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WESTERN AID COOPERATION IN MELTDOWN

Radical Change Required- After Critical Self-Reflection


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The international aid sector is in shock. The suspension of all, and subsequent cancellation of many, USAID contracts, and the dismissal of most of its staff, has an immediate impact on millions of people and thousands of aid-funded organisations, UN and international and local/national NGOs, but also government institutions running programmes with US funding. The brusqueness and brutality of it (Musk has called USAID ‘*a criminal organisation*’¹) tend to obscure that European aid donors have been, and continue cutting, their aid budgets for some time now, while USAID maintained its level until the new MAGA administration took over this year. It is the cumulative impact of budget cuts of the main Western aid-donors that is now biting deep.

The aid sector is responding with pleas and arguments to the Western donor governments not to cut so drastically. Some hope this will only be a temporary decline, with official aid picking up again in a few years, when the political landscape has changed. While trying to find alternative sources of funding to at least partially compensate the drastic losses in income, many have to let go of large numbers of staff, and several have already closed down. The international aid sector is deeply disrupted. We start hearing views that this must be the opportunity to drastically change a system that has long been criticised for its significant flaws.

This brief supports the argument that radical change is needed. But it goes deeper in its analysis and imagining of the nature of that change. First, the analysis of what is happening needs improvement: The cuts in official aid budgets go together with a sustained disregard for international norms and with an increasingly frontal attack on the primary multilateral institution tasked with promoting and defending them, the United Nations -by several of the countries behind its creation at the end of WWII. Simultaneously, we are also seeing a clear attack on the freedom of speech, academic independence, civic activism and the right to protest in the US, a trend that was however already noticeable in several European countries, not just in Hungary, but also in others that claim to be functioning ‘democracies’.¹¹

This brief therefore argues that

- Aid-funded agencies cannot only focus on ‘downsizing’ and ‘re-prioritising’ projects and programmes, while searching for alternative sources of funding.
- The decline in multilateral cooperation will impact aid agencies, and all of us, much more profoundly than the aid budget cuts. A new ‘age of empires’ is emerging, where ‘*might is right*’.
- The aid sector cannot, as it has mostly done the past 30 years, ignore the national, regional and international political economies that create and maintain poverty, marginalisation, disease, ‘underdevelopment’, wars, forced displacement, and humanitarian suffering.
- INGOs in Western countries in particular need to engage much more with the poverty, marginalisation, climate crisis impacts, but also social and political polarisation in their home societies, and the economic policies of their own governments.
- There is a need for a fundamental rethink of purpose, position and role, in light of what this ‘new’ world now needs. That must start with a critical self-examination, in each agency, about how it has been working for the past 20-25 years, individually but also as part of a wider ‘sector’. We must let go of mindsets and ways of working that are not that different from what is causing today’s crises. Only then can we consider, with fresh eyes, how we best contribute to what the world now needs. The Annex offers some initial areas for such critical self-reflection.

I. WHAT IS HAPPENING?

1. *Cumulative Cuts in Western Aid Budgets*

In recent years, and continuing in 2025, many long-standing European aid donors like France, Switzerland, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium, have been reducing their aid budgets. Admittedly, all of this comes after a very significant rise, of notably humanitarian aid, over the past decade or so, till about 2022.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2023 and 2024, USAID, as the largest single aid donor, had maintained its overall budget levels. Its brutal contraction and shift to the State Dpt., under the new MAGA-administration (to signal that this is part of a well-organised political movement, and not dependent only on the erratic figure of Trump) is in line with an existing trend among Western aid donors. The speed, scale and brutality are shocking, but the impact is a cumulative one.

It affects access to basic services like health, clean water and education, for many millions of people. The direct human impact will be measurable in ‘excess mortality’ i.e. ‘avoidable deaths’, and increased disease burden in many places -not only in countries suffering hot wars like Sudan, the DRC, Ukraine or Mali. It will also accelerate forced displacement. Important work for conflict reduction and for good, people-centered, governance, is being brought to a force-stop. The large staff redundancies in organisations and their networks not only affects individuals and those dependent on their salaries. It also means a reduction in operational capabilities, and a loss of expertise and connections. Several agencies, and supporting services, like the Famine Early Warning System, are already closing down.

2. *Multilateral Cooperation under Attack*


Simultaneously, we see clear attempts to dismantle the 80 year-old ‘international order’ that, however imperfectly, tried to promote and protect fundamental rights for every human being, and set basic rules for the behaviour of all UN member states, domestically and internationally.

Not for the first time, the UN is under attack from one or a few member states. Sri Lanka in the past, for example, showed much hostility to the UN for its critical attitude to how it conducted and ended its war with the LTTE. Successive military regimes in Myanmar have rejected attempts by the UN to monitor its respect for human rights. Kofi Annan, when Secretary General of the UN, was strongly criticized by notably the US and UK when he called their 2003 invasion of Iraq ‘not conform with the UN Charter’ and, from that perspective, ‘illegal’.^{iv} The most aggressive attacks in recent years however have come from Israel which, faced with UN criticism of how it conducts its war on Gaza and in the West Bank, has discredited the UN General Assembly^v, called the UN an ‘*anti-semitic swamp*’,^{vi} and went as far as to declare the UN Secretary-General persona non grata.^{vii}

These attacks on the UN go hand-in-hand with a sustained disregard of a whole set of international conventions and treaties, among them human rights law, international humanitarian law (IHL), the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Genocide Convention, the Ottawa Treaty on Anti-Personnel Mines, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change etc.

