

#tandem

# **HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP: LEARNING FROM THE PAST AND DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE**



BY JOHN MITCHELL  
ADDITIONAL RESEARCH BY MAE ALBIENTO  
JANUARY 2024



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## BACKGROUND AND AIMS

The purpose of this paper is to present the current landscape of thinking and practice in humanitarian leadership for the 60 senior leaders participating in Tandem, ODI's Global Executive Leadership Programme.<sup>1</sup> It will reflect on how humanitarian leadership has been understood over the past two decades, and will outline key issues and challenges: those we face today, and those we will face in the future.

The paper is organised into five parts. The first provides context by distilling some key findings from the literature. Part 2 looks at who is leading humanitarian operations today, and Part 3 examines the experiences of leaders in operational teams. Part 4 reviews the experience of leaders in providing protection, and Part 5 introduces systems thinking and explains how it can help bring about strategic improvements to leadership in the longer term. The paper concludes with a personal reflection.

The content is based largely on a portfolio of work about humanitarian leadership and related topics developed by ALNAP, the humanitarian learning network. It is supplemented by a broader literature review. Some of the references and case examples are taken from older literature, but they still have strong relevance for leadership today. The content also benefits from insights gained from informal interviews with senior leaders and wise advice from a peer review group. The paper does not include new primary data, but aims to read across the subject to support a broad understanding of the current state of humanitarian leadership and the nature of its future challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> The programme itself is grounded in the principle that learning must be practical and applicable to real-life operational complexities. The focus is on personal leadership, leadership in teams, and leading into the future.

## PART 1. LEARNING FROM THE PAST: THREE COMMONLY OCCURRING THEMES

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Leadership has long been one of the most studied areas in the business world; a Google search for the phrase produces a veritable avalanche of results. Humanitarians, in this respect, have been a little slow off the mark; the first in-depth research study of humanitarian leadership was published in 2011. Since then the sector has captured a growing body of knowledge and experience gleaned from sources including evaluations, reform processes, research, training, experimentation and analysis.

Many of the qualities, attributes and skills possessed by effective humanitarian leaders are not unique to the sector. However, the operational context in which they are applied is unique, and this creates a very particular set of issues that we will look at in detail in Part 3. But first, to help readers understand how leadership has been perceived and understood by humanitarians, we will look at three themes that recur in the literature.

### 1.2 HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH FAILURE

Evidence from evaluation reports shows that leadership has been, and often still is, shackled to a sense of failure and blame. A lack of leadership was noted in evaluations in the 1970s and 1980s (including evaluations – sadly no longer available – by Tansley in 1974 and Chambers in 1985) but became more prominent in the 1990s, most notably after evaluations of major international crises including the 1994 Rwanda genocide and the 2000 Kosovo crisis. The theme emerged again in high-profile natural disaster responses. The Haiti earthquake and major floods in Pakistan, both in 2010, drew strong criticism in which poor performance was said to have been ‘defined by poor leadership’ (ALNAP, 2012). Failures were also identified at head offices across a range of humanitarian organisations. In the words of one senior aid worker at the time, ‘we have issues around leadership everywhere’ (Walker and Russ, 2010).

It was no surprise, then, that the 2005 Humanitarian Response Review (conducted by the UN’s Inter-Agency Standing Committee, IASC) identified critical shortcomings in UN leadership and highlighted this as a priority area for action. But despite the IASC’s commitment to strengthen leadership capacity at all levels of the system, challenges and barriers to effective change were widespread.

Today, there is still a keen sense that leadership is falling short.<sup>2</sup> At the individual level, there is a perception that there is ‘a critical and long-standing gap in the selection of individual leaders with adequate experience’ (Davies and Bowden, 2023). At the team and organisational level, there is a widely held belief that agency cultures, mandates, priorities and incentives actually make it harder for leaders

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<sup>2</sup> The perception that the humanitarian system suffers from a leadership gap is widespread, but not universal. Results from a 2014 survey of humanitarian country teams found that the quality of leadership was ‘acceptable’ or ‘good’ (Knox-Clarke, 2014).

to do their jobs properly (Gilmore, 2023; Wendt and Schenkenberg, 2023; Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2022). And at the highest policy level, a review of the IASC's protection policy cited leadership as a priority for the UN Secretary-General's 2020 Call to Action on Human Rights.

Given all of the above, it is reasonable to ask why – after all the efforts made to improve leadership – we are still facing what is commonly perceived to be a leadership gap. Part of the answer may be that evaluative material tends to reflect failures rather than the successes. In addition, perceived failures may not be solely the fault of individual leaders, but instead may be influenced by deeper structural constraints and tensions in the humanitarian system itself. We will look at this in detail in section 3.2.3.

### 1.3 LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN THE INDIVIDUAL

Around the time the humanitarian world began to take leadership more seriously, the dominant model was 'the heroic leader': a prominent individual – usually (but not always) a man – who sets goals and provides direction and inspiration to a group of followers by leading operations from the front. Ross Mountain is often cited as an example of a 'heroic leader' who stepped up to make strategic decisions first and built consensus afterwards. His work as humanitarian coordinator in the Democratic Republic of the Congo between 2005 and 2010 is credited with turning around a failing response to an international crisis (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011).

This model was challenged by a study that looked closely at how respected leaders led humanitarian operations (Knox-Clarke, 2014 citing Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011). The study found that many of those providing excellent and inspiring leadership – almost always in extremely difficult circumstances – did not conform to the 'heroic model' template. They had a softer and more intuitive set of skills, and the most effective outcomes emerged from a complex, dynamic process in which behavioural roles were taken up by multiple individuals and exchanged across the team and the leader. The most effective leaders were those who could utilise skills and expertise within a network or team by effectively distributing elements of the leadership role in response to the needs of the crisis in hand.

The 'heroic leader' was replaced by this 'leader as host' model. In its challenge to the conception of leadership as top-down, stereotypically masculine, white and English-speaking, it struck a chord with many people; a short animation on ALNAP's website gathered a record number of viewings (ALNAP, 2015). However, not all of the 'heroic leader' characteristics have faded away. Indeed, some are seen as being vital, especially when the odds are stacked against success. Leaders with these qualities have been described as leaders who 'dare to do' (see section 4.2.1).

But in practice, leaders like this are the exception. In interviews, senior leaders tell us they are more willing to take risks towards the end of their careers, when they have less at stake and have already cemented their reputations. The many other leaders who have not reached these heights have, somewhat unfairly, taken the blame for failures at the organisational level and at the level of the system (Knox Clarke, 2014), becoming 'scapegoats for lack of change' (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2022).

Important as individuals are, and as unfairly labelled as some have been, they are not the only factors in leadership. Indeed, Knox-Clarke's research concluded that 'whilst the knowledge and experience of the individual leader are important, they were only one of a number of significant contributory factors to effective leadership' (Knox-Clarke, 2014). We will look more closely at these factors in Parts 3 and 4.

#### 1.4 HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP IS AN ELUSIVE CONCEPT

According to the authors of the first study of humanitarian leadership, 'There is no blueprint for understanding leadership. This would be a contradiction in terms. Leadership is an art, and it is also something of an art to capture what this elusive yet critical concept means in practice' (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011). There is evidence that leadership matters in humanitarian operations: 'where leadership has been seen to be effective, it is striking the impact that this has had on humanitarian operations' (ALNAP, 2012). But humanitarians have struggled to nail it down, as drily noted by Ben Ramalingam (2022): 'we only seem to know it when we see it'.

Clearly, clarity about concepts is important, and it is helpful to recognise that humanitarian leadership is a multifaceted, protean concept. Efforts to understand its many changing faces have led researchers to identify a plethora of models (collective, distributed, adaptive, command and control, transformational, strategic) and styles (heroic, humble, motivational, daring, democratic, laissez-faire, authoritarian) (Mitchell, 2022). All of these are valid and help elucidate elements of leadership, but the sheer variety and volume of singular concepts can be overwhelming. None of them on their own captures a complete picture.

