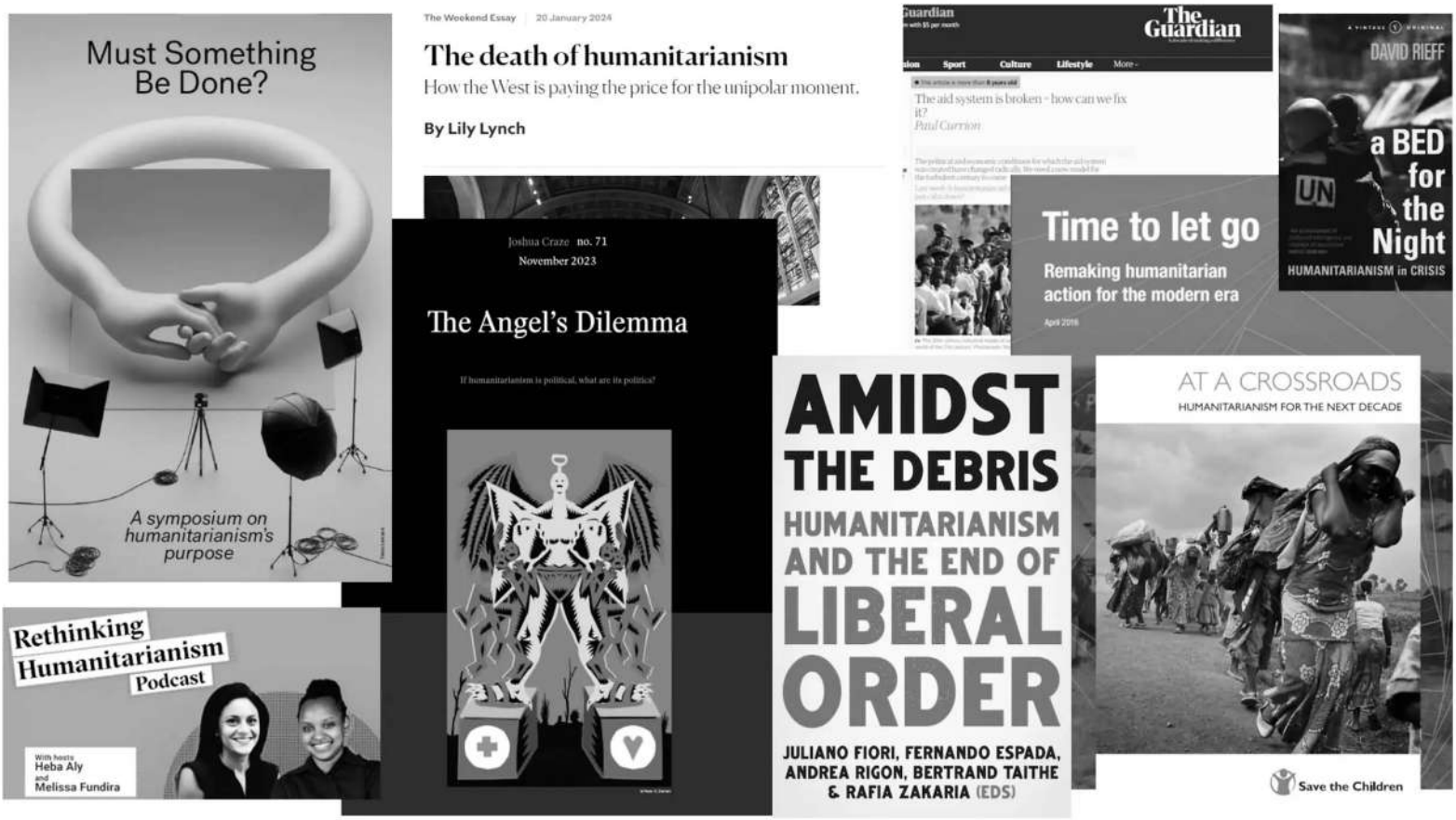
ALAMEDA .institute

WORKSHOP REPORT

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON HUMANITARIAN REFORM – PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

ELEANOR DAVEY



ALAMEDA .institute

WORKSHOP REPORT

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON HUMANITARIAN REFORM – PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

By Eleanor Davey

Acknowledgements
This report is part of a project jointly led by Eleanor Davey and Fernando Espada, entitled *The limits of humanitarianism: politics, crisis and reform in the era of climate change*, supported by Alameda Institute and the Disasters Emergency Committee. Thank you also to the participants of the workshop on which this report is based and those who provided feedback on an earlier draft.

Contact the researchers:
Eleanor Davey ekd@eleanordavey.com
Fernando Espada fernando.espada@savethechildren.org

About Alameda

Alameda is a research institute dedicated to fostering collaboration among researchers, civil society, and social movements worldwide to address pressing global challenges. Our mission is to promote critical thinking about today's major global challenges in order to find ways of dealing with current crisis in a collective and integrated way. Through our rigorous and collective research agenda, we aim to generate knowledge that informs decision-makers, in NGOs, multilateral organisations, and governments, opening up new paths — alamedas — towards a more sustainable future for children.

CONTACT
www.alameda.institute
info@alameda.institute

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This report draws from two online workshop sessions held in June and July 2024 to explore challenges in humanitarian reform. Participants included people currently involved in reform initiatives, leaders of past reform initiatives, and scholars of humanitarianism and international affairs. The conversations were held under Chatham House rule and are included in the report without attribution, alongside other research. The report reflects on common explanations for blockages in humanitarian reform, both internal to the system and beyond it, looking at these across different time periods and contexts. It considers four main themes: geopolitics, vested interests, bandwidth, and the capacity to imagine alternatives. The conclusion considers the importance of emotions in relation to reformist agendas.

