



The
Eco-Leadership
Institute



Humanitarian
Leadership
Academy

ECO- MUTUALISM

Re-imagining Humanitarianism



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**DISASTERS
EMERGENCY
COMMITTEE**

Foreword

We are living in radical times of rapid global change. In 2024, more than 300 million people will need humanitarian assistance worldwide, and this number is set to keep rising in the years ahead. Humanitarian resources are shrinking and the Western institutions that have dominated the international humanitarian sector are stuck struggling to adapt in the face of urgent criticism and the loud clamour for change. Such radical times demand new thinking, a different leadership mindset and much more soulful way of connecting to each other as humans. For as Einstein said, 'we cannot solve today's problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.'

At its heart, humanitarian action is about human connection and hope turned into purposeful action. Humanitarians must promote both international solidarity and self-determination and evolve the humanitarian ecosystem to be inclusive and equitable, where humanitarian citizenship is not bounded by self-limiting and self-serving institutional forms and intransigent power dynamics. It is time to start thinking critically and acting very differently. That is what Eco-Mutualism is about: re-imagining humanitarianism.

The Humanitarian Leadership Academy and The Eco-Leadership Institute have come together to develop and promote the Eco-Mutualist approach described herein. In this way, we hope to inspire a new generation of humanitarians to connect and be full of curiosity; to think deeply about themselves and the wider world and to critically reflect on the urgent problems of humanity. We want to inspire humanitarians to never accept the inadequate status quo and to always keep doing that throughout their lives. We urge everyone to reject the idea that you cannot make a positive difference for humanity. You embody humanity's future so you must never lose heart.

Gareth Owen OBE

Humanitarian Director
of Save the Children

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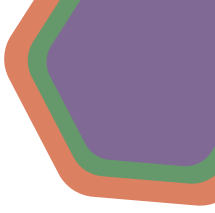
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Introduction

System change in the humanitarian sector is critical as the world grapples with unprecedented challenges. This short book advocates for Eco-Mutualism, an approach that represents a radical change to the Global North-led 'international' system of humanitarian efforts.

Eco-Mutualism moves away from paternalistic and centralised approaches, embracing many values that are already practised by the global majority of humanitarians working with civil society to deliver aid.

The two key words that guide these practices are ecosystems and mutualism. They act as anchor points to guide practice away from existing hierarchical, controller models, to a more interconnected, collaborative, & ecosystem-based approach.

This book is written in two parts; [part one](#) outlines the challenges humanitarians face, and [part two](#) outlines an Eco-Mutualist approach that can lead to the systems change that is urgently needed.



This book will address the following

PART 1

Discusses the humanitarian challenges, which are summarised in four chapters:

- 1 The Precarious-Interdependent Age
- 2 Historical Evolution of Humanitarianism
- 3 Beyond Modernity's Mindsets
- 4 Salvation Aid

PART 2

Outlines an Eco-Mutualist approach that can lead to the systems change that is urgently needed with chapters on:

- 5 Eco-Mutualism: Guiding Future Practice
- 6 Re-enchanting Humanitarianism

CHAPTER 1 sets out the global context of the new Precarious-Interdependent Age (Western, 2020) which takes us into a new paradigm, setting the scene for radical change across the globe. This impacts all sectors and organisations and two common threads emerge.

1. Disruptions and polycrisis are becoming a norm increasing precarity everywhere, and system change rather than incremental change is urgent.

2. We live in a more interdependent, interconnected world, & the challenges we face require collective & collaborative responses.

What is clear is that humanitarians are at the forefront, addressing the greatest impact of our precarious times, and therefore need to change the way they operate.

What is also clear is that large INGOs and the international aid system are working to maintain a status quo, turning a blind eye to the paradigm shift needed.





“If you don't know where you've come from,
you don't know where you're going.”

Maya Angelou

To understand the present and plan for the future it is important to trace the historical past.

Chapter two briefly sets out four ages of humanitarianism, tracking power and relationships, and how colonialism and paternalism have continued until today in different forms.

Chapter three explains how international humanitarianism finds itself trapped in the ideology of modernity, producing organisational cultures driven by machine metaphors of efficiency, bureaucracy, control cultures, and numbers and unable to shift to a holistic systemic and more humane relational way of working.

Chapter four sets out the challenges of salvation aid, and how endemic it remains. In spite of the rhetoric and conscious efforts to change this, the unconscious attachments in the Global North to salvation aid and saviourism remain. Undoing this is vital for radical change to take place..

Context

Eco-Mutualism emerges from within and from beyond the humanitarian sector (see Appendix 1). The development of these ideas has been gained from working across the globe and mutually learning from across diverse sectors. The author has worked closely with senior leaders in global manufacturing, finance, health, education, and hi-tech sectors internationally, and also with small entrepreneurial companies, hospices, & non-profits. Harvesting information, observing organisational cultures, action research, PhD academic research, coaching leaders, & learning from cross-fertilising ideas, led to the development of the theory and practice of Eco-Leadership, a new way of leadership specifically designed for our Precarious- Interdependent Age.

This led to the formation of the Eco-Leadership Institute as a think tank to further develop and disseminate these ideas.

The Eco-Leadership Institute was invited to partner with the Humanitarian Leadership Academy to bring Eco-Leadership thinking to the humanitarian sector, which resulted in this proposed approach of Eco-Mutualism. After working with more than 500 humanitarians over a two-year period what has stood out is that those humanitarians working closest to the challenges, in local and national contexts, really understand Eco-Mutualism and already practice it. Eco-Mutualism speaks to their condition, it echoes and helps inform the way they work at their best. Finding resources in their local and global ecosystems is how they survive. Working mutually to build civic societal responses produces the best sustainable results.

Our workshops, courses, coaching, and training programmes have been welcomed and we learn so much each time we engage. There are many critiques of the sector from within and many ideas and practices that overlap and help to inform this Eco-Mutualist approach, such as feminist leadership, shifting the power, critical leadership theory, and calls for localisation and decolonisation.

What Eco-Mutualism adds to the existing critiques and ideas

01

There is often a binary response presented to the challenges faced, such as localisation versus centralisation, feminism versus patriarchy, and Global North versus Global South. This binary response is part of the modernist mindset that creates boundaries and categories and is reductionist, which is critiqued later in the essay. Whilst the power analysis is correct and shared by us, binary approaches become part of the problem. An ecosystemic and mutualist approach untangles binary and modernist mindsets and opens a way to work differently. However, this means embracing critical thinking and self-awareness that enables a letting go of unconscious attachments to splitting mindsets that create a good us and a bad other.

02

The ecosystem approach undoes hierarchy and centralisation; there is no top or bottom, no centre in an ecosystem. Taking an ecosystemic approach changes the way challenges are framed, and opens new innovative and creative ways to address them. Ecosystemic approaches help make power visible, which enables power to be worked with, challenged or subverted. The ecosystemic approach is marginalised in most humanitarian approaches or crushed under the weight of the modern machine way of thinking. For system change to take place it needs to be developed and placed at the forefront of change.

03

Mutualism addresses power inequities and invites collaborative responses. It demands answers to questions such as who is at the table, who is being listened to, and how can we create shared value for all stakeholders, it recognises the agency of all. To work mutually is to radically undermine salvation and top-down humanitarian approaches.

04

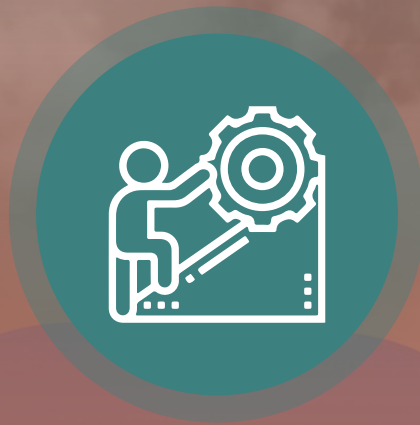
Eco-Mutualism: It is the power of Ecosystems & Mutualist approaches together that harness the energy and guide the practice in a new dynamic direction.

Eco-Mutualism is not a top-down answer to humanitarian challenges, it is an approach that amplifies best practices & acts as a guide to continue in a direction that subverts the centralised status quo that is so problematic.

The aim is to contribute to a re-enchantment of a disenchanting humanitarian sector in order to re-energise and re-organise our collective understanding of and response to humanitarian crises.

We live in hybrid ecosystems consisting of technology, people, and nature. Addressing this hybrid ecosystem demands a radical rethink of humanitarian leadership and organisational responses. Eco-Mutualism seeks to catalyse the collective power of diverse stakeholders, emphasising mutual agency, mutual respect, shared responsibility, and active engagement across all levels of humanitarian action.

Part 1.



Humanitarian Challenges

Chapter 1:

THE PRECARIOUS - INTERDEPENDENT AGE



Navigating the Complexities of the P.I. Age

The Precarious-Interdependent Age (P.I. Age) marks a significant paradigm shift from more predictable patterns of the modern era, dominated in the West by a faith that science could deliver economic and social progress. This new P.I. Age is characterised by rapid environmental, technological, and socio-political changes that continuously reshape the landscape, and promise only further precarious living and amplify our inescapable interdependencies. Humanitarians work with those facing the most precarious conditions, and they understand the interdependencies that lead to disastrous wars and climate crises, and also that are part of any solutions.

Humanitarian work is being defined by the P.I. Age. The urgent demand is to shift the organisational and leadership responses from the current ones dominated by the modern era, i.e. universality, hierarchy, centralisation, bureaucracy, and managerial control; to those appropriate to the P.I. Age; agility, adaptability, mutual collaboration, partnerships, ecosystem awareness, decentralisation, and localisation.



Environmental Disruptions

Climate change is the most conspicuous driver of this new age, manifesting in more frequent and severe weather events such as hurricanes, droughts, and floods. These environmental crises not only cause immediate destruction but also long-term displacement, food insecurity, and water scarcity. The intersection of climate and conflict is absolutely critical as a multiplier for humanitarian crises. For instance, the increasing intensity of cyclones in Southeast Asia demands a re-evaluation of how humanitarian aid is structured, moving from reactive emergency relief to proactive anticipation, risk reduction, and community resilience building.