But while the variety of models and concepts risks confusing rather than clarifying, some qualities and traits of good humanitarian leadership come up time and time again in operations. We will look more closely at this in Parts 3 and 4.

#### 1.5 SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Humanitarian leadership has a unique character due to its differing operational contexts.
- It has a history of being conflated – sometimes unfairly – with poor humanitarian performance.
- The traditional model of 'heroic leader' has been superseded by the 'leader as host' model, but heroes are still required when the going gets tough.
- The concepts underpinning humanitarian leadership have evolved and grown, resulting in a plethora of models and approaches. These are all helpful and reflect the multidimensional nature of leadership; but they can sometimes be confusing and difficult to pin down.
- Today there is considerable diversity of opinion about what constitutes good leadership, but experience suggests that there are characteristics, skills and competencies that are commonly seen across a range of leaders and contexts.

## PART 2. WHO ARE THE LEADERS? LOCALLY LED LEADERSHIP AND GENDERED LEADERSHIP

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Who participates in making key decisions related to the goals, strategy and implementation of humanitarian responses? Due to the incompleteness of the available data we are able to provide only a cursory account, but we can still make some interesting observations about trends and potential implications.

### 2.2 LOCALLY LED LEADERSHIP

Twenty years ago, the evaluation of the response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami noted a chronic lack of understanding of context and scant regard for local capacities, including local and national leadership (Cosgrave, 2007). The literature tells us that since then we have seen small improvements in the way the international system partners with local and national organisations, and an increase in the number of organisations that are locally led. But these improvements (with notable exceptions) have tended to be piecemeal and temporary, as noted by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the international response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Featherstone, 2023).

ALNAP's *State of the humanitarian system* (ALNAP, 2022) revealed that 'national staff are the bedrock of the humanitarian response', constituting 93% of the in-country humanitarian workforce in 2020. But they are 'still extremely under-represented in the leadership of the international system, both in-country and at headquarters.' According to the *Data on diversity* report (Blackney et al., 2019), international staff are 1.5 times more likely to occupy senior humanitarian leadership roles as compared with local staff, and '60% of the most senior humanitarian leadership roles are filled by international staff.'

A small survey of UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) by ALNAP (2022) found that less than 20% of country director posts were held by national staff. Results from another survey show that INGOs employ twice as many local/national staff in senior humanitarian leadership positions as UN agencies; 52% of INGO respondents who worked in the most senior humanitarian leadership positions were local/national, while only 36% of UN respondents who held senior leadership positions were local/national (ALNAP, 2022).

Although INGOs have more local/national leaders at a senior level in the regions, very few INGO board members come from crisis-affected countries. A recent survey of 15 INGOs found that less than 20% of board members were from countries that were eligible to receive official development assistance. 'Currently, even superficial representation is rare. Only 2% of board members reported having any lived experience in a refugee or other humanitarian context' (ALNAP, 2022).

So local/national leadership is under-represented in international humanitarian response, and it is probable that this has had negative consequences for the quality of crisis response.<sup>3</sup> Locally led organisations are the first to respond to a crisis, especially when the onset is sudden, and they tend to stay for the long haul in protracted situations. They frequently bring vital knowledge and skills: deeper connections with affected people and local structures; often (but not always) more access to those at risk of violence and abuse; a greater understanding of culture, customs and local politics; a greater potential for building institutional memory; and a better vantage point from which to work at the ‘triple nexus’, where humanitarian work interacts with development and peace-building (Clements et al., 2021).

In addition, local leadership can play an important role in change processes linked to localisation. In this context, for example, the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement found that local leadership was crucial in achieving a ‘profound transformation’ in their national societies (IFRC, 2013–2015). This kind of change – as we will see in Part 5 –sometimes requires national leaders to kickstart the process by challenging the status quo (see Box 1).

### **BOX 1. CHALLENGING NORTHERN AGENDAS: LEADING BY EXAMPLE – ABBAS HULLET**

Frustrated with the dominance of Northern agendas and a perceived failure to strengthen Red Cross leadership within the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, Abbas Hullet chose to leave a senior management position at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Geneva to join the Kenyan Red Cross. He says he did this ‘to prove to myself and the rest of the world... that we can do it as a national society.’ Abbas created space to lead by taking the helm of a smaller national society, releasing himself from the confines of a much larger international organisation. By challenging power dynamics and relationships he personally demonstrated the viability of successful local leaders, and set in motion a momentum for change that is still impactful today.

*Source: Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.*

## **2.3 GENDERED LEADERSHIP**

Available data suggests that the situation with regard to gender and leadership is better than some people might expect. There have been some concrete steps towards parity between men and women leaders, especially in senior leadership positions. Findings from *The state of the humanitarian system*

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<sup>3</sup> The proportion of local vs international leaders depends on many factors, including location. In the Middle East and North Africa, for example, local leaders have long been recognised as central players in humanitarian response.

show that 49% of the highest-paid jobs in UN agencies are held by women, while more men continued to hold middle-management positions (ALNAP, 2022).

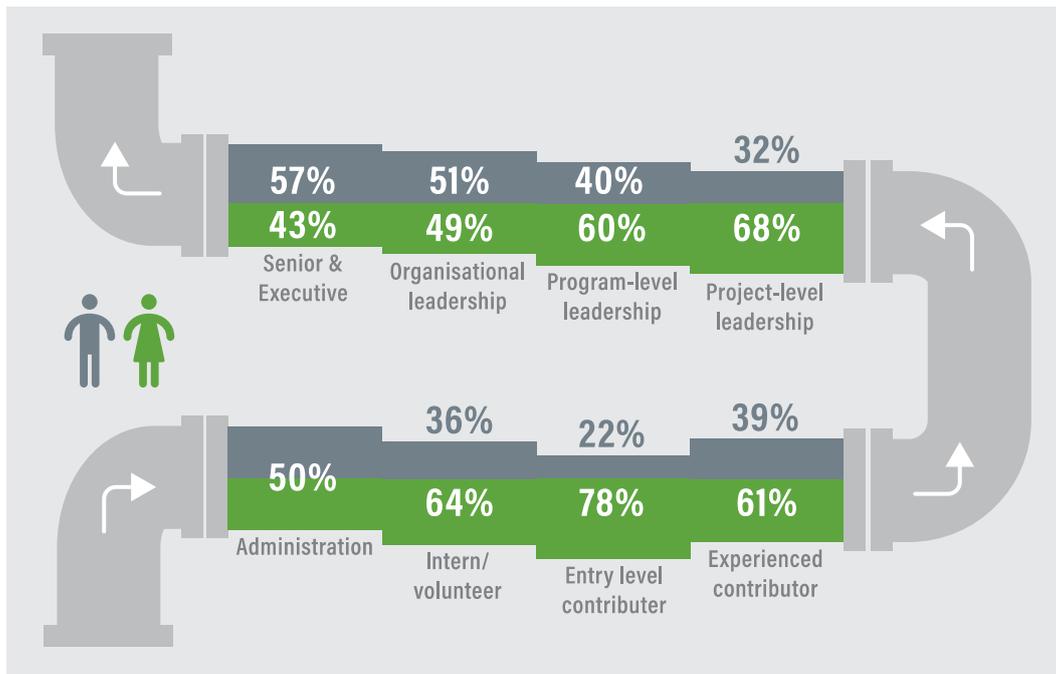
The proportion of highly-paid senior women leaders may surprise some people, as will the fact that in INGOs 61% of the highest-paid jobs are held by women (ibid.). These figures suggest a clear shift, but other studies report a mixed picture. The *Data on diversity* survey found that there were significantly more men (57%) than women in the most senior global humanitarian leadership roles (Blackney et al., 2019). It is hard to establish a true and complete picture. Progress has also been made at board level in INGOs. A review of publicly available information suggests a movement towards parity in gender representation; 44% of board members were women (ibid.).

