



INGOs
& the Long
Humanitarian
Century

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

The past, present, and future
of international NGOs

FINAL REPORT OF THE INGOs &
THE LONG HUMANITARIAN CENTURY
RESEARCH PROGRAMME



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INGOs & the Long Humanitarian Century

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FOREWORD

As Co-Chairs of the International Advisory Board of the INGOs and the Long Humanitarian Century research project, we are delighted to introduce this report, which brings the project to a close but also indicates what needs to happen next.

Over a three-year period the project has brought together a diverse group of people who work in the relief and development sector, or who work closely with it. Its aim has been to develop a shared understanding of the challenges that international NGOs (INGOs) currently face, and to help them begin to find effective responses.

These challenges are many, and they come both from the external environment in which INGOs operate, and from within INGOs themselves. And they are increasingly acute, leading some observers to describe this as a time of crisis or a tipping point for the sector.

That is why this research programme has been so timely. Looking at INGOs with an eye to their histories, it has provided a better idea of where they might be heading and how they might need to adapt (in many cases, urgently). It has not aimed to prescribe specific solutions, but to help different INGOs think through their own responses to the common challenges they are facing.

Bringing together so many senior figures in relief and development, as well as leading researchers in the field, has been a significant achievement. So too has been the creation of a space for the open exchange of ideas and frank discussion. We would like to pay tribute to everyone who has contributed in this spirit of candid enquiry, and to thank Professor Sir Mike Aaronson and Professor Andrew Thompson, plus their wider team at Nuffield College, University of Oxford, for bringing this about.

We are delighted to have been involved in such important research. We commend this report to everyone with an interest in the relief and development sector, and especially to the leaders of INGOs, who we hope will find much to inspire and galvanise them (and to reassure them that many of the challenges they face are not unique to their organisations).

The work continues: the community that the programme has created is ongoing and much remains to be done, both within individual organisations and collectively, if INGOs are to hold true to their founding values while being effective and relevant in a fast-changing world. We believe that it is vital that they do so: millions of vulnerable people around the world continue to need the kinds of support and commitment that INGOs, over more than a century, have been able to provide.



Baroness Valerie Amos

Master of University College Oxford, and former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The three-year INGOs & the Long Humanitarian Century research programme, based in the University of Oxford, has used a historical perspective to look at the future role of international NGOs (INGOs). It has not been its intention to prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution for the many different INGOs, but we do believe that we have identified the key questions that each needs to address.

Many INGOs have grown into large, complex organisations, and yet the world looks very different from when they were founded. Traditional sources of funding are drying up. Recent safeguarding scandals have drawn attention to inbuilt gender and power imbalances, and caused reputational damage. Criticism has been levelled at INGOs for having a 'colonial' mindset: reluctant to give control of programmes to local communities in the global South.

“INGOs ARE AT A TURNING POINT.”

INGOs are at a turning point in their history. Once seen as occupying the moral high ground, do they now find themselves at the periphery, at risk of being sidelined? Are they still fit for purpose?

Bringing together an extraordinary community of relief and development practitioners, academics and other subject experts, INGOs and the Long Humanitarian Century has delved deeply into some of the most important external challenges INGOs now face.

A **geopolitical situation** with an increasingly assertive China, India and Russia seeming to cast doubt on the 'universality' of West-derived humanitarian models.

Developments in **technology** having profound effects, both on the ways in which INGOs relate to people in need, and on the very nature of the need that they aim to alleviate.

The **Covid-19 pandemic** continuing to have repercussions in the global South, having highlighted and exacerbated ongoing inequalities and vulnerabilities across the world.

New social movements, aided by technology, being able to mobilise support behind particular causes with a speed and agility that INGOs cannot match.

Climate change: global in its effects, daunting in its scale and complexity, and likely to have profound consequences for the relief and development sector.

“THE WORLD DOES NOT OWE THESE ORGANISATIONS A LIVING.”

But as our unprecedented survey shows, many INGO leaders feel that they are beset by **internal challenges** – demanding donors, growing requirements of compliance and risk management, boards overly focused on growth and funding as measures of success – just when they need to focus on what is happening outside of their organisations. Although leaders are attempting to grapple with these issues, many admit to feeling 'stuck' – unable to take the radical action needed.

INGO leaders need to return to their organisations' **founding values**. The legacy issues facing today's INGOs are the consequences of decisions made decades ago – the governance structures that have evolved, the sources of their financing and the conditions attached, the scope of their operations, have little to do with their fundamental values, their 'soul.' INGOs need to reassert their original ideals, while finding different ways of operating in future.

The survival of INGOs is not an end in itself: INGOs exist to serve people in need. But if they are to help the most vulnerable, the sense of 'stuckness' that many INGO leaders feel cannot continue. INGOs need to fight for their future – and ours.

The question we pose is 'who do you think you are – and what do you want to be?' Now is the time for INGOs to refocus on the founding purposes of their organisations, to reassert their ideals and update their missions to take account of present realities, better to meet the needs of the world's most vulnerable people.

That may mean individual INGOs having a sharper sense of their distinctive competencies: how they fit within the bigger landscape of relief, development, human rights, and global solidarity. It may mean being more modest and realistic about their level of global ambition. Certainly it means being more willing to partner with other organisations – whether INGOs, local actors, or businesses – to tackle challenges that are beyond them individually.

And the future of INGOs is not a matter for INGO leaders alone. We also ask questions of the many institutions, including donor governments, that have a stake in INGOs' success.

The world does not owe INGOs a living. But if they no longer existed, a vital element in our system of global governance would be missing. With millions of people needing their support today and in the future, the mission of INGOs is too important for them to fail.

INTRODUCTION

This report considers the future role of international NGOs (INGOs) working in relief and development.

INGOs AT A WATERSHED

The most prominent INGOs emerged over the course of ‘the long humanitarian century,’ from the Battle of Solferino in 1859 to 9/11 in 2001: some in the late 19th century, some after World War I, some after World War II. By the second half of the 20th century, many had become complex organisations with global reach and a significant impact on the international system.

The world around these INGOs is changing dramatically, leading some observers to wonder whether they are still fit for purpose. Many millions of people continue to live in desperate situations, their lives blighted by extreme poverty, by armed conflict and displacement, and by natural disasters. The global response remains inadequate and unjust. Confronted by radical uncertainty in their external environment, INGO leaders understand the need to pivot to new ways of working, yet they find themselves absorbed by ever-more-problematic internal dynamics. Stuck in apparent gridlock, they are at a ‘watershed moment,’ faced with a new reality for which they seem poorly prepared.

The Covid pandemic has shone a spotlight on pre-existing challenges to global solidarity, and may even be exacerbating them. Some Western democracies, traditionally the main funders of relief and development, have increasingly ‘instrumentalised’ aid budgets, to support less altruistic foreign policy objectives. The liberal humanitarian order is threatened by the rise of new powers with different ideological perspectives – in particular China – while a newly aggressive Russia is blatantly ignoring humanitarian values and principles while annexing and destabilising neighbouring states. In various parts of the world, religious fundamentalism threatens respect for international humanitarian norms. In addition, civil society in the global South, increasingly impatient with progress in redressing traditional power imbalances, is questioning the sincerity of INGOs’ expressed intentions to transform and ‘localise.’ Aid ‘recipients’ themselves are becoming more demanding and less inclined to accept the status quo.

“THE WORLD AROUND THESE INGOs IS CHANGING DRAMATICALLY.”

“One of the major challenges facing INGOs is the fact that recipients of aid are more assertive. They are more vocal about lack of support, and the speed (or otherwise) of delivery. They are more demanding, and many also have a sense of their ‘rights.’ This isn’t just in relation to their own governments, but also in relation to international organisations. They have a voice and they are using it, and social media helps with that.” – Baroness Valerie Amos, Master of University College Oxford and former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

These external changes represent major power shifts in geopolitical relations, along multiple axes – not only North-South and East-West, but within the global South. This calls for an agility on the part of INGOs that is not always in evidence. Globalisation is not only multiplying the number of voices that INGOs need to listen to, but radically differentiating them. Having traditionally occupied the moral high ground, in advocating for humanitarian assistance and sustainable development with a human rights focus, INGOs risk finding themselves increasingly at the periphery of debates on these topics.