The Precarious-Interdependent Age (Western S. 2020)



Technological Transformations

Parallel to environmental challenges, the technological revolution continues to accelerate, altering how societies function and interact. Advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, and digital communication have revolutionised industries but also displaced labour markets, intensified surveillance, and widened the digital divide. Humanitarian organisations must adapt to these changes, utilising technology to improve aid delivery—such as using blockchain for supply chain transparency or AI for disaster response analysis—while also addressing the new vulnerabilities they create, like cyber-security threats, privacy concerns, and digital divides that impact social equity.



Socio-Political Shifts

The socio-political landscape is also transforming, influenced by hyper-globalisation and the resulting backlash of nationalism and protectionism. These dynamics complicate humanitarian interventions in crisis zones, where access and aid are increasingly subject to political agendas. Funding of aid is also caught up in geo-political and neo-liberal dynamics. Furthermore, the rise of mass migration due to conflict, climate change, persecution, and economic despair requires a humanitarian response that transcends borders and prioritises human rights and dignity, challenging the traditional state-centric approach to aid.



Interdependence of Systems

A distinctive feature of the P.I. Age is the evident interdependence of environmental, technological, and socio-political systems. Disruptions in one area can quickly cascade into others, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only posed a global health crisis but also exacerbated economic inequalities and strained international relations. It also revealed enormous hypocrisies in notions of 'global health', with the failure of COVAX (vaccinations) to reach most of the Global South (Nyabola, 2023). Humanitarian organisations must therefore develop an integrated approach that considers the multifaceted nature of modern crises, fostering collaborations that span sectors and disciplines. This interdependence decentres humanity from its controlling modernist narrative. No longer can we use nature as an unlimited resource or tame the wilderness. Now we must learn to live interdependently, nurturing the natural world, and finding more harmony in our co-existence with each other and with our non-human companions.



The Need for Adaptive Responses

The unpredictable and interconnected challenges of the P.I. Age demand a more agile and adaptive humanitarian sector. Traditional linear and hierarchical models are proving inadequate in facing the non-linear dynamics of today's global issues. The sector needs to embrace a more flexible, systems-oriented mindset that can anticipate and react to changes swiftly and effectively. This involves embracing local networks, leveraging technology for better data-driven decision-making, and fostering a culture of continuous learning and innovation.

As we delve deeper into the Precarious-Interdependent Age, the imperative for a new paradigm in humanitarianism becomes increasingly clear. Eco-Mutualism, with its emphasis on ecosystems thinking and mutualistic relationships, offers a promising framework to navigate and mitigate the complexities of this new era. By understanding and adapting to the interconnected challenges we face, humanitarian actors can develop more resilient, effective, and sustainable responses to the global crises of the 21st century.

Box 1.

Ecosystem Mapping Case Study

PIOTR KOLODZIEJ

Partnership Coordinator
Ukraine Response
International Rescue Committee



The need for an Eco-Mutualist approach

Regarding organizational limitations, I believe that, as a whole country program, we were not fully aware of what we could truly accomplish, our role, and the added value we aimed to bring to the context.

I believe that we were not prepared to provide ecosystem solutions because we lacked awareness of the ecosystem and the systemic problems we aimed to tackle. Due to leadership being poorly distributed and siloed, with key local staff or partner staff excluded from the strategic decision making process, we found it challenging to break out of our own bubble. We referred to our partners as implementing organizations rather than true collaborators who could join us in solving problems for the refugee population.

Box 2.

Eco-Leadership Case Study

MUHAMMAD KHURAM GONDAL

Country Director,
Save the Children Pakistan



In the face of the 2022 flood emergency response, Save the Children Pakistan demonstrated a pragmatic application of Eco-Mutualist principles. The organisation strategically collaborated within the humanitarian ecosystem to address the challenge effectively.

Save the Children Pakistan's response was distinguished by its ecosystem-oriented approach, where the organisation considered the local context, historical data, and potential scenarios, showcasing an adaptive learning ecosystem. For instance, we had not initially planned to provide winterised clothing kits, however, based on the feedback from the local partners and the need identified from the Rapid Need Assessment (RNA) that the country office conducted, especially in the winter-stricken region of Swat in KPK province, we provided winterised clothing kits to almost 9600 households. While in Sindh, where flood water persisted for a longer duration, the focus shifted towards waterborne disease programming. In Sindh, we not only streamlined nutrition efforts but also integrated WASH initiatives, complemented by Mobile and Basic Health Units (BHU). As a result, our team managed to support 33000 patients in Sindh during the relief and recovery stage of the emergency.

In a collaborative effort with other major INGOs, Save the Children Pakistan played a pivotal role in cluster coordination at the hub, provincial, and national levels, ensuring non-overlapping efforts and promoting a cohesive relief and recovery strategy. The emphasis on a bottom-up approach, where partners played a leading role, underscored the organisation's commitment to avoiding a top-down imposition of solutions. The feedback mechanism implemented by Save the Children Pakistan, including age and sex-disaggregated data from communities, ensured that all voices were not only heard but also incorporated into the decision-making process, reflecting a genuine commitment to the principles of Eco-Mutualism.

In essence, Save the Children Pakistan's response to the flood emergency embodied Eco-Mutualist principles by ensuring leadership distribution, fostering partnerships, and embracing an ecosystem-centric approach over top-down solutions.

*The case studies featured in this book were all written for the Eco-Leadership Certificate for Humanitarians HLA-ELI Programme.

Chapter 2:

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF HUMANITARIAN APPROACHES

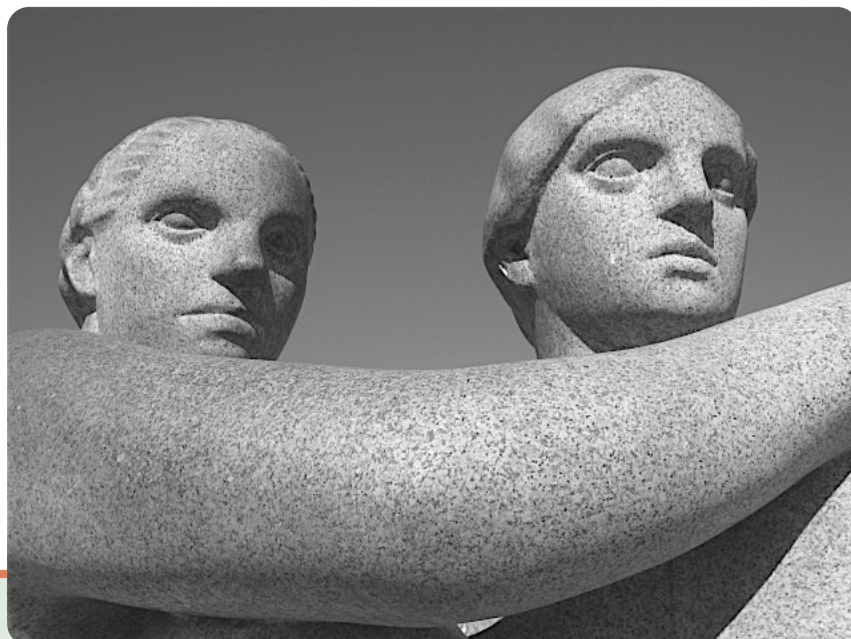
This short chapter sets out a brief summary of the evolution of humanitarian approaches. The box below (modified from Barnett, 2013), discusses three ages of humanitarianism where salvation and paternalism have been core to humanitarianism across all ages. The table following shows a fourth emergent age, the Precarious-Interdependent Age, offering Eco-Mutualist aspirational approaches.

Box 3.

Three Ages of Humanitarianism

Paternalism and salvation have been a constant presence throughout humanitarian history

Age 1. 1800-1945 Colonialism Christian paternalism. Humanitarianism was dominated by Christian Paternalism, a belief that “Christianity and the West defined the values of the international community. Liberal and religious inspired humanitarians set out to nurture new kinds of compassion, accepted new responsibilities to the distant suffering other, and aspired to release civilising processes to reduce human suffering” (Barnett 2013:30) At the heart of the colonial humanitarian approach is an explicit saviourism. This evoked the recognition of responsibilities and care for the distant suffering other which was a significant shift in ethics but at the same time, the care offered was through colonial, paternalistic, and salvation mindsets.



Age 2. 1945-1989 Decolonisation Democratic paternalism. The cultural view of interdependencies shifted and paternalism took shape in a post-colonial context. The infantilising, civilising ideology of the imperial-colonial age was no longer acceptable. New forms of global governance proclaimed that the Western rich and powerful had an obligation to 'teach' the rest of the world, which altered the tone, rather than the workings of paternalism (Barnett, 2013:31). As new nations were emerging and freeing themselves from direct colonial power, the West believed it had a responsibility to teach them democratic values. Colonialism was being replaced by new forms of paternalistic 'democratic' governance, of which humanitarianism played its part. Interdependency was a recognition to support the suffering other; but still from a top-down salvation position.

Age 3. 1989-2019 Neo-Liberal Globalisation Neo-Liberal paternalism In the 1980s Neo-liberal economics/politics reshaped humanitarian interdependencies again. Liberal paternalism was delivered through new collaborations between humanitarians and governments (shaped also by increased corporate power and influence). There was huge growth in humanitarian aid and humanitarian organisations that mirrored the corporate world. Marketing functions began to sell 'trauma' in order to maximise fundraising and to create unique humanitarian brands, as competition between the big aid organisations took a new turn. A new managerialism arrived mirroring the corporate world and RBM (Results Based Management) was pushed by governments who demanded more accountability (Fiori et al., 2021:39). Humanitarian governance and humanitarian intervention created a new machinery where power was held centrally, "to put it in slightly more worrying terms, the paternalism became buried in the machinery of humanitarianism' (Barnett, 2013:70).