In terms of leadership in operations, a survey of humanitarian country teams found that 60% of leaders were men and 40% were women (Knox-Clarke, 2014). Although this does not represent parity, the authors noted that it was an improvement on the figures that arose from previous research. However, a more recent report showed that about one third of the UN's humanitarian coordinators are women (Patel et al., 2020) which, if accurate, is a decline from the 2014 figures. Interestingly, the percentage of female country directors/representatives was also just over 40%, suggesting a relatively small attrition effect in women's career progression from one senior level to the next at country level.

The survey by Blackney et al. (2019) showed that men held 60% of the leadership positions in countries with high security risks. At the project level they occupied 69% of the most senior leadership positions, 55% of the project-level leadership roles and 56% of programme-leadership positions (ibid.). Although women held more leadership positions overall at this level (68%) this gradually declined with seniority (ibid.; see Infographic 1).

Given the advances made in closing the gender leadership gap, a few questions arise. Are there any gendered differences in leadership styles? If so, what are they? Do they have any impact on the quality of leadership and subsequent outcomes for crisis-affected people? Assorted studies and surveys bring up a range of characteristics associated with women leaders –high levels of empathy, diligence, sensitivity to needs, having better listening skills, etc. – but there is little or no concrete evidence to support these claims. One study found that ‘there is still a dearth of evidence on women leaders in the humanitarian sector. It is still unclear whether there is a difference in how men and women lead and why’ (Black et al., 2017). The same study acknowledged that ‘whilst the body of available literature and evidence slowly expands, there remains very little concrete data on whether women's leadership *actually* results in greater gender equality or improved humanitarian programming’, and that ‘there is a lack of substantive data to support the claim that a gendered leadership gap impacts on humanitarian outcomes.’

## INFOGRAPHIC 1: PIPELINE FOR MEN AND WOMEN INTO LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE SECTOR



*Reproduced from Blackney et al., 2019.*

### 2.4 LEADERSHIP, DIVERSITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Although there are good reasons for disaggregating leadership roles according to gender and ethnicity, there is nevertheless a danger of creating oversimplified social categories. The concept of intersectionality – first proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 – suggests that each of us lives as though in a web, in which different strands of power, identity and choice intersect to shape our personal identity (Slim, 2015 after Crenshaw, 1989). The implication for leadership is that every leader has a unique personal mix of attributes and experience, all of which can contribute to effective leadership.

A study of international humanitarian leaders found that being able to connect with different aspects of personal identity in different contexts can be an important aspect of leadership (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011). This quality is demonstrated by Jemilah Mahmood, who founded Mercy Malasia and has been Under-Secretary-General for Partnerships at the IFRC and Chief of the Secretariat for the World Humanitarian Summit (see Box 2).

## **BOX 2. CULTURE, IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP – JEMILAH MAHMOOD**

Jemilah considers herself to have multiple cultures and identities, including: Malaysian, Malay, Chinese, medical doctor, Muslim, female, mother, humanitarian and global business leader. She draws on each of these to guide her perceptions and behaviours depending on the context. She does not always choose to act according to a single culture or identity because she carries all of these within her, and often uses several at once to guide her behaviour. For example, when trying to move emergency relief supplies to a conflict zone she uses her humanitarian identity and business culture, and leverages her identity and expertise as a doctor to establish her credibility.

*Sources: Lane et al., 2009; Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.*

### **2.5 SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS**

- A significant majority of field personnel are national or local, but they are badly under-represented at senior leadership level.
- INGOs have a significantly higher percentage of national/local staff in the most senior positions than the UN, and more national/local leaders at a senior level in the regions.
- There are very few agency board members from countries likely to receive international assistance.
- The international system is moving towards parity between men and women leaders. Data shows that 61% of the highest-paying jobs in INGOs are held by women, and in the UN the figure is 49%.
- In countries with high security risks men held 60% of the senior positions.
- There is also a trend towards parity at board level; in INGOs, 44% were women.
- There is a lack of evidence to demonstrate differences and differential impact between men and women leaders.
- Intersectionality can help us to avoid a simplified categorisation of leadership based solely on gender and culture, and instead help us to recognise people as complex subjects with unique mixtures of skills, rather than as singular object categories.

## PART 3. OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION: THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, what singles out humanitarian leadership from leadership in other sectors is its unique operational environment. Although there is no single humanitarian context, some core conditions are very likely to apply:

- life-threatening situations;
- a requirement to act rapidly, often with security risks and poor access to affected populations;
- a lack of good information with which to make decisions;
- tensions between short-term and long-term objectives;
- a highly atomised environment comprising many agencies and mandates; and
- seemingly intractable issues around protection and human rights.

Under these conditions, leadership can be truly perilous. The perfect or ideal leadership type does not exist; however well-led operations are, there is always going to be ‘a level of chaos and improvised response’ (THart and Boin, 2010).

Although international response involves a wide range of actors including crisis-affected people themselves, the international blueprint for the system is based on humanitarian coordination teams (HCTs), the clusters, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and country-based pooled funds, all of which are designed to promote collective action under the guidance of the emergency relief coordinator. Additional commitments to provide improved coordination and leadership, as well as shared accountability for collective outcomes, were made as part of the 2011 Transformative Agenda, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the ‘Grand Bargain’. (There are, of course, many other humanitarian actors who are partially invisible to the formal system, and thus poorly monitored and not well represented in the literature.)

The 2019 Handbook for the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator fully lays out requisite principles, expectations and normative frameworks for UN humanitarian leaders.

### 3.2 OPERATIONAL MODELS, CONSTRAINTS AND SOLUTIONS

In essence, operational leadership is about:

*‘getting a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response, building a consensus that brings aid workers together around that vision and objectives, and finding ways of collectively realising that vision for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments.’* (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.)

How well have humanitarian leaders performed in delivering this vision? In addressing this question it will be helpful to understand the three leadership approaches that are commonly used in operations. These are:

1. the exceptional individual approach;
2. the structured approach; and
3. the shared leadership approach.

We will run through each in turn, drawing on findings from Knox-Clarke (2014).

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### 3.2.1 THREE APPROACHES TO OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

In certain situations, leadership is largely reliant on the personal attributes and dynamism of individual leaders. The ***exceptional individual approach*** thus tacitly assumes that individual leaders use their skills and knowledge to draw up effective strategies and plans, and then exercise their influence and powers of negotiation to inspire others. This approach depends on being able to identify exceptional leaders and then build supplementary leadership skills within the team.

However, research findings show that the approach has *not* been particularly well adapted for use in humanitarian operations. Although it was successful in allowing for rapid decision-making and operational flexibility (especially in single agency contexts), exceptional individuals were hard to find and the approach was vulnerable to inertia and poor decision-making.

The ***structured approach*** relies on the creation of clear hierarchies and formalised procedures. It is characterised by high levels of delegation, and actions are determined by systems and procedures. It is commonly found in national fire and civil defence services, such as the Incident Command System in the USA, where the underlying theory is that procedures replace the need for strong interpersonal relationships and trust. Hence the overall aim is to establish structures and systems, and train staff in their use.

The structured approach has been widely used in humanitarian response and although standard operating procedures are not always evident in response teams, when they are they have produced good results. Role clarity, common assessment procedures and clear operating principles are particularly important to underpin this approach, and it has been criticised for inflexibility and not being well adapted to dynamic environments, especially in inter-agency groups. Moreover, experience suggests that systems do not replace trust, and the effective use of systems still relies to some degree on relationships formed through training or working together.