INTRODUCTION

A system in perpetual motion

The humanitarian system is today in perpetual motion – not only in its role of identifying, responding to, and accompanying emergencies and protracted crises, but in its constant moves towards reform. At any given time, a plethora of initiatives are underway across different parts of the aid world, and more are being conceived. In the past two years, these have included attempts to reimagine coordination structures; work on a model for the coordination of cash relief; publication of a guide to ethical communications; the development of a new Risk Sharing Framework; revision of the Core Humanitarian Standards, which are intended to support respect for the rights of people in emergencies; and the "flagship initiative" of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), intended to help reduce bureaucracy. As these examples suggest, reform has become a standing practice of this professionalised sector. For the past 30 years at least, an almost uninterrupted reform cycle has also been used by humanitarian actors as a way to self-regulate and minimise the risk of external interference. "Reform projects have become incorporated into the logic of the humanitarian field", sociologist Monika Krause observed.[1]

As this culture of reform has set in, its history has begun to be recounted – at least in parts. Past reforms are primarily narrated in the context of new initiatives, creating a (selective) genealogy for the present. These stories of evolution seek both to explain the present and to provide evidence that changing it is possible. Hope and faith are needed in humanitarian reform, as the ills that reformers identify are serious – non-respect for people in need, waste of resources, egotism – and the obstacles that hinder their resolution do not seem to lessen with time. In this way, there is a deeper historical echo between the reformers of today's international humanitarian system and the "humanitarian reformers" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as abolitionists, prison reformers, advocates of poor relief, animal welfare campaigners. As Krause pointed out, both groups "start with the highest ambitions and best intentions. Facing undefined evil – and drawing legitimization from an undefined evil – actors then focus on a limited aspect of reality that they feel they can do something about."[2]

---

1 Monika Krause, *The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 128.

2 Ibid., 127.

Recently, the challenge of climate change has come to be considered the top threat facing humanitarian action.[3] Yet analysis of this challenge has often prioritised technical approaches: even studies that viewed climate change as "heading into the unknown" have proposed "adaptation" of the humanitarian system – more flexibility, stronger partnerships, and improvements in early warning systems – rather than more fundamental questioning. As frustration grows yet agendas proliferate, interrogating reform is important not only to improve understanding of such initiatives, but because humanitarian reform reflects deeper questions related to the sector's identity and meaning.

About this report

Despite hope that the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 would create, in the words of ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group, "the best opportunity in 25 years to rethink the foundations on which the system operates",[4] discussion of the humanitarian reform agenda today is often dominated by feelings of déjà vu and discouragement. This observation, drawn from reading and informal conversations, became the basis of a "critical reflection on humanitarian reform past, present and future" held in June and July 2024, contributions to which form the core of this report.

The discussions took place in two online sessions and brought together people currently involved in reform initiatives, leaders of past reform initiatives, and scholars of humanitarianism and international affairs. We are grateful to all participants, who engaged generously and constructively with each other's perspectives and ideas. As we prioritised openness to critical analysis and sought to maximise people's ability to speak freely, some perspectives were inevitably under-represented.

Discussions were structured around common explanations for blockages in humanitarian reform, both internal to the system and beyond it, looking at these across different time periods and contexts. The first session ("the will") explored claims related to the willingness to undertake called-for reforms, focusing on the influence of geopolitics and vested interests. The second session ("the way") considered claims related to the ways forward, looking first at the available bandwidth for reform and then at the current ability to imagine alternatives as the system confronts the climate crisis. This report follows the same format. For readability and flow, however, some comments have been captured under a different theme than the session in which they were raised. Additionally, the report

[3] ALNAP, "The State of the Humanitarian System" (ALNAP, 2022), 206–8, https://sohs.alnap.org/.

[4] Humanitarian Policy Group, "Time to Let Go: Remaking Humanitarian Action for the Modern Era" (London: ODI, 2014), 8, https://remake-aid.odi.digital/.

incorporates insights from a literature review on the history of humanitarian reform, aiming thereby to extend the workshop discussions and connect them to other ongoing conversations.

This research is part of the project *The limits of humanitarianism: politics, crisis and reform in the era of climate change*, funded by the Alameda Institute. The workshop sits within the project's theme "containing politics", which uses historical perspectives from the 1970s to today to examine the politics inherent in humanitarian reform and its diagnostic and deliberative processes. The project aims not to formulate recommendations but to develop perspectives that may inform ongoing debates and approaches.

What is "humanitarian reform"?

Before turning to the main topics, it is worth considering the question of how to define "humanitarian reform". Initiatives grouped under this label have been extensive. They have taken many forms, ranging from *ad hoc* initiatives spurred by small groups of individuals and organisations; to official organisational programs; to elaborate, system-wide processes involving dozens or even hundreds of organisations of different kinds (albeit not on equal footing). Some are defined by area of practice and some by the actors being targeted. In many recent cases, the concerns driving them have been similar: efficiency and effectiveness, quality programming, coordination models, funding mechanisms, accountability, risk management, and innovation in humanitarian strategies and programmes. Moves to challenge core assumptions about the relevance of humanitarianism and the role of humanitarian actors have been less frequent, although calls to decolonise and tackle racism in humanitarian assistance, to shift the power to local communities, or to denounce humanitarianism as an expression of "white supremacy" have intensified in recent years. As the West Africa Civil Society Institute pointed out, there remains an insular tendency in these discussions, which have predominantly been carried out in global North and English-language forums.[5]

[5] Cédric Christian Ngnaoussi Elongué, "Décolonisation de l'aide: Perspectives de La Société Civile d'Afrique Sub-Saharienne Francophone" (Accra: West Africa Civil Society Institute, May 2023), https://fr.wacsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/DECOLONISATION-DE-LAIDE-PERSPECTIVES-DE-LA-SOCIETE-CIVILE-DAFRIQUE-SUB-SAHARIENNE-FRANCOPHONE.pdf.

Popular discourse in the humanitarian system tends to distinguish between approaches considered incremental, reformist, or – more pejoratively – technocratic and those that mobilise "bold" ideas and a willingness to envisage revolutionary change. This distinction is a classic one in progressive agendas. It is also meaningful in a current climate where, as one participant in the workshop put it, "The debate, the discourse on humanitarian reform has been hijacked by the management of aid".

Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that politics are embedded in all approaches to reform, as they are in all forms of humanitarian action. This is equally true of the managers as of the visionaries. Indeed, even initiatives that have a narrower, more technical focus tend to stress their transformative aspiration or, at least, their contribution to more ambitious reform agendas. Hence political scientist Denis Kennedy has argued that "the struggle over standards is not only a struggle over quality; it is a struggle to define the humanitarian soul".[6] Similarly, historian Joël Glasman emphasised the importance of acknowledging that "standardization is not a neutral process, but that it is rather a product of power relationships, and that it, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of these power relationships."[7]

As these and other research works show, moments of humanitarian reform offer an important window onto the ideas, values, and stakes encapsulated in different humanitarian projects.[8] They complement earlier studies of the evolution of different aid fields and practices, some of which have suggested that "the modalities of emergency operations evolved pragmatically in reaction to specific events and agency experiences in increasingly large and complex humanitarian operations", with no "grand

---

6 Denis Kennedy, "Humanitarianism Governed: Rules, Identity, and Exclusion in Relief Work," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 10, no. 2 (July 18, 2019): 207–37, https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2019.0012.

