.

Collective leadership make changes to the behaviours and incentives between different groups and organisations.

Collective action in this regard might be in the form of coordination (e.g., among operational agencies), partnerships among different interest groups (e.g., humanitarians and communities) or dialogue across a range of stakeholders. Collective leadership has a crucial role to play in helping identify shared alignment of objectives and scope for joint action across different silos and levels of each response.

But for this to be a reality, resource mobilisation needs to be adapted to make cooperation and collaboration a core requirement rather than 'nice to have'. This means that donors and funders need to actively make coordination a first priority rather than an afterthought. Just as challenging, it requires individual agencies to be willing to give up some of their autonomy for the greater sectoral and humanitarian good.

Challenge 2: Business model leadership

As noted in our 2014 ALNAP paper (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014), one of the biggest challenges facing the sector relates to the underlying business model by means of which aid is conceptualised, funded and delivered. To a large extent, incentive systems tend to reward compliance with standard procedures and financial targets, rather than choosing the best course of action to optimise humanitarian outcomes (Bennett et al., 2016). As a result, we are seeing growing numbers of national governments rejecting the traditional comprehensive model of aid delivery to seek a more nuanced partnership-oriented approach. Interestingly, however, traditional aid agencies have not always adapted well to these new opportunities,

echoing the old adage, 'If all you have is a hammer, every problem becomes a nail.'

This is becoming a significant problem in settings that have some capacity and resources for responses and where national governments and civil society may be unwilling to hand over wholesale control to international actors. This is because the shift for international actors from being central in a response to playing supportive roles working alongside others is a major challenge: the core challenge around business model leadership is their unwillingness to relinquish control (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014). Some of the most prominent examples are Indonesia, Mozambique and the Philippines, where, despite strong national response capacities, international agencies have proved unwilling to work as equal partners.

A 2015 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) review on making humanitarian financing fit for the future argued for adopting a phased approach: ensuring critical needs are met through parallel actions to those of the national system in the early stages of a crisis, evolving into programmes that work increasingly in line with country priorities and on strengthening and working through country systems, starting with social protection schemes (Scott, 2015). Interestingly, in recent years, some actors have done exactly this in various emergency contexts, but these have not been traditional humanitarians but rather international financial institutions, most notably the World Bank.

In reality, genuine changes in humanitarian business models have come about more because they are forced on agencies rather than because of conscious choices. This was the case in the COVID-19 pandemic, when massive global disruption compelled agencies to do things differently and positive shifts were seen in several key areas, including greater localisation, flexible funding, improved inter-agency coordination and pooling of resources (ALNAP, 2021). This indicates that deeper changes can be made. However, these changes in business model leadership did not lead to meaningful changes in policy and practice. Instead, they appear to have been short-term adaptations followed soon afterwards by business as usual (ibid.: 7).

Genuine business model leadership needs to be based on a reconfiguration of the humanitarian appeals process, which needs to move beyond the blanket 'all in' approach and have more of a menu of options from which crisis-affected countries can select the best fit for their needs and capacities.

Challenge 3: Adaptive leadership

Good adaptive leadership means teams and organisations constantly assessing their actions, recognising that

they will have to continuously iterate and adapt their interventions as they learn more about the outcomes of decisions.

This requires clear processes for:

- determining the best options for action
- collecting, interpreting and acting on evidence, including defining a set of key measures for determining success or failure
- ensuring ongoing collection of operationally relevant data
- setting out a clear process for how changes in data and trends will trigger changes in action (Ramalingam et al., 2020).

It is increasingly recognised that social learning and adaptation should be at the centre of response (Doherty, 2022). For example, it was seen as a crucial element in the management of a recent outbreak of Ebola in West Africa (Nyenswah et al., 2016).

More and more evaluations are capturing ad hoc examples of where humanitarian agencies are finding ways to adapt more effectively.

More and more evaluations are capturing ad hoc examples of where humanitarian agencies are finding ways to adapt more effectively. These have been triggered by particular events, including changes in the external environment (e.g., access conditions) and changes in understanding as to how the response is going (e.g., feedback from crisis-affected populations) (Obrecht, 2018).

Many of these adaptations are likely to have been supported by the kind of operational leadership premised on the interaction between the formal leader and the team and regulated by structures, processes and procedures.

One interesting aspect of this is that the spaces vacated by international leaders on the ground are naturally being filled by local leaders. At a recent global conference, participants lauded local actors for their ingenuity and capable leadership, citing examples in Bangladesh of mobilising humanitarian funds from citizen crowd-funding; in Sudan of local leaders effectively setting up multi-stakeholder/collective approaches; and in India of 'informal local leaders' enabling local supply chains and investment in long-term resilience (ALNAP, 2021).

But there is still a sense that these forms and examples of adaptive leadership are somehow the exception rather than the rule. The previously mentioned ALNAP work identified 'risk-taking skills' (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011) as one of five main areas for humanitarian leadership qualities. Many people are now demanding that humanitarian organisations, including donors, consciously give operational leaders and teams space to

work and reward risk-taking. It is unclear how frequently this happens, and it is sobering to note that the aforementioned study found that, where leadership had been effective, it was because leaders had been prepared to take risks knowing full well they would not receive the support of their organisation. Programmes need to be able to have a clear mandate to change: instead of being seen as failures if they divert from the original plan, they should be seen as effective if they build robustly in adaptation of their way of working, because this is a signal of their commitment to relevance and appropriateness in the face of emerging needs and changing circumstances.

The future of humanitarian leadership: a reform and learning agenda

The humanitarian system is more technically and professionally competent than ever before. And in some situations, agencies have found ways to adapt to changing circumstances and deliver aid in a collective, relevant and adaptive manner. But this is arguably more because of the capacities and passion of individual leaders and less because of the existence of institutionalised approaches to *leadership*.

As Section 1 of this paper notes, there has been a tendency to rely on such individuals, rather than to actively embed their approaches and ways of working into the business as usual of the sector. And this is in part because there is considerable resistance in the system to such institutionalised approaches to leadership. Significant changes are watered down and massaged, and the adaptations and improvements that result are ad hoc and sometimes temporary, and do not add up to deeper necessary changes in the humanitarian modus operandi. We have noted three challenges where the failures are especially evident – around collective, business model and adaptive leadership.

While these failures are not the fault of individual leaders, it does appear to be the case that they are held up as the scapegoats for the lack of change, while the broader systemic changes necessary are not fully made. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the system has been described as ‘stuck in a kind of functioning inertia’ (Mitchell, 2021: 5), still rolling on and saving many lives but unable to make the transition to being fully collective, relevant and adaptable.

In order to fully address these issues, the sector needs to commit to learning and reform efforts that seek to create a stronger enabling environment for institutionalised leadership approaches, with specific reference to collective, business model and adaptive leadership.

This means actively working to ensure that the playing field for leaders is more even, and that the system itself supports leaders in these areas more actively, rather than leaders having to go against the grain of the system. It also

means tracking successes and failures in these areas in an open, transparent and collective fashion. Only by doing so can we hope to see a genuine move in the sector from relying on individual leaders towards a culture and mentality of responsible leadership.

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Towards facilitating local leadership in humanitarian project management

by Darina Pellowska

Abstract

Since the World Humanitarian Summit, donors and international aid organisations alike have developed dedicated localisation policies in which they commit to strengthening the leadership of local and national NGOs in humanitarian action and treating them as equal partners. Yet, voices on the ground continue to claim that these commitments are rarely met in practice as many international actors retain most decision-making power, leaving the role of national and local NGOs limited to following the lead of their international partners' pre-set plans and agendas. This discussion paper addresses project management and leadership approaches as typically implemented in humanitarian projects today as one of the underlying structural causes for the slow-moving progress in local leadership and participation of affected populations. It shows how the current approach entails a contractual hierarchy that leaves donors at the top who often exhibit high issue-related involvement in their leadership, i.e., they engage not only in strategic but also operational decisions and the completion of tasks. Doing so they range from participatory to authoritarian leadership. Both the contractual hierarchy and the leadership styles of donors at its top impede more equal partnerships in everyday humanitarian action. Consequentially, to enable more cooperative leadership – not only between local and international actors, but also in interaction with other key stakeholders in humanitarian projects, such as aid recipients – one, donors needed to lean more towards *laissez-faire* leadership, and/or, two, all partners needed to apply more inclusive horizontal management models. To illustrate the latter, the paper uses the example of *Scrum* and shows how an agile management approach can facilitate local leadership and participation of affected populations in operational humanitarian projects.

Key messages

- Leadership styles can be categorised by using a grid of motivational and issue-related involvement by leaders. Issue-related involvement describes the extent to which leaders are interested in deciding on and engaging in concrete work-related issues and tasks. Motivational involvement describes the level of engagement leaders have with their teams.
- Typical current humanitarian project management introduces a contractual hierarchy with donors at the top. Both donors, as well as the contractual hierarchy itself, shape how leadership can be executed: Donors set the scope of the leadership styles potentially available to other actors further down the contractual hierarchy. The contractual hierarchy establishes a chain of bilateral servant-leader relationships that tend to gradually shrink the scope of leadership styles available to actors down the hierarchy and lead to leadership leaning more and more towards the authoritarian style.
- To enable local leadership and participation of affected populations, donors and other actors at the upper end of the contractual hierarchy needed to extend the scope of leadership styles available to actors lower in the hierarchy by leaning more towards *laissez-faire* leadership. Alternatively, the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved could be redefined, transforming the contractual hierarchy to include more horizontal cooperation and allowing cooperative leadership among donors and international and local actors, and ensuring its guidance through affected populations.



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Introduction

The concept of leadership has been subject to humanitarian studies and debate for a good ten years now. While largely limited to the contexts of humanitarian coordination and leadership within individual organisations (organisational development), it has resulted in a range of valuable insights. The work of Knox Clarke (2013) on “operational humanitarian leadership,” for example, identified three distinguished humanitarian leadership approaches: the *exceptional individual*, the *structured leadership approach*, and the *shared leadership approach*. Inspired by this and based on previous CHA research, this paper engages in an analysis of leadership approaches (or *leadership styles*, as they shall be called in this paper) in humanitarian project management and links this to the localisation agenda.

Doing so, the paper first introduces the managerial grid model of Blake and Mouton (1994) to define what it subsumes under the term *leadership styles* (Chapter 2). It then goes on to apply the grid to the context of contemporary humanitarian project management (Chapter 3). In opposition to the more homogenous leadership contexts of humanitarian coordination and organisational development that have been covered more extensively by previous research, leadership in humanitarian project management needs to address a more diverse set of actors, such as donors, intermediaries, local organisations and/or local branches of INGOs, and aid recipients who all need to effectively interact and work together to develop, design, implement and evaluate humanitarian operations, despite being all separate entities with own interests.

The traditional humanitarian project management approach allows donors the power to set the leadership tone.

As shall become clear in this chapter, the traditional humanitarian project management approach, as it applies in many contexts today, allows donors the power to set the leadership tone in this cooperation and define the scope of leadership styles potentially available to their partners down the project management line. Their tendency to employ high issue-related involvement to manage their work with their direct partners (mostly international organisations), ranging from authoritarian to participative leadership, shrinks the leadership options available to the latter in managing their working relations with their subordinate partners. Chapter 4 shows that this largely contradicts the localisation agenda. It asks which leadership styles would better match the agenda and how these could be embedded in operational humanitarian project management. Chapter 5 summarises the findings and concludes that, if they take their commitments to local leadership and the participation of affected populations seriously, especially international actors, including donors, must reduce the issue-related involvement in their leadership styles in one way or another and engage in more horizontal project management.

Leadership (styles) - a definition

Although there is a wealth of literature on leadership and “how to lead”, there is still no established general definition of the term. Navigating the turmoil of different approaches, this paper applies the definition of Baumgarten (2019) which defines *leadership* as “every goal-oriented, inter-personal behavioural influence that is executed with the help of communication processes” (Baumgarten 2019, p. 9). Following this, a *leadership style* is “a continuous, typical and consistent imprint of leadership” that is often embedded in a certain historical era, but may equally be situation-, person-, or task-specific (Baumgarten 2019, pp. 15–16). These leadership styles involve a series of different *leadership techniques*, i.e., organisational and social psychological tools and methods to realise the imprints (Baumgarten 2019, p. 16).

Leadership styles can be distinguished using different scales and grids. Unidimensional scales range from the Weberian typology of “charismatic”, “traditional” and “bureaucratic” leadership (Weber 2012) to “authoritarian”, “democratic” and “laissez-faire” leadership, as described in Lewin et al. (1939). The latter is still used today in a slightly modified version, categorising leadership styles according to the nature of their decision-making imprint from “autocratic” to “patriarchal”, “consultative”, “participatory” and “cooperative”.

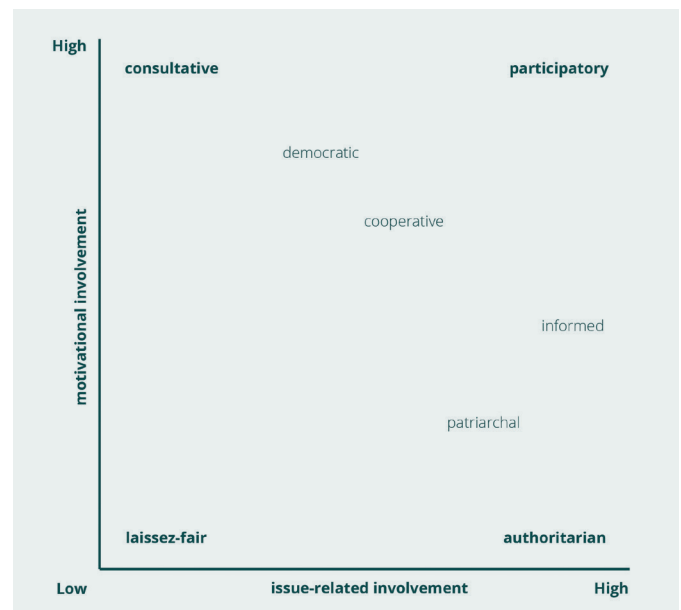


Figure 1: Leadership styles in the managerial grid model; according to Blake and Mouton (1994)

However, to categorise leadership styles, this paper uses the two-dimensional *managerial grid* model of Blake and Mouton (1994) that builds on the predecessors just mentioned. As Figure 1 shows, it merges *issue-related involvement* (depicted from low to high involvement of a certain leader left-to-right on the x-axis) with *motivational involvement* (depicting low to high involvement of the leader top-down on the y-axis) of leaders.

Issue-related involvement means that the leader is (more or less) interested in deciding on and engaging in concrete work-related issues and tasks. *Motivational involvement*, on the other hand, describes the extent to which a leader engages with their team.

According to this grid, leaders with low issue-related and motivational involvement perform a *laissez-faire* leadership style: They are neither particularly interested in deciding how the team organises their work nor in how specific tasks are actually solved. Low motivational but high issue-related involvement expresses an *authoritarian* leadership style. These leaders are often described as “lone wolves” as they, like laissez-faire leaders, typically do not engage with their team. In contrast to the former, they are, however, highly interested in solving tasks, and prefer to do so on their own.

So-called “team players” are instead found in the extremes of high motivational involvement. Leaders who practice low issue-rated but high motivational involvement have a *consultative* leadership style. They strongly engage with and build on the autonomous work and decision-making of their teams. They manage teams, not issues. Leaders with both high issue- and motivation-related involvement have a *participatory* leadership style. They strongly involve their teams in decision-making and the completion of tasks but still want to have the final say on what and how things are done.

As Figure 1 shows, these four leadership styles form a grid that allows for a variety of combinations of the four extremes in between. The following chapter applies this grid to the context of humanitarian project management.

Leadership styles in current humanitarian project management



Figure 2: Project Cycle Model of humanitarian project management



Figure 3: Humanitarian actors' contractual relations in project cycle management

Applying the definition described above, this chapter shall now uncover which leadership styles are structurally embedded in contemporary operational humanitarian project management.

Humanitarian project management, as it is taught and applied in many contexts today, builds upon the humanitarian project cycle (see Figure 2). This cycle usually begins with a dialogue and design phase where crisis-affected populations' needs, local and international organisations' focal areas and capacities, and donors' funding priorities are assessed and coordinated so that they

can be poured into a joint project endeavour that is further formalised, implemented and evaluated in the subsequent phases. Based on the experiences throughout these phases, further projects are planned again that follow the same process.

The dialogue phase at the beginning of this cycle structurally allows for open-ended, equal communication and negotiation among all actors involved, be it donors, international organisations (including UN organisations, Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies and international NGOs), local and national organisations (CBOs, home-grown NGOs or branches of international NGOs), or local community representatives. Since all are separate entities that have not yet entered cooperation, this phase is structurally characterised by a **cooperative leadership style**. There is no dedicated leader, instead, independent entities trying to match their interests and needs, all having the same decision-making power and engagement in managing operational tasks. Cooperation only materialises if all come together under joint terms.