The ***shared leadership approach*** is based on the principle of collaboration and a set of beliefs: that a group can handle workload more efficiently than an individual; that multiple perspectives produce a more rounded vision; and that expanded ownership increases the commitment of group members. This does not mean dispensing with an individual leader per se. Rather, it depends on the leader having very good facilitative skills. Most teams will require someone to hold the 'leadership' position as 'first among

equals'. This approach relies on building the right kind of group dynamics around team structures, processes and behaviour.

Practical experience shows that shared leadership is generally best suited to humanitarian operations and it has been demonstrably successful in joint decision-making and collective accountability. Having said that, elements of the other two models may also be important, particularly when it comes to organisational structures and procedures.

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### 3.2.2 SHARED LEADERSHIP AND COLLECTIVE ACTION: CONSTRAINTS AND SOLUTIONS

Although shared leadership has been identified as the most appropriate approach for collective outcomes, especially in interagency contexts, the literature demonstrates that its successful realisation is far from easy.<sup>4</sup> The overarching challenge is to establish a vision and a goal with sufficient shared clarity on the steps required to get there. Many of the problems arising appear to reflect the contradictions and ambiguities of individual agencies, as opposed to the collective aims of humanitarian country teams and clusters. Clusters are expected to provide strategic leadership, maintain and communicate a vision, and coordinate the response. But they don't have the clear authority structures to do so, and indeed sometimes work in contexts where their role is questioned (Davies and Bowden, 2023). One study found a significant correlation between the degree of support that a formal leader receives from the team and the effectiveness of the leader (Knox-Clarke, 2014). Another reported that leaders who adopt inter-group enhanced cooperation between local and expatriate team members thereby improve performance (Salem, 2019).

The literature does contain some examples of leaders maintaining and realising their vision (see Box 3), but we are unable to say with any certainty how frequently this occurs.

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**BOX 3. MAINTAINING AND COMMUNICATING  
A VISION – ANDREW MACLEOD**

A shared vision of civil military cooperation, based on the then-new cluster system, had to be built quickly with the involvement of a large number of international humanitarian actors, as well as the Pakistan military. This turned out to be an untidy and tumultuous process, and the leadership of senior UN official Andrew MacLeod, acting on the international side as cluster coordinator, was critical. In partnership with the Pakistan military he developed the concept of 'non-interfering coordination', balancing the independence of NGOs with the need to

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<sup>4</sup> Leading a multi-faceted team to achieve a common goal is often compared to the role of an orchestral conductor, who has to ensure that all the sections of the orchestra are in tune and playing in concert. The parts make up the whole, but the whole is greater than the parts (Hankinson, 2015).

coordinate with the military so that gaps could be filled. This resulted in what was described by the humanitarian coordinator as ‘the most successful military cooperation ever’, ultimately contributing to the effectiveness of the response.

*Adapted from Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.*

We will now turn to two of most common challenges: establishing the authority to lead and make decisions; and conflicting mandates and institutional barriers.

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### 3.2.3 ESTABLISHING THE AUTHORITY TO LEAD

This is an evergreen problem in humanitarian operations. The truth is that a formal leadership position does not automatically command respect; positional authority alone is not enough to create effective leaders. Leaders have to *earn* their authority. Indeed, this point cannot be emphasised enough: personal authority – rather than the authority invested in the position – is often seen as the determining factor in effective leadership. Leadership often goes well beyond the leader’s hierarchical authority.

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#### **BOX 4. EARNING THE AUTHORITY TO LEAD – SARA PANTULIANO**

In the Nuba mountains in Sudan, Sara Pantuliano set up the only operational programme that was subscribed to by both the Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement during the North–South civil war. She did not yet occupy a position of authority; in the words of her line manager, ‘grade-wise she was the most junior, yet she became the most important person in the office.’ The programme Sara set up established a single coordinated cross-line initiative centred around principles of engagement that were developed collaboratively with several partners. This considerable achievement required exceptional political skills, a clear understanding of local context through a political lens, and an ability to grasp and engage with the complexities inherent in the context. Crucially, it required working even-handedly with both parties to the conflict. Sara was credited with understanding the politics without getting personally involved in them. This required a great deal of skill and commitment to relationship-building; Sara described spending hours with individuals before big meetings so that everyone arrived more or less in agreement about the decisions to be taken.

*Source: Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.*

Earning authority in teams and coalitions is one of the biggest challenges in operations. It requires a broad skill set that includes personal qualities and management competencies, especially communications and relational skills.

### BOX 5. KEY RELATIONAL AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR BUILDING STRONG COALITIONS

- **Listening, and being prepared to learn from others.** Even the most experienced leaders strongly believe in listening to and incorporating other people's suggestions. Indeed, one study showed that one 'fatal flaw' in the least effective leaders is their lack of openness to new ideas (Zenger et al., 2007).
- **Sharing information and being transparent.** Taking the time to share information is essential in improving strategy and operational response (Knox-Clarke, 2014).
- **Speaking out and having courageous conversations.** This could mean bringing up difficult issues or – within a team – being honest with staff, especially if things are not going well.
- **Relating closely to your staff.** Studies show that if staff feel you care for them, they are much more likely to work well for you; staff need to feel they have a personal relationship with the leader.
- **Having good relationship skills.** This range of skills includes a facility for building alliances, networks and coalitions, and the ability to negotiate and engage with multiple actors.

*Adapted from Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.*

However, skills and experience on their own are usually not enough; it is important to establish clear structures and procedures. These will vary depending on the degree to which teams take a shared approach, build consensus and share decision-making. The greater the level of commitment, the greater the loss of autonomy (Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2015).

But regardless of this, there is a strong correlation between the leader's skills and the degree to which leadership and decision-making is effective in a team (Knox-Clarke, 2014). This requires a clear understanding of the parameters of decision-making authority. The best team structures assign levels of decision-making authority within the team, and clarify the kinds of decision that should *not* be delegated.

Team structures also require flexibility. As situations change, team members should be prepared for changes in levels of authority and personal responsibilities.

### BOX 6. FIVE THINGS LEADERS HAVE TO DO TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

1. Take responsibility for final decisions about issues that affect the whole office.
2. Create and maintain the conditions that enable group and delegated leadership to succeed.

3. Maintain an overview of the organisation and its position in the response.
4. Reflect the office back to itself.
5. Act as an interface between the team and the larger organisation.

Most importantly, perhaps, trust between team members must be built up. This involves everyone respecting everyone else's expertise; everyone being prepared to support decisions that they do not fully agree with (but do not think are actively bad); and everyone being able to disagree constructively. As one operational leader put it when describing their team, 'we need to be able to disagree without being disagreeable' (Knox-Clarke, 2014).

All of this requires a strong sense of togetherness. An ALNAP study says that good operational leadership is achieved through a series of interactions (between the individual with formal leadership responsibilities and a broader group) regulated by a series of structures and procedures. These three elements – individuals, groups and structures/procedures – are seen as necessary parts of leadership (ibid.). There is often not enough time to embed this degree of understanding, particularly in a rapid-onset crisis. But delays and doubt about how to make decisions can be overcome by the most experienced leaders.

#### **BOX 7. THE ART OF DECISION-MAKING: FOUR EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD**

1. Abby Maxman, former Country Director for Care in Ethiopia, recognised that building consensus is easier in a chronic crisis. She described it as 'a marathon not a sprint. If you run too fast you will lose your energy and your capital.' Hers is an example of an analytical approach, which aims to identify the best course of action from a range of different options. This approach is best suited to situations in which time and information are both available.
2. Knowing when to bring consultation to a close and make a clear decision requires judgement, courage and being comfortable with dissent. Experienced humanitarian leaders warn against being preoccupied with disagreement or personalising it. Instead, stay focused on the overall goal. 'Humanitarian leadership', one said, 'is not a command performance.'
3. Another former humanitarian coordinator explained that rapid-onset natural disasters often require decisions to be taken quickly, and the necessary consensus to be built later. This is an example of 'naturalistic decision-making', which relies on prior experience and intuition when choosing the best course of action. It is

particularly well adapted to urgent situations, especially where decision-makers have relevant experience.<sup>5</sup>

4. Good decision-making can arise from well-understood structures and procedures. In a joint NGO initiative in Zimbabwe, ‘pitching’ – majority voting within a group – was used to make decisions about funding allocation. Disagreements were rare.