The first Trump administration (2017-2020) already showed its hostility to many of these ‘regulatory’ conventions and treaties. The biggest de facto attack on them however has been by the Biden administration (2021-2024), with its unconditional support for Israel’s total revenge warfare after the (absolutely condemnable) 7 October massacre led by Hamas. Several (not all!) European governments actively supported this sustained contempt for international norms and standards, politically and even militarily. They equally failed to strongly support the UN in its defense of the right to humanitarian assistance and to protection of civilians and other non-combatants in the midst of war. European ‘leaders’ still do not appreciate how much respect the ‘West’ in general, but Europe in particular, has lost globally, because of its blatantly double standards between the Russia-Ukraine and the Israel-Palestinian wars, and how that will backfire when a Europe, abandoned by the US, needs to strengthen its ties with others.

The hostility of the current ‘MAGA administration’ (Make America Great Again) is even greater than the first Trump and the Biden administrations. The US and Israel now pulled out of the UN Human Rights Council, the US imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court,^{viii} while Israel is criminalizing those who support its work.^{ix} (Neither the US nor Israel had ever recognised the ICC). UN agencies associated with migration, like the IOM and UNHCR are also being defunded.



The consequences of this deliberate disregard for international norms and now active dismantling of multilateral cooperation are multiple, and huge. For most people on the planet, except arms traders and a small economic-political-military elite, a world in which *'might is right'* is much less secure. Those who support this aggressive nationalism will discover they are not safe: If they are young, they may find themselves deployed as cannon fodder. Maybe they survive on the winning side -but will have to live with the traumas of what they have seen and themselves have done. If they are too old for military service, they too may be affected by missile -and drone-attacks, and the interruption of vital communication-, electricity-, water- and train services by cyber-warfare. Even without major wars, slowing down the climate -and extinction crisis becomes ever more difficult, just as the efforts to be ahead of the next pandemic are jeopardized as critical medical research information is no longer allowed, or cannot be put shared or put in the public domain.^x

This dismantling of an international rules-based order will have much greater impact than the aid budget cuts. The aid sector must remember how very limited its room for action was during the Cold War (1945-1989). A new 'cold war' (and several hot, proxy, wars) is likely to be the 'new reality', though now with more than two 'super-powers', and without a 'Western alliance'. A better comparison may be the 1930s, when many countries were still reeling from the 1929 Crash and resulting 'Great Depression', the US was not inclined to get involved (historically the US has swung back and forth between isolationism and international engagement) and there was no multilateral platform like the UN.

3. *Attack on 'Liberal' Values that International Aid is Associated With*

On the surface, the virtual elimination of USAID is to save US taxpayers' money.^{xi} In reality, the MAGA movement are cutting primarily as part of their *'war on woke'*.^{xii} In their view, both international aid and institutions like the UN are associated with the 'liberal' values, which they blame for having weakened the USA, and undermining a (god-given) social order of 'regular' families and a 'natural' division of roles between 'men' and 'women' based on evident binary biology. There is a clear 'male pride' aspect to it, that others would call 'male supremacy'. There is also a clear overtone of 'white pride', and a backlash against e.g. critical race theory. Hence, this MAGA administration is also banning words like 'gender', 'gender-based violence', 'diversity', 'inclusion', 'racism', 'marginalised', 'minority' etc.^{xiii}

4. *'Freedom' as Hyper-individualism and Deregulated Capitalism*

There is a second driving motivation behind the MAGA-government's dismantling of federal institutions in the US and attack on multilateralism and the UN. It embodies another historical trend in US politics, that interprets (hyper-individualistic) 'freedom' as minimal interference of the 'state'. It does not want the state, particularly the federal level, to interfere in social relations, nor in business enterprise.

In Musk's hyper-individualistic view of being human, a *'fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy'*; empathy is a *'bug in Western civilisation'*, that others actively exploit. ^{xiv} For people like him, the state must not force us into domestic and/or international solidarity.

Weakening the state and 'democratic oversight', evidently also serves the interests of big business, who want minimal restrictive regulation. Hence, this MAGA administration is also actively waging war on environmental protection work and climate crisis activism -giving a free hand to polluting and over-extracting companies. Note that there has already been a longer crack-down on environmental -and climate activism in Europe, e.g. in the UK and Germany -beyond the understandable 'no' to destructive tactics. Logically, the now banned vocabulary in the US therefore also includes 'climate crisis', 'climate science', 'environmental quality', 'activism' and 'activists'. Not only USAID is being dismantled, so too the US Environmental Protection Agency and others. Funding for clean-energy initiatives is terminated and civic organisations working on the environment and/or climate are now actively harassed.

5. *Democracy No Longer Fit for the Future*

Some of the multi-billionaires that support the MAGA-movement (and try to influence also Europe's politics) have been quite explicit about their belief that democracy is not fit for the future. Peter Thiel, for example, (an immigrant like Musk) in his 2009 essay, *'The Education of a Libertarian'*, starts out with the following affirmation: *"I remain committed to the faith of my teenage years: to authentic human freedom as a precondition for the highest good. I stand against confiscatory taxes, totalitarian collectives, and the ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual. For all these reasons, I still call myself "libertarian." But I must confess that over the last two decades, I have changed radically on the question of how to achieve these goals. Most importantly, I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible."*^{xv}

Musk and Thiel also share a wish to escape from 'world politics' where the views of many limit them from pursuing a hyper-individualist life. The first wants to move to the stars, the latter to a residence on the ocean-floor. Thiel, already 15 years ago, saw the situation as a *"deadly race between politics and technology"* (...) *Unlike the world of politics, in the world of technology the choices of individuals may still be paramount. The fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom that makes the world safe for capitalism."*

From an opposing angle, renowned economist Joseph Stiglitz agrees that democracy cannot survive extreme inequality.^{xvi} Particularly in the US, which is more of a 'money-cracy' in which elected politicians are more concerned about keeping their financial backers happy than working for the good of a much larger 'public'. As he puts it: *'American inequality didn't just happen. It was created.'* But as the oligarchs control social media and increasingly the traditional media, it is easy to make people believe that the problems they experience are created by 'others', like migrants or the UN -a well-established political narrative also in Europe.^{xvii}

In short, it seems that the first half of the 21st century will be dominated by (mis-) leaders with a mindset from the 20th century, supported by late-19th century style mega-capitalists.^{xviii} The later, in their time, made fortunes from the then industrial top-technologies like steel, aluminum, coal, oil and the railroads (and the banking behind it), and became referred to as 'robber-barons'; the current mega-rich make their fortunes from the contemporary top-technologies, mostly in IT. None of them has an interest in protection people's and workers' rights.