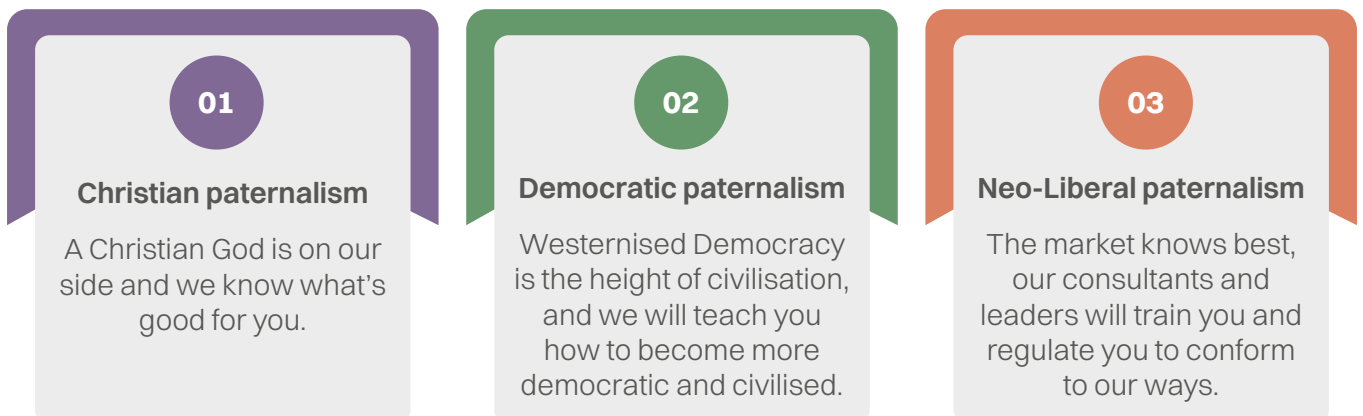
(Box taken from Western, 2024)

Humanitarianism has evolved as it has gone through the different ages. The table below summarises how it has developed, and includes a fourth emerging age which is the Eco-Mutualist response to the P.I.Age. Eco-Mutualism advocates a shift away from the paternalist-saviourism that shows up in all other ages.

The Four Ages of Humanitarianism ?

	Colonialism (1800-1945)	De-colonisation (1945-1989)	Neo-Liberal Globalisation (1989-2019)	Precarious- interdependence (2019-Present)
Humanitarian Compassionate Aims	Colonial- Civilisation	Support independence & national sovereignty	Human rights	Human agency
Power	Power-over, explicit control	Power exerted through globalisation, regulation & bureaucracy	Power exerted via financial governance & freemarket politics	Mutual power relations through ecosystems of development
Relationships	Christian Paternalism	Democratic Paternalism	Neo - Liberal Paternalism	Interdependence & mutualism

The humanitarian compassionate aims in the imperialist era showed up as colonialism with the belief that humanitarians were part of a civilising force to “save the lives and the souls of uncivilised peoples”. National independence movements in the era of decolonisation were supported by humanitarians but with the paternalistic hand of ‘we know best about democracy and we will tell you how things should be done’. The Neo-Liberal age shifted the compassionate approach into a human rights approach. This hugely increased the scope of humanitarian work, moving it from crisis responses to taking on issues such as gender and LGBT+ rights, which in turn led to further claims of Global North colonialism, i.e. pushing liberal identity politics into the humanitarian field. In terms of relationships, the first three ages are all different versions of paternalistic relations:



The current P.I. Age, above in red, demands an Eco-Mutualist response, aiming to secure resources in local-global ecosystems and to adapt and utilise new technologies, co-creating mutual ecosystems of development. Universalism and human rights require re-thinking as to how these rights align with the need to acknowledge diversity and cultural differences.

Mutualist approaches push for more human agency, which means understanding why some voices are marginalised, and by whom, and addressing power dynamics to ensure voices are included and listened to. Mutualism replaces paternalism, and there is a move from bureaucratic control and top-down governance to create ecosystems of development, promoting self-reliance and engagement to collaborate and co- create sustainable, anticipatory, and resilient civil society responses.

This fourth age is a clear break with the paternalism and power-over dynamics of past eras, and these changes have not yet been addressed at the international aid level beyond marginal change and the rhetoric of localisation and decolonisation. But the anger and the pressure are growing.

Box 4.

Ecosystem Mapping Case Study

BHEKIMPILO KHANYE

Country Director
Save the Children Zimbabwe



Eco-Mutualist learning

We had to adjust to a radical downsizing as our funding was severely reduced. The Eco-Mutualist approach we learnt when Simon visited us in Zimbabwe guided our implementation. We started with the Senior Management Team where I exercised devolved leadership. We withdrew from the office to a secluded place where we took time to collectively explore our challenges and later worked on a solution together as a team. It was agreed that we needed to embark on reorganization anchored on transitioning the office from direct implementation to working mainly through local and national actors i.e. taking an Eco-Mutualist approach. The proposed new delivery model was explored in detail and a new organisational structure worked on. Collaboration and distributed leadership within our team initiated a new agile approach, and ecosystem analysis and mutuality was the new delivery model, building on existing relationships, analysing the ecosystem to see where gaps and resources could be connected, and how we could partner with others to support their delivery.

Chapter 3:

BEYOND MODERNITY'S MINDSETS

Traditional humanitarian efforts were born in the modern period, and have been shaped by modernist ideologies, which emphasise control, standardisation, categorisation and a top-down hierarchy. This modernity mindset creates a way of thinking that limits the radical changes required in delivering humanitarian aid. To deliver Eco-Mutualism and systems-change means to undo the modernity mindsets in which the international humanitarian sector is entangled.

These ideologies are deeply embedded within the structures, cultures, and strategies of international aid organisations, which leads to rigid, formulaic responses that lack the flexibility to adapt to diverse and changing circumstances on the ground. Modernity produced the factory as an iconic model for workplaces, driven by the notions of efficiency, growth, and progress, and underpinned by the faith in science and rationality. This same modernity mindset exists within the international aid sector today, which operates with a machine-like culture that disenchanting so many in the sector.



Limitations of a Managerial Approach

The managerial mindset comes directly from the modernity ideology, and it dominates the humanitarian international sector, prioritising regulation and control, efficiency, measurable outcomes, and centralised decision-making.

While elements such as efficiency and regulation are clearly important, they are also repressive and restrict innovative solutions, adaptive and emergent development, and local involvement. For example, the focus on quantifiable results may overlook the qualitative aspects of aid effectiveness, such as community trust and building long-term resilience.

A notable issue arises when NGOs are pressured to conform to strict reporting requirements and short-term performance metrics, which may not align with the long-term developmental needs or cultural contexts of the communities they serve. This misalignment becomes evident when projects tailored primarily to meet donor criteria fail to sustain engagement or impact after the initial funding cycle, highlighting a disconnect between managerial objectives and actual community needs.



The Fallacy of a One-Size-Fits-All Solution

Modernity's approach to humanitarianism often seeks universal solutions to highly context-specific problems. This has led to the implementation of programmes that are not adapted to the local cultural, economic, or environmental conditions, reducing their effectiveness and sustainability. Effectiveness and sustainability are also claimed in aid rhetoric, but in reality are secondary goals, with primary goals being more political. The World Food Programme, for example, subsidises US agricultural and export markets which undermine local agriculture, and then food is exported from the US to places with food shortages. A pertinent illustration of this is seen in food aid programmes that disrupt local markets or fail to consider local dietary habits and nutritional needs.



Decentralisation and Localisation

There is a growing recognition of the need for decentralisation in humanitarian aid, where more power, resources, and decision-making capabilities are shifted to local organizations and communities. This shift in power has a positive impact on those directly affected by crises and also enhances the relevance and appropriateness of aid interventions. Local actors bring invaluable insights into the social and cultural dynamics of their communities, which are crucial for the success of humanitarian programmes. Decentralisation demands mutualism and ecosystem awareness, which is addressed later.

"Despite the increasing humanitarian needs in Syria, the aid system remains stagnant, acting as a temporary fix rather than addressing the underlying issues. As funding dwindles and the scale of need escalates, the approach to aid in Syria must be radically transformed. We owe it to future generations to develop a sustainable model that moves beyond mere survival to ensuring a dignified future." — Save the Children Syria Response Director

Box 5.

Ecosystem Mapping Case Study

SHWETA MALHOTRA

Head- Organizational
Development & Governance Affairs,
Bal Raksha Bharat



Eco-Leadership agility and collaboration

On 31st July 2023, Bal Raksha Bharat (also known as Save the Children India) was hit with a crisis situation with the denial of the organization's FCRA (Foreign Contribution regulation Act) license renewal, cutting off its access to foreign funding and significantly impacting its operations, programme coverage, infrastructure and most importantly the talent pool. The organization's human resource strength was 995 staff as on 31st July 2023. With reduced funding and operations, the organization was able to retain only 570 staff; a reduction of 46% in its human resource strength. 425 staff across various levels and functions were to transition out of the organization. Amidst the uncertain, unstable and fight for survival mode, the process and support actions undertaken by the organization for separation of staff resonated with the Eco-Leadership approach. More specifically the actions aligned with an eco-mindset which promotes collaboration between organizational subsystems and between the organization and others in wider ecosystems and looks at spatial, strategic and interconnected ways of understanding and meeting challenges and organizational change.



Critique of Traditional Humanitarian Approaches

The international aid sector while successful in providing relief to millions, is increasingly viewed as insufficient for addressing the complexities of today's polycrises. There are inherent limitations of this model, including its centralised control, bureaucracy, and the dominance of the Global North.

Alongside ongoing praise for the valuable work of humanitarian organisations, there is a rising chorus of critiques that signal deep-seated issues within the sector. These critiques emerge from a diverse spectrum, encompassing academic analyses (Fiori et al., 2021 and Slim, 2022), leadership insights from the field, and voices from think tanks, practitioners, and grassroots movements, including poignant open letters from Ukrainian and Polish NGOs.¹ These voices collectively highlight the sector's inefficiencies and the misalignment between current practices and the complex realities on the ground.

While identifying real problems, these critiques often fall short of offering tangible, actionable solutions and tend to overlook deeper systemic challenges. For instance, the discourse tends to oscillate between polarised views such as the effectiveness of local versus international approaches, or critiques of Western hegemony within the sector, which, while raising valid points about the need for decolonisation and more localised control, often do not provide clear pathways to achieve these aims, and they elevate binaries that are unhelpful to creating systemic and integrated solutions. This ongoing dialogue underscores the necessity for humanitarian efforts to transcend the current international-dominant frameworks and adopt more nuanced, integrative approaches that genuinely reflect and address the interdependencies of today's globalised world. The debates can polarise between either the modernist managerial reaction- "make it more efficient" or the blame the colonialist patriarchal approach- "it is all their fault." Both arguments have merit, but neither delivers the system-change needed.