7 Joël Glasman, *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs: Minimal Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2020), 125.

8 Jeff Everett and Constance Friesen, "Humanitarian Accountability and Performance in the Théâtre de l'Absurde," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21, no. 6 (August 2010): 468–85, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2010.01.014; Kennedy, "Humanitarianism Governed"; Denis Kennedy, "The Inherently Contested Nature of Nongovernmental Accountability: The Case of HAP International," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 30, no. 6 (December 2019): 1393–1405, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00134-3; Glasman, *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs*; Talita Cetinoglu, "World Humanitarian Summit and the Global Display of Humanitarianisms," in *L'Humanitaire s'exhibe / The Humanitarian Exhibition, (1867-2016)*, ed. Sébastien Farré, Jean-François Fayet, and Taithe (Georg Editeur, 2022), 144–66.

design" but instead "skillfully piecemeal adaptation".[9] However, despite a recent turn towards examining practices of humanitarian reform in their own right, the view remains partial. According to Raphael Gorgeu, empirically speaking, "Very few [works] seek to understand the dynamics through which change takes place and none really attempts to think about it in its entirety."[10] This report will not change that, but aims to make a contribution to reflection in this area.

For the purposes of the workshop, a broad definition of "humanitarian reform" was used: any efforts to organise, change, coordinate, self-regulate, or otherwise orchestrate the norms, structures, and actors that loosely constitute the humanitarian system.[11] Areas of reform highlighted during discussions included accountability to affected people, localisation, the effectiveness and efficiency of aid, technical standards, as well as more expansive visions of what change might mean. As will be explored in the report, there was a sense that climate change had not yet become a meaningful factor in collective attempts to rethink humanitarian aid. This report aims to help understand why.

GEOPOLITICS

The role of geopolitics in shaping humanitarian reform is unavoidable. As a study by the Save the Children Humanitarian Affairs Team observed, humanitarianism "evolves in correspondence with the world around it" and "processes of reform within the humanitarian sector have been influenced not only by 'facts on the ground', but also by political interests and by broader changes in the

9 Edward J. Clay, "Responding to Change: WFP and the Global Food Aid System," *Development Policy Review* 21, no. 5–6 (September 2003): 697–709, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8659.2003.00233.x.

10 Raphael Gorgeu, "Thinking about the Evolution of the Humanitarian Sector: An Exploration within the World of Ideas. A Socio-Phenomenological Approach to Change" (Geneva: HERE-Geneva, January 2023), 6, https://here-geneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Thinking-about-the-evolution-of-the-humanitarian-Sector_R-Gorgeu_Jan-2023.pdf.

11 Should a definition of the international humanitarian system then be needed, we may echo the one used in the State of the Humanitarian System report: "The network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian action is undertaken when local and national resources are, on their own, insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis." ALNAP, "The State of the Humanitarian System," 26.

organisation of social and institutional life."[12] Geopolitical influences and effects manifest, as a workshop speaker pointed out, at a macro or global level, as well as national and subnational levels.

Today, the geopolitics of reform are inseparable from the function of the international emergency response system in international politics. This system, scholars have argued, conveys the limited ambition of "emancipation in the form of humanitarian redress" – that is, relief from the worst effects of socioeconomic and political inequalities and wrongdoing, but little prospect of their end.[13] One participant in the workshop captured this dynamic by evoking the increasingly large footprint of emergency response within the functions of the UN, describing this as a "reform that we have not curated" – "we", in this context, being key operational and normative players in the humanitarian sector. It can be seen when governments use humanitarian assistance in a "turf war" for influence, apply pressure to control the description of crises (refusing to describe certain groups as "refugees", for example) and constrain thinking about how to integrate emergency assistance with longer-term agendas – three examples raised in the workshop. Humanitarian reform has not addressed this and some argued that it never could.

Hierarchies of humanity

The emphasis on the role of those in a position to give, and the power this brings, is an expression of one of the fundamental attributes of humanitarian projects: their assumed power to decide whose lives are worth saving. Anthropologist Didier Fassin has written that humanitarianism offers a "politics of life".[14] This includes determining, through intervention, which lives will be saved, in the face of an international order that values some lives more than others. Examples of the influence of geopolitics on this problematic raised during the workshop included the salience of the Russia-Ukraine war for key humanitarian donor governments, contrasted with the "ignored crisis" in Yemen, and the fluctuations in attention to conflict in Sudan.

---

12 Juliano Fiori et al., "The Echo Chamber: Results, Management, and the Humanitarian Effectiveness Agenda" (London: Humanitarian Affairs Team/Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, 2016), 22.

13 Simon Reid-Henry, "The Legitimation Crisis of the Liberal Order: Political Minimalism, Humanitarianism, and the Government of Inequality," in *Amidst the Debris: Humanitarianism and the End of Liberal Order*, ed. Juliano Fiori, Fernando Espada, Andrea Rigon, Bertrand Taithe, and Rafia Zakaria (London: Hurst, 2021), 144.

14 Didier Fassin, "Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life," *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (2007): 499–520, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2007-007.

During discussions, it was proposed that – at least in the present – reform initiatives are ultimately "about the inequality in the humanitarian sector itself and some of the inequalities that are being, sometimes inadvertently and sometimes by virtue of the existing system, recreated and reproduced by humanitarian interventions." While comments frequently signalled the powerful role of aid donors, others noted that change also happens because so-called "recipient" or "affected" countries and societies "expect donors to change the way they interact with them". Standards and codes of conduct can be used, as one person told of their experience, to send the message that "humanitarianism is not about your giving, but about the rights of people we seek to serve."