II. INTERNATIONAL AID SECTOR RESPONSES

1. *Trying to Reverse or at Least Reduce the Aid Budget Cuts*

Not surprisingly, there is much outrage that the ‘*richest person in the world is waging war on the poorest*’. But such criticism simply does not touch Musk or the wider MAGA crowd, and its similar-minded conservatives in Europe. In calmer tones, there is much appropriate advocacy against this dismantling of international aid, typically on humanitarian and political grounds. The humanitarian argument is that the aid is vital life support for millions of people. The political arguments are that

- international aid contributes to a positive image that people around the world have of the donor country. It constitutes a form of ‘soft power’.
- aid indirectly contributes to ‘national security’ by reducing conflict and irregular migration.
- if the West loses influence through its reduction in aid-based international cooperation, China and Russia will step into the gap.

In other words: Restore and maintain international aid-based cooperation, as an expression of our shared humanity and compassion and/or out of enlightened national self-interest.^{xix}

There are reasons to doubt that these cuts in Western aid budgets will be significantly reversed in the next 15 years, if at all, for economic and political reasons.

Politically, the objection of the MAGA-movement to aid is deeply ideological: if any US aid continues (as now seems likely, under the State Dpt.), it cannot promote ‘woke’ ideas and must clearly serve US economic and political interests. The MAGA-movement is more than Trump, and will persist after him. In Europe, the hostility to international aid is more associated with the resentments against ‘migrants and asylum-seekers’, which have been successfully whipped up by political entrepreneurs as it is an easy-to-understand explanation for the economic stresses that many families in Europe are experiencing. There is a perception that irregular (and even regular) migrants and asylum seekers are ‘taking our jobs’, ‘driving wages down’ and getting basic services (including housing) ‘for free’, while many in the ‘native’ population are struggling financially. That does play some role in European governments’ aid budget cuts.

Economically, particularly in Europe, many governments (including the important official aid donors) are struggling with public debt. A part of that public debt still comes from the bail-out, with taxpayers’ money, of private financial institutions whose mismanagement caused the 2008 crash. Public debt was also incurred when governments provided loans but mostly grants, to protect businesses from bankruptcy during the COVID lockdowns. A growing percentage of Europe’s populations are struggling with a high cost of living, and want their governments to address this. The trade wars that the MAGA administration has initiated will drive renewed inflation, in the US but also in Europe and globally, and reduce investment -further increasing the pressure to support their own populations first.^{xx} Cuts are being made, not just in international aid budgets, but also in domestic public services and social protection schemes.

The US now equally brusquely stepping back from its military security commitments to Europe, means that European governments, with more of a lived history of war, feel they must rapidly increase their defense spending.^{xxi} Suggesting that Europe should match the Euro 800 billion it wants to spend on re-armament with an equal Euro 800 billion for peace support work, is nice –but financially unrealistic.

All the cuts in aid budgets do not amount to the conclusion that ‘*solidarity-beyond-borders*’ has evaporated in the West. It simply is a natural human reaction that, in times of persistent economic pressure, people will want their taxes to first serve and protect them and others in a ‘community’ they know better and can more easily identify with.^{xxii}

2. *Finding Alternative Funding*

The scale of the cumulative cuts in official aid among Western donors, make it unavoidable that many aid organisations have to brusquely abandon many projects and programmes and rapidly reduce staffing numbers. Simultaneously, many are searching for alternative sources of funding. This is sensible, but time and energy needs to be protected for more radical change. All the more so, as it is unlikely that other sources of funding can compensate, for more than a short time, for the reductions in official aid.

- Foundations and philanthropists. The large majority of these can be found in Western countries, and it generally takes a long time of relationship building, before they may fund you. The good news for local/national organisations is that several (not all) in recent years have shifted to more directly funding agencies from the 'global South'. But they too will be cautious to protect their capital in a time of profound political uncertainty, which has negative effects on the stock markets.
- Private companies: Can and will they step up and contribute more? Here again, many may experience negative effects from the trade wars, rising tariffs and possible interruptions of their supply chains, and may not be willing to increase their 'Corporate Social Responsibility' funding/sponsorships. They may also be politically very cautious about who they are seen to sponsor.
- Individual supporter base: Can they increase their donations and/or leave the aid agency part of their inheritance? Many middle-class supporters in Western countries may feel the effects of inflation and a general atmosphere of uncertainty, typically incentives to save rather than spend. Can it be expected to bring more than a very temporary increase in income?
- Becoming a social enterprise: Changing from a grant-based organisation to a social enterprise is a much more profound shift, in ways of operating and mindset, than may be realized.

There is much potential, notably for local and national organisations, to obtain funding from wealthy individuals in the so-called 'global South', or to tap into the global remittances from the many diasporas, which constitute a much larger volume than all Western aid combined. But there remains a dramatic shortage of platforms to effectively connect local and national not-for-profits with potential donors from the 'global South'. There is, moreover, a real risk that INGOs, registered as 'national organisations', will be fastest at setting up such platforms, and -again- receive most of the money.