INGOs & THE LONG HUMANITARIAN CENTURY

Our three-year research programme has brought to bear a historical perspective, to help INGOs better understand these challenges and redefine their role in the twenty-first century. The world does not owe these organisations a living, but traditionally they have played a vital role in humanitarian response and tackling global inequality, and their demise would be a cause for concern. We have therefore asked what they need to do to remain relevant, useful, and effective.

Our research shows that, internally, INGOs are struggling with the demands and pressures arising from years of ‘going for growth,’ plus a set of management requirements based on donors’ desire to be in control of public funds, and to absolve themselves from risk. Some INGOs worry about ‘losing their soul,’ as their core values of social justice, solidarity, and human dignity become increasingly difficult to square with a more volatile, constraining, and competitive funding environment, including newly emerging offerings from the private sector, with management consultancies successfully bidding for aid delivery contracts on a purely commercial basis. Some question whether INGOs are still true to their founding values: whether they have been so focused on growth, chasing after international donor funding and morphing into massive service-delivery mechanisms, that they have lost their focus. That they have neglected their original identity as civil society organisations, acting as a bridge between the public at home and communities abroad. Some even wonder whether the INGO model is fundamentally broken.

SOME INGOs WORRY ABOUT ‘LOSING THEIR SOUL.’”

The loss of established income streams, multiplying regulatory requirements, and renewed questioning of accountability to ‘local’ communities, pose major challenges for INGO boards and senior executives. However, our in-depth survey of INGO leaders reveals that many CEOs feel they are so consumed by day-to-day problems that they cannot get their heads or arms around issues waiting just around the corner – for example, the inequalities produced or exacerbated by Covid, or the unfolding consequences of climate change. They struggle to seize the opportunity – and to combat the threat – posed by new discoveries in data science and an accelerating digital technological revolution that will profoundly change the way that NGOs relate to and interact with those they are seeking to help. Yet it is essential that INGOs understand the nature of these and other external disruptors, and their implications, if they are to have any chance of keeping pace in a rapidly changing world.

This poses questions for donor governments and international institutions, as much as for INGOs themselves. If the aid system as a whole is broken, INGOs clearly cannot be expected to fix it single-handed. Yet they still speak with authority, and can play an important influencing role. The motivations that led people to found these organisations are as strong as ever, and the potential of INGOs to function as a bridge between a generous public in the North and communities in need in the South, using their expertise acquired over many years in tackling poverty, disadvantage, and discrimination, is still enormous.

INGOs still possess the ability to mobilise what is good in people. But they must develop a sharper sense of the distinctive contribution they can bring to the complex challenges of sustainable development and emergency response. It is therefore vital to help them answer the key questions: what really matters; what have they learned; how do they need to change in order to continue doing what they do best, and remain useful?

INGOs DO NOT HAVE TO BE PASSIVE IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL CHANGE.”

In short, the value that INGOs create, and the ways they seek to create that value, have yet to be redefined for the twenty-first century. But INGOs do not have to be passive in the face of global change. Our conclusion is that it is the organisations that have clarity about who they are and what they want to be – who can navigate and, if necessary, fight against the forces that are taking them away from their core purpose – that will continue to be relevant and have a future in the 21st century. That is the leadership challenge that INGO CEOs and boards need to address, together with all who continue to believe that INGOs have a useful role to play.

OUR RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Our research programme, INGOs and the Long Humanitarian Century, has been a collective endeavour, bringing together an expert group of NGO practitioners, academic researchers and policymakers, to discuss in depth the most pressing issues facing INGOs. The group that we convened – the community we created – is one of the main outputs of the project, and a lasting one. We have heard presentations from a diverse and impressive cast of external speakers, who have spoken to us about these issues. We have also conducted a series of searching interviews with 50 CEOs of leading aid and development agencies, showing how they see the challenges facing their organisations and the sector as a whole, and their visions for the future. The publication *INGOs & the Long Humanitarian Century – Leadership Survey Report* sets out these CEOs' interview responses in detail. The presentations we heard, the in-depth leader interviews we conducted, and the contributions of our expert group, have all contributed to the findings in this report.

We have sought throughout to understand where INGOs have come from and 'who they think they are' in terms of values and purpose. We have looked at their present legitimacy in part by exploring the gaps between how they perceive themselves and how they are seen by others: by governments in both North and South; by the giving public in their home constituencies (primarily the UK), and by 'new kids on the block,' including new social movements and private-sector organisations involved in relief and development.

We have asked sector leaders how they perceive future leadership challenges. We have seen that while they are preoccupied with internal organisational issues, focused largely on governance and money, they are also aware of huge new external challenges that demand their attention – including the climate emergency, the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the shifting geopolitical landscape, and the digital revolution. But leaders are, perhaps unsurprisingly, unsure of what these challenges mean for them and for their organisations' future, and how to tackle them.

INGOs WILL NEED A SHARPER SENSE OF THEIR DISTINCTIVE COMPETENCIES.”

We have applied a historical perspective for two practical reasons. First, organisations need to understand their history in order to appreciate how they have become what they are now, and what they might choose to be in future. Second, not all the challenges they face are new; some have been encountered previously, and lessons can be drawn from how they were addressed, while others – including arguably the most serious – are still emerging. Put differently, some problems are cyclical; the readiness of donor governments to fund INGOs on their own terms, for example, has increased and declined at different historical moments. But others are linear and accelerating, the global climate crisis being the most obvious. Thus, if INGOs consider their history they may find they already have some of the tools they need, but they also need to understand where established methods are inadequate and new ones need to be found.

A historical perspective also serves as a reminder of the founding purpose of these organisations. We believe it is vital that INGOs rediscover this sense of purpose and identity, and translate it to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. This will involve making some hard choices about 'who they want to be;' it is not possible for anyone to do everything, and individual INGOs will need a sharper sense of their distinctive competencies. How should they fit in to the bigger landscape of relief, development, human rights, and global solidarity, and what must they do to develop different kinds of partnership, locally and internationally?

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

KEY QUESTIONS FOR INGO LEADERS

A preoccupation with internal organisational issues makes it harder for INGO leaders to address the major external challenges faced by those who need their support. But the two sets of issues need not – indeed cannot – be tackled in isolation. Being truly clear about how to deal with internal challenges will make dealing with the external ones easier, and an effective response to external challenges can help drive internal re-organisation and rebirth.

In our research we have modelled a process of enquiry aimed at INGO leaders, along the following lines:

Do you understand your history, and what you originally set out to achieve as an organisation?

Have you remained true to your core values, and are you clear what they mean in practice in the changed context of the 21st century?

Can you claim you still have a right to exist at all?

Are you able to see yourself as others see you, and if there is a gap, are you clear how you would close it?

What do you want to be now? Your future is in your hands, but you will certainly face some tough choices regarding:

- putting the people you are here to serve at the centre of your thinking
- how your sources of funding impact on your independence
- the way you partner with other actors
- the amount of 'control' you are prepared to relinquish
- which segment of the relief/ development 'continuum' you seek to occupy
- the message you need to convey to your core supporters.

The external challenges you face are too great for any one organisation to tackle independently. Collective action is required, for example to resist being instrumentalised by the very governments that support you. Are you able to work with others who share your values, and place effective collaboration ahead of competition?

Finally, can you build this process of asking yourself challenging questions into the way you plan and manage your affairs in future? This will not be the last time you face what may appear to be an 'existential crisis.'

We did not set out, nor have we attempted, to prescribe a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to the challenges that INGOs face, not least because INGOs vary so widely in terms of their size, mandates, and governance structures. But based on our research, we are confident that these are the key questions that INGO leaders need to answer if they are to remain relevant and play a useful role in the 21st century and beyond.

We will now examine in turn the main external and internal challenges that INGOs are facing.

GEOPOLITICS

INGOs do not operate in isolation: their activities depend upon the geopolitical environment around them and they are both animated and constrained by geopolitics: on the one hand they exist to change the world, but that world also profoundly affects what they can do.

During the period when people took an optimistic view of globalisation, it was easy to suppose that a West-derived rule-based order would be secure indefinitely, and easy to assume that the values that inspire INGOs are truly universal. Yet in recent decades that confidence has been dented, by geopolitical upheavals that make the world look quite different from the world in which many INGOs were formed, after the Second World War. The geopolitical sands have shifted, affecting the ability of INGOs to carry out their missions.