*Adapted from ALNAP Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.*

A lack of togetherness causes gaps in understanding and expectations, and it is not uncommon to see a lack of trust and unwelcome power asymmetries emerging within the team. (Team training ahead of emergencies, using simulations and exercises, can be an extremely effective way to develop capacities and trust (ibid.)) One study found that some of the bigger, more influential agencies who were assigned more authority in a team concentrated more on internal priorities than on collective outcomes.<sup>6</sup> This may have contributed to a situation in which, in the words of one operational leader, ‘the cluster system empowered some agencies and organisations to run the resources and does not empower the collective; it [restricts] hegemony to certain agencies’ (ibid.).

Establishing trust and authority is further complicated by the conflicting mandates of organisations in clusters and humanitarian country teams. Leaders report a high level of discomfort when operating outside their formal mandates. Even when they have clever ideas and solutions to problems, there was a tendency to hold back for fear of encroaching on someone else’s space. One respondent conceded: ‘navigating the political realities was not easy’ (Wendt and Schenkenberg, 2023).

Ambiguities around leadership authority and mandate clashes can have a negative effect on morale. In another study of humanitarian country teams, an operational leader questioned the organisational value of collective working: ‘Is working for the collective really worth it in the long run? For the people in crises, probably, but for the agency it’s a grey zone’ (ibid.).

This ‘grey zone’ describes the perceived lack of organisational incentives and support for leaders. Even when, against the odds, individual leaders manage to successfully balance organisational and collective priorities, there is still a price to pay. One evaluation found that while many UN cluster coordinators had done a remarkable job on the ground, they nevertheless felt isolated, and unsupported by their own organisation. One interviewee said:

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<sup>5</sup> Naturalistic approaches, which are often presented in contrast to analytical approaches, have been shown to be particularly relevant for frontline operations where unexpected situations call for quick, high-risk decision-making. Individuals need room to make vital decisions without having to spend time finding a consensus.

<sup>6</sup> A finding from an evaluation of the Joint Inter-Sectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF).

*'there was a disconnect between the political leadership and operational level within humanitarian agencies: staff working in positions of inter-agency consultation tend to see the benefit of exercising collective leadership much more than their superiors.'* (Ibid.)

This also plays out in organisational performance appraisals, where the focus is on the individual agency and their targets rather than the collective. Another interviewee said:

*'people are not going to be promoted because they saw the big picture. On the contrary, they would probably be penalised. "Why are you making us look bad compared to others?"'* (Ibid.)

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### 3.2.4 INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND A CULTURE OF RISK AVERSION

These quotations reflect a worrying reality: leadership seems to have emerged in spite of, rather than because of, organisational culture. Organisational incentives working against collective action is not a new phenomenon. 'Time to let go' by Bennett et al. (2016) described the need to let go: of power and control; of perverse incentives; and of divisions (as opposed to differences). The drive for upward accountability and compliance has contributed to a bureaucratic mind-set that constrains and positively discourages risk-taking, which is often an essential aspect of humanitarian leadership. One UN leader said: 'whenever you stick your neck out the UN is very ambivalent about whether to support you or not' (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011). Establishing a risk-taking culture requires leaders to take bold steps, as evidenced in Box 8.

**BOX 8. BUCKING THE TREND: ESTABLISHING A RISK-TAKING CULTURE WITHIN A RED CROSS NATIONAL SOCIETY – ABBAS HULLET**

Abbas Hullet, former Secretary General for the Kenyan Red Cross, was known for his confident leadership when it came to taking bold decisions. In his own words, 'if you don't take risks it's all routine. You are a typical civil servant. Try things and make mistakes.' Credited with transforming his organisation, he consciously nurtured a risk-taking culture among his staff. A common refrain among Kenyan Red Cross senior managers was 'the sky is the limit', the phrase used by their boss. Staff were encouraged to come up with new ideas, which were met with enthusiasm and support, albeit not uncritically. Abbas was also an advocate of innovation, and according to his colleagues he was 'a shining example of a risk-taking culture', which challenged the Red Cross Movement in its attitude to risk.

*Source: Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.*

More recently, fingers have been pointed not only at senior management but also at governing boards, which are perceived to care more about internal issues – such as growth, funding, reputation and visibility – than they do about how well their organisation coordinates with others on the ground.<sup>7</sup>

However, there are signs that change is happening. Several humanitarian agencies are beginning to seriously challenge their internal cultures and ways of doing things. This in itself demonstrates a genuine intention to learn and change. Leadership will be vitally important in making these changes, and we will look at this in more detail in Part 5.

### 3.3 SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- The shared leadership (or ‘host leader’) approach is usually best suited to operational teams working in crisis situations. However, given the considerable diversity of teams, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Elements from other (‘structured’ and ‘exceptional individual’) approaches should be used according to circumstances and context.
- Operational teams report many challenges in the field related to lack of formal leadership and the difficulty of building trust, consensus and a shared understanding. Formal position does not automatically confer the authority to lead; this has to be earned.
- Challenges are best overcome through a combination of the leader’s personal qualities (‘first amongst equals’) and clear structures and procedures. In reality, though, there is almost always a certain amount of chaos and improvisation in pressurised and challenging operational contexts.
- Operational leadership can be described as a series of interactions between an individual with formal leadership responsibilities, and a broader group of individuals, regulated by a series of structures and procedures. The individual, the group and the structures/procedures are all necessary parts of leadership.
- There are contradictions between the aims of collective action and collaborative approaches, and the more singular aims of individual agencies. These contradictions are widely viewed as an impediment to improved leadership.
- In general, commentators believe there is not enough organisational support for leaders, and that good leadership has emerged in spite of, rather than because of, organisational culture.
- Organisational cultures are widely perceived to be too risk-averse.

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<sup>7</sup> This perception featured strongly in a Leadership Lab in Berlin in November 2022, organised by the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI) and The Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA).

## PART 4. LEADERSHIP AND PROTECTION

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘protection’ is enshrined in various bodies of law, including the Geneva Conventions; primary responsibility for protection in conflict rests with the nation state and national authorities. Several internationally mandated humanitarian and human rights organisations lead on specific aspects of humanitarian protection and specific groups of protected persons. Over the past 25 years the concept has expanded, and a wide range of international and national NGOs are now actively involved.

Although protection and assistance are integral parts of humanitarian programming, we have separated them in this paper because the leadership skills required for protection in conflict situations are to some degree distinct from those required for a simple assistance-only approach. Protection reaches beyond people’s material needs by focusing on questions of personal safety and the dignity of the whole human person. It is about drawing attention to violations and abuses and finding ways in which they can be prevented, alleviated and redressed. This requires specific knowledge of various bodies of international law, negotiation skills, and diplomatic skills. These are all part of the tool kit for effective protection leadership.

The grim headline message is that the humanitarian system is failing to protect crisis-affected people from abuse and physical harm. As Hugo Slim, ex-Head of Policy at the ICRC, remarked during a lecture on experiences in Tigray, Syria and Myanmar, ‘protection hits a dead end on the big, really strategic challenges of protecting large numbers of people from large-scale violence’ (Slim, 2020). This view is supported by a recent review of the UN Inter-Agency Steering Committee’s (IASC) protection policy, which concluded:

*‘the humanitarian sector writ large needs to reorientate humanitarian action to ensure that protection is central to humanitarian action, so that the atrocities and abuses that crisis-affected people face are not ignored. This requires bold, empowered leadership.’* (Quoted in Davies and Bowden, 2023.)