System-wide, one possible scenario is that aid agencies are going to compete even harder for the reduced resources, in an all-out 'survival-of-the strongest' mode. Such competition will be within and between Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, UN agencies, INGOs and local national NGOs/civil society organisations (and private contractors). This is very likely, as the aid sector for the past 25 years at least, has been more of a 'market' or 'arena' for competition than an 'eco-system' of interdependency and collaboration. There will be a few winners and many losers. Problematically, a sector that claims to be grounded in values of solidarity and shared humanity, would then continue to show precisely the same mind-set as the for-profits they often like to distinguish themselves from.

The alternative is one of drastically increased collaboration and sharing of financial but also other resources, including organisational infrastructure, expertise, networks of connection etc., to increase the overall cost-efficiency. This may go as far as a merging of different agencies into one, to reduce overall support costs.^{xxiii}

Unfortunately, for many organisations quite dependent on official aid funding, radical downsizing, merging, or closing, seem the most likely options for many organisations.

3. *To the Rescue of Multilateral Cooperation and International Norms?*

Particularly among the aid agencies whose core is ‘humanitarian action’, or who also respond in times of acute crisis, there is a beginning critical conversation about ‘independence’ (how independent can non-governmental or even a multilateral agency be, if a significant part of its budget comes from one or a few bilateral donors) and ‘neutrality’ (in the face of massive, persistent, violations of international norms).^{xxiv}

When it comes to international norms, the usually very discreet ICRC is trying to mobilise support from states for a revitalization of respect for international humanitarian law.^{xxv} This is proving challenging. In March 2025, the Swiss government, as its custodian, was forced to cancel a conference on the application of the Geneva Conventions in the Occupied Territories, for lack of basic agreement among invited parties.^{xxvi}

But by and large, in the struggle to adapt and survive, most aid agencies seem to be neglecting the deliberate disregard for international norms and withdrawal from multilateral cooperation by the Western countries that were its founders and architects -the negative impacts of which will be much more profound.

4. *It’s the Political Economy!*

Only running social protection and mostly small-scale ‘development’ ‘projects’ is not good enough anymore when the world is facing a polycrisis. Change does not happen through ‘projects’, certainly not when designed and implemented with a misplaced assumption of certainty and control.^{xxvii} We also need to work on the political economy that creates and maintains poverty, exclusion, environmental degradation, global warming, wars, and human (itarian) misery.

By and large, the mainstream international aid sector has disconnected itself from the social movements, civil society organisations and shareholder activists that mobilise for social, economic and climate justice. In its ‘professionalisation’, it has -wrongly- overly depoliticised itself and the problems it is working on.

This cannot continue. The times demand more social and political activism, domestically, regionally and at global level –including in Western countries. Even after all the cuts, aid agencies have large networks of connections, retain talented and experienced staff and volunteers, and still can access several billions of funding. If they are truly concerned about where the world is heading, they also need to act, come together, and collaborate (rather than ego-centrally compete) as concerned global citizens and inhabitants of this planet. Together, for a livable future for all.

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ANNEX. SOME QUESTIONS TO STIMULATE A RADICAL RE-THINK

In a historical turning point, trying to carry on in our previous ways, as best as we can with diminished resources, is not an adequate response. The international aid as we have known it for the past 35 years, was already being criticized as too fragmented and too costly, and therefore inefficient, too risk-averse and at best patronizing and at worst ‘neo-colonial’. Even aid agencies acknowledged that you cannot fundamentally change a deeply embedded system by modest changes -it requires a more radical disruption.^{xxviii}

Well, the radical disruption is here.

Obviously, organizing these questions across three broad categories of UN, INGOs and national/local (non-governmental) actors, does not do justice to the great variations within each. There is no intent to paint a generalizing picture of any or all of them

To encourage and stimulate a more radical rethink of international cooperation, here a set of questions for reflection.

They are not all the questions, nor necessarily formulated in the best way. Your own insights, creativity and wisdom are warmly invited.

1. *Re-imagining a Multilateralism We Need*

In 2020, the UN conducted a global survey to mark its 75th anniversary. A majority of respondents felt the world needed more, not less, international solidarity and cooperation, particularly around the climate crisis, the species-extinction, peace, and poverty. They also wanted a more effective, inclusive, transparent and accountable UN, with strong leadership and more consistency in exercising its moral authority to uphold the UN Charter.^{xxix} Indeed, throughout its first 75 years the UN, as primary platform for global governance, has made tremendous positive contributions, yet also shown persistent flaws.

Some of these flaws need to be remedied by the member states

- *A General Assembly with no power:* The world’s population is (or should be) represented in the UN General Assembly, via the member states. It combines should have weight. Yet the UN Security Council, which remains dominated by the Permanent Five (P5), often ignores the views of even clear majorities of member states. That cannot be a set-up for real ‘global’ governance that our planet-in-peril now urgently requires.
- *An outdated Security Council (SC):* The Permanent Five (US, Russia, China, Britain, France) came out of World War II as the main victors. When they founded the UN, in October 1945, many of today’s member states were still colonies. Today, others can have a (rotating) seat in the SC, but no real influence. With their veto power, any of the P5 can block any collective action to maintain global peace and security. There have been many proposals for reform of the SC -to no effect, so far. A rules-based international order, with institutions to protect and enforce it, is mainly in the interest of less-powerful states. That is the vast majority of the current 193 member states. It might take a coalition of the willing, perhaps a new form of the ‘Non-Aligned Movement’ during the Cold War, to start building a more equitable global governance. If West-European countries want to be part of that, they need to clearly acknowledge, in a mature way, their colonial pasts, and position themselves more independently from the US.
- *Financing of the UN:* A UN which is financially quite reliant on one member state, the US, is not ‘independent’, and vulnerable to leverage from that member state. It is understandable that the US wants other member states to contribute more to the functioning of what should be a global platform for and by all. Nor is it unnatural to feel irritated by criticism of an institution that one funds.^{xxx} Even if a future UN would be less expensive, its financing cannot continue to depend on one or a very few member states.