These upheavals seem to have revealed geopolitical fault lines that may have always been there, but that were hidden during the times of relative optimism: in truth large parts of the world never truly bought into liberal humanitarian values. Change has taken place along multiple axes. Power has shifted not just from West to East but from North to South, and we have seen transformation within the global South itself.

INGOs were weakened by the so-called War on Terror. Western governments lost moral authority, and many Western INGOs were seen as being guilty by association. The relief and development sector has always had to show that it is not a prisoner of a narrow set of state interests: following the War on Terror that has meant INGOs particularly needing to distance themselves from Western state interests, or (even more narrowly) Anglo-American interests.

Then during the Covid pandemic, we saw 'beneficiary states' limiting the access that they gave to INGOs. A number of countries in the global South appeared to put greater trust in the responsiveness and practical effectiveness of national and local NGOs than in large INGOs headquartered in the global North. In some cases, Covid also provided governments with an opportunity to bear down on civil society, attempting to exert greater control over those local and national NGOs, behind doors that were closed to the outside world.

INGOs ARE BOTH ANIMATED & CONSTRAINED BY GEOPOLITICS.”

The current phase of globalisation is leading to a multiplying of the voices that INGOs have to listen to, accompanied by a radical differentiation of those voices. While a more interconnected and interdependent world can be a force for good, making multilateralism more of a possibility, for many Western liberal INGOs it can also mean increasing competition. This includes competition from NGOs with quite different values and traditions.

More fundamentally, with major changes in the geopolitical environment there have been increasing challenges to the underlying assumptions of Western liberal INGOs.

In a newly aggressive Russia, INGOs have increasingly been represented in effect as foreign agents, furthering the agendas of the US and EU, especially in relation to the discourse around human rights. According to some commentators Russia's leadership sees itself as waging ideological war against Western liberalism: not market liberalism, but attitudes towards sexuality, gender and religion, which are seen as being in conflict with Russia's particular traditions, culture and way of life.

"Critics [of western INGOs] in Russia argue that talk of liberal values disguises imperialist objectives." – David Priestland, Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford

The idea of universalism is also viewed with suspicion in India, where attempts to invoke humanitarianism have been seen as a justification for interference in the country's internal affairs. As India's economic power has grown, an insistence on sovereignty has combined with a fear of a unipolar world order, constituted by the US and EU. Such suspicions have deep roots.

"Even in colonial times, Gandhi and others had been critical of humanitarianism, seeing the imperial state as justifying itself by doing good to the people in its charge, rather than allowing them to represent themselves."

– Faisal Devji, Professor of Indian History at the University of Oxford

The other new arrival, increasingly assertive on the world stage, is of course China. China's support for development, in regions such as Africa, contrasts with its view of the relationship between the state and civil society in China. It remains to be seen how far, at a time of increasing nationalism within its borders, the Chinese state will continue to promote its own particular brand of development – philanthropic, economically progressive but state-directed – around the world.

THERE HAVE BEEN INCREASING CHALLENGES TO THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF WESTERN LIBERAL INGOs."

ARE THE VALUES THAT INSPIRE INGOs TRULY UNIVERSAL?"

"China sees itself as a country on the way up, with a new idea of how to shape the global order. It calls itself a country with a story that the world can learn from: the story of how it improved its own economic situation, and how order and prosperity can come together." – Rana Mitter, Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China at the University of Oxford

These profound shifts in the geopolitical environment raise broad questions regarding the universality of humanitarian values. We saw from our Leadership Survey that many CEOs of INGOs envision – and in many cases, positively welcome – a future aid sector in which the global North is less dominant. But for INGOs what compromises might be involved in this?

Traditional Western INGOs need to respond to the emergence of new players in the global humanitarian marketplace. But in a multipolar world, that might mean working to an unprecedented degree with others whose traditions and values are quite different from those of the Western liberal democracies.

There is a financial aspect to this. The formal aid system could be seen as a site in which a crisis in the liberal international order is being played out: the humanitarian system has long been reliant on the US and its Western allies to underpin it, but resources from those states are now diminishing, at the very time that new players are coming on the scene. If INGOs are to try and diversify, seeking funding and other support from a wider range of governments, how might they need to change?

The view from Russia, India, and China highlights the danger in talking about universal 'humanitarian principles'. INGOs need at least to be aware of other schools of humanitarian thought, which have a long history. But is it still realistic to talk of 'universal values' at all? Are the values that inspire INGOs truly universal, or are they rather the product of a particular, predominantly Western, liberal democratic point of view?

This is a moment, then, for universalism to reassert itself, and for Western INGOs to recognise the importance of maintaining their humanitarian values and principles. It is possible for humanitarian models, with ideas of impartiality, neutrality, and independence at their heart, to be reinvented, so that they can work with different traditions – INGOs partnering with more faith-based NGOs, for example, beyond those such as Christian Aid, CAFOD and Islamic Relief, which have long been seen as mainstream organisations, at least in the UK. Or if such reinvention proves to be impossible, perhaps 'humanitarianism' will need to beat a strategic retreat by sticking to its principles, and only working in areas where those principles are respected. Either way, INGOs need to be very clear on what ground they stand, and defend their own principles.

TECHNOLOGY COULD HELP INGOs TO COMMUNICATE AND RESPOND IN NEW AND BETTER WAYS.”

THE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY REVOLUTION

New technological developments, especially in data science and digital technology, are having a profound effect on our societies and economies. In many different sectors this is transforming how people relate to each other; it is enabling organisations to analyse and improve their services; it is introducing new diagnostic tools in the spheres of health and opening up online access to testing and treatment, for example.

Developments in technology are also changing the relationships that INGOs have with the people that they exist to protect and serve. Increasingly, INGOs' operations are being mediated through technology – this was the case even before Covid, but the pandemic has pushed INGOs further in this direction.

Even more profoundly, technology is changing the very needs which INGOs seek to address, and as a consequence what they provide. In recent decades a working mobile phone has become one of the things that people most need in the aftermath of an earthquake or flood, and in some settings it is now possible for refugees to use apps to find out what services are available to them nearby. In relation to longer-term development also, the work of INGOs is changing to take account of new technology, which will shape the kinds of economy and society in which tomorrow's citizens will move.

For example, there is no longer such a clear distinction between the role of INGOs' headquarters and their activities in 'the field': more can be done remotely, which has its positives – reducing the need for travel, encouraging local initiatives both in relief and development – but also has its negatives – such as making it harder for people in an INGO's HQ really to understand what is happening in distant parts of the world.

Technologies also make it possible for donors to by-pass INGOs if they feel that this is necessary, in order to help those in need – by providing direct digital cash transfers, for example. This may be a good thing in itself, but it obliges INGOs to ask how they can add value in such situations.

INGOs have faced changes in technology in the past, together with the broader economic, social, and political shifts that accompany these changes. Yet the current moment is perhaps unique in terms of the speed at which innovation is occurring, in the way that new technologies are amplifying each other in their effects, and in the blurring of the boundary between the physical and digital worlds.

Through our Leadership Survey, we learned that many CEOs of INGOs are anxious about this rapid pace of change. Many INGO leaders admitted to feeling that their organisations risk falling behind in using digital technology in particular. Individual INGOs often lack the resources to invest in in-house capabilities.

INGOs' OPERATIONS ARE BEING MEDIATED THROUGH TECHNOLOGY.”

There may be good reasons why the relief and development sector has moved slower than others in adopting new technologies. It is not comparable to the creative sector, for example, in which the gaming industry has been a driving force in developing and popularising new digital capabilities. INGOs also tend to proceed with an understandable caution in this area, as they are working with people who are often very vulnerable. The institutional uptake of big data and data analytics within the humanitarian sector has tended to be slow, partly because of sensitivities around data protection.

New technologies could also lead to INGOs being challenged in their role as intermediaries – in ways that are not necessarily to the advantage of people in need. Certainly, many of the operational applications of new technology will require INGOs to grapple with difficult questions around the appropriate collection, storage, and use of data. INGOs must be in the vanguard of work to protect personal information, given how important and sensitive an issue this is in relief and development.