### 4.2 GLOBAL LEADERSHIP FOR ACCESS AND PROTECTION

At the global or strategic level there is a lot of frustration amongst humanitarians that the UN Security Council is failing to pass vital resolutions to protect civilians in conflict. Interviews carried out by a respected humanitarian policy think tank found that the current UN Secretary-General is perceived to bow too often to political pressure from Member States when concerns of human rights abuses are raised (Davies and Bowden, 2023). One UN emergency relief coordinator (ERC), after reporting to the

Security Council on alleged atrocities during the Syrian conflict, remarked that the experience was 'like speaking to an empty room.'<sup>8</sup>

Having said this, interventions by the ERC can result in significant gains for vulnerable people. During the Syrian conflict the ERC, Martin Griffiths, was able to successfully negotiate with President Assad, resulting in the opening of additional safe crossing points for people fleeing conflict (BBC TV, *HARDtalk* 30<sup>th</sup> October 2021). In all likelihood there are many other similar instances of successful negotiation, achieved through silent and frequently invisible diplomacy.

Overall, though, humanitarians feel let down by a perceived lack of leadership at the highest levels. This is reflected in a surge in advocacy that aims to address 'a critical and long-standing gap in the selection of leaders with adequate experience and skillsets in humanitarian negotiation and diplomacy' (Davies and Bowden, 2023). In an open letter to the UK Prime Minister in 2020, 52 of the most prominent UK humanitarian leaders stated their belief that the process for selecting the ERC had not been transparent, inclusive or merit based, and that change was needed so that 'the next ERC has the authority, experience and skills to execute the most critical leadership role in the international humanitarian system' (UNA-UK, 2021).

Up to now there has been a clear preference for appointing ERCs from the UK, thereby excluding a large swathe of global talent. It is interesting to note that Martin Griffiths is quoted in a recent podcast as saying that he hoped he would be 'the last "Brit" in the job' (Rethinking Humanitarianism, 2022).

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#### 4.2.1 LEADERSHIP FOR PROTECTION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL AND IN FRONTLINE OPERATIONS

One of the challenges identified in the literature concerns the ambiguities in conceptualising and defining protection, and what it means in practice. The recent IASC evaluation concluded: 'There remains a lack of conceptual clarity about protection', and that 'protection is not well understood or owned in the humanitarian sector' (Cocking et al., 2022). ALNAP also notes that 'at its core there is a fundamental definitional problem for protection' (ALNAP, 2018). There is confusion: is protection a lens through which to view humanitarian action, an activity per se, or an objective?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Personal recollection. Stephen O'Brien was appointed ERC in 2015 and this remark was made at a conference in Geneva after a meeting at the UN Security Council.

<sup>9</sup> For some time, there has been debate about the usefulness and relevance of the principles underpinning protection. Before the Rwandan Genocide in 1994 the concept was largely contained within the domain of the ICRC and other mandated agencies, who were seen as the legal experts and guardians of the Geneva Convention. But as non-mandated agencies became involved, protection changed from being a legally-based approach to what some see as an 'all rights framework' containing an extraordinary array of social, cultural and political rights.

This is not simply a conceptual problem. A lack of shared understanding can polarise opinion within humanitarian circles about which strategies and actions will best afford access and protect people. There appears to be a strong view that, in the absence of a unified strategic protection framework, the differences in individual agency frameworks undermine a coherent approach, leading to fragmentation that is driven by the mandates and priorities of individual agencies (Davies and Bowden, 2023).

As with ‘simple assistance’, another perennial issue is risk-aversion. This is especially apparent when humanitarian leaders attempt to walk the thin line between maintaining constructive relationships with the host state and/or relevant authorities in order to maintain access, and retaining enough distance and influence to raise unwelcome protection risks. Anecdotal evidence suggests there *are* many successful examples of negotiating access when leaders ‘dare to lead’; see Box 9 and Box 10.

**BOX 9. THE VALUE OF CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING IN OBTAINING ACCESS IN SOMALIA – EL KHIDIR DALOUM**

El Khidir Daloum, Save the Children Country Director in Somalia, demonstrated the value of local leadership by bringing his in-depth knowledge into a deeply complex situation. He successfully negotiated access on behalf of the international humanitarian community with the-then Islamic Court of a new regime in Somalia. As well as contextual understanding, El Khadir’s achievement was based on diplomatic and negotiation skills, and his willingness to dedicate a lot of his time. UN leaders – short of time and unable to spend much time away from the office – sought out El Khadir for his analysis and advice, meaning that he provided a wider benefit to the greater relief effort, and became a go-to leader in the relief operation.

*Source: Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011.*

**BOX 10. TEA WITH THE TALIBAN: ESTABLISHING A DIALOGUE ON THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS – MARK BOWDEN**

Engaging with non-state armed groups presents a difficult challenge for leaders, particularly humanitarian coordinators. Between 2012 and 2017 Mark Bowden, then Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan, oversaw an integrated approach to engaging in dialogue with the Taliban to address concerns about civilian protection.

A key principle was to treat engagement with the Taliban not as negotiations for humanitarian access (as is often the case with non-state armed groups), but as a broader dialogue on commonly identified concerns about civilian protection. The aim was to achieve public recognition by the Taliban of the legitimacy of humanitarian action. Establishing an effective and meaningful dialogue involved identifying legitimate and senior interlocutors – with authority delegated by senior levels of the Taliban leadership councils – and securing their trust. This required maintaining a neutral and non-partisan approach, and total transparency about the nature, extent, intention and distribution of humanitarian action. It required a patient acceptance of the Taliban’s opaque and lengthy policy-making and decision-making processes.

Dialogue was possible because the Taliban recognised some aspects of international humanitarian law. Key areas of concern were discussed, including the distinction between combatants and non-combatants; health facilities in Taliban-controlled areas; and the protection of girls attending schools in Taliban-controlled areas.

Overall, the dialogue was successful for three main reasons:

1. a broad-based platform that reflected the interests of the humanitarian community, as opposed to the interests of individual organisations;
2. coordination with other key interlocutors such as the ICRC on common messaging, consistency in approach, and the development of mutually supportive agendas; and
3. good communication. The humanitarian and donor community were regularly briefed on the status and nature of discussions, so that all could be involved in setting the agenda and making sure their specific concerns were included in the dialogue.

*Source: Mark Bowden in Davies and Bowden, 2023.*

Kate Gilmore – who, among other senior leadership positions, has served as Executive Deputy Secretary-General of Amnesty International and UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights – has made a compelling case that senior humanitarian leaders often face seemingly impossible odds due to particular dangers and uncertainties. She argues that to rise to the occasion, leaders require ‘daring’: a combination of moral courage and inner strength (Gilmore, 2023). She says: ‘It’s OK not to be daring. But if you know you are not made for daring, please don’t dare lead.’ This chimes with an ancient understanding of leadership; the Indo-European word *leith* means to step across a threshold – and to let go of whatever might stop you (Senge et al., 2014).

Those who ‘dare to do’ are likely to be the exception rather than the rule. Leaders, often under organisational pressure, are perceived to be increasingly risk-averse, prioritising presence over the imperative to speak out about abuses. Host states are often aware that the threat of retaliation is in itself enough to silence humanitarian organisations. Presence is maintained, whatever the cost. Silence in the face of abuse raises the question of whether agencies are complicit in abuse, especially in the

absence of ‘red lines’. The failure of the UN to act in the face of grave violations in Myanmar was seen to be the latest in a ‘cycle of impunity’ that had existed since the UN’s systemic failure to protect human rights in Sri Lanka a decade earlier (Rosenthal, 2019; OHCHR, 2019). For some, risk-taking or ‘daring to lead’ is about ‘setting the tone for effective leadership (for protection) and requires institutional and organisational support’ (Davies and Bowden, 2023).

