Effective Humanitarian Governance

Patrick Saez, Jeremy Konyndyk, and Rose Worden

Abstract

This paper argues that humanitarian system reform should extend to governance. Governing institutions—such as member state boards of multilateral organizations, and NGO boards of directors—have tremendous influence over the strategic direction of individual institutions and the sector writ large. But governing bodies of humanitarian organizations and system-wide governance are exclusive, organizing power and influence around a few governments, organizations, and individuals. There are few entry points for aid agencies' downstream clients, or for host governments with the willingness and capacity to take the lead in disaster response. Moving toward a sector where mission effectiveness is measured through partnerships rather than agency capabilities, and outcomes rather than fundraising totals, will depend on governance bodies that promote and monitor those priorities. This will require more direct representation of the views of communities affected by crises in governing bodies, in the relationships between donors and their partners, and in supporting national and local humanitarian governance in countries that have demonstrated their ability to lead the response to disasters impartially. Multistakeholder platforms at the global and country level should be established to align behind common needs assessments and policy directions, and to mobilize and align resources accordingly. Finally, assessing collective effectiveness should become an independent function systematically deployed alongside humanitarian operations, directly informing governing structures, donors, and the public.

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1. Introduction

Humanitarian governance has emerged as a concept relatively recently and has been most comprehensively defined by Barnett in 2013 as relating to "the global emergence of an order geared to improvew people's wellbeing.[1]" In this paper, we focus on a narrower, more organizational definition of governance centered on the structures, incentives and power dynamics that govern humanitarian action. Even at this level, some of Barnett's framing questions are relevant, and answering them can be complex:

- Who governs?
- How is governance organized and accomplished? What are the principal techniques of control?
- By what authority do humanitarians govern and what do they do with that authority?

What has been coined as an international humanitarian system is, in reality, a loosely coordinated sector comprised of UN, Red Cross, and civil society organizations and their donors. They provide protection and assistance to some of the most vulnerable people in situations of conflict and other disasters, in theory when the state is unable or unwilling to do so. It is also an industry worth $25 billion annually, in which the exercise of power and influence is shaped by discretionary resource flows and diplomatic weight. While the range of humanitarian activities—from human rights monitoring to supplementary feeding—is as broad as the type of organizations that populate the "system," shared norms, principles, and standards provide a common guide as to *how* humanitarian aid should be implemented.

One of those fundamental principles is that humanitarian aid should be provided solely based on people's needs. Yet the power to define and prioritize humanitarian needs, and to assess the performance of the humanitarian response, lies primarily with the institutions providing those services and their financiers, rather than the clients they exist to serve. The sector has long acknowledged this contradiction in principle, while failing to rectify it in practice. At its root is a governance problem: the way power and influence are exercised in the sector eludes accountability to its clients.

The structures that govern humanitarian aid differ greatly from the public or commercial sectors, both of which have direct (if imperfect) means of aligning governance with accountability to citizens and clients. In democratic political systems, citizens bring governments to account through their votes, an independent judicial system, or the media. In the private sector, a business must remain attuned to its clients' preferences if it hopes to remain profitable. In the humanitarian sector, neither condition applies. Populations in crises have only as much influence over the services they receive from the humanitarian system as is permitted by the organizations providing them.

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[1] Barnett, "Humanitarian Governance."

The ultimate custodians of humanitarian organizations are their governing boards. These are typically composed of states representing their own interests (in the case of multilateral organizations) or of individuals often far removed from communities in crisis (in the case of non-governmental organizations). Because the system is almost exclusively financed through voluntary contributions, the priorities of donors often take precedence. To the extent that humanitarians have sought to address this, the solutions have been atomized and technical—more focused on building project-level feedback systems than truly rethinking systemic power and accountability.

Meanwhile, the exercise of power in the sector is not simply imbalanced; it is also fragmented in ways that impede system-level accountability. Each organization is accountable to its own governing body, with little to no systemic connectivity or common purpose between those bodies. As we have written previously, donors use the multilateral system to implement bilateral priorities through the dominant use of earmarked grants to large agencies, rather than core funding or pooled funds, limiting incentives for coherence.[2]

Therefore, can humanitarian governance mechanisms, as presently designed, faithfully govern and assess the effectiveness of the humanitarian mission? Humanitarian reform efforts have left governance structures effectively untouched. That should now change. Accountability and effectiveness cannot be divorced from the fundamental questions of "accountability to whom?" and "effectiveness according to whom?" The sector must begin a serious effort to explore how its governance structures contribute to its problems and move towards governance models that prioritize accountability to people in crises.

The humanitarian governance models of the future should be **representative** of the views of people the sector serves; as **nationally and locally led** as possible**; inclusive** of all relevant constituents contributing to addressing humanitarian needs; **accountable** for the achievement of humanitarian outcomes. The paper explores how the sector is currently governed, outline the shortcoming in existing governance practices, and suggest initial principles for improving institutional and collective governance.

This paper is informed by a review of relevant literature; a thematic expert workshop; a review of board membership data and governance models from 10 leading humanitarian NGOs and 9 multilateral organizations. It uses information gathered during key informant interviews and a series of roundtables with senior leaders from the donor and aid agency communities convened by CGD as part of its Rethinking Humanitarian Reform project.

2. Why is governance important in the humanitarian sector?

Formal governance structures in the humanitarian system have critical roles to play in shaping humanitarian action. Governing boards steer humanitarian organizations' strategies. They help generate political and financial support for these strategies and provide oversight and accountability for how the organization performs against its strategic objectives. They

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[2] Saez, Konyndyk, and Worden, "Financing the Humanitarian Public Good: Towards a More Effective Humanitarian Financing Model."

take over leadership when organizations face institutional crises, failures in executive leadership, or executive transitions. Hereafter, we focus on the role of governing boards in steering organizational strategies, which forms the basis for effective governance.

What constitutes a good strategy? How is good performance—or failure—defined? Adapting Moore's concept of Public Value for the nonprofit sector,[3] we outline three dimensions using the 'strategic triangle' (Figure 1). Humanitarian governance structures should pay attention to each of these three dimensions, and, importantly, how they align with each other.

Figure 1. The Public Value Scorecard, Moore.
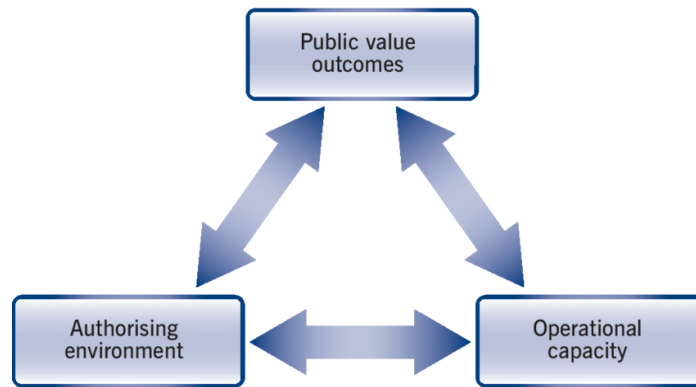
Source: Moore, 1995

Public Value Outcomes—or Mission—focus on the key question of what constitutes the value that the organization aims to produce. In the business world, that value would usually be measured in financial terms: shareholder wealth or sustained profitability. For humanitarian organizations, this should relate to the benefits they bring to vulnerable people in crises. Because of their varied origins and identities, different organizations in the system will have different ways to define and measure their value. The mission of UN agencies will often be defined by an international legal mandate circumscribed to particular situations (e.g., armed conflicts), populations groups (e.g., refugees, children), or sector (e.g. food assistance). Some organizations will limit their mission to providing relief, whereas others will seek to affect the broader environment; some will deliberately operate outside of state structures, others will engage with the latter. Governance structures will have a role in putting limits around the scope of the mission, and importantly in ensuring that an organization's actual impact aligns with the stated mission.

Authorizing Environment focuses on **Legitimacy and Support**, particularly in terms of political, social, and financial support. While the legitimacy of businesses comes from customers buying their products or services, humanitarian organizations are not paid by the people they serve. Because they rely on voluntary donations from the public or grants from donor governments, they have to dedicate significant attention to these "upstream clients,"

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[3] Moore, "The Public Value Scorecard."

meeting their needs and contributing to their objectives. A recent CGD paper[4] describes the relationship of co-dependence between donor governments and humanitarian agencies. Legitimacy cannot be assumed based solely on the formulation of a humanitarian mandate or mission. Governance structures will need to make sure that a "license to operate," evidenced by political and financial support, is maintained.