Centralisation and Bureaucracy

The international system is managed through centralised bureaucracies that can be slow to respond to emergencies, lack flexibility, and struggle to adapt to local contexts. This over- centralisation leads to layers of bureaucracy and regulation that delay the delivery of aid, add huge costs, and also dilute the effectiveness of responses. Some centralised delivery of aid can be important, but it should always be understood as one of many actors in an ecosystem of aid.

1) See <https://shiftthepower.org/> for more open letters and resources from around the world



Paternalism and the Global North's Dominance

A significant critique of traditional humanitarianism is its paternalistic approach, where aid is often driven by the agendas and priorities of donors from the Global North, rather than the needs and input of the people experiencing poverty or crisis. This model reinforces a power imbalance where recipient communities are seen as passive recipients rather than active participants in their recovery. The narrative that frames these communities as helpless and in need of saving can undermine their agency and resilience.²



Dependency Culture

Modernity cultures create dependency cultures, these are endemic in traditional humanitarian models and severely restrict the potential for engaged and sustainable development. This model often results in local NGOs becoming heavily dependent on large, Western-based international NGOs (INGOs) for resources and survival. By focusing primarily on short-term relief, these efforts create cycles of dependency that inhibit local communities from developing the capabilities or systems necessary to manage future crises independently. This approach has been evident in numerous prolonged humanitarian interventions, where the absence of exit strategies or capacity sharing has perpetuated a sustained reliance on external aid. Such dependencies not only dilute the effectiveness of the response but also compromise the autonomy and resilience of the local entities and communities. This paradigm reinforces a power imbalance where local needs and voices are overshadowed by the priorities set by distant benefactors, often leading to solutions that are misaligned with the actual needs on the ground.



Critiques from Within

Voices within the humanitarian sector have increasingly called for reform, pointing to the inefficacy of outdated models in a changing world. Reports and studies by humanitarian workers themselves have highlighted the disconnect between headquarters and field operations, the inefficiencies spawned by competition for funding among NGOs, and the cultural insensitivity that can pervade projects designed without genuine local engagement.

² For further reading on this concept see: Duffield, M., 2018. Post-humanitarianism: Governing precarity in the digital world. John Wiley & Sons.

In 2022, a significant event highlighted the ongoing challenges within the international humanitarian sector. Numerous Ukrainian NGOs issued an open letter criticising INGOs for their slow and often out-of-touch responses to the crisis in Ukraine. The letter pointed out the excessive centralisation and bureaucracy that hindered effective and timely aid. It called for a re-evaluation of the roles and impact of INGOs, urging a shift towards more localised and responsive approaches. This incident serves as a potent illustration of the need for humanitarian efforts to adapt and embrace principles that prioritise local leadership and direct engagement with affected communities, aligning with the broader shift towards Eco-Mutualism that we see from movements like Pledge for Change and RINGO (Re-imagining INGOs).³



Moving Beyond the Modernity Trap

The challenges of the P.I. Age cannot be met by simply tweaking old models or using the current ways of working, which have caused the problems, to make amends. A key reason why humanitarian leaders so often feel stuck is that they are trapped by modernity mindsets. The problem is that they don't see their entrapment. To solve the challenges they face, they turn to more efficiency, more control, and better measurements. Change will only come when leaders and organisations realise the modernity discourse they are entrapped in and move beyond it.

The transition beyond modernity's mindsets requires a cultural shift in the humanitarian sector (and beyond). This shift involves recognising and dismantling the outdated structures and assumptions that limit effective and humane responses.

The climate crisis subverts the modernity idea that humanity can control nature. By embracing more flexible, adaptive, and inclusive approaches, we can better respond to the multifaceted challenges of today.

The move is from machine metaphors that dominate today's sector to ecosystem metaphors that are the future; from closed system control, to open system participation.

To escape the modernity trap is to liberate ourselves from trying to control the world around us, and realise we are interdependent inhabitants, sharing a precarious life together with our human and non-human companions on this fragile and beautiful planet earth.

³ See <https://rightscolab.org/ringo/> and <https://pledgeforchange2030.org>

Chapter 4: SALVATION AID

Salvation mindsets are the second force that holds back radical change in the international humanitarian sector. Salvation aid is an endemic force in the humanitarian process and is pervasive in Global North-dominant big-aid donors and organisations.

In the imaginary space of the Global North mainstream opinion, “Humanitarians are selfless souls who travel far from home to an unfamiliar and challenging environment, giving up a more privileged existence in their own country. More often than not the assumption is that the aid worker comes from the developed world and that they are most probably white. It may be startling to learn that about 90% of aid workers are in fact nationals working in their own countries in the developing world” (Houdley, 2017).

This viewpoint has been reinforced by the mass marketing and fundraising content that portrays helpless victims next to white saviours. The reality is very different. Also, financially, we often think the Global North is the dominant funder of aid, yet the majority of funds are being sent by relatives via remittances as illustrated below.

Total Cross-Border Resource Flows

In 2020, the 47 countries included in this report contributed USD 841 billion in total via four resource flows (see Figure 1). The largest share came from remittances, accounting for 70 percent and reaching USD 590 billion.

Official development assistance totaled USD 180 billion in 2020, representing about one-fifth (21%) of the overall amount. Philanthropy comprised 8 percent at USD 70 billion. With a turbulent year in 2020, PCI reached only USD 0.4 billion, or less than 0.1 percent of the total.

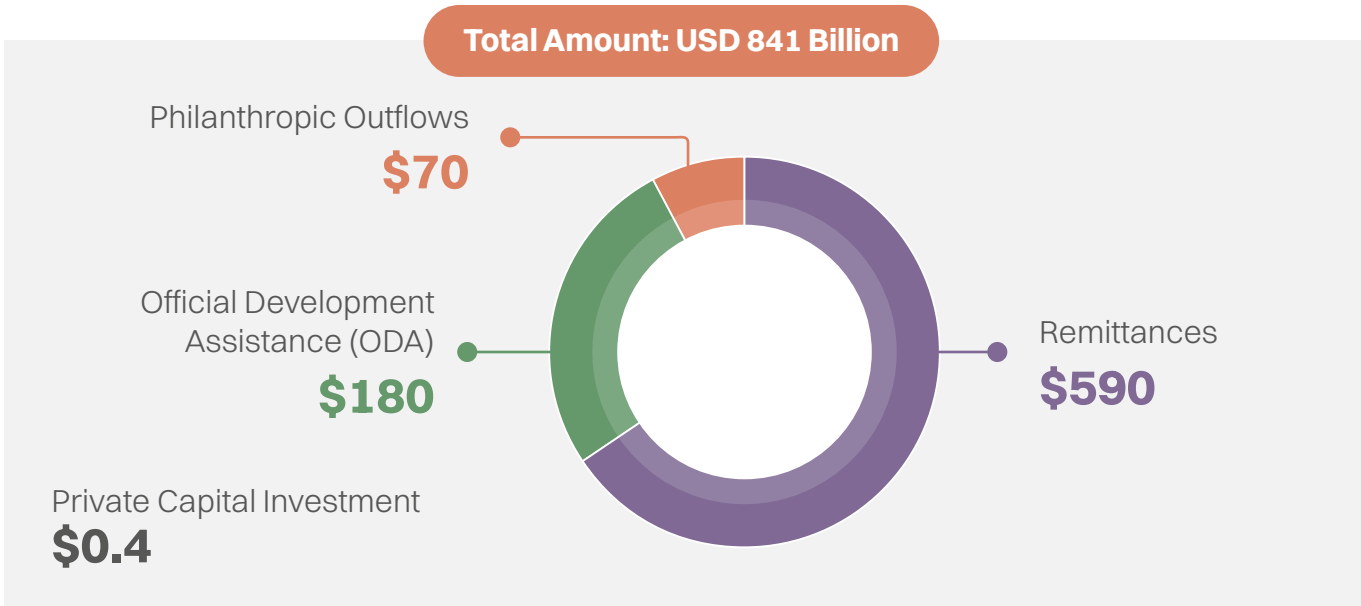


FIGURE 1. TOTAL CROSS-BORDER RESOURCES FROM 47 COUNTRIES BY FLOW 2020 (in billions of inflation-adjusted 2020 US dollars)

The humanitarian salvation story in the Global North transcends the sector and is present in wider society, propagated through media and cultural superiority narratives (Fiori et al., 2021).

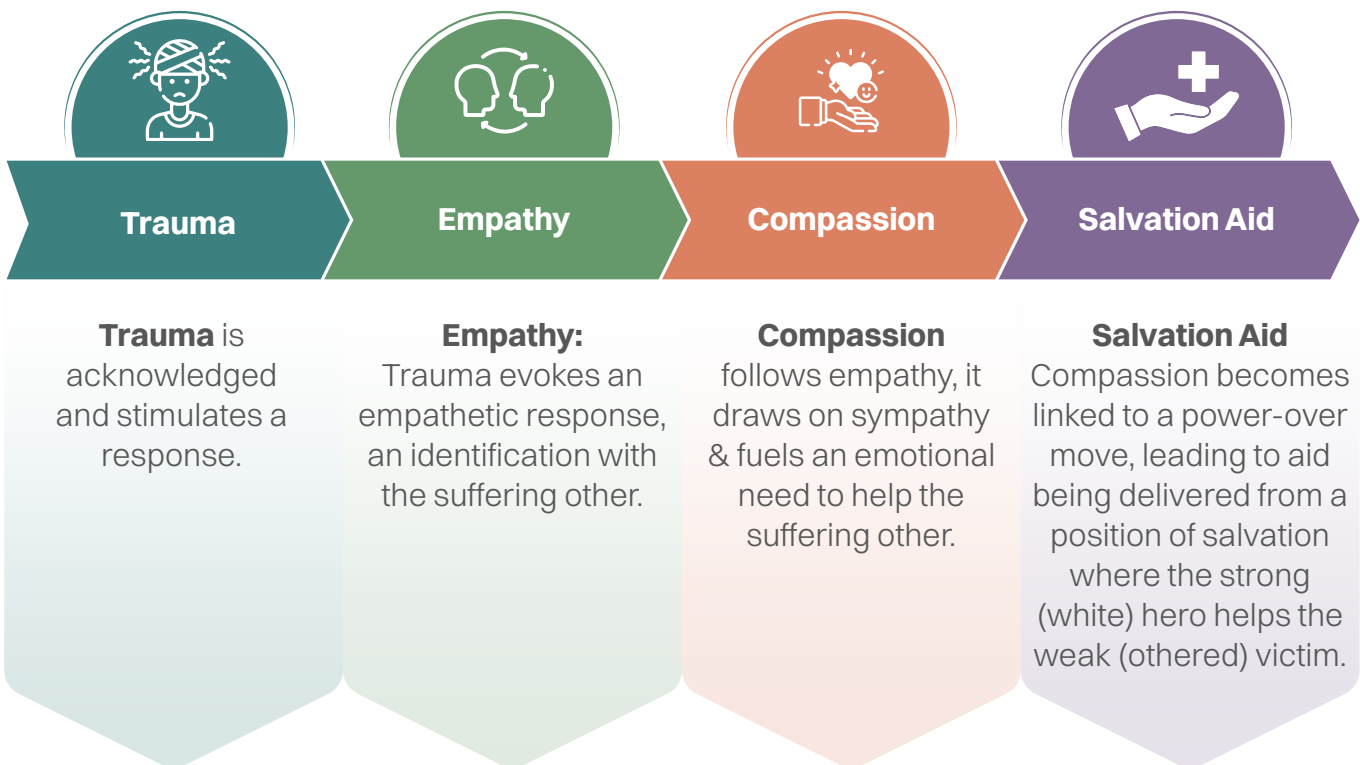
In the Global South, large INGOs are not seen as saviours but as political actors, often with negative connotations (Khan, 2023).