“As an INGO leader, you need to work now to determine whether you have the data-driven systems in place that you will need. Can you rely on your own data and information systems, on your staff, on your resources, or do you need to collaborate? And if you're thinking about collaboration, you need to address some important questions – about how and in what format data is to be shared, who it is to be shared with, and how it is to be used effectively and efficiently. And above all, how it will be safeguarded.” – Sir Alan Wilson, former CEO of the Alan Turing Institute

Nonetheless, if INGOs can manage to overcome some of these hurdles, harnessing this rapidly evolving technology offers them great opportunities. Exactly how new technologies might prove useful to individual INGOs varies, depending on the specific work that they carry out and the resources available to them. But the scope is vast: among other things, a 2021 report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, on how new and emerging technologies could be used in humanitarian activities, spoke about the potential of:

- artificial intelligence and predictive analytics (to provide improved early warnings of drought, for example)
- social media and mobile apps (to co-ordinate operations on the ground)
- biometrics (to establish the identity of people who may have no other forms of ID)
- 3-D printing (to create vital parts for machinery in out-of-the-way places), and
- unmanned aerial vehicles (to deliver supplies in remote locations).

In the context of emergency relief, technology could help INGOs to communicate and respond to affected populations in new and better ways. For example, UNHCR has been leading the way in establishing digital identities for refugees, giving them access to cash transfers and other e-services (but see the caveat about data protection, above). It is an important enabler of localisation, empowering the people that INGOs serve. And it makes it possible to anticipate future need caused by natural disasters such as flooding and drought, which is of great importance in the context of climate change.

Individual INGOs do not have the budgetary wherewithal or negotiating power to realise their ambitions for using new technology. They may therefore need to form consortia, to bargain and work with the big tech companies. For some this will be unfamiliar terrain, but organisations working in relief and development have a good record of coming together in this way.

As technology alters the capabilities of INGOs, and the expectations that are placed on them by donors and affected populations, INGOs will need to ensure that they can remain accountable: in maintaining the trust of those donors and those populations; in proving that they can manage and protect sensitive data; and in collaborating without compromising their humanitarian principles.

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Our research programme coincided with one of the most dramatic events to have hit the world in decades: the Covid-19 pandemic. This had not only immediate direct effects, but also indirectly affected health systems and global health more generally. It exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in both North and South and seriously challenged global solidarity. Unsurprisingly, therefore, it has also had a major impact on INGOs and their operations in both the short and longer term.

“The Ebola epidemic in 2014/2015 and the current Covid-19 pandemic [...] may have laid bare the limitations of the international humanitarian system as it is set up today.” – Dr James Kisia, Country Director, Catholic Medical Mission Board Kenya, and Ayan Mahamoud, Formerly Resident Representative of Somaliland to the UK. Working paper: *Why localisation should and must work: insights from key humanitarian community stakeholders from the global South.*

In real time we heard about some of the direct effects of Covid, including increased death rates (as of January 2023 some 6.7 million people are estimated to have died of Covid: this may be a conservative estimate) and other serious health impacts. Indirectly, Covid placed significant strain on health systems and caused a resurgence in other infectious diseases.

For example, in some African countries, which are among the most vulnerable to crises, these indirect health impacts outweighed the more direct ones. For many years prior to the Covid pandemic, tuberculosis was the world’s deadliest infectious disease. The World Health Organization’s Global TB Report 2022 shows that more people fell ill with TB in 2021 than pre-pandemic, resulting in 1.6 million deaths: this is the first time since 2005 that global deaths from TB have increased year-on-year.

“As an indirect effect of Covid-19, almost a million fewer people began TB treatment, and there has been reduced spending on TB prevention, diagnosis and treatment, and reduced vaccine coverage.” – Helen Fletcher, Honorary Professor, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Similar indirect effects can be seen in relation to other infectious diseases worldwide. For example, in 2020 more than 17 million children did not receive their first dose of vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a significant setback in the fight against these serious childhood diseases.

Other major indirect impacts of Covid have been felt in relation to poverty. Describing the pandemic as ‘the most significant setback to global poverty reduction in decades,’ the World Bank estimated that 71 million more people were living in extreme poverty in 2020 compared to 2019 – at the end of 2022 the World Bank suggested that the true figure could now be over 95 million.

The economic shock generated by the pandemic has been disproportionately visited upon women and young people. In some countries funding was diverted from education to pay for anti-Covid measures. School closures affected the ability of many women to earn money, as they had to look after their children at home. The most vulnerable will be slowest to recover from some of these socio-economic effects, and the pathway to recovery post-pandemic has been disrupted by the war in Ukraine, and the cost-of-living crisis in much of the world.

THE MOST VULNERABLE WILL BE THE SLOWEST TO RECOVER.”

The pandemic had a major impact on INGOs and their operations. In the face of lockdowns and restrictions on travel INGOs worked hard to adapt, for example by delivering more of their services remotely. At the same time, however, the pandemic led to their experiencing new and unexpected difficulties in some parts of the world.

In our survey of INGO leaders, carried out in early 2021, we heard how INGO CEOs were struggling to adapt their operations to the new reality of Covid: while some felt the pandemic’s positive effects in the localisation of their operations and the increased autonomy of country directors, others saw increased nationalism and a decrease in global solidarity, which also seemed to be shifting the power dynamics between international and local NGOs – increasing local autonomy not for the right reasons, but because INGOs were seeing their capacity reduced.

Colleagues reported that some governments were taking advantage of the restricted access available to INGOs during the pandemic, to exert greater control over civil society organisations within their own borders. While health considerations provided the ostensible reason for this, such a move may also have had political motivations.

COVID EXACERBATED PRE-EXISTING INEQUALITIES.”

Like ripples on a pond, we can see the effects of Covid spreading outward with passing time. There are the immediate effects of the pandemic and the organisational challenges that it led to: the way it affected people's need for humanitarian assistance, and INGOs' ability to meet that need. Then there are the more indirect health effects on people in the countries in which INGOs operate, described above.

Finally, there are the most wide-ranging implications of Covid: the profound socio-economic inequalities that the pandemic both highlighted and exacerbated. It is important to remember that we have not yet seen the end of the effects of the pandemic, and are unlikely to do so for some time. Like the banking crisis of 2009, the Covid pandemic may prove to have a 'long, spiky tail,' its effects on the operations of INGOs are dynamic and still emerging. In all of this, Covid may only have been exacerbating issues that were already there. Yet it remains to be seen how the pandemic will change the way that INGOs operate: whether their response mechanisms have adapted, whether existing power dynamics within them have changed in the long term, and whether Covid will lead to more decentralisation and innovation within the sector. Can INGOs come back stronger from the pandemic, for example in the way they use technology, rather than just being rocked by it? Have they learnt the right lessons from this crisis, and are they now better prepared for the unexpected?

In the wake of a global health crisis, it seems more difficult now to see the future of INGOs as being a simple extrapolation from their past. It may be that the global pandemic will change the way that people think about relief and development: a global crisis, demanding a global response, emphasised the fact that we do not live in isolation from each other. Perhaps INGOs will be working in a better space for multilateral action and international cooperation, in a post-Covid world.

Or maybe what we have witnessed during the pandemic is more ominous: with the ability of INGOs to be a force for good being diminished, and INGOs themselves being less effective, in many parts of the world. Some commentators saw relations between INGOs and local communities becoming more difficult because of the Covid pandemic and the way that INGOs responded: there was a perceived loss of goodwill towards INGOs in some places, with INGOs losing some of the social capital that they had built up over the years. Some INGOs had to work against myths and misinformation around Covid, the Covid vaccine, and the role of INGOs themselves. There are questions around the perception of INGOs, as a result of Covid. Might the pandemic lead to a shrinking space for local civil society: just the reverse of what INGOs should be encouraging?

Some of the answers to these questions we do not yet have: they are still emerging, as the longer-term effects of Covid play out. The world's poorest people will be living with the consequences of Covid, and relief and development agencies will be working out their own answers to these questions, for years to come.



CAN INGOs FIND COMMON CAUSE WITH THESE DYNAMIC NEW MOVEMENTS?"

NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

INGOs have long been seeking to change the world, long been campaigners for international social injustice, long been in the business of tackling global inequalities by using their voice to influence policy as well as by delivering services. Many of them began as social movements; some still see themselves as such.

