

Rethinking Humanitarianism

Episode 4

The Future of Aid

Jeremy Konyndyk

As we record this, refugees from Ethiopia are fleeing over the border into Sudan. And if this crisis plays out like most do, big aid agencies will soon begin setting up shop, providing services, organising camps, and providing traditional aid to those refugees.

Heba Aly

But what if the response was done differently? Today, we're talking disruption. In Geneva, Switzerland, I'm Heba Aly, Director of The New Humanitarian.

Jeremy Konyndyk

And in Washington D.C., I'm Jeremy Konyndyk, Senior Policy Fellow at the Center for Global Development. We are your co-hosts for Rethinking Humanitarianism, a podcast series exploring the future of aid.

Before we dive into today's episode, a quick programme note, as Heba mentioned in the last episode, I'm doing a short-term volunteer stint to support the Biden transition here in the US. But I still do have my Center for Global Development hat on. And with that hat on, I am going to keep joining these podcast episodes. And I'm really excited to be back for this one.

Heba Aly

And it's great to have my partner in crime back. So, let's jump in. In episode one and two, we explored the problems with the international humanitarian aid system and why it needs a rethink. Today we're going to hear three visions for alternative humanitarian action from three disruptors.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Simon O'Connell is the former head of Mercy Corps UK, and is about to transition to a new role as the CEO of SNV, an International Development Organisation based in the Netherlands. And he'll be talking to us today about his proposal for merging big international NGOs. Welcome, Simon.

Simon O'Connell

Thanks, Jeremy and Heba. Great to be with you.

Heba Aly

Paul Currion is a recovering aid worker who recently started a financial technology company for the aid industry. That's fancy talk for blockchain. And, actually, his biggest claim to fame is being Jeremy's former roommate.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Yeah, we knew each other well, back in the day when we were both starting our careers in the Kosovo crisis.

Heba Aly

Paul will describe a more networked humanitarianism for the future. Welcome, Paul.

Paul Currion

Thank you very much.

Jeremy Konyndyk

And finally, Muthoni Wanyeki is the Regional Director for Africa at the Open Society Foundations. And she'll be talking about what it would look like for Africa to run its own response to crises. Welcome, Muthoni.

Muthoni Wanyeki

Thank you.

Heba Aly

Simon, Paul, and Muthoni are all contributors to an o- ed series we've just launched at The New Humanitarian called 'The future of aid', where we've basically asked a bunch of smart people for visions of the humanitarianism of tomorrow.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Before we dig into those ideas, we want to ask each of you a question that we put to every guest on our show. What is one weird quirk in the humanitarian sector that makes absolutely no sense? Simon, we'll start with you.

Simon O'Connell

Thanks, yeah. For me, if it's not too indulgent, I've got two quick ones. One, which is a bit of a pet peeve that we still talk about going to the field as humanitarians. And for me with, you know, poverty and humanitarian need increasingly clustered in urban settings.

And with us, humanitarian workers, you know, going off to sit in conference rooms and attend meetings, why on Earth are we talking about the field when it seems to me that's very much a power-laden word, and one that we should stop using in the sector. And then secondly, perhaps more profoundly or importantly, the rules on overheads – I just find it, frankly, incomprehensible that you can have on the one hand, the USA to US government donors being prepared to pay over 25% of indirect cost recovery on grants through a negotiated basis, and then you have within the EC overhead rates capped at seven. I'm not saying it should be 25, it should be seven, but what we need is the obvious point of consistency across donors around what constitutes legitimate overhead costs.

Heba Aly

I would welcome 25%. Thank you very much. Paul, what about you?

Paul Currion

There's just a lot of white people working in aid, and I never really understood it. And that has informed a lot of what I've thought about aid over the years. But it's only recently that it's been the kind of thing that you're allowed to talk about, which I'm very happy about, obviously.

Jeremy Konyndyk

And Muthoni. How about you?

Muthoni Wanyeki

Actually, interestingly, mine picks up a bit on Paul's. I think as someone who comes much more from the democracy and human rights community, which is embedded within the countries and comes from in the countries of concern – and coming from Kenya, which is a humanitarian hub – I think what seems so strange to most Kenyans, most Africans, is this little cohort of white crisis workers, you know, who basically move from one crisis to another. Yes, of course, all the agencies have some level of mid-lower level African staff, but it really is an exclusive little club. And completely, as we experience it, divorced from engaging with Africans as people with agency, with ideas around our own lives.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Yeah, I, you know, we're having a whole global conversation now on representation and inclusion. And, you know, driven by the events in the US over the summer, which has sparked a rethink in a lot of domains and it's one of the things that inspired us to start this podcast – was exactly those sorts of issues about representation and whose voice matters in the sector. Definitely something we're going to continue exploring in future episodes.