As an upcoming CHA study shows, however, this is most often not the case. In practice, both, the dialogue and design phases of operational project management are heavily shaped by donors and international organisations. As interviews with over 40 representatives of local and national organisations from South Sudan and Bangladesh show, donors issue calls for project proposals

Despite donor calls being based on needs assessments, they are not necessarily as based on the interests of affected populations as they claim to be.

often with pre-set focus areas and objectives to which international and local actors are only invited to respond. Project designs and proposals that are drafted without considering these pre-set agendas and are submitted outside specific

calls are rarely successful. For this reason, many local and national NGO informants to the CHA study admitted that they mostly stick with the pre-established project framework of their international partners, not challenging it with their insights from the ground. Furthermore, despite donor calls being based on needs assessments, they are not necessarily as based on the interests of affected populations as they claim to be. Assessments are mostly drafted deductively, upon donors' or international organisations' request and hence, too, follow pre-set assumptions and logics in collecting and analysing data. However, the CHA study equally shows that some project cooperations indeed manage to establish cooperative leadership in the project dialogue and design phase, for example through open funds and proposal platforms that only have rough frameworks.

Following project cycle management, after the dialogue and design phase, project partners formalise their cooperation (see Figure 2). This is mainly done through setting up a chain of cooperation agreements between donors, intermediaries, local organisations and other partners, as depicted in Figure 3, whereby donors reside at the top, directly contracting mostly international organisations, including UN organisations and pooled funds, Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies and international NGOs, who in turn engage in partnerships with local actors, be it their own local/national entities or other local and national organisations, and so on. These cooperation agreements define both project activities and objectives as well as the roles and responsibilities of the partners, cascading operational responsibilities down and implementing accountability upwards for the fulfilment of these responsibilities.

The sub-contracting cascade affects leadership styles potentially available to the actors involved. Through contractual agreements, the responsibility to fulfil objectives, activities and tasks - i.e., operational responsibility - is posted down from one actor to another. Still, objectives - and in some cases also activities and even simple tasks - must be approved by the supervisory actor. Hence, accountability responsibility is bottom-up. The need for approval points to a **high issue-involved leadership**. However, it may **range between authoritarian and participatory**: Donors that considerably factor their partners' voices into their decisions apply a participatory approach. Others might lean towards a more authoritarian style, neither explaining their decisions nor involving anybody in their making and pre-defining projects from objectives to each simple activity and task, just ordering implementation. A good example of the former is when donors issue country- or crisis-specific calls for proposals but do not further narrow down eligible sectors or target groups. The more detailed the requirements (e.g. funding projects only for affected women, only in the health sector, only in a certain geographical area, only for a certain time period, only worth a certain amount of money, etc.), the more authoritarian the donor project leadership.

The cascading sub-contracting model furthermore implies that **donors at the top of the contracting hierarchy shape the leadership style for the whole project cooperation** as their leadership leaves only a certain range of styles available to their sub-contractors. Whereas an authoritarian donor only allows for authoritarian intermediary leadership, which in turn only allows for authoritarian local leadership, a participatory donor enables intermediaries to pass this higher motivational involvement on and also engage in participatory leadership with their local partners, and so on. However, intermediaries (and subsequently other sub-contractors down the management line) may also choose to get less motivationally involved in cooperation with their subordinates, moving leadership slowly towards more authoritarian styles. In this way, a participatory leadership style applied by donors to coordinate with their direct contractors (intermediaries) does not necessarily cascade down to affected communities. **Motivational involvement easily shrinks, eventually leaving less and less room for involvement (i.e. participatory leadership options) of actors at the end of the contractual line**, such as local organisations and affected populations.

An example of this effect is projects that are discussed, designed and formalised in participatory - maybe even cooperative - leadership between donors and their direct partners (mostly international organisations) but are passed on to local organisations and other partners only later in the project cycle, in the implementation stage, then already including a restrictive pre-set framework where workflow and activities are already spelled out in great detail. As soon as the cooperation between donors and intermediaries is formalised in a cooperation agreement, the objectives and terms of engagement are set

As soon as the cooperation between donors and intermediaries is formalised in a cooperation agreement, the objectives and terms of engagement are set for all actors down the cooperation cascade.

for all actors down the cooperation cascade. Adjusting these at the request of local actors becomes hard, if not impossible (Christian Aid et al. 2019, p. 13). Despite some major donors and international organisations showing increased flexibility within the scope of overall project objectives, local organisations' room to contribute their

perspectives and requirements or to react to sudden changes remains limited after the project formalisation phase. Project leadership thus becomes very authoritarian. All changes in the project logic typically entail lengthy administrative processes, involving the whole contracting chain and require a lot of time and staff capacity as approval is needed from each actor up the line.

Another often-mentioned example of the shrinking motivational involvement of leaders down the contractual hierarchy is that international organisations often engage

their local partners in annual contracts only, despite they themselves receiving multi-year funding (ALNAP 2022, p. 259). Interviewees of the upcoming CHA study additionally reported intermediaries applying stricter accountability requirements in their cooperation with local actors than they receive from donors. International organisations may, for example, request their local partners to send them monthly reports that are much more detailed and often required to include all supporting documents before sending reimbursements or monthly allowances. At the same time, they themselves may only be asked to send quarterly or bi-annual reports to their donors to receive regular pre-scheduled instalments. This increased pressure may cascade down until reaching operational managers in affected communities who may then feel the need to “push” their communities to fulfil project targets as requested by their “bosses” above. These findings and experiences seem to confirm the notion of a reinforcing, ever higher issue-related, and lower motivational involvement of leaders down the contractual hierarchy.

Summing up, in the project dialogue and design phase, contemporary humanitarian project cycle management structurally *allows for* (but not necessarily *entails*) cooperative leadership between humanitarian actors. However, with the signing of cooperation agreements, a contractual hierarchy of roles and responsibilities is established between humanitarian actors, with donors at the top and affected populations at the bottom (see Figure 3). Through their position at the top, donors set the scope of leadership styles potentially applied by their partners down the contractual line. Hence, their leadership is key to the whole cooperation. They often lean towards high-issue involvement that may range between participatory and authoritarian leadership. Cascading the scopes of leadership through cooperation agreements, leadership styles, however, tend to tighten up, moving from high to low motivational involvement of subordinate partners, towards more and more authoritarian styles, typically leaving actors at the end of that chain with little room for leadership.

Towards local leadership in humanitarian project management

Signatories of the Grand Bargain 2.0 committed to providing “greater support [...] for the leadership, delivery, and capacity of local responders and the participation of affected communities in addressing humanitarian

What does leadership of local responders and participation of affected communities actually mean in operational project management?

needs” (Priority 2 of Grand Bargain 2.0, Grand Bargain Secretariat 2021). But what does leadership of local responders and participation of affected communities actually mean in operational project management?

Applying the leadership style grid introduced in Chapter 2 and considering the analysis of Chapter 3, *participation* of affected communities seems to be a structural reality already. Donors could continue to execute strong issue-related involvement and show high motivational involvement of their subordinate partners, applying a **participatory leadership style**. Intermediaries then needed to pass this leadership style on to their subordinate partners and so on until it reaches affected populations.

Participatory leadership, however, only implies that partners’ voices are *heard* and *considered*, not necessarily acted upon. With this leadership style, decision-making and final orders still lay with leaders alone. In this way, participatory leadership, when confronted with the contractual hierarchy established by the cooperation agreement cascade in the project formulation phase, still leads to steadily decreased room for leadership trickling down all the way to affected populations because the subordinates in each bilateral cooperation are only *involved* in the decision-making, without decision-making power.

Participation with more room for decision-making for actors lower in the cooperation agreement line would hence need **less issue-related involvement** of all superiors, beginning with donors, leaning more towards **cooperative or democratic leadership**. The challenge to implement this in practice, however, lies with the subcontracting system of project management, where there is no continuous joint coordination with all humanitarian actors involved in a project. The chain of cooperation agreements subdivides leadership in humanitarian project management into several bilateral “servant-leader” relationships. In this way, the outcomes of cooperative leadership in the upper part of the contractual chain (developing and implementing ideas together on equal terms) might still challenge perspectives from below. This explains why, despite the deliberate commitment of the Grand Bargain Signatories to support local leadership, the ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System report still finds that 72% of practitioners interviewed feel the opportunities for leadership and participation of local actors in decision-making forums in their context were either “poor” or “fair” (ALNAP 2022, p. 241).

Supporting the leadership of local responders (and affected populations) in the sense of “goal-oriented, inter-personal behavioural influence that is executed with the help of communication processes” (Baumgarten 2019, p. 9) hence needs to further expand the space for leadership of local responders and affected populations beyond their direct higher-ranking partners. In the current project management setup, this can only be done if leaders that reside higher in the contractual chain all applied a **laissez-faire leadership style** and let local responders and affected populations organise and decide freely for themselves before adding their own interests and needs, hence enabling “leadership from below”.

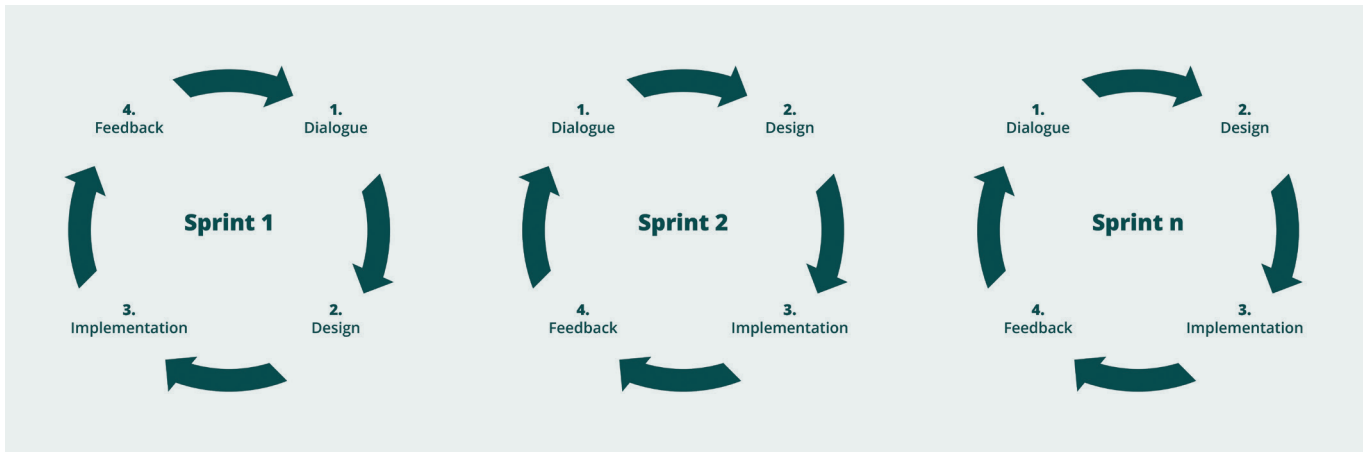


Figure 4: Agile model of humanitarian project management

Indeed, many local actors call for and appreciate less issue involvement from their international partners. However, few donors and intermediaries want to give up their control and decision-making power and want to retain at least a say on how humanitarian projects are designed and implemented. This is supported by the recent State of the Humanitarian System report of ALNAP, which found that, apart from a considerable increase in 2020 in response to COVID-19, donors did not increase un-earmarked or softly earmarked funding recently, in fact, quite the opposite. In 2021, only \$2.7 billion – 13 percent of the overall UN funding – fell under flexible funding (ALNAP 2022, pp. 257–258). The study of Worden and Saez (2021, pp. 9–10) adds that, despite some donors indeed starting to apply more *laissez-faire* leadership and loosening their earmarking, 65 percent of those interviewed continued to earmark at least some of their funding at the project level.

One solution could be to **allow *laissez-faire* leadership in project design** by introducing open funds, where local organisations could post their proposals without restrictions and then **“managing up” expectations, interests and needs in a cooperative leadership style** as designs get formalised. This is already practiced, especially in cooperations between local organisations and private foundations, and, indeed, enables “locally led” humanitarian action, where “local and national actors are at the centre and are the primary determinants of how resources are invested and how crises are prepared for and responded to” (Guyatt 2022). In these cooperations, local organisations bring their project ideas and anticipated designs to the table without having to use specific forms or follow tight application procedures. If the informally expressed project idea is interesting to the foundation, the two jointly establish an individual framework for their cooperation, each introducing their requirements and needs.

Another solution would be to change the project management setup from a servant-leader contractual hierarchy to a more complex, **horizontal management approach** that allows for **locally led cooperative leadership** without the restrictions posed by contractual hierarchies. If

all project stakeholders are part of a joint engagement, the scope for motivational and issue-related involvement would not shrink as leadership is passed on, but remain the same for all.

A management model that suits these requirements is **agile management** (see Figure 4). Complying with the demands of Knox-Clarke et al. (2020, p. 81), it moves away from a “linear [...] process – first policy, then roll out, then change – to a more holistic process where action, amplification, and change in the humanitarian environment are seen as mutually reinforcing and take place simultaneously”. Agile management, as it is described by Häusling (2020) and depicted in Figure 4, replaces the top-heavy analysis part of project cycle management (an extensive but structurally cooperative project design phase and authoritarian implementation phase) with an **iterative approach, introducing more frequent coordination cycles**. Doing so, it does not develop nor respond to fixed, jointly agreed-upon overall objectives. Instead, it uses an undefined number of smaller consultation-design-execution-learning cycles (so-called “sprints”) to produce a range of interim results that are not pre-determined but flexibly built up on each other until they finally make up end result(s). Hence, (interim) results are discussed and agreed upon anew for each sprint by all actors involved. This very flexible project management approach **reopens leadership scopes** again and again for each sprint, providing the opportunity for stricter, authoritari-

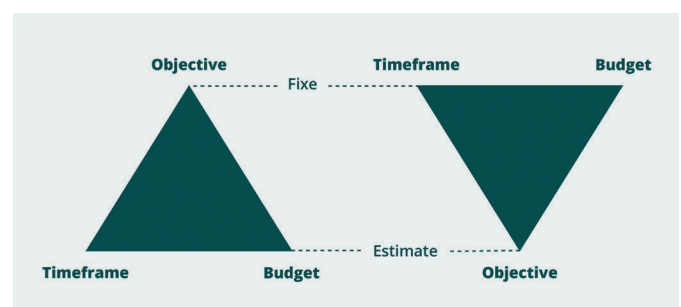


Figure 5: Traditional versus agile iron triangle (adapted from <https://www.visual-paradigm.com/scrum/classical-vs-agile-project-management/>)

an leadership styles in some phases and more consultative leadership styles in others.

In industry, this practice of subdividing a project into several minor cooperation agreement cycles has been found to produce higher-quality end products as every single project phase, from design to evaluation, becomes the result of intense communication and collaboration that involves all relevant stakeholders. If obstacles emerge on the way, it is always possible to fall back to the previous stage.

The key difference of this approach compared to traditional project cycle management is that the latter pre-defines a certain set of objectives, results and activities and then develops budgets and schedules in accordance, for example by using a so-called LogFrame. In contrast, agile management typically starts with a pre-set timeframe and budget and then explores which objectives (outputs) can be achieved within this framework using step-by-step cooperative leadership (see Figure 5).

Apart from steadily reopening leadership throughout the different project phases, agile management also proclaims **different leadership styles** *per se*. It strongly builds upon a highly self-organised project team that fulfils tasks on its own and, in doing so, is guided by two leading roles, one **facilitating leader** making sure that the team can work to the best of their capabilities, and one **operational leader**, defining objectives and success. These roles are spelled out differently across the various agile management models that develop over time. In the remainder of this chapter, this paper uses *Scrum* according to Mundra et al. (2013) to illustrate these leadership roles and their potential for locally led humanitarian project management in more detail.

Originally developed by Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986), Scrum was first applied in the software industry (Beedle et al. 2001). However, as it provides a lightweight model of project management that performs well in all kinds of quickly changing uncertain environments, it has been applied throughout several industries, from technology to marketing.

As Figure 6 shows, in Scrum, a project is operationally led by a so-called **project owner** (Bass et al. 2018) who has the vision for final project results (still a *vision*, not a clear picture!). It is first and foremost the project owner who decides whether a certain sprint is completed successfully, after which the team may move on to the next set of tasks. Hence, the project owner clearly has strong **issue-related leadership** and may decide how far they want to use it.

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In locally led humanitarian action, this would be a role ideally taken by aid recipients themselves. However, as it might be difficult to involve the whole population of at times very remotely

situated affected populations in regular sprints, this position could provisionally also be taken over by humanitarian staff who have a strong connection to affected communities, e.g., community workers, who reside with the targeted population and are hence closely informed about their priorities.