Operational Capacity focuses on the ability to produce the desired value. This should not only be equated to an organization's own capability—no humanitarian organization is large enough to achieve its goals on its own. Most of the time, they rely to a large extent on the activities of others. Governance structures should play an important role in defining how an organization relates to other entities: should they treat them as sub-contractors, partners, collaborators, or co-producers of value? How much of its resources should be dedicated to building its own capability as opposed to leveraging the capacity of others?

Conversations on humanitarian reform have not focused nearly enough on how governance choices implicitly, but forcefully, shape humanitarian outcomes. Humanitarian aid is usually not channeled through state systems. Where governmental systems of checks and balances exist to bring the state to account, those cannot usually be used in the context of humanitarian aid. Those who pay for humanitarian aid are a handful of donor governments ultimately accountable to their own lawmakers and taxpayers, not people in crises. The interests of the latter are therefore mediated by the organizations that form the system. Unlike profitability for businesses, there is no single measure of humanitarian effectiveness agreed across the system. The remit of humanitarian governance bodies, and the identities, competencies, and life experiences of those who serve on them, are highly influential in shaping different institutions' interpretations of mission effectiveness.

How an organization's board and leadership define mission effectiveness can have profound implications for organizational culture and performance. Humanitarian organizations usually have mission statements focused on outcomes for the group of people the organization serves. However, in a sector where both multilateral and non-governmental organizations rely almost exclusively on voluntary donations, mission effectiveness often entails a heavy emphasis on budgetary size and growth, a common performance metric for aid agency leaders.

Jonathan Glennie, former policy lead at Save the Children UK, has written eloquently about the perverse impacts created when that organization's leadership pursued a vision of out-fundraising major peer organizations:[5] "Growth and influence are not goals in themselves, certainly not in charities. If you have lost your moral compass, your growth and influence are built on very shaky foundations." Glennie argues that the scandals that subsequently consumed Save The Children's UK's leadership and led to the resignation of its board chair flowed in large measure from this skewed interpretation of mission effectiveness.

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[4] Saez et al., "Improving Performance in the Multilateral Humanitarian System."
[5] Glennie, "At What Cost?"

3. Who governs? How is governance structured and exercised?

At the organizational level

The effectiveness of governance mechanisms in the humanitarian sector is inherently complicated due to the heterogeneity of organizations: from UN agencies to non-UN international organizations of the Red Cross Movement to international NGOs. The humanitarian architecture is a product of the varied histories of a large and diverse set of individual institutions, rather than a consciously designed system. Major institutions within the sector trace their histories back to international legal instruments (UNHCR, ICRC, IOM); voluntary civil society movements (MSF, Oxfam, and most other NGOs); and a variety of other points of origin (WFP began its life as an FAO initiative to redistribute rich countries' excess food production). Most humanitarian organizations are principally governed by their own respective bodies—a board of directors or trustees for an NGO, a group of member states for most multilateral institutions. These governing bodies focus exclusively on the individual organization and hold little or no explicit responsibility for the organization's role and effectiveness within the larger humanitarian sector.

Individual **NGO governing bodies** vary widely in quality, structure, and representation, but typically reflect the interests of the institution's funders and supporters rather than its downstream clients. As part of our research into humanitarian governance, we conducted a deep dive into the governing board composition of prominent international humanitarian NGOs to analyze which competencies, and whose voices, were involved in the oversight of these institutions.[6] We analyzed board member backgrounds according to the following competencies: fundraising, policy influence, financial management and administration, non-profit leadership and management, and aid subject matter expertise. Board members could be categorized as having however many categories of expertise for which they met the criteria.[7] Our findings for the NGOs reviewed show notable homogeneity in board configurations and a few themes emerge. The heaviest concentrations of competencies are in the fundraising and financial/administrative management categories, which were clear areas of emphasis for nearly every organization. Beyond those two categories, the picture was more varied. Political influence, aid subject matter expertise, and non-profit management expertise were priorities for some individual organizations, but not consistently for the sector writ large.

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[6] Worden and Saez, "Decolonizing the Humanitarian Nonprofit Sector."

[7] See here for the research methodology https://www.cgdev.org/publication/Shifting-Power-in-Humanitarian-Nonprofits-A-Review-of-15-NGO-Governing-Boards

Figure 2. Averaged percentages of each competency across 15 governing boards

Average competencies across 15 governing boards
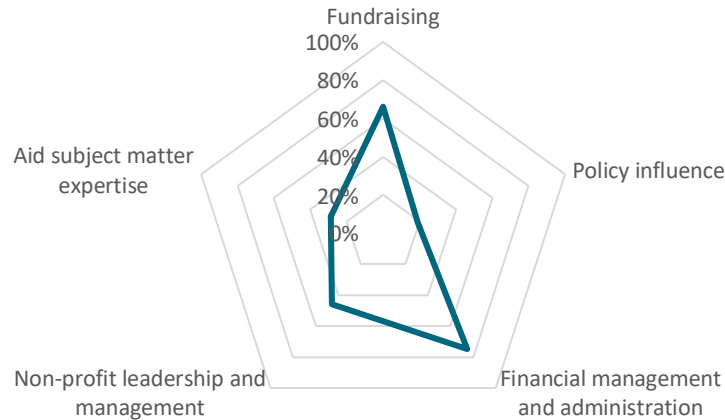
There is no single optimal balance of competencies that every NGO board should seek to emulate. Each organization must select board members based on the organization's priorities. But NGOs should also embrace the idea that board composition also implicitly *reveals* their organizational priorities. Overall, NGO boards are best equipped in areas that help promote their organizations, and least equipped to oversee the difficult and subjective, but essential, issues of mission impact. Oversight focuses more on financial and administrative matters—how much money is coming in and can the organization's spending of that money pass muster on annual audits. A board member who has in the past managed a corporation or led financial audits will be well positioned to know which rocks to turn over and which questions to ask in their board oversight role. But far more rarely do boards have a critical mass of members who can apply that same level of expert scrutiny to areas beyond the organization's financial health. We found few organizations whose boards contained a critical mass of experts and practitioners in the organizations' own core business of relief and development programming. This means fewer people who know which hard questions to ask, or even know how to critically evaluate whether an organization's core work is effectively addressing its stated mission.

Organizations of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the ICRC, national societies and the IFRC) have mandates based in International Humanitarian Law but are entities independent of states. The ICRC is a private Swiss organization whose board is composed solely of Swiss citizens. New members are co-opted by the existing board. National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies are often governed like NGOs but might sometimes operate with a special legal basis at the national level because of their quality of auxiliaries to the state. The Movement meets with states party to the Geneva Conventions on a quadrennial basis to adopt joint resolutions.

UN agencies engaged in humanitarian activities are either funds and programs and similar entities (e.g. UNICEF, WFP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNRWA) governed by a subset of the General Assembly and ECOSOC membership, or specialized agencies (e.g. WHO, FAO), which are legally autonomous organizations with autonomous governance organs—such as the World Health Assembly or the FAO Council. The governing boards of these organizations are responsible for providing oversight and general policy guidance, and ensuring they are responsive to needs in recipient member states. Importantly, they provide political support for the activities of each agency (see multilateral board descriptions at Annex X).

In a system composed of state representatives, there is no mechanism for direct representation of the downstream clients of these organizations, although some bodies include ECOSOC-approved NGOs as observers only. State members of the board are elected by ECOSOC (or the sue generis council), paying attention in principle to equitable representation of geographical groups and with limits placed on permanent members of the Security Council playing central governance roles. In practice, the weight of each grouping is distorted, with the Western European group often overrepresented, as illustrated in the table below for the boards of the three largest UN humanitarian agencies:

Table 1. UN Regional Country Groupings and their Representation in UN agencies

Regional grouping	Countries	UN membership	UN agencies	Average regional representation on governing boards
African Group	54	28%	WFP	21%
			UNHCR	31%
			UNICEF	22%
Asia-Pacific Group	54	28%	WFP	21%
			UNHCR	14%
			UNICEF	19%
Eastern European Group	23	12%	WFP	9%
			UNHCR	19%
			UNICEF	11%
Latin American and Caribbean Group	33	17%	WFP	18%
			UNHCR	11%
			UNICEF	14%
Western European and Other States	29	15%	WFP	32%
			UNHCR	24%
			UNICEF	33%
Total	193	100%		

Decisions are usually taken by consensus. The democratic system of UN boards (one state = one vote) is notable but does not reflect the true influence of different member states over each organization. The almost totality of funding is provided through voluntary rather than assessed contributions, and there is no direct correlation between membership of the executive board and levels of contribution. Moreover, as we have highlighted in a previous paper,[8] the vast majority of these contributions are earmarked to some extent rather than core, significantly weakening the oversight role of these governing bodies because they have effectively no control over the allocation of resources.