Heba Aly

And we usually end each episode actually by asking every guest to share a kind of multimillion dollar idea of how they would address some of the quirks that they have referred to, and improve the sector more broadly. And this time, we thought we'd just spend an entire episode doing just that. So we're going to spend a few minutes with each of you unpacking one idea that could offer an alternative to the way humanitarian response currently takes place.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Simon, you've written a few things in the past couple of years talking about consolidation in the NGO sector, and arguing that there are too many NGOs, and most of them are too individually small. Tell us about your idea.

Simon O'Connell

So I have been kind of banging a drum and banging on about this for quite some time now. And it's fair to say I think we've had fairly limited success. But perhaps there's an opportunity in this crisis of the pandemic to make some progress around this agenda. So to start with, even without the, you know, the horror, the really shallow, shameful decision of the UK Government to renege on its commitment around the 0.7% of GNI in ODA contribution, it's very clear that GNI, you know, right across the donor nations is going to be smaller in the coming months and years, and therefore, the overall pot of funding to go towards humanitarian need is smaller. And then the World Bank, you know, is telling us there'll be 100 million additional people in extreme poverty over the coming year, or years even. So it's for me, glaringly obvious therefore that the response needs to be from the humanitarian community, one of increased scale, but also around efficiency. And I haven't seen a lot coming through around what NGOs are going to do to restructure and operate more efficiently and effectively. And just to unpick that and what I mean a little bit, let's take South Sudan. There's well over 100 international NGOs there, a quick sort of back of the envelope calculation, if you've got every NGO with its Country Director, Finance Director, Operations Director, HR Director etc. etc., you're probably looking at not far off half a million dollars per NGO in terms of operating costs, and that's outside of the overhead costs, outside of those countries. So just imagine, again, one country, South Sudan, where I spent quite a lot of time and where there's, you know, such extensive humanitarian needs – take five of those NGOs and say we're going to operate in one structure, one country, one year, there's two and a half million dollars right there. And then imagine if you ladder that up into a sort of executive level structure. And we've seen, you know, I think, very questionably a number of NGOs executive level salaries and costs and I do have to say, you know, particularly in the US, going up and up. And I think that needs to be called out a little bit. And I think there needs to be more commitment from those in the sector to challenge cost structures. And I think all too often, NGOs tend to get overly focused or confused around the means becomes the end, therefore, the end is kind of the NGO itself, and that self perpetuates itself. So if we can shift the focus towards bigger initiatives and

outcomes, then frankly it doesn't matter whether it's an IRC or a Save the Children, or an SNV or a Mercy Corps delivering those outcomes, what matters is the outcome itself. And I think we've lost a little bit of that. I think through freeing up resources, through mergers and consolidation of the sector, we're going to get resources more available for local organisations. And I think if we're very explicit up front that in becoming more efficient, we're not saying 'okay, then there's going to be less money for deployment in the development assistance area'. What we're saying is 'those freed up resources, those efficiency gains, can be transferred through to local organisations' and Jeremy, you know, you in particular would know more than me around or you remember more of the sort of Grand Bargain commitments etc. We're struggling to meet those commitments. So let's embrace this opportunity. Let's have fewer, bigger INGOs, and then with the resources freed up let's transfer those through to local organisations, be they local civil society organisations or others on the ground with greater capacity to make a difference. And then the last point is a central one around power. We need to be very clear that there are too many medium-sized international NGOs occupying a space of power within a system of power, which is, you know, based on – you know go back to Bretton Woods institutions and Western centric models of development – we need to be much more intentional, open, and explicit around that transfer of power from the likes of me or Simon to others, but the likes of international NGOs to local organisations and others. So, a way to kind of track and then measure, communicate out and transfer that power is really, really central to this argument, I think.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Simon, it's a really interesting idea. And you could see a future where, just to take a few organisations that I know well, American Refugee Committee, where I used to work now called Alight, and International Rescue Committee, which is an organisation that was kind of a much larger, but similar mandate, organisation than IRC, and Mercy Corps where you and I both used to work, you know, if they were to all merge, you consolidate three organisations with heavily overlapping work and mandates into one that would be you know, you'd be talking about probably a billion and a half dollar a year organisation, which is on par with a UN agency. Some of the smaller UN agencies are on that scale. Is the future here that we should just have the NGOs consolidating to be able to kind of punch at the same weight as the UN agencies do? And, if so, does that potentially run contrary to opening up more space for local actors? Because I think my worry there would be, the UN agencies exert so much gravity in the system that they don't leave a lot of space necessarily for local partners, and there's potentially a risk the same would happen here. How are you thinking about that?