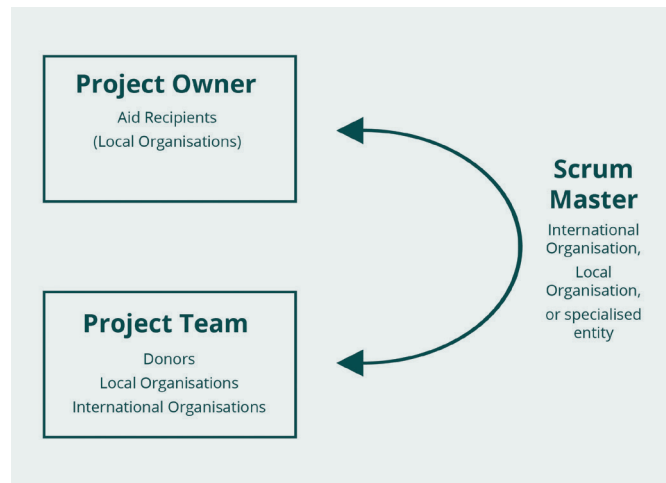


Figure 6: Project management roles in Scrum

The project owner can rely on the expertise and work of a whole **project team** – experts, working towards the delivery of the owners’ vision. In the humanitarian sector, this team would typically include technical experts such as WASH and nutrition specialists, logistics, security advisors, etc., but also accounting staff and monitoring and evaluation specialists. These roles could be situated in a local organisation. However, if required to guarantee the product owner’s satisfaction with (intermediary) project results (and in compliance with the humanitarian principles), it could be complemented by external support, for example from international organisations.

What is new in this picture is that the financing role (i.e., the donor) is also part of the Scrum team. Hence, donors would participate in regular sprint meetings, making sure that current product owners’ needs and requirements are in line with the agreed budget and timeframe. They could place their requirements in sprint meetings in the same way as any other team member, for example in the form of a *user story*: “as a *donor*, I need... so that...”. The proposed task would then be added to a task list where all tasks from the team are collected and jointly worked upon in a **cooperative leadership** approach according to their jointly defined priority. The participation of donors in these meetings, in combination with the application of handy agile management software where all team members can post new user stories (tasks), transparently showing real-time project progress to all team members, would replace time-consuming text- and forms-based donor reports and make sure that interim monitoring and evaluation are “customer” (i.e., affected populations) centred. At the same time, it would keep donors closely informed about the real-time project progress.

Finally, in complex projects with many stakeholders, Scrum introduces the role of the *Scrum master* (Bass 2014; Shastri et al. 2021). This is a leadership role focusing solely on **motivational leadership**. The Scrum master facilitates constructive exchange among all team members and the product owner and makes sure that everyone has the information and tools needed to fulfil their tasks. This involves the facilitation of meetings and trainings, as well as solving conflicts of interest as needed. As they are suitably placed between affected communities and donors, this role could be taken by international or local organisations or, alternatively, by external specialised entities.

With this setup, in Scrum, the leadership lies predominantly with the project owner and the Scrum master, while the project team coordinates itself by applying a cooperative leadership style. Project owners decide upon a sprint failure or success (executing issue-related leadership). Scrum masters facilitate the process (executing motivational leadership). With these features, Scrum has the potential to introduce the leading role of aid recipients (Auswärtiges Amt 2019, p. 10; Osofisan 2020; Rejali 2020; Bennett et al. 2016, p. 11; Participatory Revolution Workstream 2017) as well as the facilitating leadership role, often requested of international organisations (Caritas international 2021, p. 3; Rights Co Lab 2021, p. 14; Bennett et al. 2016, p. 11).

Summing up, facilitating the participation of affected communities in humanitarian action in traditional humanitarian project management is already possible and often already a reality. However, due to cascading sub-contracting setups and a tendency of actors that reside higher in the contractual hierarchy for high issue-related involvement, this does not leave much space for leadership of local organisations and affected populations at the lower end. To address this, first, donors and other actors at the top end of the hierarchy needed to show **less issue involvement**, moving more towards a laissez-faire leadership approach. This finding is nothing new and has been requested and proclaimed many times, including the Grand Bargain commitment for more “quality funding” (less earmarked, more flexible, multi-year, etc.). However, as many international actors, including donors, shy away from living up to such commitments, another option is, secondly, to subdivide project management into several coordination cycles and re-open communication and leadership again and again as the project progresses. This would enable donors to **adjust their leadership styles**, tightening and reopening their control as the project develops.

The best option for locally led, cooperative leadership is to introduce a management model, which leaves behind the contractual hierarchy of traditional project management.

Finally, the best option for locally led, cooperative leadership is to introduce a management model, which leaves behind the contractual hierarchy of traditional project management. This could be done, for example, through using agile models,

where **motivational and issue-related leadership are separated from financing roles** and donors join a team of experts organising themselves in cooperative leadership, facilitated, for example, by a *Scrum* master and guided by the operational leadership of a project owner.

Conclusion

The above discussion has shown how the equal, cooperative leadership of humanitarian projects between independent partners is, at the latest with the signing of cooperation agreements, highly shaped by donors and other actors that typically reside at the top and the upper end of an emerging **contractual hierarchy**. The hierarchical sub-contracting setup introduces a **chain of bilateral servant-leader relationships**, which cascade the scopes for leadership top-down. This tends to gradually limit the decision-making power of actors down the line, typically local organisations and affected populations.

To reconcile humanitarian project management practices with claims for local leadership and participation of affected populations, there are two entry points: One is to **address donors as leaders** on the top of the contractual hierarchy and ask them to show less issue involvement in their leadership, hence allowing other actors lower in that hierarchy more leadership space. The other is to **address the contractual hierarchy** itself. This can be done by subdividing projects into **smaller cycles** of coordination, implementation and evaluation, where all actors get the opportunity to introduce their interests and feedback on equal terms more often. In addition, **roles and responsibilities among all project stakeholders** could be redistributed, for example by applying an agile setup that sees donors as part of a self-organising project team that largely leads itself in a cooperative manner (supported by a facilitating leader) and is operationally guided by the needs of affected populations.

What all these approaches have in common is the **need for actors higher in the contractual hierarchy to give up issue-related involvement**, at least to some extent. This has been proven to be highly difficult to achieve in practice. However, as this analysis showed, if all stakeholders involved in humanitarian projects want to allow local leadership, there is no way around it.

Admittedly, local leadership and more participation entail a variety of challenges, including compromises with timeliness and efficiency. More detailed involvement and equitable cooperation of more actors at the table indeed require time, capacity, and energy – all of which are highly valuable goods in a context of heavily increasing humanitarian needs and stagnating, if not shrinking, humanitarian funding. Experiences from other industries, however, show that more horizontal, agile management processes can bring about more valuable outputs. In this way, it can lead to more effective and sustainable humanitarian action.

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More than the sum of the parts? Collective leadership vs individual agency in humanitarian action

by Karin Wendt & Ed Schenkenberg

Abstract

At the global level, there have been strong commitments to collective humanitarian action, especially since the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain agreement. But evidence suggests that these commitments are not always translated into reality. Why is this? This paper argues that an important reason is that collective leadership is not realised to its full potential. Understood broadly as a dynamic process of working collectively in view of a shared goal, collective leadership calls for everyone in the humanitarian system to take responsibility for the success of the system as a whole – not just for their own area of interest or mandate. Focusing on the interface between collective ambitions and individual agency incentives, this paper discusses some of the factors that systematically undermine collective leadership in the humanitarian system. These include agencies' internal processes and mindsets, but also external factors, which tend to stress competition over collaboration. The paper also suggests possible ways to offset the existing incentives that predominantly encourage a focus on individual agency performance at the expense of that of the collective. There is a need to distinguish between leadership within one institution and leadership on behalf of the collective.

Key words: humanitarian coordination, collective leadership, incentives

Introduction

More than three decades ago, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 provided the blueprint for the current humanitarian system, marking the international community's commitment to providing humanitarian assistance through strengthened coordination.¹ From the creation of the inter-agency standing committee (IASC) and the 2005 introduction of the Cluster Approach, via the 2011 Transformative Agenda, to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and 'Grand Bargain', the system has since continuously strived towards clear(er) leadership and coordination, and shared accountability for collective outcomes in the main areas of humanitarian response.² At the same time, evidence suggests that these ambitions and commitments are not always translated into reality. Agencies that have assumed cluster leadership responsibilities since 2005 have not sufficiently prioritised this role within their institutions, which in combination with the confusion surrounding

the meaning and impact of cluster 'co-leadership' has led to a dilution of leadership and accountability.³ Likewise, commitments to collectively address priorities such as a principled approach to humanitarian action, the centrality of protection, localisation, or accountability to affected populations have been given insufficient attention in inter-agency coordination, especially at the country level, for too long.⁴ Why is it so difficult to turn commitments to work collectively and effectively towards a shared goal into a reality?

HERE's research has shown that an important reason is that collective leadership is not realised to its full potential.

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Understood broadly as a dynamic process of working collectively in view of a shared goal, collective leadership calls for everyone in the humanitarian system to take responsibility for the success of the system as a whole – not just for their own area of interest or mandate. This paper will discuss some of the factors that appear to undermine the collective

ambition in the humanitarian system by focusing on the interface between collective ambition and individual agency. It appears from HERE's research that, beyond their commitment to collective approaches, there is little practical incentive for agency leadership to put the collective ahead of the individual mandate. Agencies' internal systems, processes, and, perhaps most importantly, their mindsets are focused on what they achieve as an agency. The environment in which they operate reinforces this by stressing the competitive need for funding, resources, and space.

After an explanation of how this paper methodologically fits into, and builds on, HERE's current and previous research, it will outline in more detail how it understands and approaches the concept of 'collective leadership' in the context of the wider humanitarian system. The paper will then discuss current barriers to its realisation in practice, including agencies' internal systems, but also external factors. The paper concludes by suggesting possible ways to offset the existing incentives that predominantly encourage individual agency performance and accountability at the expense of the collective.

Methodological approach

This paper is the result of evidence and insight gathered by HERE over the past few years, as complemented by research specifically commissioned by GELI. The paper is primarily anchored in HERE's 'Future of Humanitarian Coordination' project. Without underestimating the progress made in the last decades, this project took its roots in the conclusion that truly effective humanitarian coordination is still elusive.⁵ Assuming the UN will retain its primary role in coordinating humanitarian action for at least the next decade, the starting point was to clarify what appears to impede coordination as it is currently framed. Carried out mainly in 2021 and early 2022, the first phase of the Future of Humanitarian Coordination project was anchored in an extensive literature review, including a mapping of past recommendations and commitments towards collective action; a series of roundtable discussions involving high-level humanitarian leadership; and in-depth interviews with key informants. Notably, the project has seen that one of the elements that continues to systematically impede effective humanitarian coordination is that agency incentives do not facilitate it.⁶ The data gathered around this research angle have been particularly useful for the current paper. At the same time, this paper will also feed back into the second phase of the Future of Humanitarian Coordination project, which will take an in-depth look at a number of the more critical issues that were identified in the first phase.

This paper is also the result of insight provided thanks to HERE's involvement in the evaluation of UNICEF's Role as a Cluster (Co-)Lead Agency (CLARE II); the 2020-21 Review of the Global Education Cluster Co-Leadership; and the evaluation of WFP's 2019-2022 country strategy for Nigeria. Furthermore, the paper has benefited from evidence gathered for the HERE-led review of inter-agency principled humanitarian programming in Yemen, and the mid-term evaluation of a Dutch-funded multi-annual hybrid project/partnership with five multilateral organisations (UNCHR, UNICEF, ILO, WB and IFC) working across the humanitarian-development spectrum to further the transformation of the ongoing responses to protracted forced displacement.

Together, the above research projects involved close to 600 interviews, with key informants representing a variety of humanitarian stakeholders and institutions – UN agencies, international, national, and local NGOs, donors, coordination fora, networks, independent experts – in many different country contexts, and at the global and regional levels. Most of the projects also included focus group discussions with affected people, direct observation, and online surveys.

We have used the evidence and analysis carried out above to formulate our initial thoughts for this paper, which we then examined more closely and de-

veloped through additional data collection commissioned by GELI. Notably, this included a further literature review, specifically angled towards collective leadership, shared accountability, and organisational incentive structures, as well as around ten additional key informant interviews with donor representatives, UN- and NGO leadership and networks, and independent experts. While anchored in a common set of questions, the interviews did not follow a systematic questionnaire approach, but were shaped as dynamic conversations in which respondents were asked to dig deeper into certain issues related to their specific roles and experiences. The quotations from respondents used in the paper to illustrate or extend points have been chosen based on a criterion of representativity, i.e., that they reflect opinions that were expressed with sufficient frequency to merit mention.

'Collective leadership' in the humanitarian system

Governance and organisational theorists have examined the concept of 'collective leadership' for decades, under the guise of a variety of labels such as 'distributed', 'shared', or 'collaborative' leadership.⁷ While interpretations regarding the concept(s) differ from author to author, common characteristics include the idea of leadership as a dynamic process, which is co-constructed by those taking part in that process,⁸ and which accentuates team values and the development of knowledge and skills based on the aggregate elements of the team,⁹ effectively distributing the leadership role as the situation or problem at hand requires.¹⁰ It is essentially about everyone in an organisation taking responsibility for its success as a whole – not just for their own jobs or area.¹¹



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Most previous research looks at collective leadership from within organisations, across departments and teams. While this paper will discuss elements of internal institutional governance to some extent, it primarily considers the collective leadership at the level of the humanitarian system, i.e., the way in which plural-member organisational units contribute to the collective endeavour to help those most in need. As such, the concept of collective leadership is closely related to that of coordination. If humanitarian coordination is stakeholders coming together in view of realising a common goal,¹²

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collective leadership is the process that will arguably allow for the achievement of that goal, by engaging all stakeholders to contribute to its success as a whole. While 'collective leadership' is not a formalised concept in IASC cluster policy documents, it matches the spirit of partnership, which is a key aspect of the cluster approach, and the notion of a shared sense of purpose that is critical to meaningful humanitarian coordination. Agencies are all part of the system's coordinated response, even if they have been assigned specific mandates by the international community. The realisation of their collective ambitions through that coordination depends on their true engagement in collective leadership, i.e., that they appropriately distinguish between leadership within one institution and leadership on behalf of the collective.

Arguably, collective leadership does not preclude leadership in the more formal sense.¹³ Through channels of accountability, one person – or one institution – can be charged with influencing others towards a collective goal. The Cluster Leadership role comes to mind here, as does that of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. For collective leadership to be possible, the more formal type of leadership needs to ensure that certain specific conditions are in place, such as trust, transparent and effective communication, accountability, shared learning, and **the understanding that success depends on the power with others, not over others.**¹⁴ This research does not directly concern the more formal type of leadership, but rather the extent to which humanitarian agencies that have committed to contribute towards the shared goal appear to engage accordingly in the process of collective leadership, accentuating the ambitions, values, and aggregate skills and knowledge of that collective.

The (dis)incentives for collective leadership

Simply put, "when collective leadership is happening, [stakeholders] are internally and externally motivated—working together toward a shared vision within a

group."¹⁵ A closer look at the requirements of 'shared vision' and 'internal and external motivation' demonstrates how the commitment to collective leadership is constantly put in the shadow of individual agency preferences.

A shared vision?

Through simple collaboration, organisations can come together to implement programs or initiatives with specific outputs that happen to be relevant to each. And by coordinating they can exchange information and update each other on what each is doing to avoid duplication and address gaps. But when they undertake collective leadership, they coordinate around a shared desire to improve outcomes.¹⁶ Some researchers have even spoken about a collective "invisible leadership," which takes its actual origin in the dedication to the deeply held common purpose itself.¹⁷ The idea that the common purpose is the inspiration behind the commitment to work together resonates with regard to the humanitarian system. Through UNGA Resolution 46/182, the international community indicated their common concern about the suffering of victims of disaster and emergency situations, and their conviction of the need to make the collective efforts in providing humanitarian assistance more effective. On paper, this is the essence of the common goal that the humanitarian community has committed to achieving, and which has been supplemented with more specific commitments over the years – to centrality of protection, to localisation, to accountability to affected people, etc. In line with the idea of the "invisible leadership", it could then be argued that working together to ensure the best outcomes for those most in need is the common purpose that has laid the foundations for collective leadership in the humanitarian community. And indeed, it appears that humanitarian actors generally identify very strongly with this purpose: they see it as the *raison d'être of their profession and the organisations they work for*,¹⁸ and it is what seems to have pushed the humanitarian architecture through several waves of transformations, each aiming to improve the system and sharpen its tools.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the key informants that HERE interviewed also largely indicated that they do not believe that there is a true 'masterplan' or overall shared vision with regard to *how to get to the goal*. The system is ripe with examples

The system is ripe with examples where an overall end goal is provided without sufficient shared agreement or clarity in regard to the specific steps that will lead there.

where an overall end goal is provided without sufficient shared agreement or clarity in regard to the specific steps that will lead there. For example, while the 2005 Humanitarian Response Review suggested new ways for coordination,

strengthened leadership, and improved funding mechanisms, it did not explicitly elaborate on how these different pieces connect, i.e., which exact role should be played by whom to achieve what specific result. The strategic role of the standards and policy functions are still not sufficiently elaborated in IASC cluster guidance.¹⁹

Similarly, during the World Humanitarian Summit the Secretary-General and eight UN Principals, together with the World Bank and IOM, agreed to work towards collective outcomes across silos, over multiple years, based on the comparative advantage of a diverse range of actors, including those outside the UN system. 'Collective outcomes' were defined as concrete and measurable results that humanitarian, development and other relevant actors want to achieve jointly, usually over a period of 3-5 years, in a country to reduce people's needs, risks and vulnerabilities and increase their resilience.²⁰ However, as raised in the latest State of the Humanitarian System report, beyond bringing key actors together, the value of the collective outcomes as a practical framework for collective action remained unclear. Rather than driving real systemic or programmatic change, they have remained "an umbrella for existing or disparate programming... The lack of monitoring processes meant that there was no joint accountability for these collective outcomes and little incentive for achieving them."²¹

Both examples above highlight that while the stakeholders in the humanitarian system have made a start at collective leadership by committing to working together on priority actions to help those most in need, there is a lack of follow-through as they lack a shared common vision and understanding of the concepts underpinning humanitarian action. Agencies define needs and prioritise interventions from their own perspective and are reluctant to compromise on their own mandate. While it has been argued that the commitment itself can be incentive enough for actors to work collectively,²² HERE's research indicates that this is not the case in the humanitarian system, as **individual agencies do not internalise and/or institutionalise collective commitments or do so too little or too late.**

Internal and external motivation?