Figure 3. Unearmarked funding as a percentage of total humanitarian funding

unearmarked funding   2016−2020

19%	18%	17%	14%	17%
2016	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**
US$2.8bn	US$2.8bn	US$2.9bn	US$2.6bn	US$3.3bn
US$11.9bn	US$12.6bn	US$13.9bn	US$15.7bn	US$16.8bn

○ unearmarked funding as % of total   ■ unearmarked funding   ■ earmarked funding
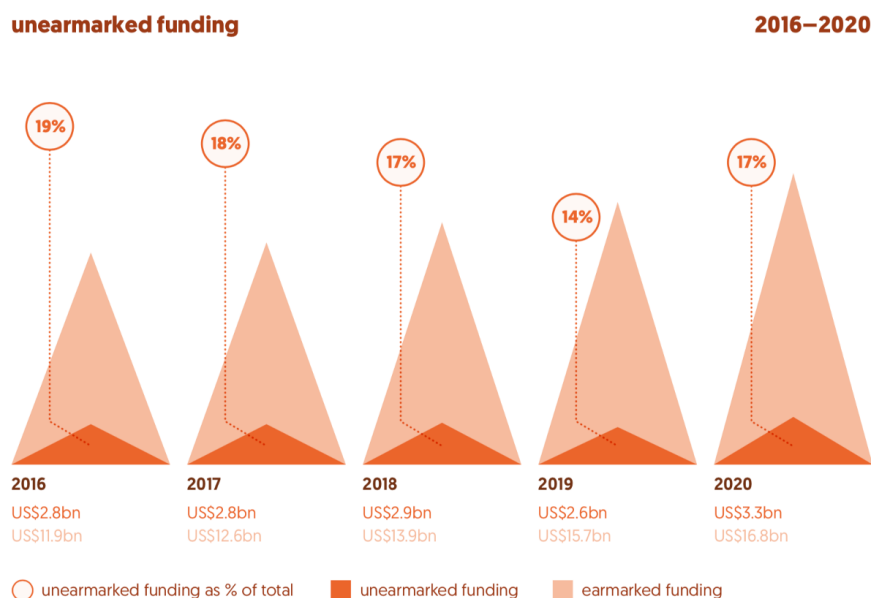
Source: Development Initiatives, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2021

Humanitarian governance—the structures and incentives that shape the exercise of power and influence in the sector—is not just a matter of formal governing bodies. It is also shaped **by informal networks and relationships**, both within and outside of formal structures. These create a very real, but hidden, barrier to greater power and influence for marginalized voices in the sector. This observation came through clearly in an expert workshop convened by CGD, where participants noted that humanitarian governance is a "negotiated process" between different powerful actors in the sector, and that those negotiations happen both inside and outside of formal governance structures.

This theme emerged in CGD's donor interviews as well. In a sector dominated by discretionary bilateral grants, relationships and institutional history with longstanding partners exert a strong pull over donor decision-making. These relationships, both individual and institutional, are densest between donors and large aid agencies, particularly large multilateral organizations. In another paper, we have referred to these powerful dynamics as

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[8] Saez, Konyndyk, and Worden, "Financing the Humanitarian Public Good: Towards a More Effective Humanitarian Financing Model."

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a "political economy of co-dependence."[9] Donors have described to us how they engage in formal governance mechanisms, but do not expect to exert meaningful oversight over the performance of agencies though them. Instead, they establish performance frameworks—often linked to their own policy priorities—and strategic 'dialogues' with their main partners. Conversely, agencies give privileged access to their leadership to their main donors through "donor support groups."

In addition, donors and other powerful states seek to influence the selection and re-election of agency chief executives. Ensuring candidates they put forward are selected is often part of the political bargaining process that characterizes many leadership appointments in the multilateral system. The top executives of WFP and UNICEF, and the Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees have traditionally been American. The US is the top donor to these three largest UN agencies, providing over 40 percent of funding in the case of WFP and UNHCR.

Table 2. UN agency leadership election and appointment practices

Contested, open elections by Member States	Consensus-based process or appointed directly by SG
1. FAO	1. UN OCHA
2. IOM	2. UNFPA
3. WHO	3. UNICEF
	4. UNHCR
	5. UNRWA
	6. WFP

At the system-wide level

Globally, the humanitarian governance architecture is considerably less robust at a system-wide level than for individual aid agencies. The global humanitarian sector is often referred to informally as a "system," but in fact there is little formal connectivity between its constituent parts. The sector has grown exponentially in recent decades and today it is a crowded and competitive field, comprising over 4,500 known organizations employing tens of thousands of aid workers.

Governing bodies of UN agencies operate in almost isolation from each other. Since 1998, the executive boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, WFP, and now UN-Women, have convened an informal joint meeting of the boards once a year to discuss selected priority issues of common concern, but under a development rather than humanitarian banner. The Red Cross Movement and the World Bank group are also governed independently outside the UN's umbrella—as are humanitarian NGOs. The movement toward something resembling a more cohesive collective—or even a system—was a relatively recent development. To a large extent, that collective has been shaped over the

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[9] Saez et al., "Improving Performance in the Multilateral Humanitarian System."

years through attempts to address shared failures in governance when responding to major humanitarian disasters. The most significant initiatives date back from the 1990s, following the proliferation of humanitarian organizations in the 1980s.

A large part of those efforts focused on self-regulation through the adoption of common norms and standards and the formation of voluntary alliances around them. Concerns about poor coordination and overall quality in the response to the conflict in (South) Sudan led to the first Red Cross Code of Conduct,[10] rooted in the principle of Do No Harm. The damning Joint Evaluation of Emergency Response to Rwanda[11] in the aftermath of the genocide gave impetus to the Sphere technical standards,[12] People in Aid standards for managing aid workers and the Humanitarian Accountability Standard. The latter two evolved into the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) in 2014, signed-up to mainly by NGO and the Red Cross organizations, but not the main UN agencies. An independent auditor, the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI) was created in 2015 to verify adherence to the CHS.

In parallel, changes to the international humanitarian architecture attempted to fill governance gaps left apparent by failures in international responses to major crises. While reaffirming the primary responsibility of states to respond to emergencies, UNGA Resolution 46/182 consolidated in 1991 the role of the UN in leading and coordinating international humanitarian assistance, through the role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the creation of OCHA and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), made up of the main UN agencies with Red Cross, World Bank, and NGO standing invitees. At the country level, the IASC is replicated as Humanitarian Country Teams. Donors and host governments, while they are members of the UN and its agencies, are not members of the IASC. They have effectively delegate system-wide coordination to a mechanism that is not accountable to them.

The IASC conceptualizes and coordinates the response to humanitarian crises as a specialized, ring-fenced activity, with the UN-led formal international humanitarian system at its center. It has become the only body where system-wide strategic and operational decisions are made and collective normative guidance is issued. The IASC is chaired by the ERC and head of OCHA who reports to the Secretary General and is in turn accountable to the Security Council and General Assembly. However, there is no formal authority of the ERC over the individual agencies. Each humanitarian institution is narrowly accountable to its own individual governance mechanism, but nowhere do these accountability structures converge. The IASC is a voluntary inter-agency body that operates by consensus and is not formally accountable upwards to the governing bodies of UN agencies, or downwards to affected countries or recipients of humanitarian aid.