Simon O'Connell

Yeah, I think a few things. And I've heard that fear and that concern. There has to be intentionality, that we're not just talking about putting more resources into fewer organisations, you need a diversity of the sector. And you need a diversity, I would argue, of INGOs, as well. Because there's some great really, really, you know, look at the sort of vaccine space at the moment, my goodness, we need the resources going

into those. But it's the multi-sectoral, non-specialised NGOs, which there's just too many. And if we're to say, and if donors were to say, because you need that incentive, if we as NGOs can say 'look at the efficiencies to be gained here', we can metric that, we can price around it, and then we can make a co-commitment across the sector – and I'm a little bit loathe to use the word sector because I'm not really sure what it means – but across a group of influential organisations and say 'wow, here's the moment to take a load of those resources' and very explicitly say, 'they're going to go through into local power structures into local CSOs or into other organisations at the front', and not taking away pots of money and putting them into high-cost less efficient structures elsewhere.

Heba Aly

I can certainly see the need to be more specialised in what each NGO can offer. And there have been movements to that end – I'm thinking of the H2H Network, which is a series of small specialised agencies that actually serve other humanitarian organisations rather than beneficiaries and come with specific skillsets – So I think there has been a bit of movement in that direction. But I mean, when you were Head of Mercy Corps, you made a lot of calls pretty publicly to say, 'I'm open for business, let's do a deal and let's partner', and, as I understand it, didn't get much of a response. So, what kind of obstacles are you up against?

Simon O'Connell

First of all, NGOs, humanitarian organisations are extremely busy, and busier than ever. Who really wants to take on the distraction of a very disruptive merger at this time? I think that's a really serious point. Again, that's where the donors and perhaps not so much the institutional donors because institutional donors are tangled up in foreign policy agendas and power structures themselves, but bigger foundations would really embrace the idea of the, the benefits of a merger, then you're going to get somewhere. Secondly, board members, who joins a board really excitedly at the prospect of the disruption and the immense amount of work and going into a merger or a consolidation? So you've got those big, big barriers there. I think there's the big barrier, frankly, still of egos and identity. I think there's you know, and it's not just sort of CEO level, I think there are so many people, great people again, passionate people who believe in their organisations and perhaps who over the years, overly identify more with an organisation than the output or the outcome that the organisation is looking to even have. Really, really difficult in the thought of the prospect of relinquishing power. So I think all of those are really, really significant barriers.

Jeremy Konyndyk

And I want to just pick up quickly on one point you raised, which is about board membership. And that's something we're going to explore in future episodes as well. You know, we don't talk enough about governance in the sector. But you're absolutely right. The incentives for a board member are never to fold the organisation you're working for, even if that might be the right idea.

Heba Aly

Thanks, Simon. Paul, you asked earlier why there were so many white people in aid and it reminded me of a column that you wrote for The New Humanitarian five years ago now asking 'why are humanitarians so WEIRD?'. And the acronym 'WEIRD' stood for Western Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic. Tell us about network humanitarianism, and how that addresses this problem.

Paul Currion

I wrote the paper on network humanitarianism for [the Overseas Development Institute] a couple of years ago now. And it wasn't meant to be proposing a vision for the sector. What it was doing is describing what's actually happening. And the easiest way to approach that description is to think about the way that technology has affected all of our lives.

So it's a fairly sort of commonplace idea that we now live in a networked society, particularly with the penetration of mobile phones and mobile internet, that that network aspect is becoming really critical to the way in which societies run. And one of the impacts there is obviously it affects the business models of a lot of organisations. And one of the things that I noticed is that it doesn't seem to have affected the business model of aid organisations in the least. So the most that aid organisations seem to do in terms of interfacing with the network society is trying to use social media for fundraising. And I think one of the problems that we have is that – in the same way that the private sector has already been caught out by the network society and a lot of companies have struggled as a result, new companies obviously have emerged – the aid industry needs to face up to the fact that its existing structures, existing processes, need to respond more effectively to the way in which society has changed. And I think what Simon was talking about is, in some respects, a response to that. Although I would agree with some of his diagnoses, I don't think the prescriptions really work. The network society, the network humanitarianism model, is not to consolidate, it's to go in the opposite direction. The network humanitarian model is to distribute, to decentralise, to create modular organisations rather than mammoth organisations. And I think some would probably agree with some of those. Heba, you mentioned the sort of small, specialised organisations and that is definitely something which the network humanitarianism idea is very much in favour of. But it's also thinking about, well, what is the real resource that we're talking about here? If we're talking about how local communities respond to aid, how local communities respond to disaster – the way they respond is they use the resources of the network society. That's how they organise their own responses. And so what becomes important is not just the material resources of aid, but the information resources, about understanding who is doing what and where, where resources are, of being able to collaborate effectively. And so part of network humanitarianism is very much moving towards more collaboration, and emphasising the relations between individuals, communities, and organisations, not the transactions. When I hear talk about, you know, the sort of outputs of aid, I think of that as a transaction. That's a

transactional thought. Whereas I think that we need to move to a much more relational approach.