The fact that members of a group have a common interest or concern does not mean that they will automatically act in order to maximise the gains for the whole group. With regard to public service provision, it has even long been argued that on the contrary, rational actors are self-interested, and when desired outcomes have to come about as a result of the effective participation of many actors, they are rather motivated to contribute less than they otherwise would, or access benefits without contributing, if they can 'free ride' on the contributions of others.²³ The parallel between public service provision within a country and the humanitarian system is not a

straight one – the humanitarian system is an international, horizontal organisation of actors coming together, not a vertical system of internal governance – but it is still relevant in that it highlights the idea that all actors involved in a collective endeavour are still primarily motivated by their own self-interest. This does not mean that humanitarian stakeholders – be they governments or agencies – have not made their collective commitments in good faith. As put by one key informant, *"it is not a lack of willingness, but is working for the collective really worth it in the long run? For the people in crisis probably, but for the agency profile and funding? It's a grey zone."* Several overlapping and interacting factors appear to disincentivise contributing to collective leadership in favour of the perceived individual agency interest.

Mindsets

First of all, it appears that agencies' motivation to engage in collective leadership is undermined by their institutional mindsets. Particularly when they have received a mandate from the international community, but also when their mission is 'self-imposed,' **agencies tend to frame their approach to the humanitarian system more or less exclusively from the point of view of their own mandate**, and with the conviction that they are the appointed 'leaders' of the international community in this particular sector or area of activities.²⁴ However, collective leadership hinges on the very idea that all stakeholders take an interest in the achievement of the shared goals, and that the process is co-constructed in a way that effectively and appropriately distributes elements of the leadership role. Conversely, a key requirement for collective leadership in the humanitarian system is that all stakeholders involved take responsibility for its success as a whole – not just for their sector. In summary, the widespread mandate-focus works against collective leadership from two angles: the agencies in question do not pay sufficient attention to responsibilities that they perceive as lying outside of their mandate, and at the same time, they do not allow for the co-construction of leadership from other agencies when it comes to topics that touch on what they see as their field of expertise.

Funding

In all likelihood, agencies' emphasis on their mandates is largely due to a deep conviction that they know best how to do and manage issues in that particular field, but it also appears to be the result of a competitive environment. Historically, the main incentive for agencies to coordinate and work together has been funding, and the process of making a common appeal through combining their response plans. At the same time, once that appeal has been made and donors have pledged funding, agencies go after the money separately. As seen in previous work carried out by HERE, agencies constantly

strive to guarantee their funding, and justify their existence.²⁵ More often than not, they appear to **enter a context asking the question “how can we frame our added value here” rather than asking “do we have an added value here, and if not, who does.”** In this sense, humanitarian agencies have been described as being – or behaving as if they are – trapped in the dilemma of wanting to do good for others but needing to do good for themselves to justify their existence.²⁶

In terms of funding and removing barriers to collective leadership, it should also be noted that the concept of (UN-managed) humanitarian pooled funds, be it the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) or the country-based pooled funds, have been put in place to promote collective action under the guidance of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). The Humanitarian Coordination function is a collective leadership function per se, represented in one person. This not a command-and-control role, far from it. They need to ensure constant buy-in from the members of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), or, in fact, ensure that these members feel that they can lead. In this sense, pooled funds have the tendency to push agencies to think collectively. However, the idea that the HC decides on pooled fund allocations to the agencies can both strengthen and defeat collective leadership. It can strengthen it when these decisions are made based on complementarities (which is different from keeping everyone happy), but also defeat collective leadership when the HC takes these decisions too much in isolation. However, they may have good reasons to take these unilateral decisions, for example because the needs in a certain sector are of higher priority than in another.

Meanwhile, one overlooked issue is the impact of donors' bilateral funding on collective leadership. While, as we have seen, pooled funds have the potential to strengthen collective leadership in terms of working towards a common goal, they are only a small part of the total of humanitarian funding. In 2007 the CERF and CBPFs together accounted for 8% of reported contributions in humanitarian emergencies.²⁷ The situation does not appear to have improved over the years: in the last decade, only close to 6% of humanitarian funding from government donors went to CERF, CBPFs and other pooled funds.²⁸ With the majority of humanitarian funding being bilateral, there appears less to be an incentive for agency heads to think collectively.

Rewards

The competition with others also appears to trigger a reluctance of agencies to incentivise work which does not primarily appear to benefit the agency itself from the point of view of its mandate. HERE has seen that agencies may buy into collective processes and outcomes on paper – and even be cluster leads – but still internally first reward that which is done for the individual agency, not

the work that is carried out for the collective. The CLARE II evaluation for example found that, while many UNICEF cluster coordinators had done a remarkable job, they tended to feel isolated and unsupported in their roles.²⁹ Generally speaking, the interviews HERE carried out out showed **a pattern of disconnect between the political leadership and operational level within humanitarian agencies: staff at the working level of agencies who are in positions where there is inter-agency consultation tend to see the benefit of exercising collective leadership much more than their superiors.**

Several respondents highlighted that they had never in a performance review been asked about their engagement with other actors in the system, but that the focus would be on the programmes and projects of the specific agency and their targets. While the success of these agency-specific projects would of course likely depend on coordination efforts on behalf of agency staff, that issue was never directly raised. As put by one interviewee: *“the key incentive is to deliver for your agency: it’s something you can assess, something you can track.”* And by another: *“people are not going to be promoted because they saw the big picture. On the contrary, they would probably be penalised: why are you letting us look bad compared to others?”* Agency operational staff may be convinced of the need to work through and for the collective to realise, for example, centrality of protection, accountability to affected people, and localisation of aid. At the same time, the leadership within these agencies are accountable to Boards that look essentially at individual agency performance and growth. Little credit is often given for how much the agency has worked with others to realise the collective leadership of the sector. Governing boards of NGOs rarely ask the Chief Executive about their collaboration with other humanitarian partners outside the NGO

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federative network. Admittedly, HERE has heard from donor respondents that they are increasingly coordinating their participation, for example in the UNICEF Board, the EXCOM of UNHCR, and the Executive Board of WFP, but

with some exceptions³⁰ it has yet to bear fruit in terms of Boards truly holding the agency leadership accountable for its contribution to collective ambitions.

Processes

At a very practical level, HERE has also seen that, within agencies, **the motivation to take part in collective leadership is significantly hampered by internal processes.** No doubt also as a result of the points above, agencies have their own strategies, budget cycles, and appraisal systems, and prefer to carry out their own needs assessments, planning, and monitoring.³¹ Prog-

ress has been made in the last few years, notably with the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF), which aims to improve the way humanitarian actors jointly plan and respond to crises.³² Nonetheless, certain agencies remain big enough to continue focusing inwardly, and to do things their own way.

Not only do these internal processes distract energy and efforts from the collective ambition, but – more worryingly – many of them do not align with the commitments made. For example, as highlighted by several interviewees, agencies commit to localisation while their internal functioning and due diligence requirements simultaneously make it very difficult to even work with local partners. Similarly, the timing and indicators of UNHCR’s internal budgeting and planning process is not aligned with Refugee Response Plans.³³ Adjusting agency-specific processes to fit the collective leadership space is a cumbersome task that demands resources and time and requires that agency leaders be held to account for collective commitments.

As mentioned, these issues overlap and feed into and off of each other. Agencies prefer to stick with their own processes to emphasise their specificity and justify their mandate *via-à-vis* those of their competitors. The leadership of agencies prefer to reward that which is done for the agency itself for the same reasons, but also because they are stuck in a path dependency created by the fact that the agency’s work is dictated primarily by its

There is a need to break this self-reinforcing cycle, and to push the agency incentives in the direction of collective leadership.

own internal processes. **There is a need to break this self-reinforcing cycle, and to push the agency incentives in the direction of collective leadership.**

Concluding remarks: how to ‘fix’ the incentives?

The power dynamics in the system make it resistant to change. In line with rational choice theory, the actors in charge or at the top tend not to want to devolve that power to the collective.³⁴ As highlighted by one interviewee, *“the cluster system empowered some agencies and organisation to run the resources and does not empower the collective, it gives the hegemony to certain agencies.”* And indeed, the 2022 State of the Humanitarian System Report confirms that “[o]ver the past four years, almost half (47%) of humanitarian aid reported to the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) was initially absorbed by just three UN agencies: WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF.”³⁵ These major players have little incentive to change a system that significantly rewards them. As one interviewee explained: *“There’s a lot of resistance from Cluster Lead Agencies [to initiatives around settlement ap-*

proaches or area-based coordination] because it’s a threat; it questions the model and the fundraising around it.”

In terms of ‘who’ would be able to transform incentives, and better allow for collective leadership, a noteworthy divergence of perspectives was seen in the additional interviews specifically carried out for this paper: while donor representatives highlighted that they hoped the findings in this research would provide them with leverage to push agencies in the direction of collective ambitions, agency representatives – be they UN or INGOs – argued that only donors have the leverage needed to begin with. In their view, donors could for example make funding dependent on collective achievements, or focus more exclusively on pooled funding.

Arguably, the task of better incentivising collective leadership and action should not fall on only one group of actors in the system, but on all of them, as part of the collective. Fundamentally, it appears from HERE’s research that collective leadership hinges on the need for all stakeholders to see the shared goal as being in their own individual interest, and not only in the interest of the collective. There has to be a common recognition that what is good for the collective is also good for the individual agency. How to bring about that change in mindset?

Collective action theory research has seen that genuine cooperation thrives primarily on non-material incentives like trust, reciprocity, and reputation.³⁶ The argument is that incentives – understood as the internal and external motivations of the parts of the collective – depend on the opportunities and constraints arising from economic and political relationships. These relationships are influenced by an agency’s reputation. Ensuring a culture of trust and reciprocity works to build the importance of a good reputation.³⁷ The willingness to uphold (or improve) that reputation in turn helps bolster responsibilities and mutual accountabilities of the stakeholders involved, in their own best interest.³⁸ The political economy of the humanitarian system appears to dictate the opportunities and constraints of collective leadership. Accountability is often sacrificed. For the IASC Principals, there is a need for an articulated balance between working as friends – based on trust and common experiences – and distance for holding each other to account. For collective leadership to be realised, concerted activity is required at multiple levels. First, at the individual level, each stakeholder/agency has to feel inclined to truly contribute, also because it perceives that to be in its own best interest. Second, the different stakeholders should have shared expectations built around their respective strengths in view of their common goal, leading to the formulation of roles and responsibilities. Third, at the systems level, stakeholders have to agree on priorities and common rules with regard to accountability.³⁹

Recognise that what is good for the collective is good for the individual agency

With regard to the first level, there is a leadership challenge which is to create a culture within the organisation that sees the collaborative advantage and value of the collective. CLARE II found that the lack of internal support for UNICEF's CLA role was not necessarily a matter of unwillingness, but the result of the agency still needing to recognise that its work for the collective may in fact have a greater impact in terms of achieving its humanitarian mission than the narrow pursuits of its individual agency mindset and focus. A series of recommendations were made towards adjusting this perspective, including reformulating UNICEF's interests in terms of a broader common good, and restructuring internal guidelines and systems accordingly.⁴⁰ A humanitarian organisation by nature cannot thrive on competition,⁴¹ and there is a need to distinguish between leadership within one institution and leadership on behalf of the collective – these two aspects provide for different dynamics at both local and global levels.⁴²

There is a need to distinguish between leadership within one institution and leadership on behalf of the collective.

Boards that hold agency leadership accountable need not only management skills and experience, but also, crucially, in-depth knowledge of development and humanitarian action, the nature and significance of collective commitments, and humanitarian principles. Boards also have to exercise critical thinking with regard to the agency's own mandate and govern in view of ensuring that it fits into a bigger picture of collective action.

Strengthen the collective around its shared purpose

HERE's research has also unearthed a number of immediate steps that could be taken to boost the second level, i.e. the relationship between the collective leadership stakeholders, built around their common interest. One respondent suggested for example that the mindset shift can be helped by no longer speaking in terms of agency mandates, but in terms of issues. In meetings and publications, instead of focusing on what is UNHCR's mandate, speak of protection; instead of speaking on behalf of WFP or FAO, speak on behalf of the food security cluster. In the words of this interviewee, *"you need to socialise certain concepts so organisations take ownership of them to better focus on them."* An interviewee who made a similar argument found that *"a lot of things that could be done to change the culture. Look at footballers – it's not a perfect analogy but some of them playing for their club but also for their country."* As suggested in HERE's Roadmap to the future of humanitarian coordination, it would be important for those in coordination leadership positions to

ask the question 'why are we here?'⁴³ from time to time. OCHA could, for example, organise meta-consultations within cluster/inter-cluster/HCTs once or twice a year on stakeholders' expectations in terms of coordination outcomes, what they expect to bring, and what they expect to achieve as a return on their investment. Another concrete suggestion would be to continue the progress that has been made when it comes to more closely considering the skills and approach of HCs when appointing them. One respondent emphasised that *"you need persuasive skills to bring agencies back on the collective track"* and explained that three qualities are crucial: interpersonal skills, knowledge of the clusters and their themes, and understanding of the different cultures and mission of NGOs. At the same time, and as emphasised by the ALNAP paper provided for Berlin event,⁴⁴ care should be taken not to over-emphasise the importance of strengthening individual leadership capabilities at the expense of institutionalising leadership within the way the sector operates as such.

Define strategic priorities and ensure accountability for them

In terms of the third level, the emphasis on strategic vision is essential. There is no question that the humanitarian system has been created around a deeply felt common conviction of the need to help those most in need through international cooperation. Crucially, the middle ground of how to get to the shared goal has to be better investigated and formulated. It has been argued that *"[i]neffective leaders try to make change happen. System leaders focus on creating the conditions that can produce change and that can eventually cause change to be self-sustaining."*⁴⁵ Priorities need to be defined, and there has to be a clear framework for shared accountability that ensures contributions to the collective ambition. Formalising the idea of 'collective leadership' in IASC cluster policy documents would be a start in terms of filling an existing gap. Incentives for collective leadership can only be served through a big-picture, system perspective:⁴⁶ if each agency focuses only on its mandate in isolation from how they all interact, there cannot be collective leadership, and attaining the shared goal will be all the more difficult.⁴⁷ Using a system perspective provides a significant challenge however: very rarely do individual agencies set out to improve their own performance in isolation; they require different actors at different levels to coordinate and consensually shift their ways of working. Given how difficult it already is for one organisation to change its own systems and attitudes, it is understandable that each agency prefers to focus inwardly. However, while it is true that many, if not most, levers for change are outside of the control of the humanitarian actors themselves, there is one which they do control: their own contribution to the collective action, and their willingness to ensure the system becomes more than the sum of its parts.⁴⁸