Following failures in the response to the conflict in Darfur and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 Humanitarian Reform Agenda resulted in changes to IASC leadership,

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[10] IFRC, "Code of Conduct."
[11] Borton, "Joint Evaluation of Assistance to Rwanda."
[12] Sphere, "The Sphere Handbook | Standards for Quality Humanitarian Response."

coordination, and financing mechanisms. The "clusters" were created, giving sectoral leadership and coordination responsibilities to the main UN agencies. The IASC also designates Humanitarian Coordinators and guides the country-level planning process and appeals, influencing the allocation of funding from UN-managed pooled funds at the global and country level (the CERF and CBPFs). Further failures of this better coordinated approach in response to the Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods of 2011, led to a "Transformative Agenda" being launched. Its aim was to clarify leadership and protocols in case of large rapid-onset emergencies, and improvements in how the IASC responds to this type of crises were made.

At the political level, ECOSOC has an annual Humanitarian Affairs Segment which provides the only forum for system-wide policy discussions on humanitarian issues. The annual ECOSOC Resolution on humanitarian coordination, as well as the General Assembly's annual "omnibus" resolution, provides an overall policy direction, but they are approved by consensus amongst all member states. The result has often been regulation based on the lowest common denominator. Importantly, resolutions are not legally binding on states and there is no mechanism to hold individual boards of agencies, or the IASC, accountable for implementing those policies. The accountability of UN, NGO and Red Cross organizations continue to be to their individual governing boards.

The incentives necessary to deliver collective action—shared objectives, shared accountability, shared systems—run headlong into siloed governance architectures that makes it difficult to ensure accountability for system-wide outcomes. As a result, there is a failure to address critical coordination gaps. Refugee responses continue to be led and coordinated separately by UNHCR, as is its mandate. There is still confusion as to who should lead the response to IDPs. And the growing multi-sector and non-sector (e.g., cash) response modalities do not fit under any of the individual agencies' cluster leadership roles, who coordinates cash programs at the country level has not been decided despite pleas from donors and NGOs.[13]

In fact, inter-agency mechanisms might have led to a consolidation of the dominance of the largest UN agencies and NGOs—what has been referred to as a "club"[14] or an "oligopoly."[15] Like donors effectively dominate the governance of large agencies, so these agencies dominate system-wide coordination structures. The combination of operational and sectoral coordination roles, and their privileged relationships with donor governments, allow a handful of agencies to dictate the rules of the collective. This is manifest in how much funding is channeled through them compared with multi-sectoral funds,[16] the difficulty for new entrants to join the "club" and the prioritization of individual agency objectives over collective outcomes.

[13] The Cash Learning Partnership, "95 Organisations Sign Letter Calling for Strengthened Cash Coordination | Cash Learning Partnership."

[14] Kreienkamp, "The Humanitarian Club."

[15] Collinson et al., *Humanitarian Space.*

[16] Saez, Konyndyk, and Worden, "Financing the Humanitarian Public Good: Towards a More Effective Humanitarian Financing Model."

**Figure 4. Proportional Funding of the UN-led Humanitarian System
by agency and organization type (2020)**

■ UN entities	■ Governments	■ RCRC
■ INGOs	■ Others	
■ L/NNGOs	■ details not yet provided	
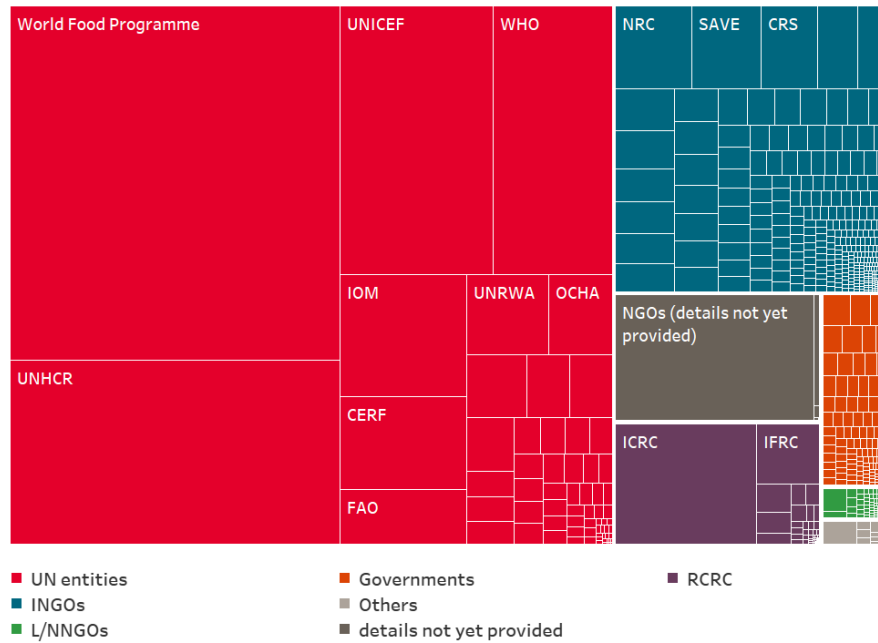
In country, IASC structures are often rolled-out using a one-size fits all approach, with the appointment of a UN Humanitarian Coordinator (usually the Resident Coordinator) and the roll-out of the clusters, mainly at the capital level. Most of the discourse on humanitarian governance mechanisms assumes that humanitarian action is governed by international humanitarian agencies through these structures. This is in contradiction with the theory and is increasingly challenged through practice. The normative basis for UN-led humanitarian coordination structures insists on state responsibility and sovereignty: it is first and foremost the responsibility of the affected state to respond to humanitarian needs on its territory, and to request international assistance or not. Most governments do respond to humanitarian emergencies on their territory. However, that domestic response has in the past often been discounted and underreported.

Governments have a central role in managing the response to emergencies. Disaster management legislation should provide a framework for the distribution of responsibilities between national institutions, and between the national and sub-national levels. A national disaster management authority (NDMAs) should coordinate disaster management policy and operations among all relevant governmental—including the military—and non-governmental actors, and with international humanitarian organizations. According to the Index for Risk Management (INFORM), an increasing number of countries at risk of disasters have established NDMAs.

Who actually governs a country level humanitarian response is ultimately a negotiated process between the government, international actors, and affected communities. It often depends on the assertiveness and capacity of the state, and civil society pressure, particularly in the aftermath of large-scale disasters. Examples of governments asserting more control over national response to recurring natural disasters include India, Mozambique, El Salvador, and the Philippines.[17] The Indonesian government asserted its sole leadership over the response to the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake.[18] Some governments of countries at risk are devoting increasing domestic resources to humanitarian financing through set budget allocations, the use of budget surpluses, and sovereign insurance. They also count on increasing levels of resources through remittances from diaspora, or private donations, for example Islamic social financing.[19]

Where they have been evaluated, state-led responses from governments with sufficient willingness and capacity to respond have been found to be more effective than those led by international actors.[20] They have enabled stronger links with development activities and increased government accountability. However, as mentioned above, the international humanitarian system often struggles to work effectively with national and sub-national authorities. This is often due to a mutual lack of trust, or because some governments are reluctant to meet their obligations. For instance, governments might be slow—for political reasons—to declare an emergency. And in situations of conflict, they may be one of the drivers of the humanitarian crisis and be unable or unwilling to provide protection and assistance impartially.

4. What might a more effective humanitarian governance landscape look like?

Effective humanitarian governance faces major structural challenges: a mission-driven culture with limited formal influence of clients/customers, extensive informal *de facto* governance, and a high degree of institutional heterogeneity and fragmentation. Humanitarian governing boards are more heavily geared toward fundraising and due diligence; substantially less so toward oversight of mission effectiveness and system-wide coherence. Existing structures tend to approach governance narrowly, focusing on individual institutions on their own terms rather than their role and impact within the larger ecosystem. This approach impedes the mobilization of high-level political and financial support because it turns humanitarian policy issues into technical, parochial matters dealt with in disparate institutional silos rather than systemic problems relevant to high level policymakers.

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[17] Harvey, "Towards Good Humanitarian Government." p. 41; Harkey, "Experiences of National Governments in Expanding Their Role in Humanitarian Preparedness and Response." p. 6

[18] Humanitarian Advisory Group, "Charting the New Norm? Local Leadership in the First 100 Days of the Sulawesi Earthquake Response."

[19] Willitts-King and John Bryant, "The Tip of the Iceberg?"

[20] Paul Knox-Clarke and Alice Obrecht, "Global Forum Briefing Paper 4."; James, "Why Can't Booming Ethiopia Handle This Year's Drought?"