Whilst a change takes place in the rhetoric and marginal gains are made, there is still resistance to change. Neal Ascherson (2024) reviewing *Empireworld: How British Imperialism Shaped the Globe* by Sathnam Sanghera Neal, Ascherson writes:

“He (Sanghera) looks at global charities for white saviour attitudes and racial bias. He finds plenty. Christian Aid long preserved the paternalism of colonial missionaries: Save the Children hired Ken Loach to make a film about itself but then went to the law to have it suppressed when it ‘criticised the charities neo-colonial attitudes and practices’...”

Over the past 200 years, humanitarian aid has been delivered through the following process:

Salvation Aid: Compassion equals power-over





Unconscious Attachments to Salvation Identity

There are many calls for the decolonisation of aid and for a shift in power, from the Global North to the Global South, from centralisation to localisation, supported by Pledge for Change 2030. To support these changes, a greater awareness of unconscious attachments to the status quo is required. Individuals and organisations have very strong attachments to the idealised self that comes from being a saviour. Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee, and CARE are good examples where the salvation ethos is baked into its name and its DNA.

In the aid sector, there is a paradox: a real conscious desire to change from colonialism exists, and yet an unconscious desire is embedded in many humanitarians, and collectively in their organisations, to retain the salvation identity.

Salvation aid is about a power-over relationship and this provides real and material benefits. Salvationists in the Global North get good returns in terms of economic rewards, which create incentives and biases for those working in the international parts of the system. There are other rewards such as the social kudos of being identified as a 'good' person helping others.

Another unspoken element that keeps salvation aid going is the pleasures of power. Having power-over can be enjoyable, although this is rarely discussed or acknowledged, and therefore becomes part of the shadow that haunts the sector. The non-material attachments to salvation aid are more powerful than the material. Many join the humanitarian sector with good intent and to act ethically. This inevitably develops into individuals and organisations as having 'good identities' which are reinforced by wider society, "you work as a humanitarian.... that must be so rewarding helping others." Individuals will protect their 'good identity' with all they have, it becomes who they are and to challenge it means losing a vital part of themselves.

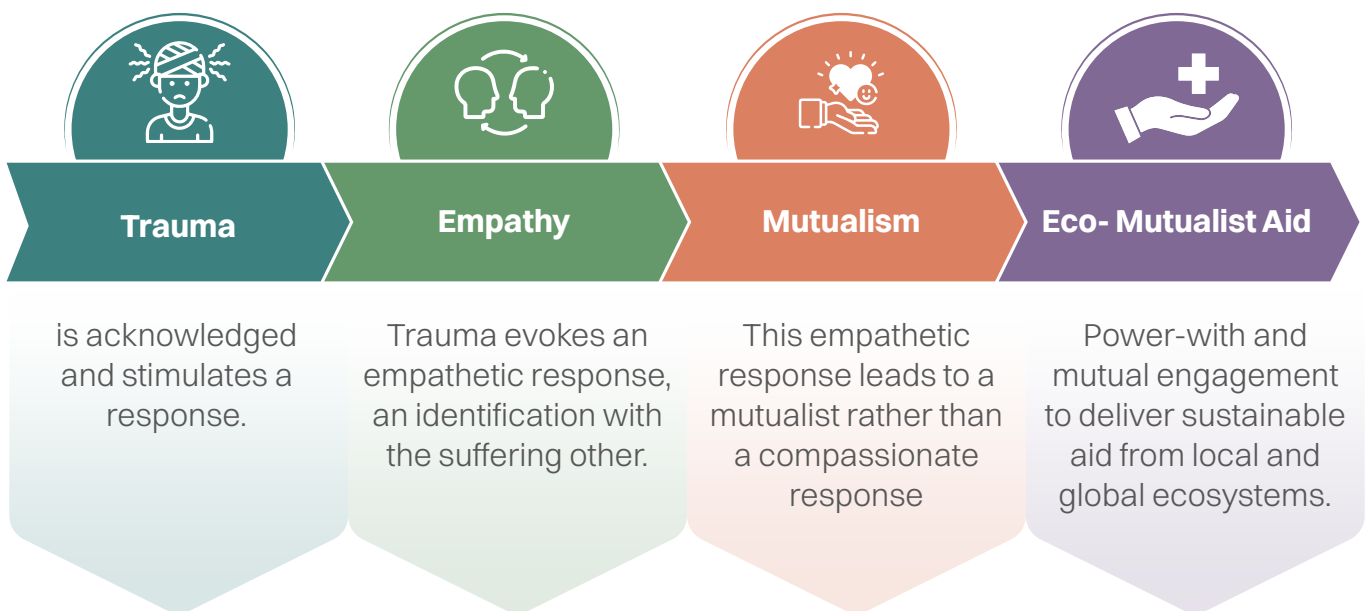
The change required is to substitute the 'good identity' of being a salvationist, with the acknowledgement that being a salvationist isn't good! However, working with others in a mutualist way is another way to gain unconscious pleasure, and is actually much more gratifying and at the same time more impactful.

The salvation relationship is also a social defence against the anxiety of working with trauma, distancing the carer from the 'victim' who becomes an object of care. When one party is a powerful saviour and the recipient is a powerless victim, both parties are somewhat dehumanised causing an emotional detachment to take place. This can be helpful in the short-term to manage trauma for the salvation aid worker, but in the longer term, the dissonance comes back to create post-traumatic stress challenges. In the immediate crisis, it prevents mutual engagement and relationships with those suffering the crisis, which leads to top-down decision-making, and often misjudgements alongside disempowering the other in crisis.

The humanity of a citizen is diminished when their agency is removed and they become a victim to be helped. The saviour is also dehumanised as they project their vulnerability onto the suffering other, and create a self-narrative of being powerful and strong, detaching themselves from difficult emotions. In central offices, another way salvation aid shows up is through the professionalisation and technocratisation of the sector that has created a new expert class. This is another power play and makes it difficult for experts to listen and value the knowledge others have.

Eco-Mutualist Aid: Mutualism equals power-with

In contrast to salvation aid, Eco-Mutualist aid changes the narrative.





01

Turning away from compassion and embracing mutualism short circuits the salvationist response, and demands a power-with response. Mutualism asks how can I/we work mutually with others, including those suffering, to discover what will really make a difference, and to acknowledge their local expertise, and experience and follow their lead. This produces an emotional shift, a power shift, and a change in the emotional economy. Eco-mutualism undoes the salvation process, by focusing on collaboration, equity, partnership, listening, and learning from each other.

02

Acknowledging shared agency and shared responsibility is an essential part of the mutualist approach. The recognition that all parties gain value changes the dynamics from the outset. The humanitarian response becomes a mutualist engagement harnessing the agency of all, including the suffering recipient, local NGOs and CSOs, donors, governance organisations and agencies, and citizens working locally, nationally, and internationally.

03

By applying ecosystem thinking to the mutualist response, we shift from looking upwards at a powerful hierarchy for answers to looking at the resources available laterally and in the whole ecosystem.

04

Eco-Mutualist aid is often already well practised in the way humanitarian aid is enacted on the ground. The task we have is to amplify this response, with the longer-term aim of local actors collaborating to build civic society responses that are more impactful, better value, and most importantly build resilience, and anticipatory and sustainable systems approaches to the challenges they face.

05

Eco-Mutualism is being enacted in local communities and has long been an alternative to the top-down, one-size-fits-all approach. It promotes a model that values local knowledge, fosters community participation, and emphasises the interdependence of all stakeholders in the humanitarian process. This approach doesn't get caught in the binary local-versus-global, or Global North-versus-Global South, as the ecosystem approach includes all parts of the ecosystem, but without hierarchical intention.

06

Global North responses will remain important but should always be seen as one part of a much greater ecosystem response led by those closest to the crisis or need. This approach seeks to democratise humanitarian aid, making it more responsive, respectful, & ultimately more effective in meeting the real needs of people facing crises.

Box 6.

Case Study

MARTA LEWANDOWSKA- WRÓŹ

HR and Administration Director,
Save the Children Poland



Russia's invasion of Ukraine (launched on February 24, 2022 by the Russian Federation) had an impact on the emigration of people from Ukraine to Poland and many other European countries.

During the first wave of refugees, more than 80,000 people a day crossed the border to Poland. This was the first time since World War II that Poland faced such a large number of refugees, and it was not prepared for it, legally, or organisationally. Society and NGOs did not have adequate experience and knowledge in crisis operations.

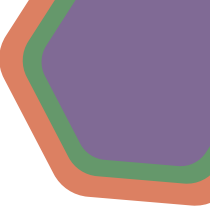
There was a lot of chaos, activities were not coordinated, and sometimes they were even harmful. There was a lack of cooperation between organisations and lack of cooperation with the Government, the greatest emphasis was on citizens who were willing to help but lacked adequate knowledge and training. After a year of Poles supporting the refugees, there came a time of reflection about what we could do better and how to act together in agreement and joint coordination of aid activities.