These issues are linked with another major concern raised during the workshop, which could be summed up as the political hollowing out of the localisation agenda. By its nature, localisation entails opposition to the "over-centralisation" of decision-making and to the growth mentalities of many dominant institutions, both dynamics in the formal humanitarian system that are related to the geopolitics of aid. The spread of localisation discourse has drawn attention to these critiques and valorised their articulation. Yet the recent amplification of localisation discourse may represent an example of "reform appropriation", in which international actors disregard calls for change made by homegrown organisations, until those same calls also come from other international actors. In this regard, it is notable that no signatories to the Grand Bargain (the process that emerged from the World Humanitarian Summit) came from countries hosting major humanitarian operations. While increased attention may eventually create the conditions for stronger action, it has also been argued that the circulation of ideas can co-exist with their "political decapitation."[15] Workshop participants signalled concern that in some circles, localisation is being approached "as a technical tool rather than a normative one", linking this to lack of change. They pointed to arguments that localisation fails to grapple with the logics of colonialism inherent in the humanitarian system.[16] For example, this coloniality shapes the "hierarchies of humanity" (again after Fassin) that present themselves inside humanitarian organisations as well as between them, helping to explain phenomena such as the ongoing transfer of risk to local organisations and their staff despite, and sometimes even through,

15 Pablo Alejandro Leal, "Participation: The Ascendancy of a Buzzword in the Neo-Liberal Era," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4–5 (August 2007): 539–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469518.

16 Farah Mihlar, "Coloniality and the Inadequacy of Localisation," Working Paper, The Humanitarian Leader (Melbourne: Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, April 2024), https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/thl/article/view/1971/1659.

reform moves nominally intended to address inequalities.[17] The social group that dominates the system operates by a set of rules, "unspoken structures" someone called them, which by now have their own life and power. "The weight to actually change those rules is maybe too high," one person proposed.

Transnational and domestic dynamics

Despite a sense of difficulty moving the system on fundamental issues, reforms were seen to have been mobilised through a series of different enabling factors or strategies. One of these was the dynamic relationship between the transnational and the domestic. Using historical examples, a speaker highlighted that agendas that could be articulated in languages already existing in Global North polities (such as particular political experiences, religious community, or ideas of justice) were more likely to find traction as "imaginaries" for action. This included when these agendas were driven by the Global South, as "the reforms that get taken up within the [international] NGO sector take on that domestic resonance and what people recognise from their own context, and then project it outwards" onto reformist agendas developed elsewhere. An example of this was engagement with the New International Economic Order (NIEO) of the 1970s, which influenced some international NGOs to develop new critiques of global inequalities.[18] While this NIEO moment did not ultimately lead to a reconfiguration of the global economic order (nor of humanitarian aid), it shows how wider political agendas engaged aid actors at a time when other factors, such as operational failings and institutional competition, were adding to calls for change.[19] Practical experience has also shaped how people conceive of agendas for change, as "aid workers have to confront the realities of what can be done" within a given setting. The resulting choices are inseparable from geopolitical context, as the

---

17 Rana B. Khoury and Emily K.M. Scott, "Localisation Doesn't Shift Power. It Deepens International Dominance," *The New Humanitarian*, July 23, 2024, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2024/07/23/localisation-doesnt-shift-power-it-deepens-international-dominance.

18 Kevin O'Sullivan, "The Search for Justice: NGOs in Britain and Ireland and the New International Economic Order, 1968–82," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 6, no. 1 (March 16, 2015): 173–87, https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2015.0003.

19 Randolph Kent, *The Anatomy of Disaster Relief: The International Network in Action* (London; New York: Frances Pinter, 1987); Peter Walker and Daniel Maxwell, *Shaping the Humanitarian World* (London: Routledge, 2009); Michael N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2011); Kevin O'Sullivan, *The NGO Moment: The Globalisation of Compassion from Biafra to Live Aid* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

political thresholds or appetites of different humanitarian actors have been influenced by, for instance, how they navigated the Cold War and the politics of colonialism.

Workshop discussions suggested instability in some of the factors that have been seen as encouraging states to look beyond geopolitical interests when making humanitarian policy. In the past, reference to shared "humanitarian" or rights-based language has provided opportunities for civil society to hold powerful actors (including notably governments) to account for their commitments. However, participants observed that today's governments appear less susceptible to charges of violating their own declared values, with the case of Gaza given as an example of policy resistant to public outcry. "States have always prioritised their political interests," a person commented, but "there used to be a bit of a fig leaf there"; they compared this to governments today "using their raw power and saying 'no, you humanitarians, particularly the UN, you have to respond in these particular locations in these particular ways'." These observations resonate with reflections elsewhere about the intensifying illiberalism of democratic states, with reference to the decline of asylum norms and violations of international humanitarian law.[20] They have direct implications for humanitarian reform: "when we talk about what can be reformed in the macro sector, really we talk about what the US will allow to happen and what the US won't allow to happen." From this larger perspective, another person argued that, "no matter how much we reform the international agencies [...] we will still remain instruments of states".

Shifting geopolitics play a part in these dynamics, as Cold War power struggles increased the potential diplomatic and strategic value of normative politics during the 1970s and 1980s, in ways that no longer apply today. They arguably undermine the practical application of normative reforms that have been previously agreed in principle, though this dynamic is anything but new. Indeed, as seen for example in the history of international humanitarian law, the non-respect of codified norms has been a key driver of continuing attempts to reinforce and extend such norms, while geopolitics have helped to determine what was codified and how.[21]

---

20 Michaël Neuman, "Humanitaire et Démocraties Libérales," *AOC*, April 10, 2024, https://aoc.media/opinion/2024/04/09/humanitaire-et-democraties-liberales/.

21 Helen M Kinsella and Giovanni Mantilla, "Contestation before Compliance: History, Politics, and Power in International Humanitarian Law," *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 649–56, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa032.

VESTED INTERESTS

Institutional interests were discussed during the workshop as playing vital but complex roles. Vested interests of large, established organisations were described in terms of inertia: "we're dealing with an institutional inertia, where the survival of an institution, its employees, implicitly becomes so important that it goes against change. So there's a power relationship, it's a lethargy that is sometimes very hard to break through." This did not necessarily mean non-participation in reform undertakings, it was noted, as some actors may engage but operate as spoilers, trying to mould or contain reforms in ways that serve their own purposes. While this may reflect incentives to protect and expand income or political influence, as has been noted in other conversations about reform, it is important to recognise that the notion of self-interest is complex in this context: "if a UN agency were in the room, they would say 'it's not us that benefits, it's our mission and our mandate, and the more resources we have to deliver on our mandate, of course we're going to pursue that'."[22] Reference to mandates can also be used to argue both for and against internal, organisational change; in those arguments, the hierarchies of humanity described above can intersect with other factors such as management ideologies to make some employees more vulnerable to poor or precarious conditions than others. During the workshop, however, contributors cautioned that on a system level, "change is mainly organic, and we need to nuance a bit the control that actors could have over change."

