

More than the sum of the parts?

Collective leadership
vs individual agency
in humanitarian
action

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The future of
**Humanitarian
Coordination**



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The paper is based in evidence and insight gathered through a series of research projects carried out over the past few years, complemented by data collection specifically commissioned by GELI. It is hoped that the Berlin event will help global policy makers, humanitarian practitioners, and donors take the discussions forward in a proactive manner to ensure policy is influenced by evidence-based research, and the leaders in humanitarian operations are sufficiently supported to deliver assistance effectively to people living in critical conditions as a result of conflict, natural hazards, climate-induced crises and other underlying causes of humanitarian suffering.

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More than the sum of the parts? Collective Leadership vs. Individual Agency in Humanitarian Action

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Abstract

At the global level, there have been strong commitments to collective humanitarian action, especially since the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain agreement. But evidence suggests that these commitments are not always translated into reality. Why is this? This paper argues that an important reason is that collective leadership is not realised to its full potential. Understood broadly as a dynamic process of working collectively in view of a shared goal, collective leadership calls for everyone in the humanitarian system to take responsibility for the success of the system as a whole – not just for their own area of interest or mandate. Focusing on the interface between collective ambitions and individual agency incentives, this paper discusses some of the factors that systematically undermine collective leadership in the humanitarian system. These include agencies' internal processes and mindsets, but also external factors, which tend to stress competition over collaboration. The paper also suggests possible ways to offset the existing incentives that predominantly encourage a focus on individual agency performance at the expense of that of the collective. There is a need to distinguish between leadership within one institution and leadership on behalf of the collective.

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I. Introduction

More than three decades ago, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 provided the blueprint for the current humanitarian system, marking the international community's commitment to providing humanitarian assistance through strengthened coordination.¹ From the creation of the inter-agency standing committee (IASC) and the 2005 introduction of the Cluster Approach, via the 2011 Transformative Agenda, to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and 'Grand Bargain', the system has since continuously strived towards clear(er) leadership and coordination, and shared accountability for collective outcomes in the main areas of humanitarian response.² At the same time, evidence suggests that these ambitions and commitments are not always translated into reality. Agencies that have assumed cluster leadership responsibilities since 2005 have not sufficiently prioritised this role within their institutions, which in combination with the confusion surrounding the meaning and impact of cluster 'co-leadership' has led to a dilution of leadership and accountability.³ Likewise, commitments to collectively address priorities such as a principled approach to humanitarian action, the centrality of protection, localisation, or accountability to affected populations have been given insufficient attention in inter-agency coordination, especially at the country level, for too long.⁴ Why is it so difficult to turn commitments to work

collectively and effectively towards a shared goal into a reality?

HERE's research has shown that an important reason is that collective leadership is not realised to its full potential. **Understood broadly as a dynamic process of working collectively in view of a shared goal, collective leadership calls for everyone in the humanitarian system to take responsibility for the success of the system as a whole** – not just for their own area of interest or mandate. This paper will discuss some of the factors that appear to undermine the collective ambition in the humanitarian system by focusing on the interface between collective ambition and individual agency. It appears from HERE's research that beyond their commitment to collective approaches, there is little practical incentive for agency leadership to put the collective ahead of the individual mandate. Agencies' internal systems, processes, and, perhaps most importantly, their mindsets are focused on what they achieve as an agency. The environment in which they operate reinforces this by stressing the competitive need for funding, resources, and space.

After an explanation of how this paper methodologically fits into, and builds on, HERE's current and previous research, it will outline in more detail how it understands and approaches the concept of 'collective leadership' in the context of the wider humanitarian system. The paper will then discuss current barriers to its realisation in practice, including agencies' internal systems, but also external factors. The paper concludes by suggesting possible ways to offset the existing incentives that predominantly encourage individual agency performance and accountability at the expense of the collective.

1 UN GA Res 46/182. See also <https://www.unocha.org/story/resolution-46182-which-created-humanitarian-system-turns-twenty-five>

2 See e.g. Sphere Association, *The Sphere Handbook - Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*.

3 See UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'; UNICEF and Save the Children, 'Review of Education Cluster Co-Leadership'.

4 See e.g. ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System 2022'; Cocking et al., 'Independent Review of the Implementation of the IASC Protection Policy'; Montemurro and Wendt, 'Principled Humanitarian Programming in Yemen'.