Endnotes

- 1 UN GA Res 46/182. See also <https://www.unocha.org/story/resolution-46182-which-created-humanitarian-system-turns-twenty-five>
- 2 See e.g. Sphere Association, *The Sphere Handbook - Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*.
- 3 See UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'; UNICEF and Save the Children, 'Review of Education Cluster Co-Leadership'.
- 4 See e.g. ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System 2022'; Cocking et al., 'Independent Review of the Implementation of the IASC Protection Policy.'; Montemurro and Wendt, 'Principled Humanitarian Programming in Yemen'.
- 5 UNHCR, 'UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings'; Montemurro and Wendt, 'Unpacking Humanitarianism'; UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.
- 6 The three other issues highlighted by the project are the lack of clarity around the ultimate purpose of humanitarian coordination, the fact that the coordination infrastructure is not in sync with global developments, and that the current humanitarian coordination is too technical and process-driven, at the expense of values.
- 7 See for example Alsaedi, 'The Important Role of Collective Leadership in the Face of Change: Literature Review'; Brinkerhoff, Murrieta, and O'Neill, 'Advancing Collective Leadership: Activating the Gifts of Your Team'; Featherstone, 'United We Stand? Collective Accountability in Humanitarian Sector'; Friedrich et al., 'A Framework for Understanding Collective Leadership: The Selective Utilization of Leader and Team Expertise Within Networks'; Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications'; Wassenaar and Pearce, 'The Nature of Shared Leadership'; Gronn, 'Distributed Leadership as a Unit of Analysis'.
- 8 Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications'.
- 9 Alsaedi, 'The Important Role of Collective Leadership in the Face of Change: Literature Review'; Gronn, 'Distributed Leadership as a Unit of Analysis'.
- 10 Friedrich et al., 'A Framework for Understanding Collective Leadership: The Selective Utilization of Leader and Team Expertise Within Networks'.
- 11 West et al., 'Developing Collective Leadership for Health Care'.
- 12 Significantly, HERE has seen that while the overarching purpose of humanitarian coordination is generally clear in its operational/programmatic terms at the country level (prevent inefficiencies and gaps in coverage), it is less so with regard to how much strategic coordination is expected. See HERE-Geneva, 'Four Pressure Points to Improve Humanitarian Coordination - Literature Review'.
- 13 Friedrich et al., 'A Framework for Understanding Collective Leadership: The Selective Utilization of Leader and Team Expertise Within Networks'. It should be noted that the argument has been made that when collective leadership is fully achieved, "there is no need for any one person to make decisions and mobilize action on the part of those assembled" (Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications').
- 14 Fox and Urwick, *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett* quoted by O'Neill and Brinkerhoff, 'Advancing Critical Conversations: How to Get There from Here.' With regard to the type of institutional leadership that would best forward these characteristics, see also the ALNAP paper prepared for the 10 November 2022 Berlin event; Ramalingam and Mitchell, 'Learning for Humanitarian Leadership: What It Is, How It Works and Future Priorities'.
- 15 O'Neill and Brinkerhoff, 'Advancing Critical Conversations: How to Get There from Here.' See also Brinkerhoff, Murrieta, and O'Neill, 'Advancing Collective Leadership: Activating the Gifts of Your Team'.
- 16 For a discussion around the difference between collaboration and collective impact, see for example <https://www.strivetogether.org/the-difference-between-collaboration-and-collective-impact/>
- 17 Hickman and Sorenson, 'Unmasking Leadership'.
- 18 See <https://here-geneva.org/the-role-of-mandates/>.
- 19 HERE-Geneva, 'Four Pressure Points to Improve Humanitarian Coordination - Literature Review'; UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.
- 20 https://agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2019/Dec/Operationalizing_Collective_Outcomes_DraftV3.pdf
- 21 ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System 2022', 44.
- 22 Herfeld, 'The Motive of Commitment and Its Implications for Rational Choice Theory'. See also Robertson and Tang, 'The Role of Commitment in Collective Action: Comparing the Organizational Behavior and Rational Choice Perspectives'.
- 23 Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*; Gibson et al., *The Samaritan's Dilemma: The Political Economy of Development Aid*.
- 24 UNHCR, 'UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings'; UNICEF and Save the Children, 'Review of Education Cluster Co-Leadership'; Montemurro and Wendt, 'Unpacking Humanitarianism'.
- 25 Egger, 'Just Part-Time Lovers? Competition, Coercive Coordination, and Friendship among International INGOs'. See also Ramalingam and Barnett, 'The Humanitarian's Dilemma: Collective Action or Inaction in International Relief?'
- 26 Polman, 'What's Wrong With Humanitarian Aid? A Journalist's Journey'.
- 27 Stoddard, 'International Humanitarian Financing: Review and Comparative Assessment of Instruments'.
- 28 ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System 2022', 57.
- 29 UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.
- 30 Working collectively can now be found in UNICEF's new corporate strategy.
- 31 For an interesting discussion on the way in which traditional project management and leadership approaches impact negatively on change with regard to local leadership and accountability to affected people, see CHA's paper for the Berlin event (Pellowska, 'Towards Facilitating Local Leadership in Humanitarian Project Management'.)
- 32 See <https://www.jiaf.info/>.
- 33 UNHCR, 'UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings'.
- 34 Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications'.
- 35 ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System 2022', 58.
- 36 Tembo, 'Improving Service Provision: Drawing on Collective Action Theory to Fix Incentives', 285. See also Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications'.
- 37 Ostrom, 'Collective Action and Local Development Processes'.
- 38 Tembo, 'Improving Service Provision: Drawing on Collective Action Theory to Fix Incentives', 281-82.
- 39 The construction of these three levels is inspired by Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications', citing Center for Ethical Leadership, 'The Collective Leadership Framework'.
- 40 UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.
- 41 Thanks to Marc duBois for the pertinent reference to the work of Paul Skinner (Skinner, *Collaborative Advantage: How Collaboration Beats Competition as a Strategy for Success*.) and for sharing his experiences from humanitarian Board governance training.
- 42 HERE-Geneva, 'Buddha, Hercules, and Others in Humanitarian Leadership Note on the HERE-Organised Round Table on Humanitarian Leadership, Geneva, 25 October 2019'.
- 43 HERE-Geneva, 'Future of Humanitarian Coordination Roadmap'.
- 44 Ramalingam and Mitchell, 'Learning for Humanitarian Leadership: What It Is, How It Works and Future Priorities'.
- 45 Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, 'The Dawn of System Leadership'.
- 46 For insight regarding efforts directly help RCs/HCs and their teams advance progress on a complex, cross-boundary challenge of their choosing in light of systems leadership, see the report provided by KONU and Dalberg for the Berlin event (KONU and Dalberg, 'Systems Leadership in the Humanitarian Sector: Findings from Field Leadership Labs'.)
- 47 Levine, 'System Failure? Why Humanitarian Assistance Can't Meet Its Objectives Without Systems Thinking—and Why It Finds It so Hard to Use It'; Barresi, 'Systems Thinking in Humanitarian Response: Visualization and Analysis of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Architectures for "The Cluster Approach"'. "Levine, 'System Failure? Why Humanitarian Assistance Can't Meet Its Objectives Without Systems Thinking—and Why It Finds It so Hard to Use It'; Barresi, 'Systems Thinking in Humanitarian Response: Visualization and Analysis of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Architectures for "The Cluster Approach"'. "noteIndex":47,"citationItem s":{"id":"1458","uris":["http://zotero.org/groups/2247439/items/WA5BZBH"], "itemData":{"id":"1458","type":"chapter","abstract":"Abstract Thinking in terms of systems is surely as old as any other kind of intelligent contemplation, but even if the creation of 'systems thinking' as a separate intellectual discipline is much more recent, academic approaches to analysing 'soft systems' have been around for at least two generations. The fact has to be faced, though, that the impact of more structured approaches to systems thinking have been extremely limited, with most of the world stubbornly continuing to address the obvious failings of the various systems that we need by tinkering with a few of the components, despite the evidence of decades that such approaches inevitably disappoint. Systems theorists have perhaps not helped as much as they could, being seen too easily as creating esoteric jargon that seeks to describe in opaque terms what was already abundantly clear to everyone anyway—but not really offering a way forward that anyone connected with the problem could actually find helpful. (More recently complexity theorists seem to be repeating the same path."}
- 48 ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System 2018'.

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- . 'Four Pressure Points to Improve Humanitarian Coordination - Literature Review', 2021. https://here-geneva.org/?smd_process_download=1&download_id=11173.
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Leadership of protection in the humanitarian sector

by Gemma Davies and Mark Bowden

Introduction

Humanitarian leaders are critical to setting and advancing strategies that help reduce protection risks for crisis-affected people. They are key to contributing to cultures in the institutions and organisations that they lead which support protection. However, in recent years humanitarian leaders have not prioritised protection as central to humanitarian action at either country or global levels (Cocking et al., 2022).

At the highest levels of leadership within the United Nations-led international architecture, including with the UN Secretary-General (UNSG), rhetoric on prioritising the protection of civilians has rarely translated into results. Geopolitical tensions, fragmentation of traditional alliances, and a crisis of multilateralism have all led to paralysis at the UN Security Council on protection risks (Metcalf-Hough, 2020; Bowden and Metcalf-Hough, 2020; Davies and Spencer, 2022a; Metcalf-Hough, 2022).

Within the humanitarian system, protection is poorly understood.

Within the humanitarian system, protection is poorly understood. It lacks institutional and political support. In the absence of

leadership that promotes protection as central to humanitarian action, there is a lack of commitment to and prioritisation of protection (Cocking et al., 2022).

Lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities at the global, regional, national and subnational levels has led to a fragmented, mandate-driven approach to protection, with the prioritisation of specific population groups or risks (e.g., children, refugees and gender-based violence (GBV)). Rather than being recognised as a strategic issue across responses, protection is often delegated to a technical level. This has undermined progress towards a strategic, coherent and collective approach to strengthening protection (Metcalf-Hough, 2020; Bowden and Metcalf-Hough, 2020; Cocking et al., 2022).

The need for stronger, more courageous leadership at the institutional, system and individual levels is well recognised, including the need for an increased use of humanitarian diplomacy as a tool to strengthen protection (Bowden and Metcalf-Hough, 2020; Metcalf-Hough, 2022; Cocking et al., 2022). Opportunities exist. Protection and advocacy¹ are stated priorities of the current Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). Humanitarian leadership of protection was a key recommendation of the

Independent Review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Protection Policy, and leadership is a priority for the UNSG's 2020 Call to Action on Human Rights and the Agenda for Protection. If implemented, they could offer opportunities for more effective leadership of protection. However, translating such calls into action requires commitment from the highest levels of the humanitarian sector – the UN SG, the ERC, and the UN Principals and executive directors of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). It requires political will, with identified actions to empower leaders, and to address barriers and disincentives.

This paper focuses on challenges, barriers and enabling factors to strengthen humanitarian leadership of protection as a central tenet of humanitarian action. It will focus on the role of leadership in reducing protection risks to civilians, defined as risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation.² It considers leaders from the country to global levels, considering what is required for more bold, empowered leadership of protection (Cocking et al., 2022). Due to the focus of the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI) project, this paper predominantly focuses on humanitarian leaders within the formal humanitarian architecture, with the recognition that effective leadership of protection does not and should not come solely from within the traditional international humanitarian architecture.

This briefing note is based on the recent IASC Protection Policy review led by HPG (ibid.), as well as its three-year programme of research and policy engagement on the role of advocacy in strengthening the protection of conflict-affected civilians (Metcalf-Hough, 2022). This research was complemented by a small number of targeted interviews with current and former humanitarian leaders, as well as people who work on leadership and protection, to ensure it is situated within current policy and operational dialogue and practice.

The state of play: leadership of protection

Leadership of protection is necessary at different levels across the humanitarian sector – in individual organisations and their networks, in coalitions and through personal action (Cocking et al., 2022). This includes designated leadership roles within the UN system; for example, the Special Representative, Special Envoy and Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) roles, and the Principals of UN

Agencies. It includes UN heads of agencies and leaders of humanitarian coordination systems, such as the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) or heads of protection clusters. Considerable protection leadership and expertise can be found within non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which can and have driven systemic shifts outside of the formal humanitarian coordination architecture (Cocking et al., 2020: 47). Individual leadership qualities are key to ensure approaches to addressing risks are translated into action.

The *IASC Policy on protection in humanitarian action* calls on leaders to ‘harness the diverse mandates and expertise of IASC organizations in achieving protection outcomes’ (IASC, 2016: 9). The policy recognises that strengthened protection is reliant on collective and coherent leadership across and beyond the humanitarian system – including among peace, human rights and political actors (Cocking et al., 2020: 41).

At the global level, the ERC sets the agenda and focus of the IASC as Chair of the IASC Principals. The prioritisation of protection as one of the five IASC priority areas (IASC, 2021a), and the recent Principals’ endorsement of the IASC Protection Policy review and identification of senior champions to take forward the recommendations could provide entry points to strengthen protection.

Since 2005, the GPC, under the overall leadership of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) as Cluster Lead Agency, has been the main leading entity coordinating technical-level, programmatic responses to protection across the humanitarian system at both global and country levels. However, the GPC and Areas of Responsibility (AoR) are led by the mandates of their agencies. This results in the provision of technical support to categories of vulnerable populations (e.g., displaced people and children), or specific risks (such as GBV), rather than the most acute risks affected people face. Programming and funding priorities of the GPC, AoRs and their lead agencies, too, drive priority approaches and risks to address. This has undermined a strategic approach that humanitarian actors can collectively adopt in a given crisis (Cocking et al., 2022: 46).

At the country level, the HC Terms of Reference (ToR) require HCs to advocate for the respect of international humanitarian and human rights law (IHL/IHRL) and to coordinate advocacy efforts (IASC, 2009). The centrality of protection is listed as a mandatory responsibility in the 2021 *Leadership in Humanitarian Action: Handbook for the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator* (IASC, 2021b) and is part of the ERC–HC annual compact. The IASC Protection Policy itself sets out the leadership role of the HC, supported by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), in identifying protection priorities and required

collective action (IASC, 2016). Protection was made one of four mandatory tasks in the ToR for HCTs adopted in 2017, and was included in HCT compacts,³ though this has rarely translated into concrete action and its implementation is not mandatory (IASC, 2017; 2020). International and national NGOs, at the global and country levels, have developed expertise, some of which has ‘led to significant change, influence and impact on protection’ (Cocking et al., 2022: 47).

Leaders need to be supported to ‘walk the talk’ and systematically prioritise addressing protection risks.

The commitment of humanitarian leaders to protection as central to humanitarian action has diminished in the past two decades. Leaders across all levels are more cautious (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Cocking et al., 2022). Leaders need to be supported to ‘walk the talk’ and systematically prioritise addressing protection risks. They need to be held accountable, and hold their staff to account, for delivering on their responsibilities. To achieve this requires working with human rights, peace, development and political actors using comprehensive approaches.

Effective protection leadership: key challenges and dilemmas

Lack of strategic approach to addressing protection risks

A primary role of humanitarian leaders is to set strategic approaches to reducing protection risks. However, identifying and prioritising protection risks that crisis-affected people face and the actions to be taken to reduce them is challenging. The complexity and sensitivities of reducing protection risks can lead to tensions and divisions in how to address them. Such decisions can polarise opinion among humanitarian actors on the ground and therefore

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serve as the litmus test of leadership. Low levels of mutually reinforcing positions and approaches have undermined coherent approaches.

There are a number of challenges that leaders face in establishing a strategic approach to address protection risks. Firstly, at the country level there is an absence of an integrated multi-year strategic framework whereby humanitarian leadership can prioritise protection risks that can be collectively addressed. Current frameworks – within individual organisations, the humanitarian programme cycle, HCT Protection Strategies and across integrated UN missions – all fall short of, or undermine, a strategic approach. This is exacerbated by ‘fragmented approaches driven by the mandates and priorities of dif-

ferent organisations or coordination mechanisms, rather than priority protection risks facing affected people' (Cocking et al., 2022: 30).

Secondly, funding and programme structures focus on funding based on organisational and cluster expertise and mandates, which often act as disincentives to collective approaches.

Thirdly, there are overlapping concepts and guidance on priority areas for leadership to take action – e.g., accountability to affected populations, the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, gender, disability, older people, inclusion and localisation. There is little practical direction on how to bring these risks together, which causes confusion and parallel ways of working by different specialist groups in a response. This can lead to a tick-box and/or cherry-picking approach to which risks to prioritise, which can be exacerbated by donor priorities and funding.⁴

Lastly, the misguided notion that directly engaging conflict parties on their abuses of IHL/IHRL might breach the principle of neutrality fails to recognise the primacy of humanity as the core goal of humanitarian action – to address human suffering. Principles have been 'instrumentalised by the (Western-dominated) humanitarian sector as a gatekeeper to humanitarianism itself' (Dubois, 2020: 9). Nonetheless, such interpretations seem to have led to humanitarian leaders' reluctance to directly engage state and non-state actors on their

conduct. But as Dubois states, principles are 'subject to deliberate compromise – and indeed compromise is the rule' (ibid.; see Metcalfe-Hough, 2022: 27). Critically, the qualities of moral courage, ethical and principled leadership – often disincentivised but crucial to effective leadership of protection – will require humanitarian leaders to be strategic as to when and which compromises are necessary (see Gilmore, 2022: 43).

The gaping analysis, advice and capacity gap

One of the critical gaps for humanitarian leaders is the lack of a robust evidence base of protection risks. This is in part due to structural issues. Analysis by different actors in the humanitarian sector is undertaken in accordance with the mandate of the 'institutional priorities of UNHCR and the AoRs rather than driven by a detailed analysis of risks and patterns of abuse for affected populations' (Cocking et al., 2020: 85). Individual UN and NGO organisations, too, tend to analyse a relatively narrow set of protection risks predominantly in line with their mandate, expertise and programming priorities, which is often linked to real or perceived donor priorities.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) conducts analysis where it has presence through country offices, in political and peace missions, or through its emergency response teams. While this analysis can be of great utility – with HCs reporting that it is often of greater use in their understanding of protection risks than analysis provided by the protection cluster⁵ – it too has its shortcomings. OHCHR staff have relatively limited presence in crisis countries, and therefore their ability to monitor critical trends and risks over vast geographical areas is also limited. Furthermore, the focus of analysis tends to be on the violation of rights, with a weaker focus on violations of IHL and the behaviours of conflict parties. Critically, in most cases it does not inform protection analysis from the GPC and AoRs described above.