Governance structures should evolve to intentionally address these challenges. Their shape should enable more effective oversight and their focus should be modified to address power inequality and fragmentation. Using again Moore's strategic triangle as a framework, this would mean that:

- **Public Value Outcomes or Mission** should be defined and measured not in financial terms but in the difference made to the lives of affected communities. Mission effectiveness should not be solely measured by satisfaction of 'upstream' clients (donors, member states), but much more by the satisfaction of 'downstream' clients: affected communities. It should also not be limited to the specific mandate or mission of individual organizations, but also include their contribution to the collective achievement of humanitarian outcomes and to system-wide changes required to improve those outcomes.

- **The Authorizing Environment (legitimacy and support)** should be assessed in terms of the ability of humanitarian organizations to mobilize adequate and appropriate financial resources, as well as political support for their mission and that of the system. Importantly, it should also include the ability to generate political will to drive a meaningful agenda for change.

- **Operational capacity,** the ability of international humanitarian organizations, and the system as a whole, to achieve humanitarian goals should not only focus on the capability of individual organizations, but also the capacity of each organization to work collaboratively with others, as well as the collective ability to leverage relevant international, national and local capacities that contribute to humanitarian outcomes.

To evolve in that direction, adjustments will be needed to address four imperatives. Humanitarian governance structures must:

1. Better represent the views of affected populations,
2. Support national and local governance where possible,
3. Enable collaboration, and
4. Enhance accountability.

4.a. Better representing the views of affected populations

In formal governance mechanisms:

As part of our research on NGO boards, we assessed the gender, ethnicity, and geographic diversity of board members. Some explanations for how these demographic characteristics are distributed on boards may be found in organizations' bylaws and cooperative agreements. Here are some examples of what we found:[21]

- Plan International's global board had the highest percentage of board members from aid-eligible countries and among the second-highest percentage of non-white

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[21] Worden and Saez, "Decolonizing the Humanitarian Nonprofit Sector."

board members of those we reviewed. Its bylaws required that the board meet specific criteria agreed by its members assembly, for gender, geographical, ethnic, cultural, and age diversity.

- As part of the Caritas Internationalis confederation of Catholic NGOs, just over fifty percent of Catholic Relief Services' board members come from US bishop conferences. This could constrain representation in categories such as gender and aid subject matter expertise, of which CRS had the lowest percentage among the group.

- ActionAid USA had the highest percentage of non-white board members at 80 percent, and among the highest percentage of non-male board members at 60 percent. ActionAid member organizations follow the principles of "feminist leadership" to dismantle patriarchy; the international board holds management accountable to implement the approach and assists national boards to integrate the principles into board development and governance practices.

We also sought to identify whether NGO boards members had, themselves, lived experience as disaster survivors—e.g. as the kinds of people served by the organizations they were governing. Most boards did not include this type of representation. Only three NGOs met this criterion at all accounting for about two percent of the board members. This is highly consequential as the aid sector confronts its own structural biases considering the global resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some scholars have referred to this phenomenon as the "white gaze" or the "foreign gaze"—the observation that the frames through which the sector tends to characterize and debate humanitarian challenges are almost exclusively from an outside perspective, with the crisis-affected people serving as the objects of the story and external (predominantly white) humanitarian workers functioning as the agents. Our analysis indicates that the white and/or foreign gaze appears to be hard-wired wired into how major humanitarian institutions are governed. Those compositional biases are likely to shape how an organization defines its mission and assesses its corporate success in achieving that mission.

Figure 5. Averaged percentages of each characteristic across 15 governing boards
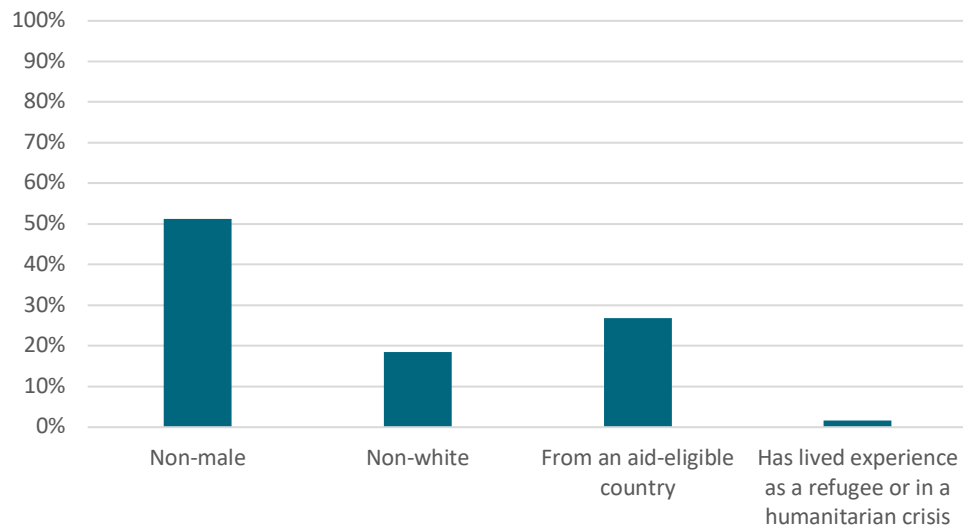
Our discussions with NGO executives about the composition of their boards largely recognized and confirmed the validity of these concerns. Most NGOs are working to diversify their board membership, albeit with differing levels of urgency. But they also cited several structural impediments to this; the lack of time availability creates a challenge for bringing on younger board members, and disparate time zones—relevant when considering how to coordinate board meetings—are a barrier to geographically diversifying. Some NGOs were incorporating new considerations for diversity as board members naturally turned over, making it an incremental process due to the relatively long tenures of some boards' membership. These are not easy issues, and they can only be resolved with consistent commitment over time. But it seems clear that the NGO sector must be more intentional about building boards that can truly represent and govern all dimensions of an organization's humanitarian mission, both in terms of engaging relevant competencies, and in terms of incorporating a range of diverse voices and perspectives.

Events in 2020 put a renewed, and overdue, spotlight on diversity and inclusion failings in the humanitarian sector. As humanitarians work to rectify a long history of exclusivity and skewed power dynamics within the sector, governing bodies must be a central part of the conversation. As CGD research on NGO board composition has shown, the governing bodies of many of the largest humanitarian NGOs remain strikingly monochrome and exclusive.[22] This is an obvious ethical failing, but it is also a substantive one. The custodians of humanitarian mission effectiveness must have an ability to understand what that mission means to and for the people it is ultimately meant to serve.

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[22] Worden and Saez.

Possible steps to start addressing this include:

- As was proposed in a 2019 CGD policy paper on People-Driven Response, NGO boards should adopt a best practice standard that at minimum 10 percent of their board members are nationals of crisis-affected countries in which the organization works, and/or are themselves current or former aid recipients.[23]

- NGOs should also adopt explicit commitments to demographic and life experience diversity among board members. This should be backed by transparent reporting of board demographics. Facilitating board diversity will also entail steps to remove practical and material impediments to inclusion of a wider pool of potential board members. Steps could include actively recruiting for a wider range of desired skillsets; providing financial support to compensate for the time commitment of board members who lack the personal wealth to contribute pro bono board service; removing expectations that board members will be major donors; and recruiting members outside of the CEO's personal and professional networks by publicly advertising board vacancies. For example, Doctors of the world UK recently advertised a Trustee position, specifying they were actively "looking for people with lived experience of migration or exclusion from health services."[24]

- As also argued in our People-Driven Response paper, substantive and structured oversight of how aid clients evaluate the aid agency's work should be a standing element of board oversight. Governing boards should dedicate the same level of attention and expertise to this element of mission accountability as they do to financial accountability. Boards should routinely review candid direct feedback from populations the organization serves, just as they would annually review the organization's financial audit results. To facilitate this, civil society representatives from countries where the NGO operates, and that are not in a sub-contracting relationship with the NGO, could be part of a board sub-committee. This is the model adopted for example by Peace Direct, a peacebuilding NGO, which in April 2021 formed a Global Advisory Council[25] made up of peace activists, researchers and human rights defenders and community leaders to provide guidance to the governing board and leadership.

Building greater inclusivity into multilateral governing bodies is a greater challenge. On one level, these bodies are nominally more diverse—they incorporate representatives from a wide range of member states from both the rich and the developing worlds. But because the members of these bodies are, by definition, states, they tend to represent the interests of governments and not necessarily the marginalized populations that humanitarians serve within those states. This makes it hard to broaden the interests represented in the governance process. However, some steps could be pursued:

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[23] Konyndyk and Worden, "People-Driven Response."