Now obviously, there are problems with this. I haven't at any point suggested that network humanitarianism solves the problems that the aid industry faces. What I am saying is that if the humanitarian industry does not respond to the network society, it will just be steamrollered. I see the empowerment of communities, of individuals, by network technologies as being the single most important shift that we as aid organisations could be supporting. And my worry is, I think we can respond to it, I think we can change the structures and the processes of aid. I think if we do it'll be generally good for everybody. But if we don't, the danger is that the values of aid, the humanitarian principles that we believe are important, will get lost. And that's what worries me. I think most of all, as a recovering aid worker, I still believe in the humanitarian mission, if you like. And I don't want to see the values that I think are important disappear. So network humanitarianism, to the extent that it's a solution, from my perspective, it's a solution for ensuring the survival of humanitarian principles, not a solution for ensuring the survival of the humanitarian industry.

Heba Aly

So can I just better understand Paul, what it actually means or looks like in practice, because in my mind, and we had conversations about this concept years ago when you were first kind of developing it, and I had always compared it to the Airbnb of humanitarianism, where you've got some kind of platform in which people can express their bespoke needs and get a bespoke response as locally as possible first, and then you know, you search further and further as you need to, and maybe humanitarian organisations are part of that platform and maybe they aren't, but it also includes you know, your neighbour or the lawyer down the street or translators from another country or whatever. But could you just outline a little bit more what this actually looks like?

Paul Currion

I have very mixed feelings about the Airbnb comparison.

Heba Aly

I figured you might!

Paul Currion

The reason for that is one of the things that worries me about the network society is the rise of the large platforms. I think they are generally a negative influence on society and economy. Airbnb destroyed the couch-surfing community, and the couch-surfing community was much more the network humanitarianism model. All it was was an informal network of people who agreed to let other strangers stay on their couch when they were passing through. And that then became monetised, it became centralised, it

became aggregated, it became a data risk. And so I worry about the Airbnb comparison. In that sense, I don't want people to think that I'm proposing a sort of a one-size-fits-all platform that all humanitarian endeavours can exist on.

On the other hand, that Airbnb comparison, when you describe it in more detail, yes, it's much more like that. It's about how the network can provide the avenues for aid to reach people, for people to reach out for aid, and for aid to reach people.

There's a number of examples of this. Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring, when a Twitter account basically organised the resourcing for a field hospital to treat the protesters that were injured, up to and including very expensive medical equipment in the range of, you know, \$40,000 worth of medical equipment. That was a combination of volunteer effort with network effects essentially. You can also see it at community levels. There was one example which was Daryeel, which is a Somali initiative. But again, it's community based, it's basically using WhatsApp to structure aid deliveries for communities that are in need of food resources. I kept a running list for a while of these types of initiatives, because it was literally every week.

Even in countries where, you know, infrastructure, you might expect to be better resourced. In the United States of America, you've had examples of this after flooding, after hurricanes – the communities basically organised themselves for search and rescue using internet-based chat groups and geolocation. So there's lots of interesting things. Another example there was after the Fukushima disaster, there was a crowdsourced effort to measure the radiation levels. Not just crowdsourcing the data but actually crowdsourcing the meters that were needed to measure the radiation. And that kind of stuff is not what you would immediately think of with humanitarianism, but it's the kind of thing that I think we can expect a lot more of in the future.

As more network devices roll out into the world, as more communities come online, they will find their own uses for this technology. It doesn't stand still. And it's not things that we as the formal aid industry can predict. So what we should be doing to the extent that we, as a formal industry should exist, is to act as facilitators, to act as hubs in networks of information, and to be able to reinforce those networks where they might need reinforcing.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Paul, this dovetails interestingly with some research in Somalia a few years ago that Mercy Corps did that looked at food resilience, food security resilience. And one of the things that they identified as a huge driver of food security resilience at a household level was depth of social networks. And that's something that is almost totally outside of what aid organisations would typically programme around. Your point about investing in that information infrastructure, supporting that sort of exchange and that networking, what does that look like? Like, who does that? Where does the money for that come from? Does it need money? And what would that take and who should do it? I'm struck, reading the paper you put up years ago and hearing you talk now, partly, this just

comes back to really fundamentally rethinking the business model, that to get away from aid that is fundamentally outcome-driven, transaction-driven, market-based in nature would need a really very different kind of financing infrastructure. So what would it take to put this into place?

Paul Currion

The period when I was writing the report I was involved with a lot of discussions around crowdfunding. And so at that point I was very much optimistic that crowdfunding sort of financial resources could work. I don't think it works at scale. I don't think it necessarily works for the type of traditional humanitarian work that we're doing. It does work for community-based responses.