The GPC's Protection Analytical Framework (PAF), finalised in 2021, was developed to respond to such concerns (GPC, 2021).⁶ The tool seeks to provide multidisciplinary protection analysis to support decision-making and the development of risk-reduction strategies. It is now the foundation of protection cluster analysis efforts. It will also be applied in five country-based protection clusters with the aim to inform humanitarian programme cycle, analysis and response processes. However, to ensure the use of the tool informs decision-making and supports leaders to prioritise critical protection risks, it is crucial that it is delinked from individual agency programming and funding but informs humanitarian programming as a whole; is driven by context and the protection risks as articulated by affected communities; and contributes to monitoring trends over time.



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Even where there is relatively strong analysis, humanitarian leaders, the HCT and humanitarian actors require informed specialist advice on how to prioritise amidst an array of different protection risks, and ways to manage options, dilemmas and approaches to addressing risks. Such advice can be undermined by the protection cluster and AoRs due to these bodies often prioritising according to mandate, funding and programmes. It can be further exacerbated by protection actors, who often assume the roles of ‘activists’ or ‘idealists’ who can call for purist outcomes in upholding IHL/IHRL, rather than supporting leaders to manage such options and dilemmas (UNHCR and OCHA, 2017; Davies and Spencer, 2022a). The IASC Protection Policy review called for strategic-level support to HCs, HCTs and non-protection specialist organisations, as well as at the global level, which should sit separate to and outside of the protection cluster (Cocking et al., 2022: 16). While potential options for this are currently being considered, it is critical to ensure that this mechanism is delinked from programmes and funding in order to ensure the priority risks addressed are the most relevant for affected people that humanitarian leaders could seek to address rather than driven by funding and mandate priorities.

Lastly, there is a critical and long-standing gap in the selection of leaders with adequate experience and skillsets in humanitarian diplomacy, negotiation, mediation and IHL/IHRL. Historical efforts to address these capacity gaps have focused on investment in training and guidance. However, this has not been effective in addressing the issue. Additionally, previous investments to prioritise the recruitment of HCs with coordination skills have been to the detriment of ensuring adequate skills in humanitarian diplomacy and negotiation. There is a critical need to prioritise the recruitment of leaders with such profiles (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Metcalfe-Hough, 2022).

Risk aversion as a disincentive to protection leadership

A critical dilemma that humanitarian leaders within crisis-affected countries face is in finding the right balance of maintaining relations with the host state and relevant authorities in order to maintain access and the delivery of services, while retaining the level of influence to raise sensitive, often unwelcome, protection risks.

How far humanitarian leaders are willing to go is one of the most critical factors.

With high levels of risk aversion across the humanitarian sector in recent years, humanitarian leaders across the board have become increasingly cautious. How far humanitarian leaders are willing to go in taking calculated risks to addressing protection risks, along with limited support for taking bolder approaches, is one of the most critical fac-

tors undermining leadership of protection in the humanitarian sector (Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Cocking et al., 2022; Metcalfe-Hough, 2022). This is across all levels – between individual leaders, and also institutional, structural and diplomatic support at both country and headquarter levels.

Senior leaders across the humanitarian sector are expected to maintain presence and access for the delivery of assistance, and often prioritise this whatever the cost. UN Heads of Agencies and INGO country directors whose performance is judged on funding and the number of beneficiaries reached seek to retain access for the delivery of programmes (Davies, 2021; Cocking et al., 2022). When leaders of individual agencies prioritise individual agency interests it can lead to compromises for short-term individual gain – for example in access – at the expense of a collective approach with longer-term impact (Montemurro and Wendt, 2021; see Box 1). This remains a major barrier for the humanitarian response to developing collective approaches to addressing protection risks. For HCs, in particular, this means managing the diverse interests, expectations and disincentives of HCT members. With Heads of Agencies potentially influencing assessments of HC performance appraisals, it can lead to HCs treading a careful line to keep Heads of Agencies on their side to safeguard their own position and career. Such perverse incentives (or disincentives) can lead to warped priorities at the expense of the acute risks faced by affected people. This is where moral and ethical leadership is critical, but it is often unsupported by both institutions and the sector writ large.

The Prisoner’s Dilemma

A recent report considered the opportunities and challenges to a principled collective humanitarian response in Yemen, whereby a lack of trust and communication in how individual agencies operationalise humanitarian principles undermines the effectiveness of the response.

The authors liken such practice to the paradigm of the ‘Prisoner’s Dilemma’, a situation where individual decision-makers are incentivised to make decisions such as making compromises to ensure access to deliver programmes, which undermines collective gains for all humanitarian actors. For Yemen, organisations focusing on individual agency programmes and funding to be granted access to deliver assistance allowed the authorities to ‘divide and conquer’.

When one organisation makes compromises for short-term gains of access, it undermines the ability of other organisations to uphold a principled approach. To address this dilemma requires a common recognition that short-term gains undermine long-

term collective benefits. The role of humanitarian leadership should therefore be to foster collective approaches such as jointly agreed operating principles, and to promote commitment to longer-term strategies to secure humanitarian and protection objectives. More open communications from agencies on how their actions are aligned with a common position can enhance the collective leverage of the humanitarian community and improve the impact of humanitarian action for affected people.

Box source: Montemurro and Wendt, 2021: 5

Risks to operations and access continue to have a chilling effect on leaders taking bold and common positions in seeking to strengthen protection. Host states are aware that even the threat of retaliation is enough to silence humanitarian organisations, and that organisations often prioritise maintaining presence whatever the cost (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Metcalfe-Hough, 2022).

However, there must also be recognition that silence in the face of abuses is itself taking a position vis-à-vis protection. It can lead to perceptions that organisations are negating the critical risks faced by affected people. For example, in the case of a leaked audio recording documented UN officials questioning the level of conflict-related sexual violence a day after the release of an Amnesty International report detailing the context and scale of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Tigray, the gravity of which they assessed could amount to war

Without humanitarian leaders putting in place a strategic approach to protection, and agreeing on collective red lines, they can risk contributing to a culture of impunity.

crimes and crimes against humanity (Amnesty International, 2021). A women's civil-society group responded that these remarks were 'sanitising, rationalising, and discrediting the voices of survivors' (Women of Tigray, 2021). In extreme cases, silence can lead to perceptions that humanitarian organisations are complicit in abuses experienced by civilians (Davies, 2021). Without humanitarian leaders putting in place a strategic approach to protection, and agreeing on collective red lines, they can risk contributing to a culture of impunity. This was the case, for instance, in relation to Myanmar whereby the abject failure of the UN to act in the face of years of widespread, grave violations of IHL/IHRL and of the Rohingya population – amounting to harsh persecution and the risk of genocide – raised questions as to whether the UN tolerated mass atrocities, contributing to a 'cycle of impunity'. Shamefully, the 'systemic failures' of the UN in its mandate to protect human rights in Sri Lanka a decade earlier were found to have been repeated (Rosenthal, 2019; OHCHR, 2019).

Risks to addressing protection obviously vary between contexts. While there is an array of potential risks related to promoting protection, most common concerns can include restrictions of programmes, denial of visas, and harassment. However, in reality, HPG has found that incidents of retaliation directly related to advocating on protection risks are not as pronounced as often assumed, while risks associated with carrying out advocacy are rarely assessed (Davies, 2021). An HPG survey⁷ with a broad set of national and international humanitarian actors at crisis and global levels found that 68% of respondents had not experienced negative repercussions as a result of undertaking protection advocacy⁸ (Spencer and Davies, 2022). We also found worryingly few examples of mitigating measures put in place to manage potential risks. This is problematic: if organisations do not develop tools to track and manage risks and harassment, they can be more easily controlled and manipulated (Mahony, 2018; Davies, 2021).

Linked to this, the impact of such risks can be overstated. The expulsion of individuals and leaders from a country is often perceived as a significant risk with significant impact. But that is not necessarily the case. It may not lead to a major disruption in programming. It could even lead to positive results – as was found in South Sudan when a Médecins sans frontières (MSF) staff member was expelled after MSF publicised the exponential increase in cases of sexual violence that it was treating in a clinic in Bentiu. It was reported that there were concrete and positive changes to the lives of survivors of SGBV following the expulsion as a result of increased provision of health, psychosocial or judicial support. Interviewees reported that the resulting public advocacy gave confidence to national actors and survivors of SGBV to demand change (see Davies and Spencer, 2022b). This comes back to what affected people want and need from the international community – which in some cases, including the two cited here, is recognition and condemnation of the abuses they are experiencing as much as, or potentially more than, the delivery of assistance.

Setting the tone for effective leadership requires institutional and organisational support.

Setting the tone for effective leadership requires institutional and organisational support. However, HPG's research shows that senior humanitarian leadership – particularly HCs – do not feel supported by their headquarters to raise sensitive protection risks with relevant authorities. Institutional support is often weak, and donor/member state support perceived as inadequate (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Metcalfe-Hough, 2022). High-level support is relatively rare, but there are precedents. Take, for example, the public interventions from the UNSG, ERC, the United States, the United Kingdom and other member states following the 2021 suspension of operations of MSF and the Norwegian Refugee Council

(NRC) in Tigray, and the subsequent expulsion of seven UN senior staff members from Ethiopia (UN News 2021; Metcalfe-Hough, 2022). As Gilmore states:

if the organisation's culture is to encourage and reward only 'yes-people' rather than the daring, or fails to signal clearly that it 'has the back' of its leaders when they stand up for principles, or fails to provide clear and accessible protections if leaders face threats, intimidation and bullying of the kind for which some Member States are infamous, then again it is daring that will be among the first casualties (2022: 47).

Leadership needs to come from the top and across the humanitarian system – starting with the UNSG. UNSGs sometimes indicate support to promoting protection early in their tenure, as demonstrated with the previous UNSG's development of the Human Rights Up Front initiative (UNSG, n.d.) and the current UNSG's efforts on the Call to Action for Human Rights (UNSG, 2020). However, leaders often fall short of translating rhetoric into action especially when such initiatives are not supported, or are blocked, by Member States. Interviews carried out by HPG found that the current UN Secretary-General too often bows to political pressures from Member States when concerns of human rights abuses are raised, and is inconsistent in his response to different crises. Many believe that the UNSG is not sufficiently upholding his mandate to address serious violations of IHL/IHRL and to prevent or halt their escalation to atrocity crimes (Lilly, 2022; Davies and Spencer, 2022b). Lack of leadership at such senior levels undermines strategic and operational leadership across the international system (Lilly, 2022).

Within individual organisations, where there is an organisational culture of promoting protection, there is often greater consistency in supporting and promoting protection concerns, and support to leaders in this regard. For the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), humanitarian diplomacy and protection dialogue are a core part of its mandate. One of MSF's founding principles is *témoignage*, or bearing witness and speaking out where necessary to the abuses one witnesses affected people suffering (MSF, n.d.). Protection has been an institutional priority of the NRC for many years. Supported by the leadership of Secretary General Jan Egeland, the protection of civilians is now a global priority. This demonstrates that, when the tone is set for effective leadership on protection, with organisational and institutional support, leaders can be empowered to take a stronger and more strategic approach to protection.

In the absence of structural and institutional support or incentives in prioritising protection, whether a leader acts to prioritise it frequently depends on their own commitment and willingness (Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020; Cocking et al., 2022). At times, this can be towards the end of a leader's career, when they

have less at stake and/or more confidence and networks to leverage. This results in a lack of consistency in addressing protection risks with some taking a strategic approach while others do very little. Critically, changes in leadership can result in a change in approach – undermining a long-term strategic approach that is crucially required for addressing protection risks.

Enabling more effective leadership of protection

Strengthened analysis

A granular understanding of the drivers of conflict and protection risks is yet to become a systematic tool to support the decision-making of humanitarian leaders. In recent years, some humanitarian organisations have strengthened investments in conflict and context analysis. Mercy Corps has significantly developed its crisis analytics capacity, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the World Food Programme (WFP) routinely invest in conflict analysis at both the global and crisis levels, and an increasing number of organisations have developed partnerships with research institutes.

The protection analytical framework seeks to address this. It recommends that protection analysis should be informed by the analysis of affected people, as well as thematic, context and cultural experts in a given crisis-affected country. While this is a positive development, it is critical the tool is accessible and of practical use to humanitarian actors.

Comprehensive protection analysis requires drawing on the expertise of a range of actors within and outside of the humanitarian system

A more comprehensive analytical approach is required. Comprehensive protection analysis requires drawing on the expertise of a range of actors within and outside of the humanitarian system – from the peace, political and human rights spheres, to research and academia at the local, subnational, national, regional and global levels. Such analysis should be routinely invested in across humanitarian responses, potentially as a shared resource among humanitarian actors, and should be regularly reviewed and updated to allow for nimble use in real time. This would serve as an entry point to identify strategic approaches to engagement with state and non-state actors in addressing protection risks.

Strategic approach to prioritising protection

Comprehensive protection analysis is one step towards equipping humanitarian leaders to collectively develop a long-term vision for reducing protection risks. Another

step is the identification of a limited set of critical protection risks that humanitarian leaders can collectively address. Doing so will enable them to leverage opportunities and developments to identify entry points to carry out humanitarian diplomacy. Such diplomacy requires investing in building relationships with all conflict parties and duty bearers, and maintaining regular protection dialogue in the long term. A long-term approach can and should be built on over years. Leaders should have analysis available when they begin their tenure to equip and enable them to collectively devise strategies to address protection risks.

The aide-mémoire on protection of civilians could be drawn on further to provide a strategic analytical framework (UNOCHA, n.d.; Bowden and Metcalfe-Hough, 2020). Along with protection-of-civilian debates at the UN Security Council, this can serve as a basis to support humanitarian leaders to collectively develop a contextually based set of protection priorities that humanitarian leaders can seek to address – while considering the limitations, added value and opportunities, and working towards realistic, specific outcomes (see Box 2). Where there has been collective action, it usually comes from determining common objectives. Analysing examples of good practice, and factors that enabled it could support leaders to understand what is possible, building on such approaches.

‘Tea with the Taliban’ – establishing a dialogue on the protection of civilians

A difficult challenge for humanitarian leaders, particularly HCs, is engaging with non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Between 2012 and 2017, Mark Bowden, then HC of Afghanistan, oversaw an integrated approach to engaging in dialogue with the Taliban to address protection-of-civilian concerns.

In Afghanistan, a key principle in engaging with the Taliban was not to treat engagement as negotiations for humanitarian access (as is often the case), but to initiate a broader, sustained dialogue on commonly identified protection-of-civilian concerns and to ensure the public recognition of the legitimacy of humanitarian action by the Taliban. Establishing an effective and meaningful dialogue involved identifying legitimate and senior interlocutors with delegated authority from senior levels of the Taliban leadership councils and securing their trust. This required maintaining a neutral and non-partisan approach along with total transparency on the nature, extent, intention and distribution of humanitarian action. It required patience and recognition of the opaque and lengthy nature of the Taliban policy- and decision-making processes. From 2013, the results of the dialogue were communicated through the Emir’s

various Eid messages, garnering wide acceptance by Taliban supporters and militias.

Dialogue with the Taliban was possible because the Taliban recognised some aspects of IHL and acknowledged IHRL. The protection-of-civilians agenda as reflected in the aide-mémoire could therefore be used as a framework that set an agenda around the following areas of concern: who was defined as a combatant or non-combatant; the legitimacy of humanitarian action; maintaining the protection and integrity of health facilities in Taliban-controlled areas; the rights to all for primary education and the protection of girls attending schools in Taliban areas; and a continued protection-of-civilian discussion led by the human rights delegates in the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to report and analyse key incidents and civilian casualties.

The dialogue resulted in important, specific outcomes, including the recognition and acknowledgement of all humanitarian organisations; the establishment of a ‘hotline’ to address incidents affecting humanitarian organisations, recognition of the non-combatant status of health workers and teachers, and the protection of schools and health centres. The success of the dialogue resulted from three key elements under the HC’s leadership:

- A broad-based common platform that reflected the interests of the humanitarian community as opposed to the individual interests of individual organisations.
- Coordination with other key interlocutors such as the ICRC on common messaging and consistency in approach to develop mutually supportive agendas.
- The critical need for communication. The humanitarian and donor community were regularly briefed on the status and nature of discussions and the humanitarian community was involved in setting the agenda and its specific concerns were included in the dialogue.

Box source: Mark Bowden, former HC, Afghanistan.

Leveraging senior-level support and accountability

A critical factor enabling country-based humanitarian leaders to prioritise and seek to address protection risks – even where there are risks – is through senior headquarters leadership support. To achieve this, spaces for frank engagement between country-based leaders and regional or headquarter leaders, where sensitive risks

can be discussed, should be made available. Peer-to-peer networks of current and former humanitarian leaders could also enable leaders to consider what is possible.