Because of the powerful role of vested interests, "agents of change" were seen as necessary to take institutions in directions that may encounter resistance. In this vein, it was argued that learning, subverting and co-opting institutional realities can be a more effective approach than directly confronting them. A participant with experience in a large international NGO suggested that at executive and board level, most leaders "are not experts in the cause, they're experts in running institutions. So there's no point going to them with the cause." Instead, they argued, it was necessary to operate tactically according to the parameters of what institutions already value, even when seeking to take them in different directions: "The cause, the politics, and the money – speak the right language to the right people in the context of power."

[22] Jeremy Konyndyk in "The Midwife," *Trumanitarian* podcast, episode 66, 26 January 2024, https://trumanitarian.org/episodes/undertaker-and-midwife/.

The challenges and opportunities of climate change

Conversations during the workshop reflected a sense that, despite increasing attention devoted to its impacts, the significance of climate change for the humanitarian system remains the subject of uncertainty and ambivalence. While the public discourse of the humanitarian sector tends to stress the challenges of climate change, when considering how vested interests shape reform it is important to take into account its perceived opportunities. As argued elsewhere in this project, the sector's increasing engagement with climate change has been characterised by the adoption of the language of climate "crisis".[23] Based on the workshop discussions, linking this narrative of crisis to specific institutional mandates has facilitated at least two types of opportunities for agencies.

The first derives from the "institutionalised arena" associated with climate change meetings and conferences, with one participant noting that "humanitarians have been fairly late comers to that arena but have found that they have a place there. It's a place for visibility, it's a place for advocacy, it's a place to focus on issues." This is linked to the second perceived opportunity inherent in the climate crisis, which is the potential to access new sources of funding. Some workshop participants questioned the humanitarianisation of climate change as potentially "more of a PR move" intended to encourage the flow of funds than evidence of a substantive reckoning. Yet on an operational level this may not bear out: one workshop participant cited analysis of funding for responses to the 2022 floods in Pakistan to suggest that applying a climate change framing had allowed various donor bodies to "relabel" previously allocated support rather than increase overall funding. They suggested such practices would continue due to "competing priorities" at national and global levels and the increasing frequency of disasters worldwide.

[23] Eleanor Davey and Fernando Espada, "When the World of Emergency Met the Climate Crisis," June 13, 2024, https://alameda.institute/article/when-the-world-of-emergency-met-the-climate-crisis/.

Despite ongoing work to articulate how the sector could or should change in the era of climate emergencies,[24] a participant expressed scepticism about the shared level of "conceptual clarity" on climate change, contesting the idea put forward by some agencies that "the climate crisis is a humanitarian crisis and every humanitarian crisis is a climate crisis". There may be a risk, they argued, that the organisational scramble to access "climate crisis" funding will pose a barrier to understanding and draw attention away from humanitarian reform. Conversely, there may be potential elements of convergence between climate action and the localisation agenda – a point that has also been made in studies of adaptation, for example.[25] In sum, there is still no answer to the challenge: "how can we ensure that the climate agenda coalesces with humanitarian reform efforts and becomes an integrated part of it rather than a deflection or a distraction from reform?" Or, as as another person reflected in response to the draft version of this report, it appears that "it's possible that climate change could be relevant to addressing certain difficult issues within the sector, but it's also possible to have a productive conversation about humanitarian reform without delving too deeply into this potentially controversial topic." The same might be said of human rights, which were not substantially evoked during the discussions. This may be linked to the focus on particular narratives around obstacles to reform, but is suggestive nonetheless.

The stakes of reform

Institutional opposition appears to have contributed significantly to the uphill battle facing large-scale reforms. One participant described the Grand Bargain as having "completely lost its credibility" and

[24] Hugo Slim, "Humanitarians and the Climate Emergency," June 28, 2023, https://gppi.net/2023/06/28/humanitarians-and-the-climate-emergency; Andrea Steinke, "Climate Change and Humanitarian Change: Challenging Norms, Mandates and Practices" (Berlin: Centre for Humanitarian Action, 2023), https://www.chaberlin.org/en/publications/climate-change-and-humanitarian-change/; Andrea Steinke and Sonja Hövelmann, "Loss and Damage – a Humanitarian Kairos Moment," Humanitarian Practice Network (blog), accessed October 13, 2023, https://odihpn.org/publication/loss-and-damage-a-humanitarian-kairos-moment/.

[25] Pamela Combinido et al., "Bridging Localisation and Climate Adaptation Pathways: Case Studies from Asia, the Middle East and Africa" (Humanitarian Advisory Group; GLOW Consultants; Islamic Relief Worldwide, December 2023), https://islamic-relief.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IRW-Bridging-localisation-and-LLCA-pathways.pdf; Stefanie Tye and Isabella Suarez, "Locally Led Climate Adaptation: What Is Needed to Accelerate Action and Support?," Working Paper (Washington D.C.: World Resources Institute, 2021), https://www.wri.org/research/locally-led-climate-adaptation-what-needed-accelerate-action-and-support.

another cited current views that it was "dead" due to refusal to change power dynamics, singling out UN agencies as spoilers. We heard that what is labelled as reform today is too "process-oriented" and often has little traction at operational level. Reform agendas often remain "unknown" among responders and "whatever is going on in the Global North does not reverberate to the ground." Participants described meeting with international NGO program staff who were unaware of their headquarters' stated commitments; at times, pointing out these commitments has provoked backlash. One local organisational leader described perpetual lip service in high-level forums they had been part of: "We have a proposal, everybody nods their head, agrees, 'I think it looks nice'. But when I returned to the ground [...], none of the signatories talked about that commitment. None. So we the local actors have to carry the whole burden ourselves." At various times in the conversation, people evoked fundamental issues which are muted or suppressed in current approaches to reform, such as the politics of life described above.

The "artificiality" of reform from this perspective raises questions about why there is continuing engagement with these processes. Many of the answers given reflected the notion that survival was at stake – the survival of diverse forms of support for people affected by crisis, of particular roles for particular institutions, and of the system as it currently operates. Humanitarian reform is like "riding a tiger," a participant commented: "Those who are in the North will keep riding because they know when they get off the tiger, the tiger's going to eat them." For some organisations from the Global South, the outcomes of reform processes (from which they are excluded) may affect their survival, their ability to support their own communities, or the health of the civil society sector in which they operate.