- *Suspending or expelling a member state?* No collaborative network can function if it cannot act against those who continuously violate its fundamental principles and -agreements. In 1974, in an unprecedented move following a campaign by African governments, then apartheid South Africa was ‘suspended’ from the UN General Assembly. (The US, Britain and France had used their veto power to prevent it from being ‘expelled’ from the UN). There are other member states which ignore or violate UN Resolutions, but possibly the most persistent one is Israel. If member states can persistently ignore, without consequences, the demands of the body in which all nations in the world come together, and even attack that body, because they have powerful protectors in other member states, the very essence and purpose of the UN as a promoter and defender of international norms and standards is undermined.^{xxxix}
- *Political appointees in UN agencies:* It is appropriate that the UN agencies in their staffing represent the spectrum of member states. But too many, expensive, senior positions are filled by appointees of member states influential in a particular agency. This does not always guarantee competency and can unduly protect them from investigations into misbehaviours. How to balance this better?

Some of these flaws are more under the influence of the UN itself

- *Do we need all these UN agencies and entities?* Look at the list of all UN agencies and associated commissions and committees.^{xxxix} Do we need that many, all of which require their own, costly, infrastructures of offices and support staff? Which ones make significant contributions to our collective wellbeing, which ones less so?
- *The competition between UN agencies?* UN agencies are not ‘united’ -‘working as one’ has been a persistent problem, and competition between agencies for the ‘leadership’ role in specific contexts, continues. This does not serve the UN’s purpose and is not in the public interest.
- *A heavy and costly bureaucracy?* The internal checks and balances are too cumbersome: not only does that make working with UN money very costly, it also negatively impacts on effectiveness (e.g. timely action).
- *Which programmes and projects are really best run by a UN agency?* Some UN agencies have very useful capabilities. The WFP and IOM for example have very operational logistics- and supply-chain capabilities that few others can match, and that have proven their value on many occasions. But beyond that, these and many other UN agencies should not be implementing themselves lots of project for which non-UN agencies are better placed -except, perhaps, if there is a need to better protect it from political pressures and interference. Too many projects seem to be run by UN-agencies as a means of expanding and maintaining themselves beyond their core funding from member states. It distracts from the UN’s core mission which is centered on protection and promoting rights, norms and standards. Many actually spend only a small part of their budget on that core mission.^{xxxix}
- *As accountable for its programmes and actions as anyone else?* UN agencies receive significant amounts of bilateral aid funding. Yet listen to colleagues in bilateral donor administrations, and they all complain how poor the reporting of UN agencies is, and how these resist independent monitoring and -evaluation, with the eternal argument that they have their internal systems for this. That is inappropriate -they also work with taxpayers’ money.
- *The limits of UN staff immunity?* It is appropriate for ‘international civil servants’ to have a degree of ‘diplomatic immunity’. But are the limits of that adequately defined, so that they are not ‘protected’ for any and all civil and criminal investigations? Sadly, there also have been too many cases of internal whistleblowers being haunted rather than rewarded by the UN – and with no recourse to external, independent, arbitrators.

One possible platform to further pursue this is the Coalition for the UN We Need. Check it out:

[Coalition for the UN We Need](#)


2. *Re-Inventing the Purpose and Functioning of (Western) Non-governmental Organisations*

Critical reflection 1: Operating costs

- *Big headquarters?* Quite a number of INGOs (not all!) have big headquarters in their home country, with sometimes well over a hundred staff. Large headquarters mean important office infrastructure costs, especially if set up ‘close to’ policy -and decision-makers, which tend to be in more expensive capital cities. Some of the support functions, such as external communications and fundraising, and ultimate financial controlling, may justifiably be situated there. But should programming and related expertise not be in greater proximity to the contexts in which the action takes place? And the more layers and departments of people you have, the more time-consuming it becomes to take decisions.
- *Appropriate salaries and benefits*, especially for senior management: Managing organisations with sizeable budgets is a responsibility that must be properly compensated. But the salaries and extra benefits of at least some directors and other senior management staff, seem excessive for what is ultimately a not-for-profit line of work, in solidarity with people who have much less. The argument is that the agency needs to be able to attract the best talent on the market. The counter-argument is that it will attract people whose primary motivation is money (and prestige), not solidarity with the less fortunate in our world. And who may do everything to stay in such lucrative position.
- *Spending on branding*: In a competitive fundraising environment you need to stand out -as the marketing people will tell you. But how much do you spend on branding, using money raised for the supposed benefit of people-in-greater-need? (Do we need the ‘free’ gifts of all these bags and stationary with the name of the event and its organizing agency?)
- *Repeat work*: Is it necessary to commission yet more research or organise another conference on topics that have already been well researched and many times ‘conferenced’. Is it really necessary to develop an ‘in-house’ agency manual, when there are adequate manuals freely available?
- *Multiple organisations*: Diversity is good -but do we need so many INGOs, many of which with similar lines of work, but each with a costly infrastructure? Would it not be more cost- effective if several of them simply merged -even though that means that some top managers will lose their job? What is a good balance between too many and too few?