[24] https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/jobs-and-volunteer-roles/

[25] Peace Direct, "Global Advisory Council Launched."

- While states will remain the formal governing members of multilateral institutions, those governing bodies should become much more deliberate about multi-stakeholder engagement in governing processes. Attendance by civil society observers should become a minimum requirement.

- Multilateral agencies should build client feedback directly into the oversight functions of the governing body. This should include commissioning independent assessments—unmediated by the agency—of the agency's performance, from the perspective of aid clients.

- Agencies should build, and donors should finance, even more ambitious and systematic efforts to elevate representatives of affected populations into the governance process. Consideration should be given to creation of formal structures. As noted in our People-Driven Response paper, the REDD+ mechanism for representing sub-national indigenous interests in preventing deforestation demonstrates the feasibility of creative approaches to non-state-actor representation in multilateral governance. As with NGOs, advisory sub-committees to the executive boards could be created to represent the views of communities served by each multilateral institution.

In informal governance:

Given the de facto importance of informal governance on humanitarian institutions' behavior, it will also be important to build more inclusivity into the relationships where power is sustained. This is less a question of changing policy than of changing practices and culture. Those who currently hold power and influence in the sector—notably the leaders of bilateral donor agencies and large operational agencies—should proactively work to broaden the voices and perspectives that shape their decisions.

Bilateral donors should take intentional steps to expand direct relationships with institutions in the Global South and local frontline organizations. The trusting institutional and personal relationships that donors have with large traditional aid agencies are meaningful and valuable, but they can also be a crutch and impediment to diversifying whose voices influence the sector. Parliamentary bodies overseeing humanitarian aid spend should also make sure that they are advised directly by civil society and community representatives from countries where the government is supporting humanitarian programs.

Bilateral donors and international humanitarian organizations should also build more spaces in which global and local aid practitioners can engage and expand their networks. Larger and well-resourced aid institutions should provide funding and facilitation to enable the participation of marginalized voices in the conferences, meetings, and other fora where informal governance relationships are developed and maintained. If only international agencies have the resources to build global relationships and networks, then only those agencies will be able to develop informal influence. One means of doing this could be a twinning model, in which donors and aid agencies participating in international conferences

and similar gatherings commit to finance and facilitate the participation of a counterpart institution from the developing world.

4.b. Supporting national and local humanitarian governance

Even with political will and institutions in place, many governments of crisis affected countries still require international support to mount humanitarian responses to large-scale events that overwhelm their financial and technical capacities. Low-income countries tend not to prioritize domestic resource spending towards effective national disaster response systems, relying instead on the expectation of international humanitarian aid. Middle-income countries struggle too. For example, while an exceptional budget surplus allowed the Ethiopian government to allocate $735 million to the food security crisis that year, it only committed $147 million the following year, even as the emergency worsened.[26]

A core role of international aid should be to strengthen national humanitarian governance. As mentioned above, international humanitarian coordination mechanisms tend to be applied in ways that at best accommodate, but often ignore, national governmental and civil society institutions. As one of CGD's research partners said in a public event,[27] international actors 'are guests, and should act like it'.[28] International humanitarian actors are inconsistently transparent with local and national authorities about their activities and coordination mechanisms are not always inclusive of government representatives. This contributes to a lack of understanding of and consideration for respective roles and capacities, which often ends-up undermining national humanitarian governance mechanisms.

Donorship models also contribute to constraining the capacity of national and local actors to lead. As we explain in another paper,[29] humanitarian finance is overall made up of bilateral grants from donors to international humanitarian organizations rather than governments. In 2019, only 4.5 percent of humanitarian funding from OECD DAC and non-DAC donors went to the public sector.[30] Contributions are mostly projectized, short term and focused on delivery by international organizations, rather than support to national capacities to respond.

International actors, including donors, have a key role to play in addressing these negative incentives by:

- **Strengthening national and sub-national humanitarian governance mechanisms through dedicated, long-term capacity-building programs.** Experience in countries that have responded effectively to disasters on their territory show that the most significant enabling factor has been the architecture of

[26] De Waal, *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine.*

[27] Worden et al., "Turning the Grand Bargain Upside Down: Views from Indonesia | Center For Global Development."

[28] Saez and Lavey, *Rethinking Reform.* (panelist Puji Pujiono, Senior Advisor, Pujiono Centre)

[29] Saez, Konyndyk, and Worden, "Financing the Humanitarian Public Good: Towards a More Effective Humanitarian Financing Model."

[30] Development Initiatives, "Funding for Effectiveness and Efficiency."

national and sub-national disaster management systems.[31] Investment is needed to pay for staff, training and equipment, and technical assistance through secondments is often effective. Donors should also support civil society actors' technical capacity, advocacy, and organizational ability to contribute to national humanitarian governance by systematically including disaster management as a priority for their civil society strengthening programs.

- **Aligning international humanitarian action behind national and sub-national governance.** The Grand Bargain included a commitment to "support and complement national coordination mechanisms where they exist and include national responders in international coordination mechanisms as appropriate and in keeping with humanitarian principles." Five years on, there is evidence[32] of incremental support to local NGOs participation in international coordination fora. However, there has been little progress in including national and local actors as cluster co-leads, although new IASC guidance attempts to address this gap.[33] Changes in practice should go further: where national humanitarian governance structures exist, are impartial and effective, international structures should align with and complement them, rather than run in parallel. At the sub-national level, this would help shift to the more effective area-based coordination model that we have advocated for last year.[34] Sub-national institutions—for example city councils— could in effect govern area-based hubs that bring together bring together local, national, and international responders.

- **Channeling more crisis response funding through governments.** Where governments have developed systems to meet their responsibilities, international aid agencies should play an increasingly minor role. In those countries, donors need to consider whether the overwhelming proportion of humanitarian finance channeled through international organizations, particularly the UN, could be undermining national humanitarian governance. Except in situations of conflict, it may be more appropriate, efficient, and effective to fund governments directly. There should be no impediment in principle for donors to do so. Direct funding partnerships could in fact provide an incentive for greater government accountability for delivering their disaster management functions impartially and effectively.

4.c. Enabling collaboration through multi-stakeholder governance

The current landscape of specialized, fragmented, and siloed governance mechanisms is no longer adapted to collectively align policy direction, financial support, and operational capacities in responding to crises. UN agencies report to their member states, government donors report to their legislatures, and so on. But there is no equivalent mechanism for

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[31] Harkey, "Experiences of National Governments in Expanding Their Role in Humanitarian Preparedness and Response." p. 20

[32] Metcalfe-Hough et al., "The Grand Bargain at Five Years: An Independent Review."

[33] IASC, "Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms—IASC Results Group 1 on Operational Response."

[34] Konyndyk, Saez, and Worden, "Inclusive Coordination."

bringing all of this "network of interconnected institutions" together to confer on priorities, align annual spending of $25 billion, and ensure collective accountability for impact. And rarely in any of these governing institutions are crisis-affected populations represented. The fragmentation of humanitarian action on the frontlines mirrors the fragmentation in how the sector is governed at a global level. As one donor leader observed in a CGD senior-level roundtable, rarely if ever do humanitarian leaders gather to assess the sector as a whole; instead, governance and oversight happen almost exclusively through the individual governing body meetings of one aid agency or another. This impedes a holistic approach to the sector's performance and logic; instead, it treats each agency as a fiefdom unto itself rather than as a supporting player within a larger ecosystem.