We also heard that "humanitarian sectors need to reform for their *own* survival" as they risk being bypassed by the rise of other systems of aid and international financing, such as those associated with China, which make more use of bilateral channels and regional organisations.[26] Beyond the stated commitment to reform in the name of improved humanitarian responses, therefore, there may be shared interests among those connected with the system to ensure its continued relevance. As of yet, however, this has not led to the relinquishing of power by those among whom it has historically been concentrated.

[26] Shaquille Ifedayo Gilpin, "China, Africa and the International Aid System: A Challenge to (the Norms Underpinning) the Neoliberal World Order?," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 3 (May 2023): 277–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211063804; Jingdong Yuan, Fei Su, and Xuwan Ouyang, "China's Evolving Approach to Foreign Aid" (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, May 2022), https://doi.org/10.55163/WTNJ4163.

BANDWIDTH

The pressures that come with the emergency response role of humanitarian organisations have been identified as an obstacle to humanitarian reform – and critical analysis in general. Mindsets geared towards action and implementation, and lack of opportunity to step away from the drumbeat of emergency, contribute to difficulties thinking beyond established frames of reference.[27] As one of the researchers in the workshop put it: "Humanitarians are strained and stretched and they are perpetually so, so bandwidth for things that aren't emergency responses is always limited."

However, the very nature of current reform approaches also appears as a contributing factor in the challenges they face. This point was made by the former UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and then Grand Bargain Eminent Person Jan Egeland, reflecting in 2023 on frustrations with the slow pace of progress: "humanitarian reform has become more cumbersome than when I launched the 2005 humanitarian reform initiative. [...] Now, many more actors demand much more consultation and every change requires lengthy negotiations and strong leadership over time."[28] Though managing an increasing number of stakeholders undoubtedly plays a part, the strikingly bureaucratic nature of high-level reforms should not be naturalised as an inevitable consequence of the sector's growth; instead, they should be open to challenge as potentially a way of devaluing reform while continuing to (in theory) practise it.

Another factor may lie in proliferation – an issue particularly relevant to the kinds of reform that constitute "guidance". The sheer volume of measures intended to improve aid has become

---

27 Dominic Naish, "Not a Priority: The Lack of Contextual Understanding in Humanitarian Missions," *Humanitarian Practice Network* (blog), May 4, 2021, https://odihpn.org/publication/not-a-priority-the-lack-of-contextual-understanding-in-humanitarian-missions/ ; Eleanor Davey and John Borton, "History and Practitioners: The Use of History by Humanitarians and Potential Benefits of History to the Humanitarian Sector," in *The Impact of History? Histories at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Bertrand Taithe and Pedro Ramos Pinto (London; New York: Routledge, 2015), 153–68.

28 Jan Egeland, Foreword to Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Wendy Fenton, and Farah Manji, "The Grand Bargain in 2022: An Independent Review," HPG Commissioned Report (London: Overseas Development Institute, June 2023), 4, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2023-08/HPG_report-Grand_Bargain_2023_master_rev.pdf.

overwhelming. In 2013, when there were already over 100 different quality and accountability initiatives for humanitarians to navigate, one study asked: "Humanitarian standards – too much of a good thing?"[29] Bandwidth, then, appears as an essential question to consider with regard to the ability to conceive and carry out change.

Meanings of bandwidth

The workshop explored several layers to the idea of bandwidth for reform, not all equally acknowledged or valued. None of them were considered to be in generous supply.

Focusing on the experience of civil society organisations from the Global South navigating interactions with the international aid system, the first issue raised was *operational bandwidth*. Time, money, and personnel: these resources now face heavier demands from reform processes than in the past. One participated warned: "The complexity of reform processes, multiple different reform processes that exist within the system – within clusters, at the Grand Bargain, at the national level, at the global level, at the regional level – it's leading to a fragmentation, for sure, and a duplication of effort." For organisations that are already overstretched, engagement in these various processes (which incurs significant financial cost but often yields few apparent benefits) must often be balanced against operational priorities. Ultimately, we heard, "The priority is survival, it's not the reform process", meaning there is "little room for engaging with broader systemic change." Underscoring the importance of this political economy of reform, another participant observed that core funding was a fundamental issue that should be included in any agenda to decolonise humanitarian aid and related areas such as global health. As recently argued in a study of decolonial perspectives on aid by WACSI, "the refusal to finance operating costs, short-term funding, and cumbersome administrative requirements hamper [civil society organisations'] ability to diversify their resources, invest in research and innovation, plan long-term programs, retain key staff and stay true to their original mission."[30]

Another layer was *emotional bandwidth*, particularly trust. Thirty years into a repetitive cycle of reform, some NGO leaders from the Global South have become "exhausted and disillusioned" by apparently "empty promises" and a succession of initiatives that feel like "a reiteration of past efforts

[29] John Cosgrave, "Humanitarian Standards: Too Much of a Good Thing?," February 14, 2013, https://library.alnap.org/help-library/humanitarian-standards-too-much-of-a-good-thing.

[30] Ngnaoussi Elongué, "Décolonisation de l'aide: Perspectives de La Société Civile d'Afrique Sub-Saharienne Francophone," 2.

that have failed to bring about meaningful change." For an example of how emotional bandwidth may be run down in this way, we may turn to the World Humanitarian Summit, which was preceded by a novel and inclusive two-year consultation processes. "The potential for a disruptive turn in the humanitarian system swept atmospherically through the consultations," researchers who studied the process found, "creating a sense of excitement, a feeling that existing frustrations would be heard and addressed; the process offered the prospect of a genuine dialogue long missing." Yet "those who held power within the humanitarian system found the message being conveyed too contentious to engage with" and "the message was shut down, very deliberately." The catch-cry that emerged from the summit – "as local as possible, as international as necessary" – more resembled gaslighting than progress, the researchers argued.[31] Undoubtedly, the emotional fatigue that results from such experiences can limit energy and engagement with new processes.

A third meaning of bandwidth was *space for critical analysis*. Workshop participants described the limited capacity of high-level leadership in the humanitarian system to engage with analytical inputs. A person with experience of working with top UN officials told the group: "I would produce a one-pager and the office would come back and say 'no that's too long, only three bullets please'." Time-poor leadership struggles to make the space to engage with research that could inform their work and the system does not prioritise knowledge in ways that would create incentives for these challenges to be overcome. Further, another participant added, there are a limited number of issues that can be considered at a given moment. They referred to the period when sexual exploitation and abuse became a priority agenda, and how the focus on it occupied as much as half of the attention and energy of key collective forums; the point was not to suggest that it did not merit this attention, but to show how certain agendas may command large proportions of the available bandwidth at a given time, squeezing out other potential topics of concern.