One of the things that the research in recent years has really shown is the importance of diaspora communities in mobilising resources for responses in their countries of origin. And I think that's one area where the aid industry could potentially really shift and really help to sort of mediate trust, mediate information, provide those sorts of information resources in a way which could enhance diaspora-based responses rather than undermining them.

The one thing that I wouldn't like to see is the replication of the NGO model into the network society. I do not have a high opinion of the NGO as a structure. I think it's actually undermining civil society. People see the NGO as being the vehicle for social change, because that's what donors will fund. That's what the government will recognise. But you know, a football club can be a vehicle for change. That's civil society. Faith networks, most obviously can be vehicles for change. They're civil society. Community groups that have nothing to do with anything, that we as aid organisations never get involved with are civil society. And I think we need to expand our vision in that sense as well to start to understand the dynamics of how those sorts of groups mobilise responses, and what we might be able to do to help them, rather than focusing on what we should do for our, you know, in terms of our processes. I mean, I have to say, I predict the withering away of the aid industry. I have been a doomsayer for a while now. But I see nothing that really changes my mind about this.

I do not think the traditional aid industry has a future. To some extent, I don't think it should have a future. And I think the responsible thing for us to do is to move towards that sort of community-based support. And I think network humanitarianism is probably the best way to do it.

Heba Aly

And I mean, you call it network humanitarianism, others call it mutual aid. And we saw a lot of references to that post-COVID, or during the response to the pandemic. And so, certainly, I suppose less foreign of a concept than it might have been when you first started talking about this, and one that I think dovetails a bit with what Muthoni has also written about. Your submission, Muthoni, to 'The future of aid' series described a kind of

new world order in which, in that case you were talking about Africa, but I think it applies just as much to the rest of the so-called Global South – isn't just getting a piece of the pie anymore, but it's making the pie. Walk us through that vision.

Muthoni Wanyeki

So, I should say, first off, that I don't think I have a very coherent, well-planned strategic direction towards that vision. But I do have a sort of set of insights that have come, you know, that have occurred to me especially over this last year that we've all been living through. And one thing it's brought to mind is, I grew up in Kenya during the Amin era. I was quite small. And we saw at that time, it was not unusual, we had Ugandan teachers, we had Ugandan nurses, friends of ours, you know, their parents were mixed Kenyan-Ugandan and so on. And in a way, thinking about the big debates around integration of long stay refugees within a community. We had integration. Before the whole industry got professionalised and sort of organised as an industry, and encampment came along and that sort of thing. The other thing that occurred to me which really motivated the article that I wrote is just the incredible examples of African solidarity for one another, at the family level, at the neighbourhood level, at the community level, and including regionally. And some of the most inspiring and moving things that we saw over this past period in terms of responding to the economic devastation caused by responses that were deemed necessary from a health perspective to deal with COVID, but, you know, were devastating for informal sector workers, for rural assistance farmers, for pastoralists, for even those farmers who until then had made enough. And I think, you know, I can personally count on my hands three people who initiated sort of their own personal cash transfer systems. And because people knew them, they were sort of personalities and social influencers, they were trusted, people gave them money, one person I know supported almost 5,000 families through donations, and requests would come in, and so on. And I saw examples like that all across the continent in terms of the response. And it made me think a lot about debates on a return to sort of social protection.

And we know within Africa, and probably within the rest of the Global South, the way most African families manage risk and prepare for risk is really through informal social protection mechanisms that have existed for a long time. And those risk mechanisms, risk management mechanisms, they can include the diaspora if there's family members in diaspora, they can include other members, you know, the chamas, the tontines, and so on. And it really made me think how they came into their own and sort of, you know, really did provide that solidarity ourselves to our own communities that were in such crisis during this period. I think that also linked with a certain kind of leadership that we saw at the continental level, maybe not, maybe I think at the national level. It was more touch and go, more patchy in terms of some countries being serious, and others being less so. But certainly at the continental level, we saw incredible leadership from the African Union Chair, the appointment of the African Special Envoys, the creation of the common purchasing platform, first on PPE, then on oxygen, now moving on to negotiations around where to get sufficient supplies of vaccines. We saw the sort of coming into itself of the African CDC, the Centers for Disease Control, and, because

they were being serious, a serious grouping of money behind it: philanthropic money, bilateral money, multilateral money. And I think it's put the Africa CDC in terms of crisis management in the future in a much better area.

The thing that was lacking is okay, you have this incredible planning at the continental level, you have this incredible solidarity at the sort of neighbourhood, community level, but the linkages. And, if we could get that right, that would I think be a significant step forward. Providing the leadership, providing a channel through which external sources can come into the debate and support the leadership, the agency, and the self-determined solidarity with one another, rather than this sort of dependency on an industry that really isn't ours, to be honest.