Strengthened accountability is critical. Leaders and institutions need to be held accountable to prioritise protection as central to humanitarian action, and supported in doing so (Cocking et al., 2022). Accountability should come from multiple directions: from leaders to their staff, organisations to affected populations, institutions to donors, and donors to affected populations (Metcalf-Hough, 2022). Strengthening accountability requires a range of approaches. The IASC Protection Policy review recommended the development of an accountability mechanism with clear roles and responsibilities established (Cocking et al., 2022). Installing feedback mechanisms could allow for more agile identification of positive practice and practice requiring course-correction. Individual agencies should put in place policies and frameworks to hold leadership to account. Monitoring leaders' performance through performance appraisals, and reporting on investments and achievements, are practical approaches in assessing whether responsibilities to promote protection have been delivered regardless of results (Metcalf-Hough, 2022). Significant engagement and support are required from member states and donors to achieve this. (Cocking et al., 2022)

Collective responsibility

Protection challenges are multifaceted and cannot be resolved by humanitarian actors alone. Collective responsibility and mutually reinforcing approaches across human rights, peace and political actors that work within, alongside and beyond the humanitarian system are critical to reducing risks. However, there is limited evidence of coherent approaches to addressing protection risks. Institutional and cultural factors remain a barrier to strengthen complementarity, which act as exclusionary factors to

A normative change is required to ensure greater complementary approaches with actors within, alongside and beyond the humanitarian system

actors beyond the humanitarian sector: humanitarian actors' focus on systems and processes, which undermines collective analysis and strategic decision-making; the lack of appropriate strategic forums for effective engagement; and humanitarian protection jargon and a legalistic approach to protection. A normative change is required to ensure greater complementary approaches with actors within, alongside and beyond the humanitarian system (Cocking et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The humanitarian sector writ large needs to reorient humanitarian action to ensure that protection is central to humanitarian action, so that the atrocities and abuses that crisis-affected populations face are not ignored. This requires bold, empowered leadership of protection in 'a culture that encourages them to take action to reduce risks to people affected by crises is essential if protection is to be prioritised' (Cocking et al., 2022). Humanitarian leaders need to be supported by organisations to strengthen current approaches. They need to be held accountable and to hold their teams to account for commitments to protection (ibid.). To enable this, the right leaders, with the right experience, need to be put in place at the right time (Rosenthal, 2019: 25; Metcalfe-Hough, 2022). This requires investment in skills such as negotiation and mediation; understanding of ways to balance hard and soft diplomacy; and the ability to manage the risks of carrying out humanitarian diplomacy.

More must be done to ensure strategic approaches for humanitarian actors to collectively address protection risks; to work more effectively with broader sets of political, peace, human rights actors and researchers; and to create ways to flexibly adapt approaches according to change in context.

To achieve this, leaders need an understanding of the fundamental components of IHL/IHRL. This should be supported by community-driven, locally grounded context analysis, and bolstered by regular presence in and visits to affected areas.

Current opportunities should be leveraged. There has been a recent commitment from the IASC Principals to take forward recommendations of the IASC Protection Policy review under the leadership of two identified co-champions.⁹ Leadership and accountability are priority focuses for the UN Agenda for Protection. The current ERC has set the tone for leadership of protection. Likewise, the incoming principal of OHCHR could make for a strong protection leader with his expertise in humanitarian protection. These developments offer opportunities to strengthen institutional and structural support for bolder leadership of protection, to course-correct and empower leaders to more effectively address protection risks, and to provide much needed incentives to do so.

But, in order to do so, political will and commitment is required from the highest level of the humanitarian system, supported by a diversity of actors beyond the humanitarian system, supported by UN member states. This requires a mindset and culture shift to ensure protection is central to humanitarian action. Bold, principled leadership that prioritises humanity, and is willing to take risks by prioritising protection in the best interests of affected people, is so pivotal that 'if you know you are not made for daring, please don't dare lead' (Gilmore, 2022: 49).

Endnotes

- 1 For the purposes of this paper, advocacy is defined as all forms of approaches seeking to influence the behaviour of duty bearers – from private engagement, through third parties and public advocacy, using approaches including persuasion, mobilisation and denunciation.
- 2 For the purpose of this paper, we refer to protection risks in terms of reducing risks of all forms of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation, in line with the approach of the IASC Protection Policy Review. For more information see the Independent Review of the IASC Protection Policy (Cocking et al., 2020: 20).
- 3 The HCT Compact sets out key commitments of HCT members towards the HC and one another, drawing from the HCT ToR. It is intended as a tool for mutual and collective accountability between the HC, the HCT and in support of HC accountability to the ERC.
- 4 Some organisations – such as the International Federation of the Red Cross – have adopted an integrated approach to protection, inclusion and accountability. This is an approach that could be built on, though this does not necessarily support – and indeed could be incongruent – to supporting humanitarian leadership to identify priority protection risks to collectively address in a given crisis context.
- 5 This is specifically in instances where OHCHR is not the Cluster Lead Agency.
- 6 By October 2022, the PAF has been utilised by approximately 16 protection clusters in the development of their respective Protection Analysis Updates .
- 7 The survey, carried out at the end of 2021, had 460 respondents from across UN, INGO and national NGOs, 63% of which were working in country operations. For more information see Spencer and Davies (2022).
- 8 For the purposes of the survey, protection advocacy in crisis contexts was defined as any action that seeks to directly or indirectly influence the behaviour, policies and actions of duty bearers in order to strengthen the safety and security of civilians in crises and reduce their exposure to risks. Advocacy can range from private diplomacy to public condemnation and the range of actions in between, or a range thereof.
- 9 The two champions are Filippo Grandi, UNHCR Principal, and Sam Worthington, Executive Director of InterAction.

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What humanitarian and development leaders can learn from scientists: Exploring new approaches to systemic challenges through leadership ‘labs’

by Amy Dong, Shyam Sundaram, Michael Koehler

Foreword

This paper has been produced as part of a series on humanitarian and development leadership, and for presentation and discussion at an event in Berlin, 10 November 2022, co-hosted by the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI) and the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) in Berlin. The Berlin event is supported by and made possible with the generous support of the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO).

This report is the result of in-country work that has been commissioned by GELI and supported by the UN Development Coordination Office. We hope it will help global policymakers, humanitarian practitioners and donors support leaders in humanitarian operations to mobilize assistance effectively to people living in critical conditions as a result of conflict, natural hazards, climate induced crises and other underlying causes of humanitarian suffering.

Dalberg and KONU would like to thank GELI for establishing this agenda and making the space for these discussions.

Abstract

Mobilizing progress towards major humanitarian and development challenges – such as those enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – requires an understanding of complexity, of coalition building and advocacy, and a collaborative approach to leadership. Recognizing this, GELI contracted an international development consultancy, Dalberg, and their leadership partners, KONU, to design and implement **Leadership Labs** across several countries to support humanitarian leadership teams to work more effectively together. This modality of a ‘lab’ is borrowed from the world of science and reflects how this program was designed: as a space for learning, experimentation, and collaboration at the frontiers of humanitarian leadership. This report details the Labs’ purpose, methodology and approach, the impact to date, and findings around common leadership challenges faced by humanitarian leaders, as well as ways to address them.

To date, the pilot Labs in Pakistan and the Philippines – as well as ongoing Labs in Bangladesh and

Somalia – have surfaced that leaders in the humanitarian and development space face significant challenges to true collaboration. These include, but are not limited to, mandate-driven responses at the expense of people- and problem-centered responses; tension and distrust within teams and across levels of the system; and structural disincentives to collaborate across agencies and organizations.

So far, the Labs have supported UN Resident Coordinators / Humanitarian Coordinators (RCs/HCs) and their teams to lead more effectively within this system

The Labs have supported coordinators and their teams to lead more effectively.

both by building their long-term capacity to diagnose and collaborate on a complex challenge using a systems leadership

framework, as well as achieve meaningful progress on their goals through leadership interventions with critical stakeholders within and beyond the UN. In the Philippines, for example, 93% of participants reported greater individual agency to exercise leadership in their work, and 96% of participants are now very likely to bring, or are already bringing the Lab’s systems leadership concepts to other areas of their work. 96% of participants also noted that the Lab was helpful or very helpful in accelerating impact for their objective of developing durable solutions for internally displaced peoples (IDPs). Overall, participants across all Labs have appreciated the space to reflect and hold honest conversations about their work, as well as the support in designing and testing different leadership interventions to mobilize cross-sectoral change on major humanitarian challenges.

Introduction

When Lab participants – including UN agency heads, leaders from local and international NGOs, private sector representatives, community leaders, donors, and government representatives – were asked to reflect about the perceived lack of progress around their work on a thorny challenge, many surfaced feelings such as “overwhelm,” “frustration,” and “urgency.” This sense of frustration is a reality that many people in the humanitarian and development field experience. It is also often perceived as a taboo – but it shouldn’t be. The humanitarian and development con-

text is full of complex, system-wide challenges that have very few quick fixes, and even fewer challenges that one person or one organization can solve alone. However, cross-sectoral collaboration remains difficult, with Lab participants citing differing formal mandates, competing priorities, and a focus on short-term, technical solutions as just a few of the obstacles standing in the way of sustainable coordination work. Thus, it makes perfect sense for this kind of work to feel overwhelming and frustrating. Systemic challenges like climate change and displacement are at – or even beyond – the frontier of what we know how to do.

Navigating this complexity requires a systems approach to leadership.

requires the ability to make sense of the interconnected factors that make positive change hard to achieve and the ability to strategically engage a diverse array of stakeholders to advance a common goal.

That is where the Leadership Labs come in. Launched in 2021, the Leadership Labs is a program jointly offered by GELI and the UN DCO to support leadership teams to work more effectively together by expanding individuals' and teams' bandwidth for complexity. This was in recognition that, if the world is to make effective progress towards the SDGs and actually change the direction we are going in, then different ways of working are needed. Put differently – what got us to where we are today is no longer going to work to achieve the ambitious and thorny challenges ahead of us.

The modality of a 'lab' intentionally borrows from the world of science, where laboratories are seen as spaces where groups of experts explore a frontier of knowledge through thoughtful experimentation, collaboration, and iteration. Labs generate learning and progress at the same time – even when experiments do not go 'as expected.' This is because labs have two conditions that make this possible: First, the experimenters set boundary conditions that are 'safe enough' to encourage experts to experiment with otherwise dangerous phenomena. And second – perhaps more importantly – failure is celebrated as a norm that contributes to, rather than detracts from, progress.

Leadership Labs were developed as a creative search for new approaches to address challenges of the humanitarian sector.

and development sector. With the support of systems leadership specialists from Dalberg and KONU, the Lab partners work directly with RCs/HCs and their teams to

Navigating this complexity requires a systems approach to leadership.

It requires the ability to make sense of the interconnected factors that make positive change hard to achieve and the ability to strategically engage a diverse array of stakeholders to advance a common goal.

Building from this metaphor, the Leadership Labs were developed as a creative search for new approaches to address the most difficult, wicked challenges of the humanitarian

and development sector. With the support of systems leadership specialists from Dalberg and KONU, the Lab partners work directly with RCs/HCs and their teams to

help them advance progress on a complex, cross-boundary challenge of their choosing. Topics tackled to date have included: coordinating strategies to more effectively combat climate change at a country level, tackling entrenched issues that are contributing to internal displacement, aligning approaches around water management to tackle drought and food insecurity, and changing mindsets and practices around gender norms.

This program has now been underway in a number of countries around the world. There were initial pilots that were delivered in Uganda and Cambodia in 2019 and received positive feedback from the RCs in each of these countries. The program then began in 2021/22 in Pakistan and the Philippines, and has since expanded to include additional country partners – including Bangladesh and Somalia – in 2022 and 2023. The experiences and approach from these last four Labs is included in the paper that follows.

Purpose and Approach

The Labs seek to achieve long-term capacity building and progress using a systems leadership approach.

using a systems leadership framework. This is where the tools of system leadership are shared and discussed. The second is to achieve meaningful progress on an existing in-country challenge with a group of humanitarian and development stakeholders within and beyond the UN using a systems leadership approach. This is where the system leadership tools are applied and experiments are generated.

The Labs are designed to achieve real progress on two interrelated objectives.

The first is to build a group's long-term capacity to diagnose, collaborate on, and mobilize change

The program differs from more traditional problem-solving approaches (or technical working groups) in a few ways.

- First, the Lab brings explicit focus to diagnosing the obstacles standing in the way of progress—issues such as competing priorities, misaligned incentives, or differing perspectives on what success really looks like on the issue—alongside discussion of the technical solutions needed to meet certain milestones.
- Second, this Lab focuses on live experimentation. As opposed to just a focus on planning and discussing, there is a strong bias towards trialing new approaches and building new relationships through the Lab to see what works and what doesn't.
- Third, the Lab is focused intentionally on building relationships across boundaries at a personal and professional level – the discussions are not just about

understanding how we make progress on the issue, but how we as individuals and leaders drive change in collaboration with others on thorny, multifaceted issues.

Program Components and Duration

The Labs provide multi-layered support to UN RC/HCs and members of the broader United Nations Country Teams and Humanitarian Country Teams (UNCTs/HCTs) over the course of approximately six months. This includes ongoing remote support as well as up to two in-country engagements with the team. The exact schedule of activities is co-created by Dalberg and KONU facilitators, the RC/HC, and a core team of collaborators selected by the RC/HC, which usually includes representatives from the broader UNCT/HCT, NGO and civil society sector.

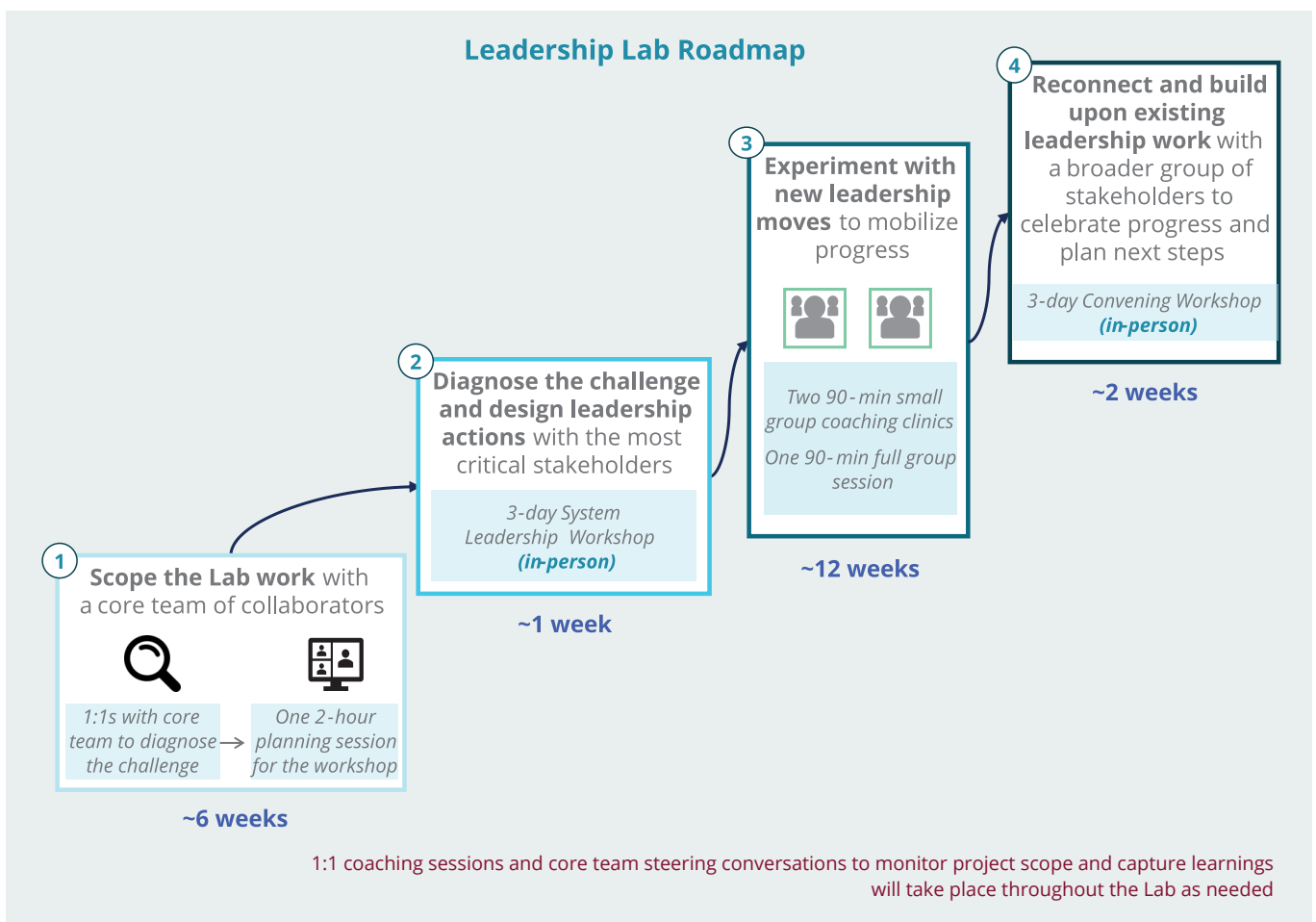
At the beginning of the program, the RC/HC and the core team selects a persistent pain point they are encountering in development or humanitarian operations. Then, across four phases of work, the faculty team assists the group in making progress on that issue through a mixture of personalized and team coaching, creative working groups sessions with the team, experi-

ential in-person leadership workshops, and moments to reflect and co-create in the team environment.