#### 4.3 SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Overall, the humanitarian system is failing to protect crisis-affected people from abuse and physical harm.
- At the level of strategic global governance, and notably at the UN Security Council, Member States have showed an unwillingness to support resolutions and other actions that would ensure humanitarian access in the most serious conflict situations. However, there have been notable exceptions. Many people are arguing for a change in the UN Emergency Coordinator appointment process.
- On the ground, there is a felt need for a unified strategic protection framework. Individual agency frameworks are undermining a coherent approach.
- It is recognised that humanitarian leaders face extremely complicated trade-offs when negotiating with governments and non-state armed actors on the ground. There are positive examples of leaders negotiating access. These leaders often demonstrate moral courage and inner strength.
- In ongoing operations characterised by conflict and rapidly changing circumstance, operational experience is a key determinant of effective decision-making and prompt action.
- There is a strong sense that more could be done if leaders in general were less risk-averse and had more support from their organisations.

## PART 5. FUTURE DIRECTIONS: IMPROVING OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This report has reflected the fact that operational leadership is best achieved through collaboration and collective action driven by a shared leadership approach. But this has proved to be far from easy in practice. The space in which operational leadership could flourish is squeezed by an unsupportive institutional culture characterised by inter-agency competition, conflicting mandates, an overly bureaucratic approach and risk-aversion, all of which contribute to a lack of support for humanitarian leadership. Many argue that mind-sets and cultures will have to change to address this situation. But how can we change a highly complex and entrenched system underpinned by deep-rooted values and ways of doing things?

One approach is systems leadership, a long-established concept in the business world (for a fuller explanation see Senge et al., 2014). By innovating and changing ways of working, systems leadership tackles seemingly intractable situations and creates opportunities to work more effectively in complex environments. Instead of focusing on short-term, reactive problem-solving (a speciality of humanitarians), the systems leader takes a longer-term and more strategic approach to bring about changes and improvements over time.

The evidence that systems leadership is gradually being adopted by humanitarian organisations is seen in the recent leadership profile for United Nations resident coordinators (see Box 11), which outlines what a UN leadership culture should consist of.

#### **BOX 11. SYSTEMS THINKING: LEADERSHIP PROFILE FOR UN RESIDENT COORDINATORS**

##### **Systems thinking**

- Analysing complex environments
- Identifying pathways for impact in complex environments

##### **Co-creation**

- Building trust
- Facilitating collective action

##### **Foundational attributes**

- Co-creation
- Building trust
- Facilitating collective action

### **Driving transformational change**

- Fostering innovation
- Leading change

*Source: UNDP, 2023.*

Specialists tell us that systems leaders must have three core capabilities: seeing the larger system; fostering reflection and more generative conversations; and shifting the collective focus from reactive problem-solving to co-creating for a better future.

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#### **5.1.1 SEEING THE LARGER SYSTEM**

Most of us focus our attention on the parts of the system that are visible from our own vantage point, which often leads to arguments about who has the right perspective on a problem. Understanding the larger system is necessary to build a mutual understanding of complex problems, and enables collaborating organisations to jointly develop solutions that are not evident to the individual, and then work for the entire system – rather than expend energy on fixing individual bits and pieces. (See 5.2.)

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#### **5.1.2 FOSTERING REFLECTION**

Fostering reflection requires holding up a mirror to address preconceptions and assumptions. The aim is to develop an understanding about how our own personal model may limit our thinking. Crucially, this is not just a cognitive exercise; it is about having an emotional appreciation of the reality of others, bridge-building to address mistrust, and creating openness and creativity. Tools for fostering reflection aim to banish embedded assumptions. Examples include peacekeeping circles, dialogue interviews and learning journeys.

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#### **5.1.3 SHIFTING COLLECTIVE FOCUS**

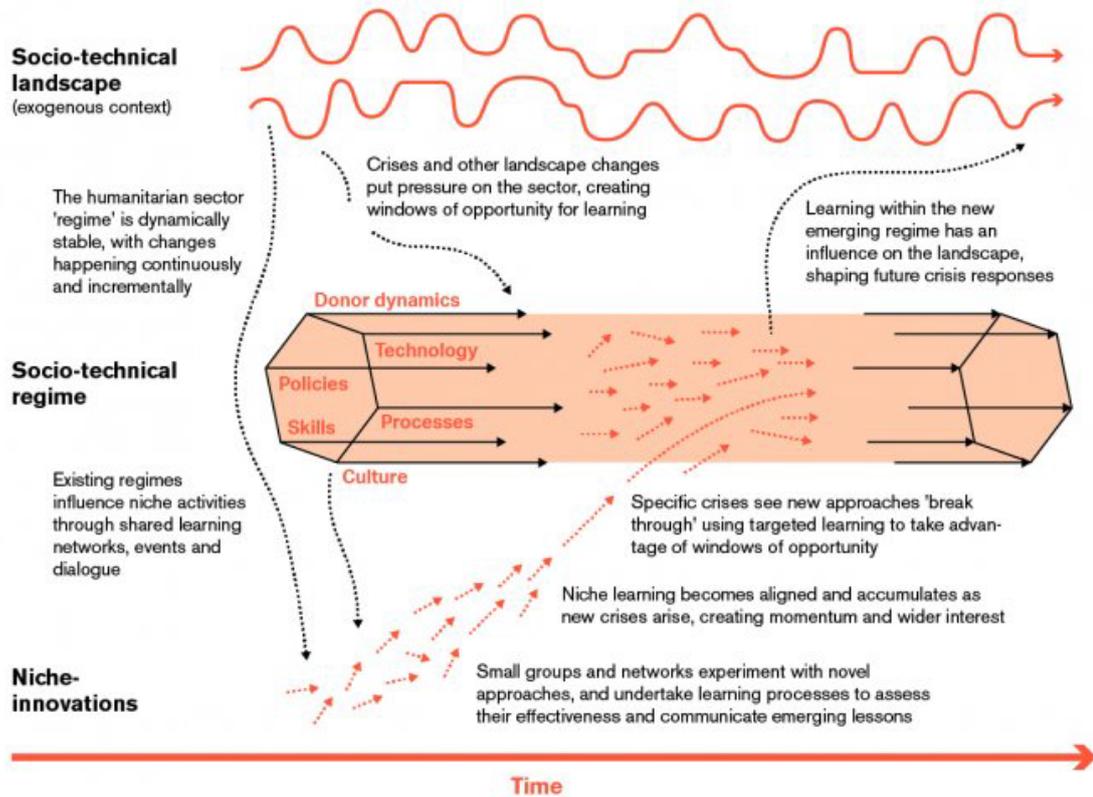
Systems leadership means helping the organisation to move away from reactive problem-solving, and towards building positive visions for the future. The most effective systems leaders are able to move past problems, using the tension between the vision and current difficulties to inspire novel approaches. Experience has shown this is a slow and gradual process, because it usually involves facing difficult truths about the present. One focus-shifting approach is ‘appreciative enquiry’.

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### **5.2 WHY SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP IS IMPORTANT: SEEING THE BIG PICTURE**

The Geels model is a helpful framework that provides a wide-angled, three-dimensional view of a complex system, showing how different actions and activities interact with each other at three levels in a system.

## INFOGRAPHIC 2. SEEING THE BIG PICTURE: THE GEELS MODEL



Source: Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2022.

This framework strengthens operational leadership by helping us to understand how activities and processes are connected to each other, and how the interactions between them can bring about improvements in culture and ways of doing things. Let's run through each of the three levels with humanitarian leadership in mind.

New experiences and learning for leadership take place at the **niche level**. Old assumptions are tested, and innovative approaches are piloted: for example, GELI/KONU leadership labs take senior leaders out of the field and into a safe space to work out new ways of getting around tensions and distrust in operational teams. Participants come from organisations across the sector and work through thorny challenges using a systems thinking approach. The niches provide a testbed for doing things differently, away from the normal dynamics of a sector. Another example is UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' 'flagship initiative', which aims to transform the humanitarian programme cycle and coordination structures; this is currently being piloted in the Philippines, Niger, South Sudan and Colombia. Another example, of course, is the Tandem Leadership Programme.