The last example I wanted to give is probably more recent and just thinking about, I've been very involved in how to respond to this conflict in Tigray. And as we know, there are already what 36,000-37,000 Ethiopians who've fled over into Sudan. Everyone is in massive preparation on the Ethiopian side. They just released their humanitarian response plan on the Sudanese side, which is broke, doing what they can with the regional government, and so on. But again, at the community level, the response of ordinary Sudanese across the border, who have nothing, who are devastated by conflict themselves, who've only just the other day sent their leadership to Khartoum to join the transitional government. And yet, you know, you see the Ethiopian Sudanese friendship societies are mobilising, you see the University of Khartoum collecting donations and sort of linking with community-based groups in the east to provide support. And those are the things I think that will save us in the end. I agree. I hope Paul is right. That we're coming to the end of the aid industry. But I think, you know, in terms of managing risk, managing crisis in ways that get us back to real sort of natural solidarity with one another, and that feed into continental and national leadership, not continental and national policy, where they themselves take these community initiatives seriously and sort of embed them in how we run our countries, I think that gives us some sort of inkling and glimmer around the kind of future I would like to see.

Jeremy Konyndyk

I think it's a fascinating critique. And I think one that certainly tracks with a lot of what I've observed over my career. One of the things that's been really striking over the last 20 years in the aid sector, has been how much less the kind of formal aid sector internationally is doing on natural disaster response now. And the reason for that is, communities and countries have really taken more of that on themselves. And so, you know, where I used to run disaster response for USAID, and in the 90s USAID would be running around chasing down every small hurricane and earthquake. Now, most of those are handled by national governments and communities. And the most that the international donors would provide would be a small amount of money and solidarity, but the heavy lifting has been done by the countries themselves. And I think you're absolutely right, in any response we always say that the first responders are the communities themselves. What I wonder about, and Tigray is an interesting example of this, is how can that be sustained? Or how long can that be sustained? The ability of

those Sudanese communities on the border, which, as you say, are very poor themselves, to continue supporting large numbers of people is probably pretty finite.

So, what would that kind of solidarity model look like in a sustained way, in your view. I think for a natural disaster it's one thing, because that's a kind of quick shot, and then you begin bouncing back. Something like a long-term displacement crisis has a very different rhythm to it, and poses different burdens on those kinds of communities. Do you have a sense of what that might look like? And how might the classic aid sector pivot to better support that, or is that just something that can't even happen? Should we just do away with that, that classic aid sector and figure out some other way of supporting that?

Muthoni Wanyeki

So, let's stay with the Sudan example. Right? What will typically happen and what is about to happen is that the UN planning and all of their international subcontractors are going to kick in very soon. What gets crowded out by that is this community-level response. Imagine if we had a way that these incredible initiatives, these community-based organisations, the solidarity effort within the capital, the engagement with the Sudanese government on, you know, helping it manage the response was actually planned and brought into it, and local initiatives, including the initiatives of arriving people from Tigray themselves, weren't crowded out. How would that be different? I think it would give us a very, very different kind of scene in terms of what happens in eastern Sudan moving forward.

Jeremy Konyndyk

And I think it tracks as well with something we heard from Danny Sriskandarajah in the first episode we did, where his big idea was social protection, and thinking differently about how we engage with kinds of social protection networks at all levels.

Heba Aly

But Muthoni I just want to follow up a bit on Jeremy's question. Because if we imagine that it's going to take, well your point right now is, you know, these UN responses crowd out the local response – what would happen if that UN response didn't exist at all? Surely there would be a short-term price that gets paid, in lives, until the society transitions to a different kind of model. I don't see how you can kind of jump from one to the other without some kind of price being paid in the middle.

Muthoni Wanyeki

No, of course I'm not saying that. What I am saying very clearly is there's a desperate need for resources on the ground, capacities on the ground, etc. And if that comes in

from the UN system and its subcontractors, so be it. But, in that coming in, how do you take into [the] response the community level response within Sudan, the interlocutors who are civic interlocutors within the rest of Sudan, the Government of Sudan, including at the state level in the east, and not sort of have the industry sort of takeover? Okay, we're doing WASH, we're doing tents, but engage, and engage also with those who are coming across the border. You know, one of the most depressing things I think as an African is to see, you know, people who had skills, who had some sort of life, livelihood or income, however humble that may have been, just sort of sitting. And there's something very disempowering. So no, it's not about not caring about lives, or thinking that there has to be some sort of more conscious deliberate planning for a different kind of way of working as we transit to more national-level responses that involve and engage people's natural instincts to want to show solidarity to fellow Africans, or fellow humans as the case may be.