Critical reflection 2: Mindsets

- *Growth for growth's sake?* There are INGO directors who are clear they do not want to go beyond their ‘middle-sized’ situation. But several others (also in some UN and Red Cross agencies) in the recent past set significant increases in their annual turnover as a key strategic objective. Often these were already big ones, who wanted to go from half a billion to a billion, or from a billion to two billion US dollars/year. Why? Would you not have expected that greater relevance, improved quality and greater effectiveness would be central strategic objectives? Is this obsession with endless ‘growth’ a replication of a wider economic ideology that is driving our planet to the brink?
- *Competition for market share or interagency leadership?* You too must have heard senior managers in INGOs strategize to maintain and increase their ‘market share’? You too must have seen (UN agencies and INGOs compete with each other for ‘leadership’ of interagency ‘coordination’ and ‘collaboration’. Would you not rather expect, if the purpose is defending and creating public goods, that ‘cooperation’ would be the driving consideration, supported by solid but also very ‘servant’ leadership?

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- *Big titles?* A few decades ago, the top person in many aid agencies was called the ‘director’. That subsequently evolved to ‘Executive Director’, then ‘Chief Executive Officer/CEO’. Particularly in the US, we also find ‘Presidents’ and many ‘Vice-Presidents’ (all with capital letters). Why should an advisor be called a ‘Senior Advisor’ -is there anybody introducing themselves as a ‘Junior Advisor’? Others present themselves as ‘experts’ -without specifying the particular nature and limits of their expertise. What influence does this inflation of titles have on egos? Is it necessary? Should a good dose of ‘modesty’ not be a desirable character feature when it comes to international cooperation?
 - *Careers rather than vocations?* A long time ago, people joined the UN, a Red Cross Society or an NGO out of idealism, in the belief that these organisations were firmly focused on making the world a better place for more people. It was more of a ‘vocation’. Not a small number have been disappointed and left or became cynical. Now, for too many, it has become, in the first place a ‘career’. Which some pursue in a primarily self-serving manner, through all sorts of institutional politicking to get to, and stay, at the top. Is this what we expect, and accept, from people whose purpose should be to serve others?
 - *Disempowering hierarchies?* How is it that, in a sector which such clear value-based purpose, many not-for-profit organisations, who claim to ‘empower’ people around the world, are so hierarchical? Most staff are pigeon-holed in very defined functions in multi-layered organigrams. Does it bring out the best in their own employees? Does that encourage them to engage more broadly and take wider responsibility for the pursuit of the collective purpose?

The ‘corporate NGO’: There are not a few NGOs that seem to have taken on the worst of the private sector they so easily criticize.^{xxxiv} They behave like ‘corporates’, with the negative connotation of competitive self-interest, particularly for a set of key people. It is hard to see how their actions and mindset relate to their (original) purpose of serving others in greater need, from a sense of shared humanity and solidarity.

Critical reflection 3: What role in our home society?

The home societies of INGOs also have significant levels of poverty, of marginalization, of neglected and abused children, of adolescent youth lacking direction, of homeless men. There are violations of labour rights and real public health and access to justice challenges. Significant numbers of jobs will be lost due to AI. Social protection (‘welfare’) programmes and services are being scaled back as governments try to balance the books. Their home societies also feel the impacts of the climate crisis and of polluting and unsustainable resource extraction. Why then not engage also here?

No less importantly, their home societies for several years now have been affected by polarization and serious questioning of ‘democracy’, fueled by social media and insufficient skill to critically evaluate the credibility and purpose of different types of ‘information’. Why then only work on conflict-reduction and conflict-transformation in other societies?

All of this is affecting, primarily, the ‘autochthone’ population, not only ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’. Many not-for-profit associations try to address this, most do not (also) work internationally. Only a very few of the international NGOs do substantial work also in their home societies. Is this separation between domestic and international work appropriate, in a deeply interconnected world?

Critical reflection 4: Development- and sustainability economics

At least in Europe, if you do ‘development studies’ or ‘international relations’, you will have one or more courses on economics. Yet overall, there is astonishingly little critical work done by mainstream INGOs on terms of trade, globalized economies, globalized finance, and the political economies that shape this, nor on the social economics of a wider ‘green transition’.

Yes, development-oriented UN and non-governmental aid organisations run projects that actively consider markets in stable or post-disaster/post-crisis ‘recovery’ situations. But few of these really touch on the power relations that influence markets.

Yes, years ago, some INGOs were actively involved in critiquing and campaigning against the ‘structural adjustment’ practices that the World Bank and IMF forced upon loan and grant recipient countries, and which did them so much harm. A very few also campaign around the debt burden of aid-recipient countries.

But there are not many today, in the mainstream aid establishment, who talk about the historical and contemporary global economy structures that created and maintain ‘underdevelopment’ and unequal terms of trade (notwithstanding all the rounds of trade talks^{xxxv}). Nor do many in the mainstream aid establishment talk about the ongoing global resource extraction, and the pollution, disease and violence it creates, which structurally transfers more wealth to aid donor countries than the value of that aid or loan. Contrast this with Global Witness, a small INGO that was never part of the mainstream aid establishment, which years ago brought up the hard realities of ‘blood diamonds’ – which eventually resulted in the interstate ‘Kimberley process’ of certification.^{xxxvi}

Similarly, few of the mainstream INGOs (with the exception of some whose core mission is children’s rights) work extensively on ‘business and human rights’, investigating e.g. human rights abuses in supply chains of Western companies. (There is often a greater involvement of local, national and regional not-for-profit associations, though again not so much the ones in the mainstream ‘development’, ‘humanitarian’ and ‘peace’ sectors.)

The world is now at a crossroads: Our planet cannot continue to support our levels of extraction, consumption and pollution. We need to shift from an endless ‘growth’ economy to a ‘sustainability economy’. This is more than a ‘green transition’, a key issue is also the replacement of human workers by machines, robots and AI. We can run thousands of ‘projects’ all over world, even tens of thousands with newly increased aid budgets. But the scale of the challenge is such that we need structural alternatives, and transitional pathways to them, that are financially possible, socially equitable and therefore politically feasible. We need to help our decision-makers with well thought-through proposals. Again, there are not-for-profit organisations working on this, but very few from the mainstream aid establishment.