This was the time when Save the Children began to establish cooperation with various smaller and larger NGOs in Poland. We wanted to pass on the knowledge and experience gained over the previous year by SCI staff as well as our foundation.

We leveraged our training capabilities together with the Humanitarian Leadership Academy to impart as much knowledge as possible regarding humanitarian standards, emergency operations, and how to bring aid in a more structured way.

Eco-Mutualist principles were manifested through the distribution of leadership responsibilities. Decision-making wasn't concentrated at the top; instead, leadership was distributed among individuals and organisations within the ecosystem. Local NGOs were actively engaged in the decision-making process, emphasising their role as critical contributors. Leadership from the edge became a cornerstone, recognising that innovation often arises from the peripheries where diverse perspectives and experiences converge.

Instead of relying solely on in-house expertise, we recognised the richness of the ecosystem and established partnerships with local NGOs, volunteers, and students. I noticed that this collaborative approach provides a holistic understanding of the challenges and facilitates the co-creation of solutions. The ecosystem, consisting of



different stakeholders, can become a source of strength, providing different perspectives and resources necessary for successful implementation, which we impart during trainings, and which will translate into more effective action and assistance in the future.

By transferring knowledge to support ecosystem partnerships and finding solutions focused on standards, this initiative will not only improve humanitarian standards but perhaps in the future also create a resilient and cooperative ecosystem capable of meeting future challenges.

The move towards Eco-Mutualist aid will be discussed in part two.

Part 2.



Re-enchanting Humanitarianism

INTRODUCTION

Part two of this book sets out a way forward for humanitarianism.

Eco-Mutualism presents a radical shift in humanitarian strategy. This chapter explores how embracing ecosystem thinking and mutualistic principles can radically change humanitarian efforts to become more adaptive and sustainable. This is not a prescriptive template or model of action; the very essence of Eco-Mutualism is that it demands mutual engagement within local and global ecosystems. Each ecosystem will co-create the humanitarian responses they desire and that fits within their context.



Eco-Mutualism aims to amplify and promote learning from local communities. It emphasises lateral and peer-to-peer engagement seeking knowledge, wisdom, and best practices from within local ecosystems and transferring this learning across the wider aid ecosystem. It also draws upon the international experience from beyond the humanitarian aid sector.

Another critique of the sector is that it can be very self-referential and inward-looking. INGOs have strong internal cultures and often don't look beyond their own walls, they are competitive with other INGOs whilst preaching collaboration and partnership. Movements like Pledge for Change 2030 are welcome as they challenge this by building bridges and partnerships to lead change in the sector.



The sector more broadly has its own language and discourses that entrap it and often has a strong resistance to learning from outside. This refers back to salvation aid mentalities, where the idealised-self becomes grandiose and knows better than local communities and outsiders.

This is a dangerous state of affairs that needs to change. Chapter five invites you to reflect openly on your experience of humanitarianism, drop the defences and try to embrace what this might mean for you and your ecosystem. The final chapter six, addresses the need for re-enchantment, to co-create a dynamic and re-energised sector.



Chapter 5:

ECO-MUTUALISM: GUIDING FUTURE PRACTICE

Ecosystems and Mutualism provide two anchor points that act as a guide for humanitarian practitioners. They emerge from our work in the humanitarian sector and beyond it, building on current local community activity, and also from a wider perspective drawn from international research and dialogue with leadership scholars and practitioners in diverse sectors (Western and Garcia 2016).

The two words are master signifiers: together they form a powerful pairing that can help guide humanitarian strategy and operational activity.



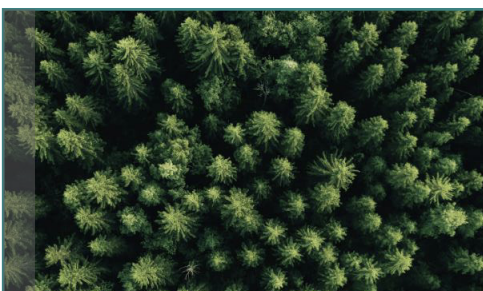
Ecosystems

Ecosystems demand a change of perspective, a widening of vision, and a shift away from the hierarchy, and towards holism, spatial thinking, seeing patterns, connectivity, and interdependence.



Mutualism

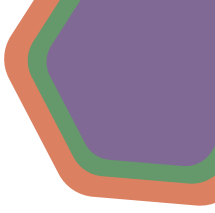
Ecosystems demand meeting each other with generosity, openness, and a desire to engage fully. To be mutual undoes hierarchical power, and means to work with each other in a spirit of collaboration and from a position of equity.



Ecosystem

Ecosystem approaches undo the linear, top-down & centralising behaviours that have plagued international humanitarian aid and development interventions. In an ecosystem, there is no top or centre.

Each individual, organisation, technology, and environmental/social context are active participants in a dynamic and interdependent whole. Turning away from the obsession with results-based thinking, ecosystemic approaches open our mindsets to engage with new possibilities, new resources, new knowledge, and different ideas. Voices from the margins and from civil society amplify their Eco-leadership approaches, and through connecting to local and global ecosystems offer a radically different way of delivering aid.



Mutualism

Mutualism guides the humanitarian work towards acknowledging mutual agency, recognising that everybody has a part to play.

Co-creating mutual/shared value challenges the binary power divide between aid-giver and aid-recipient. Mutual accountability challenges the dependency model of aid, moving towards an interdependency approach where all participants take responsibility and thus experience being

engaged citizens. Mutual appreciation that all actors have agency is core to this approach.



Ecosystem Thinking

Ecosystem thinking sees all elements of a humanitarian crisis as interconnected and interdependent. This approach looks at immediate needs and considers also the long-term health of the entire system, including environmental, social, and economic factors.

For example, in managing refugee crises, ecosystems thinking would not only address immediate shelter and food needs but also consider the long-term impact on local communities and the environment, aiming to co-create sustainable livelihoods and integration strategies. This means building a coalition of partners and engaging local actors in decision-making from the outset.

This will always be hugely challenging, due to diverse power demands, including competing and conflictual political tensions at local and global levels as currently seen in Gaza and Sudan. The only way to approach this is to make the power relations transparent and enable interventions that support viral change beginning at local levels, whilst others influence and create spaces for change at more macro levels.

Ecosystem thinking means shifting from the vertical to the horizontal, so rather than looking up at the hierarchy of donors and powerful INGOs/UN for them to provide solutions, the focus returns to ecosystems, local and global, physical and virtual, which can provide resources in terms of people, technology, and aid.

Recognising and supporting civil society responses i.e. listening and connecting LNGOs, CSOs, INGOs, local governing actors, and private sector players to work collaboratively together is a fundamental part of a mutualist ecosystem response.



Collaborative Networks and Local Empowerment

By fostering collaborative networks that leverage local knowledge and expertise, globally headquartered humanitarian organisations can enhance their responsiveness and relevance. This involves forming equitable partnerships with local NGOs, community leaders, and other stakeholders who understand the local context and can help tailor interventions to be culturally appropriate and environmentally sustainable. Such networks also facilitate a more efficient use of resources and reduce redundancy in aid efforts.



Principles of Mutualism in Action

Mutualism in humanitarian aid emphasises reciprocity and shared benefits among all stakeholders, including affected populations, local governments, NGOs, and donors. The mutualist principle challenges the traditional donor-recipient dynamic and promotes a partnership model where each participant's knowledge and resources are valued.

Eco-Mutualism shifts away from trying to reproduce Westernised health and education systems that re-create the 'factory-health and education models'. For example, community-based systems strengthening health and education programs where local practitioners are trained to deliver services and build local capacity while also addressing immediate health and education needs.

Power and resource imbalances will always exist, however, the Eco-Mutualist approach aims to make these imbalances more transparent and create a culture where all voices participate.

Box 7.

Ecosystem Mapping Case Study

LAURA JEPSON-LAY

Regional Director
Program Development, Quality & Impact,
Save The Children East & Southern Africa

Ecosystem Approaches connectivity and interdependence

On the circular economy project, the ecosystem focuses on collaboration to contribute to social purpose by addressing electronic waste (e-waste) and child labour and school drop out by having interdependence among stakeholders e.g. government, NGO, corporate partners, and community groups. Participative partners have given their own respective resources which is not limited to funding but also management and human resource to achieve the impact. Each partner has the role to play on how they can drive conversation on impact, how their capability is critical element for the success of initiative.





Five Principles of Mutualism

01

Mutual Agency: Each actor and stakeholder has agency, whilst different levels of power resources and influence exist, a mutualist approach demands a recognition of the agency of all, with the aim for the greatest equity in decision-making.

02

Mutual Respect: Engaging with an ethos of respect and equity is an essence of Eco-Mutualist approaches. Marginalised voices need to be listened to and engaged with differently. No longer with a salvationist-empowerment focus, but with mutual respect that leads to radical transformation: from marginalisation to full participation.

03

Mutual Value: Creating and acknowledging shared value in humanitarian aid undoes salvation aid. Donors and all humanitarian actors, including those not part of the international aid system – private enterprises, faith-based organisations etc, gain value from their aid engagement: in economic and professional terms, and also in identity and social value, they are not the oversimplified heroic, altruistic actors they portray. Aid recipients and local communities need a strong voice to determine what value is co-created within humanitarian aid and development work, disrupting colonial assumptions.

04

Mutual Accountability: With mutualism comes shared accountability and responsibility. What different stakeholders are responsible for requires negotiation and dialogue. Mutual accountability ensures ownership rather than having something done to a community or for a community. Accountability also leads to more sustainable outcomes.

05

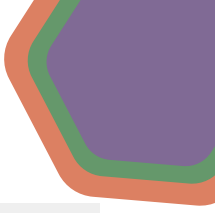
Mutual Participation: Mutualism implies participation, there are no bystanders, just participants taking up their agency to the best of their power and ability. We are all potential humanitarians, it is not limited to a few professional experts, and the more participation, the quicker change will come.



Eco-Mutualist Humanitarianism

Eco-Mutualism is a call to action and advocates for local and specific diversity and a relational approach, emphasising that humanitarian efforts should embody participative, collaborative, and grounded actions.

The pairing of 'ecosystems and mutualism' brings two powerful concepts together that can guide humanitarianism into a dynamic future. The aim is to unlock the talent, energy, and power of collaboration that lies trapped or repressed within our humanitarian ecosystems due to structural and colonial power.