Beyond the narrowly defined humanitarian system, there is no forum in existence that convenes the full range of relevant stakeholders in crisis management—bilateral donors and multilateral banks, UN and NGO aid agencies, but also affected governments, civil society, the private sector, and affected populations. As mentioned above, the IASC is UN-centric and dominated by a few agencies, has no real authority over individual organizations and is not inclusive of donors and national actors. No common platform was put in place to implement the actions recommended by the Agenda for Humanity. The Grand Bargain leadership process involves both donors and aid agencies, but it is again narrowly focused on individual commitments—and like the IASC, had not involved national voices until mid-2021.[35]

This landscape makes it difficult to drive and sustain sector-wide collaboration and reform. The question of how to structure and finance multi-sector cash programming, for example, has languished for years in part because there is no forum to deliberate a challenging issue that spans multiple donors and multiple aid agencies. To address this and other collective action problems, an effective multi-stakeholder governance mechanism is needed. To some extent, the Global Refugee Forum stemming from the Global Refugee Compact attempts to address this issue for refugees, but it does not cover the entire humanitarian system. It also remains focused on voluntary pledges.[36]

As we have previously written,[37] constituency-based governance models such as the board of the Global Fund, provide alternative models for a potential common humanitarian replenishment mechanism. Such processes generate high-level political engagement by aligning multi-stakeholder, macro-level policy and strategy deliberations with tangible resource planning—a function that does not meaningfully exist in the humanitarian sector. The annual humanitarian appeals process, the main UN-led fundraising exercise, is not underpinned by a distinct governance structure. It is not a forum for aligning multi-policy, strategy, and resource allocation—functions that remain at the discretion of individual donors. The Global Fund also convenes three sides of the governance triangle—donors,

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[35] This changed with Grand Bargain 2.0, which includes the NEAR Network in its facilitation group.

[36] Root, "Can the Global Refugee Forum Deliver What the UN Compact Is Missing?"

[37] Saez, Konyndyk, and Worden, "Financing the Humanitarian Public Good: Towards a More Effective Humanitarian Financing Model."

implementers, and recipients—a dynamic that likewise does not have a clear parallel in collective humanitarian governance mechanisms.

Humanitarian leaders should consider evolving the annual humanitarian appeals process and accompanying pledging rounds. This consideration would mean convening donors, major aid agencies, and national actors (governments and civil society) in periodic reviews of sector-wide performance and efficiency, policy priorities, and resource priorities. These periodic reviews could be tied to enhanced sector-wide data on future risks and holistic needs, to enable a perspective on needs that is comprehensive rather than siloed by agency or program area. It could also be a connective tissue between disparate agency governing bodies, by providing a platform on which the state members of those bodies could collectively convene to assess and set sector-wide policy priorities and flow those priorities down to individual agencies. Emulating this model at the country-level through a multi-stakeholder platform could contribute to addressing some of the barriers to effective implementation of the "triple nexus" in practice.[38]

Generating and sustaining higher level political and financial support for humanitarian policy priorities and reform will require developing an agenda that can attract meaningful high-level political engagement, creating a forum where a suitable level of engagement can occur, and working to mitigate the collective-action dynamics that impede momentum toward greater change. The negotiations that produced the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain in 2015–16 show both the potential and the pitfalls. The process of consultations was exemplary in its holistic and inclusive approach, but the outcome lacked the "teeth" of an inter-governmental agreement. The Grand Bargain attracted elevated political engagement because it inherited an agenda from a UN High Level Panel, but once the links eroded, and the implementation diffused across numerous technical working groups, political attention waned and has proved hard to rekindle.

Platforms established to encourage high-level political support towards achieving other non-binding global priorities, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, might provide better models for global cooperation to deliver a common humanitarian agenda. For example, the Education Commission and recently created Global Education Forum bring together former or serving heads of state, ministers, and CEOs to generate political and financial support for the achievement of SDG 4. Adapting this kind of process to the humanitarian sector might entail a rhythm of annual or biennial humanitarian "ministerial" summits to convene senior level donor, affected government, aid agency, civil society, and private sector leaders to deliberate and drive decisions on major policy directions in the sector.

Such a forum could also elevate issues, as needed, for even higher-level political attention in other fora (like the development ministerial-level meetings that generate and elevate issues to the G-7 and G-20). This type of regular ministerial convening could, for example, occur in conjunction with the sort of sector-wide policy and resource review proposed above. Developing a clearer forum for addressing macro policy issues across the sector at large

[38] Medinilla, Tadesse Shiferaw, and Veron, "Think Local. Governance, Humanitarian Aid, Development and Peacebuilding in Somalia."

would better facilitate high level political engagement than the current practice of sub-dividing important policy matter across number agency governing bodies.

4.d. Enhancing accountability through governance

The independent review of the Grand Bargain has concluded that "five years on, there is no evidence that—at system level—humanitarian response has become more demand-driven."[39] Feedback from affected communities appears to corroborate this conclusion: analysis of perception surveys conducted by Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) suggests that people consistently do not think that aid meets their needs or contributes to their self-reliance. Affected populations also feel unable to influence decisions on humanitarian aid. The 2018 scandals of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by the staff of international humanitarian organizations also point to an accountability gap. Twenty-five years after the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance (JEAAR) to Rwanda launched a humanitarian accountability movement, and although accountability initiatives have flourished since, there appears to be a long way to go still. Part of the problem might lie in how accountability is governed across the system.
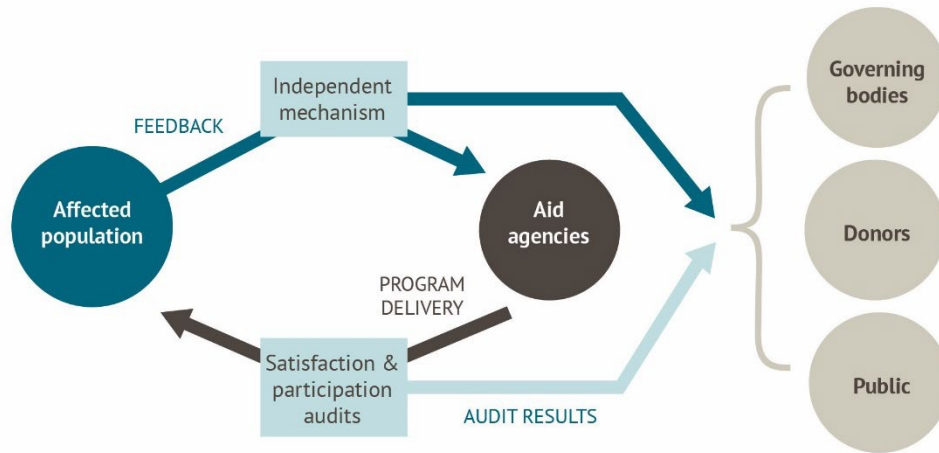
- **Independent accountability mechanisms.** There cannot be true accountability in the humanitarian system without adequate checks and balances. Currently, all functions, from assessing needs to planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation can be concentrated within the same organization, which creates conflicted interests. It is unrealistic to expect mechanisms to seek feedback or allow complaints from downstream clients to be entirely objective if they are managed and financed by the same organization they are seeking feedback on. Yet organizations in the sector have traditionally been opposed to independent scrutiny beyond financial audits, preferring instead to opt for self-regulation. While self-regulation has undeniably led to improvements in quality and accountability, the 2018 SEA scandals and the GTS survey show that it might still be insufficient. The creation of HQAI to independently verify adherence to standards is a welcome addition. However, assessing adherence by individual organizations to a broad standard—the CHS—is not the same as accounting for the collective performance of the system in responding to particular crises.

  To provide an objective assessment of whether an organization or the system as a whole fulfills its commitments to affected populations, accountability mechanisms need to be independent, and be linked to actual consequences. In CGD's paper on people-driven response,[40] Konyndyk and Worden advocate for feedback mechanisms to be independent and able to report directly to governing boards, donors, and the public, and for the actions taken by humanitarian organizations in response to feedback to be independently audited. This is a long way forward from current practice.

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[39] Metcalfe-Hough et al., "The Grand Bargain at Five Years: An Independent Review."
[40] Konyndyk and Worden, "People-Driven Response."

Figure 6. Incorporating Population Feedback

- **Independent outcomes measurement.** The need for an independent accountability mechanism is particularly acute at the collective level. In another CGD paper,[41] Saez et al explain how data on outcomes is collected in all humanitarian operations, but it is usually inconsistent, fragmented by sector, uneven between sectors, and not systematically organized. Outcome measurement systems should be established at the country level and governed independently by an organization not directly involved in delivering the humanitarian response.

  This role would involve working with humanitarian organizations to agree on outcome-level objectives and indicators, designing a data collection system to measure those indicators, gather and analyze data and report on findings publicly. It should systematically include surveys of how the collective aid effort is perceived by affected populations.

Resistance to independent scrutiny in the sector needs to be understood and addressed. When, as he was leaving his role, former UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock proposed piloting an Independent Commission for Voices in Crises[42] (ICVIC) to address the accountability gap, many in the sector pointed[43] to proposals for an independent accountability body—or Ombuds—in the late 1990s being shelved to leave place for the standardization work mentioned above. Criticisms of Lowcock's proposal as too bureaucratic, top-down, focused on international organizations and donors and ignoring existing accountability efforts might be valid. However, the proposal had the merit to insist on the independence of the mechanism and to link it to the main incentive in the system— funding—by making the Commission's reports available to donors.