In many respects the new social movements of recent years are different, however. By focusing mainly on campaigning on a single set of issues and by being technology-enabled while not carrying the burden of service delivery, they are faster-moving, capable of mobilising large numbers of people quickly around matters ranging from gender equality (#metoo) to racial justice (Black Lives Matter) to climate change (Extinction Rebellion). More dynamic and agile than many established INGOs, some new social movements are raising precisely the kinds of question that we have been considering in this report: around the legitimacy and relevance of INGOs, and around their future role.

The question for INGOs is how they should position themselves in relation to the new social movements of the 21st century. Can INGOs find common cause with these dynamic new movements which have such potential for galvanising support, and develop new ways of working with them, in pursuit of common objectives?

To do so will mean overcoming several challenges. First there is the question of power dynamics: are INGOs really prepared to share power with new social movements, and how should they do so?

Then there is the issue of legitimacy. INGOs have long had to take account of emerging social movements, responding to them, and finding common ground with them. There is a perception however that INGOs now lack dynamism, compared to earlier periods. Some activists feel that established INGOs are so mired in process and procedure that they are unable to act with the necessary speed. That many INGOs are now large, bureaucratic organisations. That where they once challenged the Establishment, they are now part of it.

A lively debate exists within the relief and development sector as to how far this perception is true, and the relationship of INGOs to new social movements goes to the heart of this debate. What seems certain, though, is that many of today's activists will see INGOs as relevant only when they can work for political change in the countries in which they are based, as well as those in which they operate.¹

“The question is not whether INGOs will live, but whether they’ll be relevant and legitimate. We need to look at how we are with our own governments, in our own countries. If we can’t make INGOs legitimate in our own places of work and identity, that becomes a barrier to our being a partner and collaborator in [other] countries [...]. You derive legitimacy first in your own country. You have to hold your own government to account.” – Nasra Ismail, independent global development expert

1. Of course, some INGOs have long worked for domestic political change in this way.

ESTABLISHED INGOs HAVE BEEN VIEWED WITH DISTRUST BY SOME NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS.”

Finally there is the issue of trust. Partly this is something that is affecting organisations across all sectors, with the Internet leading to greater transparency and accountability, but at the same time with the potential for disinformation and the erosion of trust.

“There is a trust deficit which is felt by INGOs, and by government and businesses too. Employees, consumers, and voters are more critical and less trusting than ever before. Employees are looking to their employers to reflect their values, and they’re expecting more of CEOs. [...] You need to be led by simple principles. What is the purpose of your organisation, and what are your values? [...] Do it authentically, and your staff and supporters will accept that you can’t do everything. Know your lane.” – *Kajal Odedra, Global Communications Director of change.org, the world’s largest petition platform for social change*

At the same time, established INGOs have been viewed with distrust by some new social movements. This may have been increased by the sexual abuse and exploitation scandals which shook the relief and development sector in 2018, but the roots of it are wider-ranging, and go back further.

“Many activists are sceptical of working with larger INGOs. The reasons include senior management not looking like the people they purport to serve or work with: that can be a warning sign. Then there can be scepticism because of the way that INGOs often represent their beneficiaries: showing people in Africa as helpless, for example. There’s white saviourism and racism in much of this. A grass roots organisation aiming to dismantle racism – why would they want to work with INGOs like that? [...] Grass roots organisations can also be wary of being used: of larger organisations jumping on trends in the media rather than wanting to make lasting change.” – *Zainab Asunramu, Advocacy Adviser, Councillor for Thamesmead East*

If they are to find effective ways of working with the new social movements of the 21st century, therefore, it is important that INGOs do not lose sight of where they came from, of their purpose and values. In seeking to engage with the new social movements, they will need a degree of humility. They need to remain open to challenge, including from within – there is a younger generation of staff within many INGOs, who are pushing their leaders to address today’s issues more actively. They need to encourage diversity of thought, including in who they hire, the make-up of their boards, and how they encourage people at all levels in the organisation to share ideas. And they will need to find ways of supporting and amplifying the work of new social movements whose objectives they share, without seeking to control or instrumentalise them.

THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Finally, there is climate change. Of all the external challenges that INGOs now face, the climate crisis is the most daunting in its scale and complexity. Not only does it cause uncertainties regarding the future role of INGOs, but it threatens to reverse many of the gains that they and others have made in the past.

Historically NGOs have often had to deal with extreme weather events, which have been (at least in part) a major cause of humanitarian disasters. But they have been able to do so episodically and locally: they have not had to deal with climate change as a global phenomenon. Responding piecemeal to extreme weather events or crop failure is quite different from tackling climate change holistically. Of all the external challenges to INGOs we have considered, the climate crisis is undoubtedly the most troubling: one which is something more than a continuation from the past, but rather a radical departure from it.

For many INGOs, it has been tempting to put climate change in the ‘too big, too hard’ box. This is an issue that is so wide-ranging, so difficult to deal with, that it might even seem to go against the implicit assumptions behind much INGO fundraising.

“The normal response from the humanitarian sector is ‘we have the solution to the problem we’re trying to address.’ Normally it’s a single resource deficiency. Somebody hasn’t got food: we can give them food. Somebody hasn’t got shelter: we can give them shelter. You are the one-stop shop. [...] But with the climate problem, which we know is complex and multi-faceted, the humanitarian sector isn’t able to say to its support base ‘that’s the problem. We’ve got a solution,’ because we haven’t.” – *INGO leader, Leadership Survey Report*

It is vital, though, that INGOs are not paralysed by the difficulty of dealing with climate change and its consequences. This is a challenge that cannot stay in the ‘too hard’ box.

The climate crisis will increasingly require INGOs to understand the effects across the relief and development continuum: while shifting weather patterns are likely to lead to more emergencies such as floods and droughts, they will also have important consequences for longer-term poverty reduction. INGOs need to see poverty reduction and efforts to tackle the climate crisis as being two sides of the same coin: if they fail on one, they fail on the other.

“The two defining challenges of this century are climate change and poverty reduction. If we fail on one we fail on the other. They are interwoven. The investments and innovations that will drive sustainable, resilient and inclusive growth will tackle climate change, reduce poverty, and foster shared prosperity.” – *Professor Nick Stern, Chairman of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment*

The immediate question facing traditional relief and development NGOs is to what extent they have a role in addressing the causes, as well as tackling the consequences, of climate change. If INGOs do see themselves as having such a role, how might they work with other parts of international civil society to that end? If they do not wish to take on this role, they will surely appear less relevant in future.

Certainly, the scale of the climate crisis makes collaboration essential. The sector must overcome the boundaries not just between different types of NGO, but between traditional NGOs and other non-governmental actors, such as environmental groups.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

Facing up to climate change will also require greater dialogue and cooperation with the private sector. Responding to the climate crisis calls for investment and innovation on a scale and with an urgency that would make it impossible for INGOs acting alone. The private sector is well placed to provide the new technology and technical assistance (such as anticipatory technologies, predictive analytics, and other tools for forecasting and planning for disasters) that relief and development organisations will increasingly need, to face the uncertainties caused by climate change. The challenge is to make these global public goods rather than purely commercial products, as at present.

INGOs may therefore need to become bolder in their relationships with the private sector. We are entering a new period in which 'hybrid advocacy' will become increasingly urgent: in which INGOs will need to work both to hold the private sector accountable in relation to sustainability, and to collaborate with the private sector in areas where collaboration is necessary. This will require considerable agility on the part of INGOs: knowing when to partner and when to critique, which private sector organisations to team up with and which to call out, and how to nudge private sector investment in the right direction, to make it more sustainable. This all needs to be done at speed.

INGOs have a role in holding governments and the private sector to account regarding the sustainability of their practices. There will be a role for more specialised NGOs in this task: contributing to an informed, NGO-led watching of individual industry sectors, for example, in which their environmental records are scrutinised and analysed, with NGOs' findings then being taken up more widely.

Unlike some of the other external challenges facing INGOs, climate change is an existential threat to all of us, the global North as well as the global South. While it is likely to exacerbate economic divisions, with the poorest countries suffering most, this is a truly global crisis, in which it is in the interests of everyone to act together. INGOs have a vital role to play in bringing the world to this realisation, and in educating people in general (and more specifically their donor publics) regarding the likely consequences of climate change.