Related to this is the sensitive issue of taxation. Taxation is a critical issue for government income (i.e. the public budget), but also for people’s standards of living, for investors and companies’ profitability. How many of the mainstream aid-agencies are part of e.g. the Tax Justice Network or the (southern.led) Global Alliance for Tax Justice?

Implementing ‘projects’ can bring tangible benefits to a certain number of people, the value of which cannot be underestimated. It also gives us the ‘real world’ understanding to counter misperceptions and ungrounded assumptions. But the challenges in the world today are such, that work at the micro-level needs to be complemented by work at the macro-level.



3. *Local and National Actors Stepping Up*

The argument has been made that the impact of the aid budget cuts could be lessened if a much larger percentage of it were directly provided to local and national actors, who -generally- operate with lower costs. That would also be a very significant step in ‘decolonising’ aid. Whether the international agencies are prepared to do this, is another matter: after all, the lockdowns during the COVID pandemic were equally seen as a catalyst to shift power and resources. In the end, no such systemic change happened.^{xxxvii}

In any case, also national and local (non-governmental) organisations can benefit from some critical self-reflection on issues such as

- *Competition?* International aid agencies are more inclined to compete than to collaborate. But among local and national agencies, the competition is certainly equally fierce. Many of them want to see more structural change, beyond the temporary benefits of ‘projects’, but that requires active collaboration. They have their own networks but, as with international agency networks, the leaders or representatives of such networks are not always speaking with the (informed and consulted) voice of the network -and some stay too long.
- *The quality of leadership?* While the same happens among international aid agencies, it seems to be more common among local and national agencies to have directors/leaders who stay in position for years, even decades. Many of them are extremely dedicated and have consciously chosen not to pursue easier professional opportunities. Several of them also demonstrate impressive skills, not in the least the ability to continue to navigate complex and changing political environments. But prolonged dependence on the same person eventually weakens every organisation. And too long at the top eventually affects the leader as well: At best you will not remain as fresh and innovative as you once were, at worst your ego starts inflating. Here too, egos can stand seriously in the way of closer interagency collaboration.
- *Hierarchies?* Many local and national organisations are internally not more inclusive and participatory than international ones. Some show equally authoritarian practices. Which does not fit with a professed claim to be working closely with ‘communities’, and to favour a more participatory governance in their societies.
- *Power?* The systemic power inequality between international and national/local agencies in the aid sector has been under the spotlight for some years now. But local and national agencies can also have power over the social groups/communities they engage with. Is there an explicit self-critical reflection on that?
- *Responsibility and accountability:* Local and national organisations around the world have been demanding a greater share of the aid money, with less restrictions. That is entirely justified. But it then make sense to state more explicitly how they will exercise their responsibility over more money given to them in trust, and how in practice they make themselves accountable, in the first place to those they work with and for, their wider society and own government.
- *Being propositional:* Local and national organisations are rightfully critical and demanding, not in the least for a seat at the table. But you are more likely to get listened to when you are then also offering considered proposals. As put so succinctly in Spanish ‘*de contesta a propuesta*’ -from ‘contestation’ to ‘proposition’.
- *Racism:* There is an appropriate, sharp, critique about racism in international aid agencies, particularly from ‘white’ people towards ‘people of colour’. But a real conversation about this would include acknowledgment that this can lead to ‘reverse prejudice’ (where all white people are painted as ‘racist’) and, more importantly, that there can be racism and other forms of structural prejudice and discrimination in the societies of people of colour. For example, there is also racism against black people in the Arab world and in South-east Asia, in Latin America there is racism of ‘latinos’ against the ‘indigenous populations’, in India brides of light skin colour are often more desirable than darker-skinned ones, not to speak of the persistent caste system, with its alleged degrees of purity and impurity.

- *Economics*: Many local and national organisations work on livelihoods in a context of market-economies. But should they too not do more in-depth work on the financing of national economic policies, on public expenditure choices, and on international economic relations? (How many international agencies have supported the development of their ‘capacities’ on this e.g. learning to understand and interpret national accounts?) Many of course do not have the financial and human resources for this but, as for international agencies, such could be mobilized through collaboration, with other agencies and with individuals or departments at universities in their country or region.

You may disagree with some of these questions (and their underlying assumptions). You may find them incomplete, or incorrectly formulated. That is fine.

Their main objective is to take the mental (and emotional) energy **beyond** everything that comes with ‘surviving’ the aid budget cuts. **Radical times demand more radical reflection**, including the courage to consider, for example, pooling your remaining resources with another, and/or risking more politically sensitive work -because whether you like it or not- the politics have come to you.

Refine, adjust, complete these preliminary reflection points as you see fit -but stay with their purpose