However, it would be a mistake to consider this simply the fate of high-demand work in high-pressure, rapidly-evolving environments. Rather, as illustrated by the experiences of the research team conducting an inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of responses in northern Ethiopia, there is also an issue of refusal of "negative" news.[32] Discussions during the workshop highlighted that the

---

31 Max Kelly, Maree Pardy, and Mary Ana McGlasson, "The Sound of Silence? Listening to Localisation at the World Humanitarian Summit," *Disasters* 48, no. 2 (April 2024): e12611, https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12611.

32 Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop, "The UN-Led Response in Ethiopia Was a Failure. It's Time for Accountability.," *The New Humanitarian*, June 5, 2024, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2024/06/05/un-response-ethiopia-failure-accountability.

system is fundamentally geared *not* towards understanding the outcomes of its work but towards fundraising (see also comments above about "PR moves" around the climate crisis). They identified the dependency of powerful players on a positive humanitarian narrative: "For donors, because it safeguards their budgets, which is bureaucratic power, and for the agencies obviously because the bottom line, the metric on which you're judged is fundraising and growth, and not actually whether you reduce malnutrition in Somalia or whether you reduce food insecurity in Yemen." This was seen to further compromise what analytical bandwidth might exist. As explored below, however, when threats to the positive narrative appear great enough, this can galvanise reform.

Creating space for change

The mid-to-late 1990s was a time of concerted change in the formal international humanitarian system. Multiple significant initiatives dating from this period continue to underpin the current international emergency response architecture and guide the conduct of organisations associated with it. So how were challenges of bandwidth overcome?

As explored in the workshop and represented in scholarship on this period, amid several major crises in the 1990s the most powerful driver of reform was the political and technical failings of aid agencies faced with the genocide in Rwanda and its aftermath in militarised refugee camps in Goma (today's Democratic Republic of the Congo). In the crisis of legitimacy that these experiences provoked, "humanitarian reformers were able to draw on these conditions to leverage the crisis and to shift the sector in ways that were both functional – so they were technical, they were professional – but they were also fundamentally rooted in values". The resulting initiatives varied in their approaches, from the new public management techniques applied with an initially "confrontational" style by HAP, to the more "collaborative" and consultative style chosen by the Sphere Project. The Dorchas Guide to Ethical Communications, which dates from the 2000s, was given as an example of how "crisis can also be manufactured": "There was no Goma moment, rather these activists were promoting the idea that prevailing advertising models were in conflict with organisational values – human dignity and accountability – and this was a crisis."

While a sense of crisis can thus take advantage of or create the conditions for reform, the discussion highlighted limits to its reach. One participant noted that change has tended to be gradual, departing from (and remaining close to) what exists rather than starting from what may be. In this understanding of the system's evolution, "some ideas are more internalised than others. And if a new idea comes about what humanitarian action could be, if this idea comes into tension with an idea which is more internalised, then this new idea would have difficulty to find its way through. On the

contrary, if it reinforces this core idea which is more internalised, then it will be easier to move." This picture readily finds support in accounts of humanitarian reform.[33]

Additionally, opportunities to "manufacture crisis" are not equally accessible to all who would like to see change. Participants agreed that major moments of change had often emerged from a "defensive reaction" to criticisms that reached audiences outside the system's usual circuits. There was support for the role of whistleblowers – those "who leak documents or who take those brave acts of pushing us and challenging us in ways that drive the political incentive, the defensive responses" – and a call for others to find creative ways to quietly support and enable them. However, the idea that "if you want to have change then you have to provoke a defensive reaction" was challenged as a strategy that only works for those whose power or access to resources is already secure. Participants indicated that others who have provoked a defensive reaction from a position of less security have been "blacklisted, defunded, marginalised, left out of the conversation". A different approach is therefore necessary.

IMAGINING ALTERNATIVES

"We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings." This quote from science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin was proposed by a participant in the workshop as a reminder that, despite all the frustrations, change is possible. ("You can, if you like, replace 'capitalism' in the quote with 'the humanitarian system'," they commented.)

It was part of a final session of the workshop exploring mindsets that may expand or reduce pathways to something different, and how this related to the challenge of climate change. Opening reflections highlighted the impact of the "humanitarian fetishism with the present: not being able to draw conclusions from the past and not being able to have a vision for its future, for a better future, for a

[33] Raphael Gorgeu, "Evolution, Ideas and the Possibility of Change in the Humanitarian Sector," Working Paper, The Humanitarian Leader (Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, July 2024), https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/thl/article/view/2035/1705; Jessica Alexander and Emmeline Kerkvliet, "Lessons of Lessons: A Window into the Evolution of the Humanitarian Sector" (London: ALNAP, 2022), https://www.alnap.org/help-library/lessons-of-lessons-a-window-into-the-evolution-of-the-humanitarian-sector.

collective future beyond ideas of anticipation." The result was that "we anticipate disasters but we don't anticipate our own future."

New futures

What futures people do imagine, in the humanitarian system and elsewhere, are often heavily determined by path dependency. Efforts to take account of known constraints can come to dominate not just the steps that are considered necessary, but the end points of which people are able to conceive. Instead, people seeking change were advised to embrace uncertainty. "Our job, as anyone who's trying to make the world better out there, it's not to predict what's going to happen, it's to work towards what we want to happen," one speaker affirmed. This means being willing to make mistakes, pushing for more than what we think we might get, and imagining unintended consequences. This point was taken up by a participant with extensive experience of reform, who reiterated that "yes, we may fail, maybe it doesn't work, but maybe it will work. We don't know." Another with a record of promoting internal, organisational reform recounted adopting the motto: "don't blink".

Inclusion was another theme in opening up new ways forward. We heard that being properly inclusive can lift certain demands on the collective imagination: "we don't just have to imagine how other people might experience the futures that we're thinking about, we can ask them. Because we have a huge and very diverse community of people who are working in this field. But we have to ask them and we have to go to where they are in terms of being able to answer." Resource-intensive, highly formalised reform processes are unlikely to achieve this.