INGOs will also have a role in enabling affected communities to speak on their own behalf. To this end, they will need to work with these communities, and be prepared to 'blow the whistle hard' on potentially imminent future disruptions: health systems that are not suited to extreme heat, disrupted energy supplies, or social upheaval from population displacements.

In all the above, the quality of the analysis, communication, and engagement will be vital. INGOs need to build on their strong track record of campaigns in which positive agendas with clear messages have had a dramatic impact.

Finally, INGOs must not overlook the environmental impact of their own activities. Their own programming can contribute to the problem. Yet at present not all INGOs have climate plans, or the kind of sustainability targets that can be found in comparable organisations.

"Scandals such as that around safeguarding can tank public support. INGOs need to be at least as good as other organisations, and that includes on climate change. But as a sector, have we embraced that?" – Rachel Kyte, *Dean and Professor of the Practice of Sustainable Development at Tufts University*

At the same time as they are beset by a host of external challenges – from a shifting geopolitical landscape to the impacts of new technology and the rise of new social movements – INGOs also face challenges that are internal to their organisations, and to their sector. These internal challenges affect the ability of INGOs to act effectively, to respond to the external situation that confronts them. For many INGOs, there is also a danger that an excessive preoccupation with internal issues may distract them from the external challenges that they face, causing them to face inwards at a time when they most need to focus on the changing world around them.

THE LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Much of our understanding of the internal challenges facing INGOs comes from a major strand of our research programme, which involved a wide-ranging survey of INGO leaders, carried out mainly in 2020. Unprecedented in terms of its scope and depth, it involved more than fifty leaders of diverse INGOs being interviewed at length about the challenges they feel that their organisations face, about how questions of legacy and legitimacy are understood within their organisations, and about how those organisations (and the wider relief and development sector) might look in 2030.

The organisations that these leaders represent vary widely in terms of their histories, their size, and the causes that they campaign, raise funds, and work on behalf of (from health to protecting children and supporting refugees). They include both secular and faith-based INGOs, those specialising in emergency relief, long-term development, or a combination of the two. We do not claim to have been comprehensive, but we consider that together they comprise a good cross-section of the major players, generally based in the global North, that have traditionally dominated the relief and development landscape.

With our interviewees able to explore ideas in-depth and one-to-one, the Leadership Survey is remarkable for the candour of the responses that it received, and for the rich picture it provides of the issues that preoccupy INGO leaders. It gives us an understanding of the challenges that INGO leaders face that come from within their own organisations, and those that come from within the sector more broadly. The full report of the Leadership Survey can be found at: https://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/media/5189/ingos_leadership_report_final_single-pages.pdf

The survey revealed a widespread feeling within the INGO community that this is a period of transition, when INGOs need urgently to find new ways of working in the face of rapid change. Leaders of INGOs recognise that this is a time to reassess their organisations' mixed legacies and their current roles, with questions being raised about their legitimacy, their core identities, their income streams, their relationships with donors and the people they help: in short, their relevance in a fast-changing world.

LOCALISATION

Many INGO leaders describe similar visions for the future of the relief and development sector. They anticipate, and in many cases wish to bring about, a situation in which INGOs from the global North will be less dominant, with some of their power having shifted towards the global South. Leaders of INGOs foresee a situation in which they might work in a more 'localised' way, with partners that are closer to the communities that they are aiming to help. The picture is more one of a network of relationships, rather than a hierarchy.

"There's definitely room for more organisations to be working together. I believe that the time of the very big NGOs is drawing to an end." – INGO leader, Leadership Survey Report

In making this vision a reality, however, leaders of INGOs foresee challenges originating from within their organisations. A vision for 2030 that involves a reduced role for themselves, with fewer 'boots on the ground,' may make for a relief and development sector that is more widely seen as having legitimacy. But this is a more complex narrative for individual INGOs to use in fundraising. What resonates with the donating public is an image of INGOs as having the capacity within themselves to solve the problems they describe. A well-known organisation that promises to distribute its funding through a network of local partners, who may be less well-known and whose capacity and capability may therefore be questionable, may seem like a riskier proposition.²

FUNDING AND GROWTH

Time and again in our Leadership Survey we see this same pattern: leaders of INGOs wanting to take their organisations in a certain direction, but feeling constrained in making the far-reaching changes that they feel are needed.

The desire to safeguard sources of funding represents a major 'internal' constraint in this respect. According to the INGO leaders who we spoke to, 'money' and 'donors' are the two most influential factors that will shape the relief and development ecosystem by 2030. Every INGO is constrained to some extent by the need to access funding, and therefore by the expectations and demands of donors (including donor governments). Across the sector there is strong competition for financial support, while governments' relief and development budgets are coming under growing pressure.

Moreover, many INGOs have become accustomed to the idea not just of treading water financially, but of growing in terms of the financial value of their programmes, or the number of staff members or regional offices. While, in fact, for many INGOs the era of growth is past, a narrative based on the desirability of growth can still be very difficult to counter.

On an individual basis also, INGO leaders who may support the idea of localisation, and understand its importance, may yet be reluctant to be the ones who shrink their organisations: overseeing a reduction in budget, and with it a reduced operational footprint and smaller headcount. Instead, they – and their boards – feel the very understandable desire to stick with their customary KPIs.

"No one wants to be the leader that cuts jobs and shrinks the organisation." – INGO leader, Leadership Survey Report

2. Of course, several high-profile INGOs have been notable in their emphasis on working with local partners.



INGOs HAVE BEEN LED TO ACT IN A CERTAIN WAY IN RESPONSE TO MARKET FORCES."

THE 'HUMANITARIAN MARKETPLACE'

One of the legacy issues that many leaders of INGOs need to face concerns the business models that have evolved within their organisations: in many cases decisions have been made in the past which have taken them in a particular direction, and yet which were in no sense inevitable, or reflections of an INGO's founding purpose and values.

Though there has always been a degree of reticence among INGOs in talking about humanitarian action in terms of marketplace behaviour, in many respects it makes sense to think of INGOs within what is in effect a 'humanitarian marketplace.' INGOs have been led to act in a certain way in response to market forces.


"Like most markets, the humanitarian marketplace is complex – where INGOs engage and compete across various sectors for public voluntary contributions, support and donations from corporate institutions and trusts, and increasing levels of governmental and multilateral funding."

– Angela Penrose, former Director of Policy, Save the Children and Mark Bowden, Senior Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute. Working paper: *The Evolution of the Humanitarian Marketplace & NGO Financing Models*

When sources of funding were plentiful, many major INGOs responded by looking to expand, applying for bigger grants, and increasingly operating internationally through federal structures. The 'commodity' they were trading became the humanitarian project: easily comprehensible and reassuring to donors, and seemingly amenable to oversight and control. Doubts remain, however, over whether the 'projectising' of relief and development in recent decades best serves their intended beneficiaries.

Now, in an environment in which funding is harder to come by, many INGO leaders are left with some of the consequences of the 'humanitarian marketplace,' and the way that their organisations have positioned themselves within it. Many INGOs now have internal infrastructures that can seem bloated, and in many there persists a culture of seeing their peers as competitors, rather than as collaborators.

Yet INGOs do not have to continue acting in this way. These legacy issues do not reflect what many INGOs were set up to be, what they fundamentally are, or what they can be in future.



WHAT CAN INGOs AS A WHOLE DISTINCTIVELY ADD?"

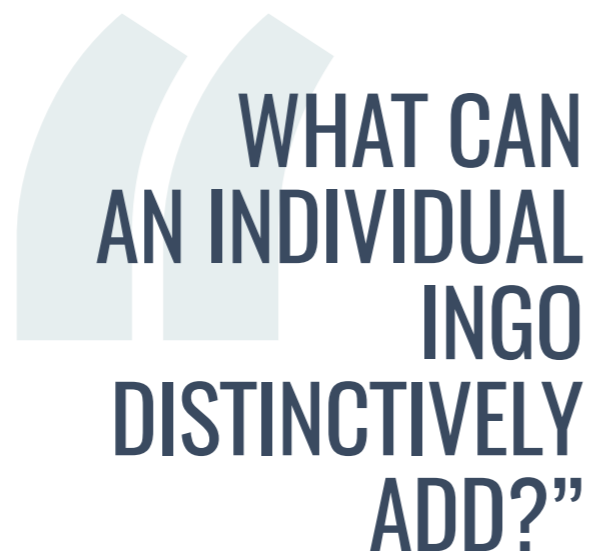
RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT

INGO leaders may also be living with the legacy of decisions made by their predecessors in terms of the positioning of their organisations along the continuum of intervention, from the most urgent of relief operations at one end, to longer-term development at the other. Again, where INGOs have chosen to focus their operations within this relief/development spectrum may have little to do with the integral nature of their organisations.