Heba Aly

I didn't, I didn't mean to be kind of simplistic about it. But I think it's a real dilemma that many who do believe in international solidarity face because they see the pressures, and they see the ethical reasons to move towards a much more locally owned model of helping one another. And yet, they also see the risks of pulling out and what kind of world we live in, when international solidarity doesn't exist. And so it's kind of figuring out how you shift that balance in a way that isn't so incremental that it never really happens, but in a way that isn't so radical, that it then does leave a massive gap.

Jeremy Konyndyk

Well, I have a huge amount of sympathy for what you're for what you're saying here, I think you really get to a pretty important fundamental critique of how the aid sector operates, which is that once that Big Aid machine moves in, then it makes itself the centre of the story, whether or not it is actually the centre of the story. And it doesn't generally move in, as you say, with a posture of figuring out, 'okay, what's going on, what's working, and how can we support it'? It goes in with a posture of 'okay, we've got the water, you've got the food over here, you've got the healthcare', and leaving aside and failing to take advantage of the capacities that already exist. You're 100% right on much of that. I wonder if we could move now to bring Paul and Simon back into the conversation. I would love to just hear from each of you some of your reactions to each other's ideas, and thoughts on how some of these might come and go or the kind of trade-offs between them.

Simon O'Connell

Really profound and thought-provoking conversation. And frankly, nothing from Paul or Muthoni that I would disagree with, really. I think the need to shift towards more networked approaches, to decentralisation, to working more locally, I absolutely, wholeheartedly embrace that. And to be fair to many of the sort of, you know, bigger

mainstay INGOs, I think a fair few have been on that journey. Yes, too slowly and there's a long way to go. But I think there are many already on that journey.

I think, Paul, just a little bit, you know, on your point around the aid sector's coming to an end. I mean, yes, perhaps. But I think, just to push back a little bit on that, we've been hearing that for a long time. And I think the power structures linked to the aid sector: the politics, the foreign policy agendas, I think there's a lot of entrenched vested interests in ensuring that doesn't happen. I'm not kind of making a loaded statement or a value judgement one way or another. I just think it's unlikely to happen that soon. And then, I mean, perhaps sticking with the Sudan and Ethiopia example, Muthoni, I completely hear what you're saying and I share the fear of, you know, kind of flooding in of, and again I go back to my earlier point, sort of generalist, multi-sectoral NGOs, you know, a little bit chasing the funding.

However, I do think Jeremy, to your point, that a lot of NGOs who are no longer international, are responding to sort of natural disasters, it's the gnarly, political, protracted crises in those very fragile settings where I do still see the need for the high-capacity INGOs, and I think Muthoni, imagine if you know, this horror unfolding in Ethiopian Tigray was a decade ago, and you had the Bashir regime in Sudan, and Meles in Ethiopia. I was lucky enough to spend a lot of time in both those two countries, particularly in the Somali region of Ethiopia, and I think my goodness, the role that INGOs played, yes, perhaps not good enough, but in pushing and advocating for humanitarian access, and Jeremy, you saw some of that in eastern Sudan. I was in Darfur in 2004 or 2005 when a lot of the kind of humanitarian indicators were worse in the east of the country, you need I think organisations, be it UN or others, and of course, local voices, advocating for the needs of those communities. And that sort of international solidarity point that you were referring to, Heba. So, for me, I mean, I think to conclude on the response, it's more about being clear around, what is the role of the INGO? What is the role of the UN system? What is the role of the local organisation? And yes, you know, shift towards more network models. And yes, desperate need as I've been kind of banging on about around the need for efficiencies. But there's still got to be, I think, a role in there for the international NGO. It's just got to be much sharper, much more focused, more specialised and clearer, and also accountable for the outcomes.

Heba Aly

Paul, any reactions?

Paul Currion

Yeah, reactions to what Muthoni was saying. I, you know, I fully agree. I recognise that as she said, it's not a kind of a structured vision as it were, for the industry. But in terms of the direction in which it goes, I can't support it enough. And I think one of the challenges for articulating that kind of vision is that, by definition, you're not trying to prescribe what these countries, what these communities should do. What you're saying

is, they should be allowed, they should be enabled to pursue the path that they want rather than a path that's set down for them by a donor, or a particular coordination structure that the international community has set up. So I don't think it's a flaw in what Muthoni was saying that it's not a really well-structured vision. I think that's the whole point of it, is that we shouldn't have that sort of definitive structure necessarily in place for when we're talking about empowering communities, empowering countries to develop their own capacity.