Eco-Mutualism

Eco-Mutualist thinking produces more engaged collaborations, it amplifies, encourages, and shares learning from existing practices that utilise the hidden resources in our ecosystems. This creates more impactful and sustainable outcomes. Better results are achieved from a more purposeful, participatory approach that maximises the ecosystemic opportunities. Eco-Mutualism is a generative approach, realising existing power and potential through collaboration, shifting from dependency to interdependency cultures, and embracing systems thinking to deliver systems-change.

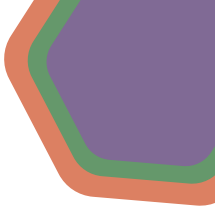
Eco-Mutualism is an emergent, not a prescriptive, approach. It is an unfolding process, where each local context co-produces its particular Eco-Mutualist humanitarianism.



Overcoming the Challenges of Implementing Eco-Mutualism

Implementing an ecosystems and mutualism-based approach is not without challenges. It requires significant changes in organisational culture, funding structures, and programme design. Moreover, measuring the impact of such complex interventions can be difficult with traditional metrics, which often value immediate, easily quantifiable outcomes over long-term systemic change. Re-thinking how aid is delivered, what outcomes are desired, and how efficacy and success are measured are all part of this journey.

The strength of Eco-Mutualism is that it doesn't have to wait for top-down change. Wherever you are in the ecosystem, change is possible. Eco-Mutualism is practised through the application of Eco-Leadership approaches, such as leading from the edge and the understanding that small changes can lead to big changes, drawing on the experience and theories of social movements.



Eco-Mutualism in Practice

Imagine if every humanitarian meeting was guided by the anchor points of ecosystem and mutualism, asking questions like these:

- Who is present and who has been left out of this meeting? And why? **01** -----
- **02** Where does power lie in this meeting?
- Who has a voice and who doesn't? **03** -----
- **04** Who is heard when they speak and who is not?
- How can we improve our collaboration with partners? **05** -----
- **06** How can we engage aid recipients more in designing resilient responses?
- Where in our civic society can we find the right people and partners to deliver aid better? **07** -----
- **08** Where in the local ecosystem can we find the experience, expertise, knowledge, leadership, energy, technology and materials we need?
- Where in the global aid ecosystem can we find partners that can support what we need to do, rather than what they tell us we need to do? **09** -----
- **10** How can we look awry? How can we reframe the challenge to seek more sustainable and innovative solutions?
- What gaps exist in our ecosystem of responsiveness to climate flooding? **11** -----
- **12** How can the gap be filled?
- Who can we connect within the ecosystem 'to make a difference that matters? **13** -----

Eco-Mutualism is already being practised in many places, and under many diverse names, it is not a fixed way of working. Pledge for Change 2030 is a good example and has three pledges: Authentic Storytelling, Equitable Partnerships and Influencing Wider Change.

Equitable Partnerships emphasises the Mutualist approach - they write: "Equitable partnerships will be our default approach by 2030. National and local organisations will lead humanitarian and development efforts wherever possible."

- ▶ Wherever we work, our broad aim is to encourage a more resilient, independent, and diverse civil society that works in real solidarity with international organisations.
- ▶ INGOs competing for funds, facilities, and talent can unintentionally weaken civil society in the countries where we operate. In the years ahead, we'll allocate more resources to help national and local organisations take the lead.
- ▶ There will be more collaboration between INGOs to reduce duplication of effort when local organisations are dealing with two or more of us.
- ▶ We'll take a more collaborative approach to risk management.
- ▶ We will share the burden of costs in ways that will make our partners stronger and more sustainable.

Authentic Storytelling aims to disrupt the white-gaze aligning our call to move from salvationism to mutualism: they write: "Some of the stories we tell and the pictures that illustrate them have reinforced harmful stereotypes. This kind of storytelling, sometimes associated with 'white gaze' distorts reality, and should be eradicated from our internal and external communications."

Influencing Wider Change emphasises the ecosystem approach to systems change: They write: "Our leaders will publicly announce the pledge, spelling out to peers, donors, philanthropists and the private sector why we've decided to change the way we work and how we're going to do it."

- ▶ We will argue for these changes to be made across the aid and development sector and we'll create opportunities for Global South leaders to lead conversations and advocate for change in public platforms.
- ▶ We will speak out against any government policies or international action that perpetuates a colonial approach to aid and development.
- ▶ We will track our progress in implementing the Pledge for Change 2030 and report it publicly to show staff, supporters, partners, and the global aid system that we're 'walking the talk'.
- ▶ We will share what we learn and demonstrate how we're shifting power and resources to the Global South with the aim of encouraging other INGOs to follow suit.

The Humanitarian Leadership Academy, The Eco-Leadership Institute, and Pledge for Change are working collaboratively to further the aims of all three partners, aligned to deliver the Pledges and an Eco-Mutualist future for humanitarianism.

Chapter 6:

RE-ENCHANTING HUMANITARIANISM

This chapter explores why so much of the sector is disenchanted and stuck, and the steps required to re-enchant humanitarianism, which has to happen for a revitalised, dynamic and adaptive new humanitarianism to emerge.



Disenchantment in Humanitarian Work

Disenchantment often arises in the humanitarian sector due to feelings of ineffectiveness within existing systems, amplified by routinisation and bureaucratisation. Humanitarians engage in this work because they are values-driven and deeply care about delivering change. When this is frustrated by a system that blocks change and makes them feel impotent, then disenchantment sets in. Sadly, many of the disenchanted workers in INGOs become part of the problem they complain about. They take 'pleasure in their displeasure,' complaining about the system, and unconsciously enjoying their complaining, whilst at the same time resisting any changes that might challenge their positions or disrupt their safety.

This sense of disillusionment demotivates staff and weakens the impact of humanitarian efforts.

To counteract this, re-enchanting the sector involves revitalising the passion and commitment that initially drives individuals to work in this field. Re-enchantment is generative and generous, it demands liberating autonomy and enabling people to use their skills and talents, something that is lacking in the big INGO machine cultures.

Re-enchantment is not just about changing policies or practices; it's about fostering a deeper emotional and cultural connection to the work. This process involves creating environments that celebrate creativity, autonomy, and generosity and re-engage the human spirit. The goal is to shift from a culture of compliance and disillusionment to one of inspiration and active engagement.



Re-enchanting humanitarian teams and organisations

There are different ways to re-enchant teams and organisations. One way is to implement Eco-Leadership's three core principles: Social Purpose, Participative Organisations, and Eco-Mindsets. These principles support the re-enchantment process.

Principle
01

Social Purpose - What is your true desire?

Clarifying with individuals and teams their social purpose is essential to re-enchant and reengage. This is much more than repeating an organisation's vision statement. What is the real purpose of their work, and how does this align with social change? This clarifying process is about embodying the team's purpose, defining what is their true desire and how they can connect it to their actual work.

Principle
02

Participative Organisations - Valuing everybody's input.

When employees are fully participating, feel actively engaged, and that their skills, knowledge, and efforts are being appreciated this leads to a re-enchantment. Valuing diverse leadership inputs, informal and formal, and valuing contributions re-enchants those who are disillusioned.

Principle
03

Eco-Mindsets - Connecting and belonging.

Developing eco-mindsets means to reawaken our human connections with each other and with the natural environment. Modernity disenchant as it separates and divides. Eco-Mindsets reconnect us with each other, and we discover we belong to the whole world, we depend on each other to thrive and survive. This reconnection and belonging is what re-enchants us.

Box 8.

Eco-Mutualist Re-enchantment

This is an excellent example of Re-enchanting Humanitarianism, drawing on the rich resources within the local ecosystem, temple gardens and the elderly in this example, and connecting them together to create change via mutualism rather than looking for top-down change. The beauty of this case study is that a deeply humanitarian response is not reliant on centralised funding or on professional humanitarians - we are all humanitarians and can all mutually produce ecosystems of well-being.

From Condoms to Cucumbers (from Devex Online Journal)

In eastern Thailand, an innovative project is turning temple grounds into thriving vegetable gardens, helping older people in the process. The mastermind behind this initiative is none other than Mechai Viravaidya — famously known as Thailand's "Condom King" for his work in family planning.

Octogenarian Mechai, who earned his unique nickname from his advocacy work in the '70s and '80s, believes in the untapped potential of those over 60. With the global elderly population set to double by 2050, he sees the **gardens as a way for older people to continue contributing to society**, proving life doesn't grind to a halt after a certain age.

Piloted at three temples in Buriram province, the project uses temple land for cultivating crops. Mechai argues that community-led initiatives, rather than government support, are **the key to successful eldercare**— especially given Thailand's meager state pensions.

Mechai plans to scale this initiative nationwide by using Thailand's over 40,000 temples as “elderly country clubs.” Mechai sat down with Devex contributor Rebecca Root to explain **why he's turned his attention from condoms to cucumbers and eldercare**, and why the work must be locally led.

You can read more about this here:

<https://www.devex.com/news/devex-newswire-how-thailand-s-condom-king-envisions-eldercare-107792>



Re-enchanting by Activating Positive Change Together

Re-enchantment occurs when individuals and teams feel they are making a difference, however small, in a system. So much international aid work is anti-task i.e. it leaves individuals feeling empty and frustrated. Local NGOs fill out endless forms to try and gain funding, knowing that this time could be spent in such better ways. Creating small changes in ecosystems and understanding that many small changes lead to big changes overcomes the inertia felt when one waits for change to come from the top down. Getting good stuff done is essential to re-enchant. As Kate Moger, Director of Pledge for Change says, “We can make the world different by doing things differently!”

Eco-Mutualism re-enchants by:

Promoting Connectivity and Belonging: Strengthening the sense of community within and between organisations and among stakeholders can help mitigate feelings of isolation. This includes more inclusive decision-making processes and fostering a culture where every team member feels they are a valued part of the organisation.

Distributing Leadership: Encouraging a distributed leadership model values diversity from individuals at all levels of an organisation. This approach not only enhances engagement and job satisfaction but also ensures a diversity of ideas and solutions that can rejuvenate programmes and initiatives.

Exploring Power Relationships: Power is everywhere, and Eco-Mutualism works towards distributing power with greater ethical awareness i.e. taking social justice stances and acknowledging structural power inequities. This is not a utopian view, it acknowledges some have more power and resources than others. Making power transparent is the first step towards greater social justice.