Throughout the course of the Lab, RCs/HCs hone, practice, and apply strategies that can lead teams through disagreement and difficulty and toward collective problem-solving. At the same time, their HCTs and broader in-country humanitarian and development stakeholders iteratively design and test creative ways of working as a team to address systemic challenges more effectively. In doing so, they develop an increased sense of shared purpose and trust across their agencies, organizations, roles, and/or identities.

Given the collaborative and co-owned nature of this work, the program can be intensified in a period shorter than six months or lengthened if a longer timeframe is judged necessary by the team. For instance, the Pakistan country team opted for a shortened version of the Lab to address more immediate climate and gender needs in their cooperation framework, while the Philippines country team opted for the full program with two in-country workshops to engage in deeper coalition building work around the issue of internal displacement.

The Lab structure is depicted in the figure below.



Findings and Impact to Date

Country Teams and their partners face significant challenges to deep collaboration.

The work in the Labs thus far have made clear that UNCTs/HCTs and their cross-sectoral partners face significant challenges to deep collaboration.

This is driven by factors such as the structure of the humanitarian coordination system, leaving RCs/HCs with significant responsibilities and expectations but limited resources; mandate-driven response at the expense of a people-centered response; tension and distrust within teams; and structural disincentives to collaborate across agencies and organizations. While this program will not address these underlying structural challenges, it is intended to support RCs/HCs and their teams in leading and collaborating effectively within this system.

Common leadership challenges that surfaced across the Labs include:¹

- 1. Leading effectively given competing priorities and lack of formal authority** – Participants shared that the process of enrolling UN and non-UN organizations with “competing priorities” was “difficult without the formal authority to do so.” Unless they could “tell” someone to do something, they found it difficult to generate buy-in and build a strong coalition for success given the existence of a broader, authority-dependent culture within and beyond the UN.
- 2. Leading beyond a mandate and the challenge of crossing boundaries** – Many participants noted discomfort with operating outside of their formal mandates, and that even when they did have differing opinions or innovative ideas, “navigating the political realities was not easy”, especially within the UN context. There was a strong sense noted that unless the solution was within their “mandate,” they could not champion it for fear of moving too much into someone else’s space.
- 3. Building cross-sectoral coalitions for change** – Participants indicated that it “can be extremely difficult” to talk to those outside of their own organization, given few formal mechanisms or protocols are in place to allow for coordination and collaboration across, for example, UN-government or government-NGO boundaries.
- 4. Creating a space to share honest feedback and hold productive conflict** – A key skill that many senior leaders struggled with is how to have honest and difficult conversations, particularly when it involves interpersonal dynamics within the UN system. False harmony is often seen as a better outcome than productive conflict, so the latter is consistently avoided.

- 5. Identifying the optimal balance of technical and political leadership** – Participants questioned whether humanitarian workshops like the leadership lab should include only more senior figures with political influence around an issue, given “technical experts are often better positioned” to generate “real change on the ground.”

Across the Labs, participants were able to engage with their selected in-country challenges² in the following ways:

- **Diagnose and frame a complex, systemic challenge** in a way that articulates the root issues standing in the way of progress across layers of the system, as well as identifies *who* needs to learn *what* in order to engage hearts and minds for a cross-boundary issue: *“The Lab helped us move away from labels and technical mandates. ‘Business as usual’ failed us for years because we didn’t have a common sense of purpose.”*
- **Gain awareness of the various perspectives, values, and losses** across systemic layers that make progress hard: *“In the Lab, I heard new perspectives from others that I had never really considered in my role, but it made me think about new ways of working towards a common goal.”*
- **Engage in productive conflict with colleagues** to diagnose and address the underlying issues of a challenge that cannot be addressed only with technical ‘fixes’: *“It’s rare for us to have such deep, frank conversations that cut across government, UN, private sector, and civil society, and this Lab let us do just that.”*
- **Design and try out leadership interventions needed to receive genuine buy-in** to make progress on a collective systemic challenge: *“It is amazing - the fact that we’re creating a coalition with all these senior leaders in government and local communities - this is a new way of working for the UN and for the country.”*

Across the Labs, progress emerged in many ways.

The following four mindset shifts illustrate some of the cultural patterns that this program addressed in order to help participants not only make progress on their challenge, but also on their overall way of working in complexity.

From speedy problem-solving to a deeper appreciation for inquiry and learning

UN leaders – and humanitarian leaders more broadly – are known experts in problem-solving. They are used to

Case Study: Coalition Building in the Philippines

In the Philippines, the Lab laid the groundwork for significant action on the selected in-country challenge of internal displacement. Early results include:

- Development of a cross-sectoral coalition (“Hearts and Minds with and for IDPs”), a strategic roadmap, and an engagement charter, which outline how this group of diverse stakeholders across the public, private, non-profit and multilateral sectors can continue to build on the momentum created in the Lab and advance progress for durable solutions through targeted objectives and collective accountability. The shared vision agreed to by all 35+ participants includes: moving toward zero protracted IDPs in Philippines, pushing for the Philippines to be seen as a global model for providing durable solutions for all IDPs, promoting the acceptance and respect of all IDPs in their communities, and government ownership and coordination of ongoing durable solutions efforts. Participants also surfaced a few common priority areas for small groups to take forward in their own organizations and with new allies, including exploring innovative financing options, advocating for a normative framework, supporting land reforms, increasing capacity support for Local Government Units (LGUs), reducing conflict and violence, and, most importantly, placing IDPs at the center of all reforms and actions through advocacy and outreach;
- Renewed momentum to work with the government to help them make progress / take initiative on this issue. This includes new conversations with legislators to help unlock progress on the IDP bill (including with the House of Representatives and the Senate), conversations with non-traditional government stakeholders to help center the issue (e.g., with the National Security Advisor), and conversations with the newly appointed stakeholders in the executive branch;
- Reframed cooperation within the development/humanitarian system to more effectively collaborate and share resources beyond traditional “mandates” – this includes large NGOs reframing their workplans in country to more effectively center IDPs, and greater cooperation across UN agencies to contribute to a joint effort (e.g., sharing seconded resources to the RC office to turbocharge efforts to make progress on this issue); and
- Greater coordination and engagement with the global agenda of the work: by leveraging the presence of the former Special Rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs and Robert Piper, the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement, the coalition was better able to tie its work in with the global change agenda and are planning on using global “anchors” as accountability mechanisms to ensure progress of the coalition.

responding rapidly and technically to any issue at hand, and their organizations are particularly well equipped

For systemic challenges a deep understanding of the root causes is critical.

to mobilize aid and available resources when crises such as disasters suddenly arise. However, when it comes to tackling thorny, systemic challenges like mobilizing collective efforts around climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, technical solutions are often not enough. Instead, a deeper understanding of the root causes is critical, which often involves asking questions such as: *Why has coordination failed so far? Where might there be differing perspectives on what effective collaboration look like? Who needs to learn what?* In the Lab, this looked like – as one UN agency head put it – “slowing down to speed up.” Participants conducted multiple-day diagnoses to distinguish the surface-level issues from the deeper, adaptive gaps around their selected in-country challenges, including where there may be competing

priorities, conflicting perspectives, or losses at play – all before developing various leadership commitments to try within the ‘laboratory’ to generate learning and progress on the challenge.

“We’re so used to jumping from one crisis to the next. This Lab was a breakthrough in challenging that status quo. The workshops helped our team focus on an important challenge we’ve been putting off for a while and helped us finally get underneath the iceberg. By taking a step back, we started breaking free of our technical mandates and think about genuine coalition building.”

From blame and displacement of responsibility to shared ownership and collective responsibility

All too often when dealing with highly complex systems, people respond with defensive routines to reduce the

stress, overwhelm, and ‘heat’ they feel around the problem at hand. Some of these routines include finding someone else with the right formal authority or mandate to ‘own’ the work, avoiding the problem altogether, or relying on technical expertise to propose a quick fix. As one NGO participant shared: *“This is just how it is in our work. We either don’t feel like we have enough time or resources to deal with everything, or we think the problem can be fixed if we ‘just had’ a better policy or cooperation framework.”* But relying on these routines is often a trap. In the Labs, participants across different countries were challenged to hold frank conversations with each other to discuss why – even with dozens of policies and frameworks already in existence – progress still seemed to be stalled on issues like climate mitigation, gender equality, and internal displacement. When asked to reflect on

Collective responsibility is needed in making long-term progress around complex issues.

that no one actor was the ‘villain.’ Rather, Lab participants emerged with the sense that everyone had a role to play, specific expertise and resources to share, and losses to acknowledge and manage in making long-term progress around a complex humanitarian issue.

“I see that we cannot wait for an outside authority to fix our problems – we in the humanitarian and development space must collaborate on these issues ourselves. The Lab is here to help us do that – collaborate better in a complex system where there are no clear social hierarchies.”

From ruinous harmony to productive conflict

Choosing false harmony over productive conflict can prevent progress.

progress yet [on our challenge] is that we always choose false harmony over productive conflict.” This preference for agreeability is not the outlier but rather the norm in the UN and beyond, and in many ways, this safety-first behavior works to preserve civility, partnerships, and a friendly form of surface-level collaboration in an otherwise overwhelming space. But, as Lab participants shared early on, *“we need to hear the real priorities of other agency representatives and organizations if we want to really change our reality for the better.”* Within the safe boundaries of a laboratory, and with explicit norms around confidentiality, an openness to exploration, and a willingness to experiment with new ways of working, Lab participants were able to candidly discuss differing perspectives with-

their own and others’ role in the context of the overall challenge, participants began cultivating a much deeper and more empathetic shared understanding of their challenges so

that no one actor was the ‘villain.’ Rather, Lab participants emerged with the sense that everyone had a role to play, specific expertise and resources to share, and losses to acknowledge and manage in making long-term progress around a complex humanitarian issue.

in the room, as well as engage in candid conversations around why there has been a historic lack of genuine buy-in around an issue, and what could collectively be done to encourage shifts in hearts and minds.

“I’m here because I failed you all before as a leader of this work. But by being transparent and vulnerable with you all, I hope we can work across boundaries to get the real work done. I’m ready to jump in and take on my little piece, but we all need to do this together and share our leadership. Personally, I’ve already heard perspectives from others today that I had not considered, and it makes me think about new ways of working towards our common goal.”

From siloes and competition to deeper relationships and trust

Whereas ‘business as usual’ in this system often entails development, humanitarian, and peace actors working within siloes and competing with other organizations for funding and resources, the Lab’s highly participatory activities encouraged participants to think beyond their individual roles, step outside of their formal mandates, and connect with each other on the deeper level of purpose. One activity for participants invited pairs of strangers to ask each other, “Why are you here?” and then after

Focussing on shared purposes can build new partnerships and friendships.

listening for a response, pause and ask again, “Why are you *really* here?” Across the board, the answers received in this second round entailed a response more from the heart than from the head, pointing to a sense of shared purpose, of feelings of compassion and urgency, and of an intense desire to create positive change with others in the room. These were the responses that formed the beginning of new partnerships and friendships, and these are the feelings that have continued to connect participants even after the Labs’ official end.

“I was so impressed by how intimate, friendly, and open this space felt - I was able to make connections with colleagues I never work with normally in my role, and this is something that more people should have the opportunity to do. And between the first and second workshops, I found myself meeting with my small group every two weeks to share learnings and progress. This is truly the start of a new form of collaboration in our system.”

Conclusion

These Leadership Labs have offered an opportunity for humanitarian and development leaders within

The Labs offered new ways of working together by emphasizing connection, roles and shared purposes.

change, and to design and test out new leadership approaches to collective action.

Just as scientists use their laboratories as spaces for innovation, failure, progress, and reflection, participants reported that the Labs offered them a safe, creative playground for experimentation and learning. This was true when engaging both with like-minded individuals as well as those with differing perspectives around a collective systemic challenge. Being able to practice and apply adaptive leadership skills – including diagnosing and acknowledging diverse perspectives, values, and losses; starting challenging conversations; and creating the structures and roles for coalition building – was critical to breaking through some of the barriers holding back progress on pressing in-country humanitarian issues.

The Labs provide several insights on leadership development in the humanitarian space.

driving collective impact, it is difficult to achieve under the current status quo of inter-agency competition and focus on technical solutions. Second, it is important to continually create spaces for leaders to share honest feedback and hold productive, difficult conversations with one another – particularly given that a key skill many senior leaders often struggle with is navigating interpersonal dynamics within and beyond the UN system. Third, helping leaders identify ways of working outside of their formal mandates and experiment with ways to lead with their informal authority is critical for cutting through agency and organizational siloes. Fourth, new approaches to problem-solving are needed to address and transform competition into a genuine commitment to co-creation – including the ability to go beyond technical solutions and access hearts and minds to build a sense of common purpose. Finally, action learning is fundamental to any systems leadership exercise. The ability to learn by doing, experiment with new ways of working, and collaborate with a diverse and “non-traditional” group of stakeholders is key for transforming humanitarian and development leadership.

These Labs are ongoing and we are looking forward to continuing to generate and deepen the insights – and identify what that means for the broader humanitarian and development sector. At the time of writing, the Labs in Bangladesh and Somalia are still under way and will

and beyond the UN to experiment with new ways of working together, to deepen their connection to each other, their own roles, and a sense of shared purpose in bringing about

The Labs provide several insights on leadership development in the humanitarian space. First, while relational and collaborative leadership is essential for

conclude in March 2023 – and we hope that more Labs are able to come to fruition in 2024 and beyond. And as they continue to have impact at a country-level in shifting approaches, mindsets, and strategies, we believe there are also lessons to be pulled out for how the overall humanitarian and development sector operates in the coordination and headquarters capitals of Geneva, Brussels, New York, Nairobi, and beyond. Systems leadership can help to unlock progress towards achieving progress on thorny and wicked humanitarian and development challenges. And the world needs progress and results. We look forward to continuing to support the entire coalition of actors in the humanitarian and development space on that journey.



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ANNEX: Program Methodology

Dalberg/KONU utilize a methodology based on the Adaptive Leadership Framework, which is the product of 40 years of research and teaching at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.^{3,4,5} The framework leverages ideas and practices from organizational change, political science, sociology, psychology, and systems theory.

Adaptive Leadership focuses on 5 essential shifts in perspective that are needed to achieve change in complex systems:

- **From Authority to Leadership** – a shift *from* the belief that the person in charge is the leader *to* an understanding that leadership is an activity one can take from any role
- **From Power to Progress** – a shift *from* the perception that success involves control over a group’s work *to* an understanding that success requires group collaboration and trust
- **From Technical to Adaptive** – a shift *from* thinking that leadership entails delivering the “right” answer *to* understanding that addressing complex challenges involves empowering others to learn about the challenge at hand and explore what changes in culture, mindset or action may be needed to address it
- **From Personality to Presence** – a shift *from* focusing on individual charisma *to* an understanding that good leadership requires a genuine understanding of the underlying issues at hand, as well as any conscious / unconscious biases at hand
- **From Individual to System** – a shift *from* believing that complex challenges arise because people are “good or bad” or “right or wrong” *to* an appreciation that individuals are representing values or perspectives that are important for the broader group, even (especially) when they conflict

The Adaptive Leadership framework has been used to build team capacity and accelerate governance initiatives in post-conflict, developing, and fragile contexts including Timor-Leste, Madagascar, Burundi, Tajikistan, and Papua New Guinea. Former Colombian President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Juan Manuel Santos credited the adaptive leadership model as a major influence and resource in his work to end Colombia’s 50-year Civil War.

Endnotes

- 1 Quotes from this point forward are anonymized statements from Lab participants across the four country programs.
- 2 In Pakistan, the Lab team opted to address gender and climate change challenges through the program. In the Philippines, the Lab team chose to make progress on developing durable solutions for Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). In Bangladesh, the Lab team selected mobilizing and aligning collective action around climate change as their focus area. And in Somalia, the Lab team sought to improve coordination around drought and water management.
- 3 Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- 4 Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- 5 Heifetz, R. A., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Imprint

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This publication is a compilation of papers presented at the “Berlin Thought Leadership Lab” in November 2022 on the topic “Leadership for an Ever-Changing World: Amplifying Collaboration and Transformation within the Humanitarian Sector”, jointly organised by the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI) and the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) and kindly funded by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO).

Editors/Publishers: Panos Moutziz, GELI and Ralf Südhoff, CHA

Suggested Citation

CHA, and GELI. 2023. Leadership and humanitarian change – why more collaboration and transformation is needed. Berlin: Centre for Humanitarian Action.

Other CHA publications

Düchting, Andrea. 2023. Digital accountability: The untapped potential of participation when using digital technology in humanitarian action. Berlin: Centre for Humanitarian Action.

<https://www.chaberlin.org/en/publications/digital-accountability-2/>

Hövelmann, Sonja. 2022. With nine months on the clock: Where does the Grand Bargain 2.0 stand and what role is Germany taking on? Berlin: Centre for Humanitarian Action

<https://www.chaberlin.org/en/publications/cha-policy-brief-where-does-the-grand-bargain-2-0-stand/>

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<https://www.chaberlin.org/en/publications/time-for-a-reset-the-world-humanitarian-summit-and-the-grand-bargain-5-years-on/>



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March 2023