The logic of organisational growth has led some INGOs to attempt to cover a large part of the spectrum: to be involved both in emergency relief and the much longer-term issue of poverty reduction, for example. There is also a natural logic behind the desire to expand beyond short-term responses to crises: in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's words, 'there comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.'

Yet with recent growth in the numbers and kinds of humanitarian actors, and with funding more difficult to come by, now is a time for INGOs to focus more on their distinctive competencies. That means not just what might distinguish them, in the eyes of donors, from other INGOs: it means being aware of their role within the wider international relief and development system, which includes many other kinds of organisation, including governmental and inter-governmental agencies. What can an individual INGO distinctively add to this? What can INGOs as a whole distinctively add – what might be significant about the 'non' in non-governmental organisation, when it comes to relief and development operations? Are there operations for which INGOs are best equipped, or best suited?

"We may ask, in a world of radical uncertainty vividly illustrated by the Covid crisis for which the world was so poorly prepared: what are the best ways to address the complex challenges of sustainable development and emergency response, and where/ how can INGOs support that? What is it that – in a crowded field – INGOs best and uniquely bring to the increasingly merged challenges of addressing short-term emergencies and ensuring greater long-term resilience and opportunity, in a situation of ever more obvious global vulnerability and interdependency? [...] If they are to continue to be effective in ways that at once maintain their essential purpose (doing good in the world) and make the most of their comparative advantages, what might they need to do more of, do less of, or do differently?" – Mike Aaronson, former CEO, Save the Children UK, and Penelope Brook, formerly with the World Bank Group. Working paper: The Future Role of INGOs: Navigating Uncertainties in the Relief and Development Space.



WHAT CAN
AN INDIVIDUAL
INGO
DISTINCTIVELY
ADD?"

RISK AND COMPLIANCE

If the pursuit of funding is felt by INGO leaders to be one constraining factor, then the demands of institutional compliance and risk management are another. Within the relief and development sector, these demands are felt to be increasing (largely as a result of the 'securitisation' of development since 9/11, and exacerbated by recent scandals that have involved some major INGOs), with compliance looming larger in leaders' minds, and taking up a greater proportion of INGOs' resources, both in terms of their finance and their manpower. Many leaders of INGOs feel that their boards are largely prioritising risk management and compliance over change and innovation.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Many INGO leaders feel that their freedom to act is limited by their organisations' own internal governance structures and in particular the mindset of their boards. Many major INGOs have evolved into highly complex organisations, some with global federated structures: they are difficult to manage, difficult to turn around.

"Most of us INGOs are families and federations of one kind or another. [...] That's quite a challenging model within which to take radical decisions."

– INGO leader, Leadership Survey Report

Many INGO boards are made up of people with business backgrounds, for whom the turnover and growth of an organisation are the natural metrics of its success. This is at odds with other aspirations, for example for INGOs to become smaller while local organisations become larger and more powerful. A lack of diversity is also identified by INGO leaders as being an issue within their governing boards (and indeed, at all levels of leadership within their organisations).

'STUCK'

Faced with these challenges, many INGO leaders express concerns about the ability of their organisations to respond effectively. Many confess that they themselves feel 'stuck' – consumed in the day-to-day, constrained, and absorbed in their organisations' internal dynamics. It is easy to overestimate their own scope to act, they say, given the number of stakeholders that they need to manage (including donors and members of their own boards).

What hope is there then, that INGOs will be able to confront the radical uncertainties that they face in a changing external environment?

"I think that in 2030 we will be more or less at the same place as today. I don't think that ten years is enough timeframe to drastically change."

– INGO leader, Leadership Survey Report

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE SECTOR


The INGOs and the Long Humanitarian Century research programme was structured around the themes of **Legacy**, **Legitimacy**, and **Leading into the Future**.

Our emphasis has been on using history to shed light on the legacy bequeathed to the present leadership of international NGOs. We are living in a period in which many of them are asking whether they can continue in their existing form, but their way of thinking about the world and their place within it is shaped by their own pasts, which is why this historical perspective is so important.

'Legacy' for INGOs means more than just the founding ideas and values that originally led to their creation. It includes also the many 'legacy issues' that every INGO leader needs to grapple with: the cumulative effects of past decisions, of choices made by their predecessors, often years ago. These can include the governance structures that have evolved within their organisations, the sources of their financing and the conditions attached to it, the scope of their operations – both geographically and in terms of the activities that they undertake – and how much they have pursued the goal of growth.

Part of what we have set out to do, through our emphasis on history, is to illuminate the nature of this mixed legacy and make it easier to understand. In doing so, we aim to enable INGO leaders to differentiate between the different kinds of legacy issues. The fact that an INGO has evolved in a certain form may have very little to do with its founding values: it may simply be the consequence of pragmatic decisions that have been made over time. Hence it is possible for INGOs to refocus on their original values and ideals, and still find ways of operating that depart from those they have followed more recently.

We hope that, by creating a space for critical reflection, we have made it easier for INGO leaders to see the costs, as well as the benefits, of some of the decisions that have been made during their organisations' histories. Like the proverbial frog in the pan of water that does not notice as it gradually heats up, changes that affect INGOs can be so gradual as to be almost imperceptible. By providing a historical perspective, we hope that we have enabled INGOs better to perceive the ways in which they, in addition to the environment around them, have changed, and whether – like the frog – they had now better jump before it is too late.



THE SURVIVAL OF INGOs IS NOT AN END IN ITSELF.”

The survival of INGOs is not an end in itself. Throughout our research programme, we have kept in mind the idea that 'the world doesn't owe these organisations a living.' INGOs exist to serve people in need, by mobilising the support of others who want to help: the important question is whether INGOs can continue to play the vital role that they have undoubtedly played over the 'long humanitarian century', in providing emergency aid when it is required, and helping to improve people's lives in the longer term.

This is where the second of our structuring ideas, **Legitimacy**, comes in. The legitimacy of many INGOs has increasingly been questioned, with organisations perceived to have lost some or much of their independence. Being in a more subordinate position with regard to donor governments makes it harder to speak out against policies that they disagree with. This may be partly because INGOs have become too dependent on government funding, with many measuring success by the size of their organisation's programmes. In other cases, INGOs' laudable and understandable attempts to bring together disparate members to become global families have led to serious compromises, especially where some members of those families are dependent on major government donors. Government policy in many western donor countries (including the UK) has also shifted since 9/11, with a greater emphasis on aid as a weapon of national security, and development being seen as motivated less by altruism, and more as a tool of foreign policy.

It seems then as if simply being an INGO no longer confers moral authority. Perhaps, INGOs should never have presumed that they had such authority in the first place: instead they should have been clear about the sources of their legitimacy. Slowly, imperceptibly over the years, some INGOs seem to have lost sight of those sources, to the point where the humanitarianism that they practise has become simply transactional: as if some INGOs have allowed themselves to become mere contractors in relief and development.

We believe that INGOs can and should be much more than this, and that their legitimacy comes ultimately from a strong relationship with their supporters, their local partners, and their beneficiaries. An INGO may have a well-known brand, a large income, high-profile board members and thousands of staff, and yet still not have these kinds of relationship. INGOs need always to be asking themselves 'in whose name are we acting?' They need to be true to the people they are working to help, and to the public to whom they appeal for support.



SOME AREAS OF CHANGE DO NOT APPEAR TO BE RADICALLY NEW.”

What, then, of **Leading into the Future**? A historical perspective shows similarities between the present day and the world that many INGOs were born into, but also profound differences. The view back shows that there was geopolitical upheaval also at the time when many INGOs were formed, and throughout their history – in many cases, even greater political upheaval than there is today. There is also nothing new about INGOs being profoundly affected by changes in technology – for example, developments in the past around transport and communications made possible very different ways of working for INGOs. Social movements, also, are not new: many INGOs, when they began, saw themselves as such.