Engaging with Narrative and Storytelling: Stories have the power to transform perspectives and ignite passion. By sharing successful case studies, personal experiences from the field, and narratives of change, organisations can inspire and reconnect their members to the core humanitarian mission.

Embracing Innovation and Creativity: Allowing for innovation within the workflow encourages team members to come up with novel solutions to complex problems. This can be facilitated by engaging with artwork, thinking parties, group lunches, and dialogues, reading groups, hackathons, innovation labs, and incentives for creative ideas that advance the team's and organisation's goals.

Re-enchanting humanitarianism is crucial for mobilising change and revitalising the sector's commitment to its core mission. By transforming the internal culture of humanitarian organisations, we can enhance their external effectiveness and impact.

Re-enchantment means unleashing leadership everywhere!



Guiding Principles for Eco-Mutualist Humanitarianism

Guiding Principles for Eco-Mutualist Humanitarianism

1. Eco-Mutualism aspires to bring mutual benefit and mutual value to all.
2. Eco-Mutualist humanitarianism is radically decentralised.
3. Eco-Mutualism moves from dependency cultures to interdependency.
4. Eco-Mutualism shifts power from hierarchical control towards horizontal engagement.
5. Aid beneficiaries are not regarded as dependent recipients, but as mutual participants.
6. All participating actors have agency.
7. Leadership from the edge (LEDGE) leads to viral change.

Outcomes of Eco-Mutualism

- Humanitarian aid and development are co-produced.
- The 'Eco-Mutualist turn' means that internationalism and centralised position-power are no longer considered the dominant force.
- Building civic society is always a by-product of Eco-Mutualism because collaborative engagement and participation are the heartbeat of a healthy civic society.
- Eco-Mutualist approaches address multiple crisis and complex aid and development challenges, with ecosystemic, mutualist, collaborative, adaptive, and pluralistic responses.

Conclusion

Eco-Mutualism presents a critical shift in humanitarian efforts, moving away from international, centralised, and paternalistic models towards a more inclusive, interconnected, collaborative, and ecosystem-based approach. As we have explored in this book, the challenges of the Precarious-Interdependent Age - characterised by environmental upheaval, rapid technological changes, and complex socio-political dynamics - demand innovative and radical change. Sadly, whilst many humanitarian employees are doing courageous and vital work across the globe, the international humanitarian system is too often failing them. What is required goes beyond incremental change. Salvation aid and modernist methods can no longer be justified.

- Humanitarians work within the world's most precarious communities.
- Humanitarians should therefore be leading the global response as to how we can adapt and live well in this Precarious-Interdependent Age.
- Currently, humanitarians are held back from achieving this by modernist and salvationist mindsets that continue to dominate the international aid sector.

This book revealed the repetition of control and paternalistic cultures over the three ages of humanitarianism and the power-over cultures that continue to be practised today.

Part two of the book, highlighted the pathway to change through Eco-Mutualism, an approach that resonates with those living in the global majority regions. When the Eco-Leadership Institute has worked with humanitarians from the Ukraine war, and those in Poland working with refugees; or in Tanzania meeting with Local and national NGOs, or on the online Eco-Leadership Certificate programme, the main response to this approach is, "Yes!! We get it! We already do a lot of this, how can we work mutually together to develop this further?" When these ideas are shared with INGO central offices, I get a few people who really engage and wish to mutually collaborate to drive this forward, and many others who are quietly resistant, sceptical, and undermine the progress we strive for.

Box 9.

Ecosystem Mapping Case Study

GUGU XABA

Chief Executive
Save the Children
South Africa

I value the interdependent, interconnected Eco-leadership system because it showed me the value of sustained change through self-transformation and gives me the ability to influence my networks in all instances whether at work, my personal life, and any other group I am exposed to.





The hope for change lies in five areas:

01

The voices from the Global majority are becoming so loud and so angry that colonial saviourism and the current modernist international aid system are being exposed as both immoral and inefficient, tearing down any idealisation retained in this salvation identity. Movements like Pledge for Change 2030 are examples of this drive for change.

02

The gap between the imaginary work of excellent delivery by the current salvation aid approach, and the reality of working as a local NGO or CSO or as part of the INGO 'machine' and seeing how it is failing people, exposes salvation aid as a broken project, no-longer viable as an option.

03

Increasingly, depth psychological approaches to understanding the emotional work required to deliver humanitarian aid are gaining traction. Understanding emotions at work and the importance of culture change will help the process of letting go of salvationist controlling tendencies and encourage Eco-Mutualist working.

04

The realisation of the new P.I. Age and the transformations required politically, socially, and environmentally are gaining traction (and resistance). Outside of the humanitarian sector, a coalition of progressive leaders and organisations are adopting Eco-Leadership approaches to become more decentralised, agile and ethical. Humanitarians operate in wider ecosystems and these changes will help drive the sector away from last-century modernity methods to new ecosystemic ways of working.

05

Eco-Mutualist approaches are re-enchanting. To experience being part of an ecosystem, connected to people working mutually together to build community; to feel connected and interdependent with the natural environment, and to feel a part of a global community of humans and non-humans sharing this planet makes us feel whole. This experience re-enchants us and promotes further change in the system.

Eco-Mutualism offers a framework that isn't a prescriptive way of delivering aid. It builds on and learns from existing best practices that are happening all around the world. Eco-Mutualism is an emergent practice and will be contextualised by local actors in any given situation.

Eco-Mutualist approaches are not next-generation change, they are happening now, they are alive and they need to be supported and amplified. Case studies and stories need to be shared, and the skills, experiences, and knowledge need further development.

An Eco-Mutualist humanitarian approach engages with all parts of the ecosystem and works mutually with our human and non-human companions. The aim is to maximise the opportunity to live as well as we can when facing a precarious and interdependent future.

To conclude, the adoption of Eco-Mutualism allows us to not only confront and adapt to the challenges of our times, but also to drive forward a more equitable, responsive, and valued humanitarian ecosystem.

Appendix 1. Context and Background of this Book

This book and the earlier report have been sponsored by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA) and the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC). The HLA has partnered with the Eco-Leadership Institute to develop this work.

This book emerges from the mutual engagement of leaders from within two different ecosystems:

Ecosystem 1. Global Leadership Scholars and Practitioners

The Eco-Leadership lens has been developed over 17 years, through academic research alongside direct engagement with practitioners across the globe, and across all sectors. The Institute's founder, Simon Western, has worked as a coach, organisational consultant, leadership development trainer, and social activist, working with senior leaders in global companies such as Ford, HSBC bank, and Microsoft, and also with CEOs in the health and education sectors, and leaders at all levels in the non-profit and faith sectors. This intimate engagement with leaders, combined with a critical theory and psychoanalytically oriented approach, led to the publication of books and journal papers that have developed the theory and practice of Eco-Leadership.

In 2016, 40 scholars and practitioners from 20 diverse regions and countries were mutually engaged to research and write essays about how leadership had evolved in their region/country, drawing on the specific historical, cultural and social themes in that region. Countries/regions included were: The Middle East, Argentina, ASEAN region, Australia, Brazil, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Russia, Scandinavia, South Africa, Turkey, UK, and USA. This collection of essays was 'woven' together to create a deeper understanding of how leadership and organisational change took place in diverse settings and was published in *Global Leadership Insights and Analysis* (Western and Garcia, 2018) providing a critical, global counterpoint to more Western-centric texts.

The understanding gained from this research has been utilised to explore Ecosystem Two.

Ecosystem 2. Humanitarian Practitioners

Extensive action-research took place in the humanitarian sector to deliver the initial report for the HLA in February 2023. This involved desk research across a wide range of journals, books, and websites. We also engaged in sharing the work developed in Ecosystem One on Eco-Leadership with the humanitarian sector. Eco-Leadership approaches and the embryonic ideas of Eco-Mutualist approaches were shared with those working in diverse parts of the humanitarian ecosystem. We held many unstructured conversations with diverse humanitarian actors, including two field trips; one to Poland to engage with Save the Children staff and local NGOs/CSOs responding to the Ukraine war, where we met with 13 local NGOs and their teams. The second field trip was to Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe to engage with local NGOs/CSOs and Save the Children staff, listening, learning, and sharing our thinking, then mutually engaging in future development where appropriate. We held trauma workshops to learn more about the systemic impacts of trauma on aid organisations and individuals.

Since the first report was published last year, further action-research projects have taken place to deepen our understanding of these Eco-Mutualist approaches. We are constantly learning what practices are already in existence, and how previous practices from different sectors across the globe can produce mutual learning. We have engaged with 500 humanitarian actors, including 60 humanitarians from Ukraine and Poland in a 3-day training event, hosted an Eco-Leadership training project for Country Directors and their teams across East and Southern Africa, and led an Eco-Leadership Certificate training for 40 humanitarian staff across the globe online, plus many other engagements with senior leaders in the sector.

This book is an emergent product of the entanglement between ecosystems one and two, it is a work in progress. It aims to stimulate dialogue and to be a part of a wider ecosystem of change that subverts a current international aid system and co-creates something new.... moving from disenchantment to re-enchantment.

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Book Endorsement

“Eco-Mutualism” is just what the doctor ordered for this century to save us all for the next few centuries! Just when the world is falling apart and our fragility showing up in every which way – countries / people / environment / Climate – all of which are falling apart due to our individualism and “here-and-now-ism” this is just the antidote I believe in and this book has brought it into a method. The concept as outlined suddenly makes me feel that the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) can be achieved if only we can establish mutualism and in an ecologically consistent way to ensure it is inclusive of all. The Book provides a way forward from concept to action. There is music in the very phrase “Eco-Mutualism” – I am already humming it.

Sudarshan Suchi

Chief Executive Officer Bal Raksha Bharat

Book Endorsement

“We can make the world different by doing things differently.” I encourage you to bring your curiosity, challenges, questions and ‘power-with’ to create new paradigms with the ideas and initiatives - like the Pledge for Change - highlighted in this book. I am excited by the possibilities Eco-Mutualism offers the humanitarian sector, and look forward to seeing how these will weave into the many efforts to create and nurture change in the emerging eco-system for global solidarity.”

Kate Moger

Global Director Pledge for Change



Humanitarian
Leadership
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The
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