With regards to what Simon says, yeah as I said, I think I agree with Simon on a lot of the diagnosis around the problems that particularly international NGOs have struggled with for years, for my entire career in the aid industry, which is far longer than I like to talk about. And the problem is, you know, I've been through several rounds of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. And I hear organisations talk about decentralising, and I talked to those organisations and in some cases, you know, work with them, and they're not doing it. It's almost like theatre, because they can't, because they're not set up to do that. The incentive structures are wrong, the organisational structures are wrong, the staff they've got are not the right staff to do that. And where they do start to manage it, it's such a tremendous struggle that it almost inevitably gets pushed back pretty quickly. With regards to the vested interests point, yeah, I think the aid industry will survive in the sense that, you know, you could still have aid organisations but I'm not sure they'll be that meaningful anymore. The sort of international solidarity, that in some ways is important. I don't know how to measure that. I don't know how to measure the effectiveness of international NGOs speaking up about political violence in a particular country, and I don't think they necessarily would need to be operational NGOs. And we've seen in many cases that operational NGOs are in fact the least capable of speaking up because then they risk not being able to operate in those environments anymore. And of course when international voices speak up, they frequently drown out local voices. And so again, you know, I have huge questions about the assumption that international solidarity actually does what it claims to do. So, yeah, I don't want to be entirely negative, I recognise there are organisations doing good work, I recognise there are people in those organisations doing good work. But that doesn't really change my view, that doesn't change my diagnosis. And I don't think our feeling that people and organisations are really trying really hard to change and really trying hard to do their best – that shouldn't really be a factor in our judgments about what is best for people who are in need of assistance.

Jeremy Konyndyk

And I think it does come back to something that Simon said a moment ago, which actually echoes what we heard from again from Danny Sriskandarajah a few episodes ago, which is really rethinking what's the purpose of an international NGO or an international aid organisation? What do we want or need them to do? It's not probably what they have been doing for the last 30 or 40 years. But the funding architecture makes it very difficult, Paul, as you say, the incentives, the way that money flows have

not really adapted to the sort of realities that you've all been talking about here today. Muthoni, I'm curious for your take on that or anything else we've heard from Simon and Paul, you know, what should the aid sector be doing? What is the value out of an international NGO in the new future where we might be heading?

Muthoni Wanyeki

I mean, I'm sure we all remember, was it the 90s or 2000s, the big debate on Paris Principles, donor alignment, ownership, blah blah blah, which was much more on the development side than on the humanitarian side. But even those debates have sort of gone away, even that discussion around Western bilaterals and how they engage with the Global South. They're sort of finished, or at least I don't seem to come across them in the same way.

But there is a problem with the structuring of funding, at the subcontracting, the sort of need for it to also have benefits to citizens of the places that it's coming from. And I think in terms of solidarity, what that means is, there's actually quite a bit of advocacy work to be done in Western societies around their foreign policy, around how aid fits into it, around the architecture of how they give ODA and so on. If they were prepared to take it on, then in my future that would be the role that INGOs play, sort of really advocating for changes, structural power changes in terms of this, you know, behemoth that's developed over the years. I mean, we're so far from the days when, I don't know, the 70s, when Canadian SIDA was giving money to FRELIMO? I mean, can you imagine, anything like that happening today?

So, lots of things have happened. We've evolved, we've professionalised. We've bureaucratized, and not necessarily to the benefit of people for whom it was intended.

Jeremy Konyndyk

That's a fascinating point to close on. Muthoni, Paul, Simon, thank you so much for being part of the conversation today. It's been really fascinating, really refreshing to think about some different futures for the aid industry and how we might start heading in that direction. So, thank you.

Simon O'Connell

Thank you.

Muthoni Wanyeki

Thank you all.

Heba Aly

Thanks very much.

Heba Aly

We're keen to hear your thoughts on the three visions we've talked about today. Can NGO mergers, network humanitarianism, and local solidarity solve the problems humanitarianism faces today? Can they even become a reality? Tweet your comments or questions to us @CGDev and @newhumanitarian with the hashtag #RethinkingHumanitarianism, or record an audio note on your phone and email it to RHpodcast – That's RH for Rethinking Humanitarianism – RHpodcast@thenewhumanitarian.org, and we will play it on the next episode.

Jeremy Konyndyk

We ended up talking today quite a bit about money. And that is, in fact, the subject of our next episode. We're going to follow the money and explore how humanitarian financing shapes so much of how this sector works. Is it possible to shift from a supply-driven to a demand-driven approach to humanitarianism? Is it possible to break the monopolies enjoyed by the large agencies? Do donors even want that kind of a change? All that and more next time.

Heba Aly

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Jeremy Konyndyk

To learn more about the topics we're discussing on the podcast, head to thenewhumanitarian.org for a series of opinions on the future of aid, or check out cgdev.org where you can find CGD's research on humanitarian effectiveness and reform.

Heba Aly

Thank you for listening to the Rethinking Humanitarianism podcast. See you soon.