Some areas of change in today's world do not appear to be drastically new, therefore: the only difference is one of degree. But there is also a sense of a growing pace of change, with the revolution in digital technology in particular causing this acceleration. The social movements of the early 21st century, for example, look different from those of the early 20th, largely because of the greater connectivity and accessibility made possible by the Internet and mobile devices (social media being a powerful means of mobilising opinion); like the famous beer, they can reach parts that more traditional organisations cannot.

Finally with climate change, there seem to be challenges that go beyond what INGOs have faced before, and that are greater than the sector can deal with alone, calling for greater imagination and courage in forging new partnerships. It is possible that we are moving into a world in which 'once-in-a-generation events' happen much more frequently. Radical uncertainty may be the new normal in this regard: we can expect more 'exceptional events' in future. Only with a new humility, coupled with a renewed ambition and a willingness to reach out to new partners and new solutions, can INGOs address this.

VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

While some INGOs have existed for more than a century, it is not a foregone conclusion that they will be with us indefinitely. Their past does not guarantee their future: that is determined by what they do in the present. If these organisations carry on as before, if they do not face up to the challenges that confront them, their role may diminish to the point where they can no longer act in the way that vulnerable people need them to do. They will no longer be useful.

Leaders of INGOs told us that they hoped to see a relief and development sector in which the power dynamics have shifted; one which has become more 'localised.' One in which big INGOs are less dominant, working more through networks than through hierarchical structures, and better able to meet the needs of local communities.

Yet at the same time (and despite being willing to grapple with these issues) INGO leaders spoke of a sense of 'stuckness,' of being hamstrung by the expectations of donors, and by their own internal governance structures. Many therefore did not foresee much concrete change by 2030 – whether in their organisations' use of technology, in the way that they raise funds, or in the overall relief and development system. In relation to the biggest challenge of all – climate change – many felt powerless to act.

This is a depressing prospect: such 'stuckness' cannot continue if INGOs are to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. In particular, the external challenges that these organisations face are serious and wide-ranging, and INGO leaders will be unable to respond to them adequately if they are too much focused on their internal issues. INGOs need to fight for their future – and ours.

INGO leaders now need to take the future of their organisations into their own hands, taking their people with them. The question, fundamentally, is: who do you think you are – and what do you want to be? Do you understand your history and what your organisation originally set out to achieve? Have you remained true to your core values, or have you moved away from them? Are you clear about the basis of your legitimacy, of your reason to exist? Are you able to see yourself as others see you – or if there is a gap, are you clear how you can close it?

It is not possible for any single INGO to do everything, however tempting it may be to try. Individual INGOs may need a sharper sense of their distinctive competencies: how they fit in to the bigger landscape of relief, development, human rights, and global solidarity. This may mean being more modest and realistic about their level of global ambition: of stopping doing some things that they have got used to doing.

Nor is it possible for any INGO to do everything on its own. If INGO leaders feel that the challenges they face are beyond them individually, then the INGO community needs to come together to act collectively. If they feel that they are lacking in new thinking, they need to partner with organisations (whether those are other INGOs, or local actors, or technology specialists) that can provide them with it.

Finally, INGOs need to be shrewder politically if they are to operate effectively. INGOs have always needed to negotiate complex geopolitical environments, but now more than ever these organisations need good political instincts and capabilities. They need to be able to stand up to governments rather than dance to their tune, but they can only do this through diplomacy and influence, rather than by confrontation.



THE QUESTION, FUNDAMENTALLY, IS: WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?”

KEY QUESTIONS

The future of international NGOs requires challenging questions to be answered, and they need to be answered urgently.

FOR INGO EXECUTIVES AND THEIR BOARDS:

- How will you focus your thinking on, and give a greater voice to, all the people within your organisation, as well as the people who your organisation exists to serve? Are you willing to address the unequal power dynamics between men and women, and between international and 'local' actors? Will you allow the latter to have a greater say in setting the agenda, and what mechanisms will you put in place to consolidate a more equal partnership with them?
- How will you help to empower, but if necessary also challenge, host governments to act on their responsibilities towards their own people, and to create an environment where local civil society can flourish and provide support to the population?
- Are you ready to be guided by more than just market forces in determining what activities you should be undertaking and how you are going to measure success? Are you willing to consider indicators of impact that go beyond your organisation's size and growth?
- How will you ensure that your sources of funding allow you to maintain your independence and your resulting ability to challenge at all levels of the international system?
- Which segments of the relief/ development 'continuum' do you seek to occupy, and which are you ready to let go of? Are you willing to concentrate on capacity-strengthening, advocacy, and documentation of evidence of what works, rather than necessarily being involved in operational delivery?
- Are you ready to embrace collaboration to tackle shared challenges? Including with your competitors, both among the INGO community and in emerging areas, e.g. new social movements and social entrepreneurs, or the private sector?
- What message do you want to convey to your core supporters, who contribute to your legitimacy as a civil society organisation within your own country – what do you want them to think you are here to do?

However, if INGOs are to go on contributing to efforts to reduce poverty, end discrimination, and increase global solidarity, it is not just INGOs themselves that need to change – so too do the many institutions, including donor governments, that have a stake in their success.

FOR DONOR GOVERNMENTS:

- If you want INGOs to continue to deliver what they traditionally have delivered, to help you meet your obligations to build a fairer world, are you willing to examine your own practices and how they have changed in recent years?
- In particular, are you courageous enough to accept a greater level of risk when you fund INGOs to work in insecure environments, as opposed to making demands for accountability that force them into risk-management mode and consume a disproportionate amount of their time and effort?
- To underline your commitment to local capacity-building, are you willing to make this a criterion for intermediary organisations that seek access to your funding? Are you ready to accept the added risks of 'letting go' that this may entail? How can you best partner with INGOs to increase local capacity, whether by direct funding of local organisations or by other means?
- Are you ready to support INGOs who wish to pioneer innovative solutions that may fail, and do you value learning from those failures?

FOR UN AGENCIES AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

- Are you willing to work with INGOs to establish who is best placed to deliver what, and on which parts of the relief/ development continuum? How do you see your role in developing meaningful working relationships that reflect INGOs' role as international civil society organisations, and yours as part of the inter-governmental system?
 - Can you take the lead in articulating standards for 'localisation,' that would promote a more inclusive debate and create a yardstick for all involved in relief and development work?
 - Can you help move the debate away from being exclusively about resource transfers, and make it more about creating the conditions for people in local communities to learn and adapt?
-

A RETURN TO VALUES

Now is the time for INGO leaders to refocus on the founding purposes of their organisations, to reassert their ideals and update their missions to take account of present realities, so that they can better meet the needs of the world's most vulnerable people.

They need to shake off their sense of powerlessness. The challenges that they face are real, but looking inwards will not help to address them. Every challenge is also an opportunity, but only by seeing themselves as the outside world sees them will INGOs be able to grasp these opportunities and take advantage of them.

International NGOs need to be clear about who they think they are – what is their purpose and what are their values – and what they want to be in future. Their organisational form, sources of funding, ways of working – these are all of secondary importance, and if necessary can be changed. They are not ends in themselves.

No, the world does not owe these organisations a living. But if they no longer existed, there would be a vital element missing in our system of global governance. With millions of people needing their support today and in the future, the mission of INGOs is too important for them to be allowed to fail.



**INGOs NEED TO SHAKE OFF THEIR
SENSE OF POWERLESSNESS.”**

Authors:

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Oxford, July 2023

Associated papers/ suggested further reading:

“Why localization should and must work: insights from key humanitarian community stakeholders from the global South” (November 2020) Dr James Kisia and Ms Ayan Mahamoud – unpublished Working Paper available at <https://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/media/5568/why-localization-should-and-must-work-insights-from-key-humanitarian-community-stakeholders-from-the-global-south.pdf>

“The Evolution of the Humanitarian Marketplace and NGO Financing Models” (July 2021) Mark Bowden and Angela Penrose – unpublished Working Paper available at <https://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/media/5567/the-evolution-of-the-humanitarian-marketplace-and-ngo-financing-models.pdf>

“The Future Role of INGOs: Navigating Uncertainties in the Relief and Development Space” (Jan 2022) Mike Aaronson and Penelope Brook – unpublished Working Paper available at <https://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/media/5566/navigating-uncertainty-ingos-in-the-relief-and-development-space-18-january-2022.pdf>



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