Indeed, disenchantment with such reform processes has already brought some leaders to turn their attention away from the formal system. But this need not be considered a bad thing. According to one participant, "those actors are redirecting their energy elsewhere and focusing on building something different, something separate, and they are developing their own systems and frameworks. It is with the hope of making enough strides for the sector, for the global system, so the system can eventually catch up to where their ideas are." Another paraphrased the activist message as "stop trying to influence the people in power but become the people in power". Workshop participants heard concrete examples of how Global South leaders are proposing new initiatives, acting in the spirit of: "it doesn't really matter colleagues, whatever you do in the North; do it, if that makes you pleased. We will do our own thing." An invitation was extended to join in and listen.

This situation will undoubtedly bring more proliferating initiatives. But it could also create constructive insights. An earlier roundtable convened by HERE-Geneva raised the possibility that "the

question is perhaps not so much 'what's left to do' as 'where do we restart': is it possible to rein in a system that has run away from itself, or is it necessary to start from the beginning and build up the system again, starting from the local level and the needs that are seen there?"[34] Contributions to our workshop suggested that this was already happening, in ways that system reform processes (or the actors central to them) were yet to take seriously.

Confronting climate change

Participants in the workshop appeared to agree that alternatives had yet to be imagined for a world affected by climate change. This idea was put forward several times and no one challenged it. Notwithstanding some rhetorical shifts, one person said: "I think the humanitarian system has just absorbed it, the fact of the climate crisis, so basically the narrative goes: 'well we do emergencies anyway, the climate crisis is just more emergencies, so we're just going to do more emergencies. We're going to shift a bit and that will require more money. But nothing has changed substantially, we will just do what we do'." Another described this as "reinforcing the hull [of the Titanic] rather than just moving the deck chairs".

Climate change was not being approached in a sufficiently sophisticated way by humanitarian actors, claimed another person concerned about the lack of substantive engagement beyond "adaptation":

> "Climate change is many things and it is not a static issue that we now also need to contend with in addition to all the other issues. It's a continuously evolving phenomenon which is highly unpredictable and which is moving and causing change in a way that is much more rapid than what climate models have been saying and science has been saying. Of course ultimately this is about the impact and the consequences of a warming world, which translates into biophysical change, into social change, economic change and ultimately political change. So it's a highly complex phenomenon that cascades through systems."

Researchers in the workshop pointed to the scarcity of data on climate variability in the Global South, with knock-on effects for the ability of humanitarian actors to anticipate impacts. They also challenged the group to think about "who was in the knowing and what type of knowledge are we dealing with?", arguing that knowledge being generated on the ground, including the knowledge of

[34] Here Geneva, "Humanitarian Reform: What's Left to Do?" (Geneva: Here Geneva, 2023), 5, https://here-geneva.org/roundtable-humanitarian-reform-whats-left-to-do/.

Indigenous communities who have been finding ways to deal with climate-induced events for centuries, is being overlooked. In effect, previous studies have found that "many humanitarian actors are not aware of the need to take climate into account in their programming [...] and have not given the issue any serious thought", despite the fact that "many of the necessary skills and expertise" exist in country offices, local and national organisations, or are available outside the sector.[35]

Monumental as the stakes of climate change are, they will not automatically lead to something new from the humanitarian system. Mobilising an ambitious response to climate change is difficult and attempts to do so can be overwhelmed by the seemingly more urgent emergencies of the day. However, it is possible, one participant said, drawing on techniques that have helped to achieve change in the past: "it's up to humanitarians to mobilise, to rhetorically link the climate crisis to core values, and to articulate avenues for reform."

CONCLUSION

The workshop did not attempt a conclusion, nor will anything definitive be offered here. However, it may be salient to reflect on the emergence of emotions as a key theme in ways to develop new avenues for change. Turning emotion to productive use was advocated as another aspect of embracing uncertainty:

> "Use your anger and use your hope. I think very often when we're strategising or talking about how to move into the future we're told to be cold and calculating and not consider emotions. However, quite a lot of human history if you look at it has been driven by emotions of various kinds. And we should be willing to tap into what we really want and what we're really angry about as we think about the futures that we're trying to build."

It has been argued that key moments of "human rights and humanitarian politics were shaped by the limits, and possibilities, imposed by collegially produced sentiment" in ways that evolved over time: "Human rights were paired with soaring hope and desperate need in the 1940s and 1950s; with

[35] Marion Reinosa, "Implementing the Climate Charter: Analysis and Mapping of Expertise Available to Signatories on the Implementation of the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations" (Inspire + / Groupe URD, March 2023), 7.

rage in the 1960s and 1970s; and with despair and pity in the late 1970s and early 1980s."[36] This last phase represents the convergence of human rights with the needs-based approach of the formal humanitarian system – a palliative mode of politics that by now faces significant challenges even within the system with which it is identified. Like its "unspoken rules", the affective settings of the humanitarian system will be hard to shift.

With this endeavour comes the risks of burnout and disillusionment, risks that must be acknowledged and addressed to make individual and collective engagement sustainable. This is another aspect of taking stock of emotions in the context of reform. However, it is important to recognise that managing emotional impacts does not mean eliminating them. Hence the call during our workshop for more collective conversations that tolerate and even create discomfort. One person reflected that "What we see now with all the reform process, or what everyone has been seeing for the past decades, is that we are reform-willing as long as it does not interfere with our own or our organisational comfort." Perhaps a phase of accepting discomfort is necessary to bring about change, they suggested.

With this advice in mind, it bears acknowledging that our own conversation was not characterised by a strong or frequent sense of discomfort. While as authors of this report we cannot speak for whether or to what extent individuals privately felt uncomfortable, there appeared to be few moments where a collective discomfort was apparent. As is often the case in conversations among humanitarian system analysts and activists, trenchant comments about the system's shortcomings and biases met with confirmation and appreciation. Good-natured references, on several occasions, to "shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic" reflected the way that humour was deployed to ease the passage of potentially destabilising comments about the failings of the system and the difficulties of addressing them. This sense of a joint endeavour may help to reinforce persistence; it may also, at times, exclude.

This reminds us that the enablers of reform may contain within them the seeds of obstacles. The opposite can also be true, as illustrated by those who respond to blockages within the system by taking their energies elsewhere. Recognising these contradictions, as well as some of the deeper dynamics that shape the conduct of reform, may aid the work of humanitarian reformers both inside the system and beyond.

[36] Roland Burke, "Emotional Diplomacy and Human Rights at the United Nations," *Human Rights Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2017): 275–76, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2017.0018.


ALAMEDA
.institute