The **dominant regime level** reflects the institutional architecture of the international system: donor organisations, UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and INGOs, all of whom are central to the functioning of the traditional humanitarian business model. Inherent within this structure are established sets of practices, processes, skills, technologies, cultures and associated rules and values, all of which are deeply embedded in mind-sets and structures. This is where many institutional barriers to leadership exist, and where organisations need efforts to create a stronger enabling environment for institutionalised leadership approaches.

The **landscape level** encompasses global political, social and ecological forces, all of which can change suddenly and interact with each other to shape how humanitarian crises play out. It is here that the ERC and others interact with governments, multilateral organisations, non-state armed groups and others, often in highly charged and complex environments. And it is here that the humanitarian system needs to attract, recruit and support senior leaders who are skilled in diplomacy, negotiation and managing large-scale bureaucratic processes.

Changes and improvements to the humanitarian system will be, to some degree, dependent on the positive alignment of actors and organisations at each of these levels. For example, changes in organisational culture to promote leadership do not happen at the regime level; and as things stand, improvements emerging from the niches are likely to be stifled. At the same time, institutional changes at the regime level will be slowed down if the niches fail to innovate, experiment and show the feasibility and viability of new operational approaches to leadership. And at the landscape level, advances for humanitarian access and protection will be subject to complex political forces that can be outside of our control. Such forces can be positive (a conducive environment in the UN Security Council) or negative (the absence of political agreements with parties engaged in conflict). Whatever the condition of the landscape, success will partly depend on the quality of strategic leaders and the quality of support from organisations at the dominant regime level.

**BOX 12. EXAMPLE OF POTENTIAL ACTIONS TO CHANGE REGIME-LEVEL CULTURE IN ORDER TO SUPPORT OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Dominant culture	Actions for change
Risk-aversion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Donors reassess accountability requirements</li> <li>• CEOs and managers of operational agencies review organisational appetite for risk and provide support for leaders who take bold action</li> <li>• Find additional clarity on responsibilities at different levels of the organisation</li> <li>• Support innovation</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review terms of reference, appraisals and incentive structures</li> </ul>
Lack of national and local leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create spaces for reflecting on preconceptions and personal assumptions</li> <li>• Challenge implicit negative assumptions about the experience, skills and values of local/national staff</li> <li>• Change human resources policies to reflect a positive attitude towards the recruitment and retention of local/national staff</li> </ul>
Leading without requisite authority: conflicts between agency and collective aims and mandates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operational agencies find a more balanced approach between organisation-first priorities (fundraising, growth, getting in first, logo visibility) and collective approaches</li> <li>• Provide support for leaders on the ground</li> </ul>
Lack of trust within operational teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in training together as a team</li> <li>• Invest in mentoring and coaching, and improve communications between HQ and the field</li> </ul>
Repeating mistakes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in learning</li> <li>• Create safe spaces for reflection</li> </ul>
Ambiguities around definitions and understanding of protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agencies work towards a single shared protection framework</li> </ul>
Lack of diplomatic and negotiation skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in training and mentoring</li> </ul>

### 5.3 DRIVING TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

One element of the leadership profile for resident coordinators reproduced above concerns leading a wider transformational change process: one that doesn't only improve leadership, but improves the system as a whole. This is relevant for all leaders, not only those at the UN. One example is the International Red Cross/Red Crescent's New Way of Working Initiative, in which 14 national societies are creating new kinds of partnerships with the intention of pooling resources and plans. The intention is to do this by developing common accountability frameworks, context analyses and needs analyses, and then to align, merge or even abolish country-level structures.<sup>10</sup> Much of this is about changing mind-sets, and the importance of leadership is explicitly acknowledged by encouraging national societies to invest in 'transformational leaders' at all levels to implement system-wide change.

Although there is a dearth of formal learning about the actual experiences of those leading change processes, we have identified from grey literature and with change-makers and leaders some of the most commonly reoccurring issues.

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#### 5.3.1 BE PREPARED FOR CHANGE TO BE A LENGTHY PROCESS

Successful change tends to go through a series of phases, and requires a lot of time. High hopes and expectations – 'early enthusiasm capital' – begins to wear thin if early progress is not visible; most people won't go on 'the long march' if there are no short-term goals to meet and celebrate (Kotter, 2012). Without this, too many people give up and join those who are actively resisting change.

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#### 5.3.2 FORMAL LEADERS HAVE CATALYTIC POWER

Leaders with formal authority, whatever their personal style or approach, can make a significant difference to the success or otherwise of complex change processes. For example, the charismatic leadership style of former ERC Jan Egeland is commonly seen to have helped to make the protection of civilians a global priority, empowering other leaders to take 'a more strategic approach' (Davies and Bowden, 2023). Leading by example is key, even if it means losing some authority when shifts in traditional power structures are required.

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#### 5.3.3 LEADERS MUST EXPECT AND MANAGE RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Change processes inevitably bring about some level of disagreement and conflict. These can spring from cultural differences (societal and/or organisational); a resistance to relinquishing power and control; and – in cases of potential downsizing – the fear of losing one's job. Some conflict is highly visible, but anxiety and disagreement are often hidden; people who do not want to antagonise or disappoint

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<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Red Cross/Red Crescent personnel.

managers or powerful figures can do their utmost to frustrate changes, or refuse to think about the change process at all.

#### 5.4 SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- As the challenges for humanitarian leadership become more pronounced and the humanitarian system continues to grow in size and complexity, systems thinking can help us see the bigger picture and address the key cultural impediments that stifle better leadership and, ultimately, better outcomes.
- Tools from systems thinking are becoming an integral part of leadership competencies and profiles. Systems thinking involves taking the time to reflect on our own personal assumptions and – where appropriate – adapt and change our values and ways of seeing and doing.
- The Geels model is one tool that can help provide us with a 'big picture', multi-dimensional view. It shows how activities interact with each other to bring about change and improvements to both leadership and the humanitarian system.
- A number of transformational change processes are underway to improve humanitarian action, and system leaders are likely to play a key role.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I began the literature review for this report by recalling my role in what I believe was the first in-depth research study on humanitarian leadership. The method was to identify ten humanitarian leaders who had a reputation for achieving exceptional outcomes – often in extremely difficult circumstances – and learn how they did it. I have a strong memory of meeting some of them and chairing an animated discussion at the launch of the report. I was left with a feeling of admiration for all of them, for what they had achieved and for their modesty and generosity. I also remember their frustrations, and hoped that over time the humanitarian community would find ways to overcome them.

By the end of the literature review, I was struck by how so many of the same obstacles, challenges and frustrations were still in play, coming around time and time again. Indeed, less than a year ago I attended an event at which researchers and leadership specialists discussed findings from their latest reports, and at times it felt that time had stood still. The humanitarian community still had courageous individuals who achieved great things, but often this required them to go beyond their organisation's norms and boundaries.

As I continued this review it became more apparent that many of the root causes of the aforementioned difficulties are embedded in the cultural and operational mechanisms of the humanitarian system itself. Without addressing these head-on, humanitarian leadership will continue to face the same challenges and frustrations. It was also evident how difficult it is to get a complete picture of the structure of the system itself, and how this affects the ability to lead effectively. How do all the elements fit together? How do they relate to each other? What does it all add up to? Most importantly, what needs to change, and how do we make these changes?

It's not surprising, then, that agencies are increasingly turning to systems leadership and systems thinking to help address these challenges head-on. This is good thing, and will hopefully produce results that become embedded in leadership good practice. It is also heartening to see what appears to be a surge in transformational change processes in humanitarian organisations, reflecting a desire for change and improvements in leadership, and better outcomes for people affected by conflict. I hope these new efforts can create a brighter future for humanitarian action.

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