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Reference

- i NBC News: [USAID security leaders removed after refusing Elon Musk's DOGE employees access to secure systems](#)
- ii The aid sector therefore finds itself in what a IARAN study in 2017 foresighted as one possible scenario, 'overflow', with a reduction in aid budgets, a reorientation among donors to domestic affairs, and a withdrawal from global governance.ⁱⁱ That scenario did not foresee the shrinking of civic space even in Western Europe.
- iii To keep Western aid in perspective: at times of acute crises, there is a lot of immediate direct assistance from other people in the country that is not measured and does not enter into any statistics. The volume of remittances, money sent back from members of a family or a larger social group who live and work abroad, for social protection/welfare and/or assistance in times of crises, is larger than the Official Development Assistance.
- iv [BBC NEWS | Middle East | Iraq war illegal, says Annan](#)
- v [Erdan shreds UN charter in protest of General Assembly vote to boost status of Palestinian mission | The Times of Israel](#)
- vi [Israel-UN relations sink to new depths](#)
- vii [FM Katz declares UN chief Guterres 'persona non grata' in Israel over response to Iran attack | The Times of Israel](#)
- viii [Imposing Sanctions on the International Criminal Court – The White House](#)
- ix [Knesset Advances Bill Imposing Up to Five Years in Jail for Israelis Cooperating With ICC - Israel News - Haaretz.com](#)
- x [Trump's data purge: What to know on CDC infectious disease sites | Association of Health Care Journalists](#)
- xi There is significant wastage in the aid sector. But nowhere has US taxpayers' money been so misused as in its politico-military adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, led by the State Department and the US military and police, with active involvement of many US business corporations. For Iraq, read Stiglitz & Bilmes 2008: *The Three Trillion Dollar War. The true cost of the Iraq conflict*. For Afghanistan, read particularly the 'lessons learned' (sic) reports of the Special Inspector for Afghanistan Reconstruction [Reports](#) and the incredible and costly mistakes that kept being made over and over again.
- xii Not all US 'conservatives' are aligned with this. See e.g. David Brooks talk to the 'conservative' Alliance for Responsible Citizenship [How the Elite rigged Society \(and why it's falling apart\) | David Brooks - YouTube](#)
- xiii As reported by the New York Times on 7 March 2025. It is ironic that MAGA ideologues, like J.D. Vance at the recent Munich security conference, criticize Europe for constraining free speech i.e. blocking racist, misogynist and hate speech, yet then initiate a sweeping programme of elimination of speech of what they call 'woke' liberalism.
- xiv [Elon Musk wants to save Western civilization from empathy | CNN Politics](#)
- xv [The Education of a Libertarian | Cato Unbound](#)
- xvi See Stiglitz 2012: The Price of Inequality, or [Inequality and Democracy by Joseph E. Stiglitz - Project Syndicate](#)
- xvii "People think there is a single solution to complex problems and the solution is often making an enemy of a group of people -pulling back and rejecting the other." Duncan Green
- xviii A wider trend towards authoritarian leadership is being observed in the private sector, *characterized by impulsive decisions, centralized power, and an aggressive "move fast and break things" mindset*, including 'break people', is being observed. E. Leybourn Business Agility Institute Newsletter, 22 March 2025
- xix These arguments are not new, see e.g. R. Riddell 1987 *Foreign Aid Reconsidered*

xx A significant return of the Democratic Party in the US will not change this – it will also have to face that pressure, not in the least given the influence that financial pressures had on many voters in the 2024 elections.

xxi In Europe, it may take more time for disgruntled and disaffected voters to realise that the far right does not have miracle solutions, particularly when it comes to the economy and protection of standards-of-living, and will not be more supportive and protective of working class people (and trade unions) than the ‘liberal democrats’ have been. Nor do the sections of the far right who express sympathy for Putin’s regime, clarify how precisely they see the future political, economic and military relations with Russia.

xxii Rutger Bregman in his 2020 book ‘*Humankind. A hopeful history*’, refers to psychologist Paul Bloom’s observation that ‘*empathy is a hopelessly limited skill*’ (p. 218). It is something we can feel for people we can see and experience (real, or on film), but less for others who are ‘remote’, whom we have never met or seen closer up.

xxiii Some merging of programmes and even of organisations has already been happening in recent years, at least among INGOs.

xxiv It took years for the ICRC to publicly acknowledge its failures during the Nazi period, particularly with regard to the genocide of Jewish people (Shoah/Holocaust) [The Red Cross and the Holocaust](#); [The ICRC in World War Two: The Holocaust | International Committee of the Red Cross](#)

xxv [United Nations: ICRC president warns respect for international humanitarian law “in crisis” | International Committee of the Red Cross](#)

xxvi [Switzerland Cancels Geneva Conference on Palestinian Territories Due to Lack of Consensus - LN24](#)

xxvii See e.g. D. Green 2016: *How Change Happens*.

xxviii This may have to be much more radical than e.g. the 2017-2018 design experiment, initiated by the ODI’s Humanitarian Policy Group ‘*Imagining Alternative Humanitarian Action*’.

xxix [UN75 Report: The Future We Want, The UN We Need | United Nations](#). One outcome was the UN75 People’s Declaration and Global Plan for Action (May 2020) [Microsoft Word - FINAL 2.0.docx](#)

xxx The current Netherlands’ government has stopped funding critical advocacy towards it, from civil society organisations in the Netherlands. It argues that these CSOs need to fund such advocacy from a supportive constituency.

xxxi Also the European Union is now forced to look for alternatives to full consensus of all 27 members, following years of obstructionism by notably Orban’s Hungary.

xxxii [The United Nations System - All UN agencies 2024](#)

xxxiii For similar, succinct, overview, see e.g. A. Suleiman [\(3\) Post | LinkedIn](#)

xxxiv Only a few follow those private sector companies (including some very big ones) that thrive on flat structures, self-managing teams, and an organisational culture where people are invited to bring their full self, and take leadership when and where needed.

xxxv Which is not surprisingly if we learn how some Western countries systematically decided what could be discussed in trade talks and what not, and chose for trade to be ‘free’ where it suited them, and not free where it went against their economic interests. Listen to [Howard Nicholas: International Trade and the WTO - What’s the Real Story? 1/2](#)

xxxvi Global Witness has been less influential in their research and campaigning about the corruption and resource extraction in oil-rich (like Angola) or timber-rich countries (like Cambodia).

xxxvii ‘*Many of the intentions to progress the localization agenda and deliver on commitments that were made at the start of the pandemic did not result in significant or long-lasting change, despite the greater role played by Local/National Agencies in the COVID-19 response.*’ Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the COVID-19 Humanitarian Response. Executive Summary 2022:7