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[41] Saez et al., "Improving Performance in the Multilateral Humanitarian System."

[42] UNOCHA, "Proposal: Piloting the Independent Commission for Voices in Crises (ICVIC)."

[43] Deloffre, "An Independent Commission for Voices in Crisis."

A new institution might not be necessary. There are existing models (e.g., HQAI) and service providers (e.g., GTS and third-party monitoring contractors) that could deliver the type of independent feedback mechanisms and audit mentioned above, if they are done independently. The first step would be for HQAI verification to become a requirement—rather than a choice—for all NGOs and multilateral organizations, and for independent outcomes measurement, including perception surveys, to become the instituted as a norm in all humanitarian country operations.

5. Conclusion

Much frustration has been directed at various rounds of humanitarian reforms for bringing about incremental and marginal improvements rather than transformative changes to the humanitarian system. Part of the reason might lie with humanitarian governance mechanisms that have been left unchanged and are no longer adapted to meeting the global humanitarian challenge. Transforming the system will require more than individual policy commitments. The formal and informal mechanisms to wield power will need to be effectively rebalanced towards affected people and enable collective action rather than competition.

Changes can be made now. The proposals above do not require new international legislation or reshaping multilateral agencies. They could be implemented by adapting existing governance mechanisms and creating platforms for collective interaction that are sorely lacking. What is required first and foremost is political willingness from those that yield most power in the system to make those adaptations. Without them, it is unrealistic to expect that the system will deliver the much-delayed ambitions of putting people at the center, or local actors in the driving seat.

Table 3. Governance arrangements of eight key multilateral humanitarian agencies

Organization	Board Responsibilities/ Committees	Governed by/ Reporting lines	Membership process	Representation of CSOs/clients and observer status
ICRC	All ICRC activities are overseen by an assembly comprised of 15–25 Swiss nationals appointed to four-year terms and includes the president and vice president of ICRC. The assembly defines institutional strategy, formulates policy, and approves budgets. It makes reasonable effort to take decisions by consensus, or simple majority. The Assembly Council, a subsidiary of assembly, takes decisions on management, strategic, and communications issues. The Assembly includes commissions for audit and recruitment.	The assembly does not report to another body. Members of the audit commission may not also be members of the Assembly Council.	The assembly carries out the functions of an organizational executive board, including establishing selection criteria and appointing, suspending or expelling members.	Non-ICRC members may be invited to meetings held in camera. The assembly can designate former members as honorary members who may be invited to talks with the office of the president on strategy and operations, and receive updates on ICRC affairs.
IFRC	IFRC is overseen by a governing board of five VPs, and includes the ex-officio president and VP of the Swill Red Cross, and four VPs elected in the International Federation's GA. The board reports to the assembly and has authority to make certain decisions in between General Assembly sessions. Its work is organized around thematic commissions and committees. Board membership comprises 20 national societies, plus chairs of the commissions for audit and risk, and finance, and a youth committee, from additional national societies.	The General Assembly is IFRC's supreme governing body. It comprises representatives from all national societies and meets every two years. Delegates elect governing board members and the IFRC president.	All 192 national societies of the federation are represented in the General Assembly. Each has one vote.	General Assembly meetings coincide with the broader Council of Delegates. At annual Council of Delegates meetings, RCRC Movement components, states, and observers participate in plenary and spotlight sessions. Participants and observers may share statements for the official record.
IOM	The Council determines and reviews the policies, programmes and activities of the Organization, approves reports of subsidiary bodies and the SG, and approves the budget among other activities. The Council elects the DG by 2/3 majority and the DG is accountable to the Council.		UN member states that accept the IOM's constitution are eligible to join. Or, a state may make a certain level of financial contribution and be voted in as a member by a 2/3 majority of the council. Currently 174 UN member states are members of IOM and there are 8 observer states.	

OCHA	As an office of the UN secretariat, OCHA does not have a board; its work is reported to the General Assembly via the Secretary General. OCHA advances norms through inter-governmental processes and coordinates assistance. OCHA has 3 divisions: coordination, financing and resource mobilization, and operations and advocacy.	The USG/ERC, and ASG/Deputy ERC, for humanitarian affairs oversee OCHA, and are accountable to the Secretary-General.	OCHA is not a membership organization; UN members make recommendations to fill leadership positions and the selection process lacks transparency.	OCHA has 5 regional offices and carries out its coordination function through the IASC, including partnerships with regional organizations.
UNHCR	UNHCR's Executive Committee (ExComm) approves biennial programs and budget; advises the HC; provides HC authority to establish implementing instruments for projects and to obligate funds. ExCom reviews the work of a standing committee and endorses its decisions.	The Executive Committee of the Programme of the UNHCR established by ECOSOC in 1957 oversees UNHCR. It had 25 members at its founding and has 107 members today.	Members must: be a member of the United Nations or one of its specialized agencies, be elected by ECOSOC, represent the widest possible geographic basis, have a demonstrated interest in and devotion to the solution of the refugee problem	UN Member States and other entities with standing invitations can participate as observers at plenary sessions. Observers may include UN entities, IGOs and NGOs. They may speak at the discretion of the ExCom Chairperson, but are unable to vote or participate in decision-making.
UNICEF	UNICEF is governed by the Executive Board, which provides oversight and intergovernmental support, coordinated by a Bureau of officers including the President and, in line with GA and ECOSOC guidance. The board takes decisions based on consensus and holds informal consultations. Draft decisions are circulated by the secretariat for adoption. The executive board holds informal meetings on issues of interest to board members, and 3 regular sessions throughout the year. The board also holds joint meetings with other UN funds and programmes (UNDP/UNFPA, WFP, UN-Women, UNOPS) on relevant themes.	UNICEF reports annually through the Executive Board to ECOSOC, to whose authority it is subject. The Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989 provides UNICEF's legal framework.	The 36 Member States are elected to three-year terms by ECOSOC, based on regional allocation. The board chair also rotates based on election by geographic region for a one-year term. Permanent members of the Security Council do not serve as board officers.	In addition to informal consultations, representatives of UN regional groups may speak on behalf of their groups in sessions. Member States are allowed observer status when their country programs are under consideration. The Board may, when it considers it appropriate, invite other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to designate observers to attend its meetings.

WFP	WFP is overseen by an Executive Board of 36 member states, whose functions include information-sharing, consensus-building, decision-making. The board is committed to consult with the FAO finance committee, UN Advisory Committee on Admin and Budget, and FAO sub-committee on Surplus Disposal	The Executive Board strives to make decisions on consensus, and reports to ECOSOC and the FAO council.	18 members each, are elected by ECOSOC, and the FAO Council, to three-year terms with eligibility for re-election. Terms may be split between members and members may stand down and allow others to take their seat.	The Rules of Procedure allows for participation without voting rights for other UN member states, Associate FAO Members, or of any specialized agency or the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The Executive Director with agreement from the Board may also invite INGOs and NGOs to attend without the right to vote.
WHO	WHO's Executive Board is composed of 34 persons who are technically qualified in the field of health, each designated by a Member State that has been elected to serve by the World Health Assembly. Members serve for three-year terms, and select a chairperson from within the board. The board performs functions entrusted to it by the Health Assembly and advises and submits proposals to the assembly. The board may also request special sessions of the Health Assembly be convened. An annual board meeting is held in January. The Health Assembly has authority to adopt conventions or agreements. The board may establish committees on its own initiative or at the direction of the Health Assembly. WHO representatives are invited to ECOSOC and GA meetings to participate without vote in deliberations on matters related to health.	The Health Assembly reviews and approves reports and activities of the board, and reports to ECOSOC. The assembly considers recommendations from ECOSOC, the GA, and the SC.	Member States designate candidates who are elected by the World Health Assembly to serve on the board. At least one member is elected from each regional organization each year.	Either the board or health assembly may convene local, general, technical, or other special conferences and arrange for representation by IOs and others. The Health Assembly may invite any organization with responsibilities related to those of WHO to appoint representatives to participate in meetings, without voting rights. National organizations require consent of the Government concerned to be invited.

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