II. Methodological approach

This paper is the result of evidence and insight gathered by HERE over the past few years, as complemented by research specifically commissioned by GELI. The paper is primarily anchored in HERE's '[Future of Humanitarian Coordination](#)' project. Without underestimating the progress made in the last decades, this project took its roots in the conclusion that truly effective humanitarian coordination is still elusive.⁵ Assuming the UN will retain its primary role in coordinating humanitarian action for at least the next decade, the starting point was to clarify what appears to impede coordination as it is currently framed. Carried out mainly in 2021 and early 2022, the first phase of the Future of Humanitarian Coordination project was anchored in an extensive literature review, including a mapping of past recommendations and commitments towards collective action; a series of round-table discussions involving high-level humanitarian leadership; and in-depth interviews with key informants. Notably, the project has seen that one of the elements that continues to systematically impede effective humanitarian coordination is that agency incentives do not facilitate it.⁶ The data gathered around this research angle have been particularly useful for the current paper. At the same time, this paper will also feed back into the second phase of the Future of Humanitarian Coordination project, which will take an in-depth look at a number of the more critical issues that were identified in the first phase.

5 Collinson and Schenkenberg, 'UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings'; Montemurro and Wendt, 'Unpacking Humanitarianism'; UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.

6 The three other issues highlighted by the project are the lack of clarity around the ultimate purpose of humanitarian coordination, the fact that the coordination infrastructure is not in sync with global developments, and that the current humanitarian coordination is too technical and process-driven, at the expense of values.

This paper is also the result of insight provided thanks to HERE's involvement in the evaluation of [UNICEF's Role as a Cluster \(Co-\)Lead Agency \(CLARE II\)](#); the 2020-21 [Review of the Global Education Cluster Co-Leadership](#); and the evaluation of WFP's 2019-2022 country strategy for Nigeria. Furthermore, the paper has benefited from evidence gathered for the HERE-led review of inter-agency [principled humanitarian programming in Yemen](#), and the mid-term evaluation of a [Dutch-funded multi-annual hybrid project/partnership](#) with five multilateral organisations (UNCHR, UNICEF, ILO, WB and IFC) working across the humanitarian-development spectrum to further the transformation of the ongoing responses to protracted forced displacement.

Together, the above research projects involved close to 600 interviews, with key informants representing a variety of humanitarian stakeholders and institutions – UN agencies, international, national, and local NGOs, donors, coordination fora, networks, independent experts – in many different country contexts, and at the global and regional levels. Most of the projects also included focus group discussions with affected people, direct observation, and online surveys.

We have used the evidence and analysis carried out above to formulate our initial thoughts for this paper, which we then examined more closely and developed through additional data collection commissioned by GELI.

Notably, this included a further literature review, specifically angled towards collective leadership, shared accountability, and organisational incentive structures, as well as around ten additional key informant interviews with donor representatives, UN- and NGO leadership and networks, and independent experts. While anchored in a

common set of questions, the interviews did not follow a systematic questionnaire approach, but were shaped as dynamic conversations in which respondents were asked to dig deeper into certain issues related to their specific roles and experiences. The quotations from respondents used in the paper to illustrate or extend points have been chosen based on a criterion of representativity, i.e., that they reflect opinions that were expressed with sufficient frequency to merit mention.

III. 'Collective leadership' in the humanitarian system

Governance and organisational theorists have examined the concept of 'collective leadership' for decades, under the guise of a variety of labels such as 'distributed', 'shared', or 'collaborative' leadership.⁷ While interpretations regarding the concept(s) differ from author to author, common characteristics include the idea of leadership as a dynamic process, which is co-constructed by those taking part in that process,⁸ and which accentuates team values and the development of knowledge and skills based on the aggregate elements of the team,⁹ effectively distributing the leadership role as the situation or problem

7 See for example Alsaedi, 'The Important Role of Collective Leadership in the Face of Change: Literature Review'; Brinkerhoff, Murrieta, and O'Neill, 'Advancing Collective Leadership: Activating the Gifts of Your Team'; Featherstone, 'United We Stand? Collective Accountability in Humanitarian Sector'; Friedrich et al., 'A Framework for Understanding Collective Leadership: The Selective Utilization of Leader and Team Expertise Within Networks'; Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications'; Wassenaar and Pearce, 'The Nature of Shared Leadership'; Gronn, 'Distributed Leadership as a Unit of Analysis'.

8 Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications'.

9 Alsaedi, 'The Important Role of Collective Leadership in the Face of Change: Literature Review'; Gronn, 'Distributed Leadership as a Unit of Analysis'.

at hand requires.¹⁰ It is essentially about every everyone in an organisation taking responsibility for its success as a whole – not just for their own jobs or area.¹¹

Most previous research looks at collective leadership from *within* organisations, across departments and teams. While this paper will discuss elements of internal institutional governance to some extent, it primarily considers the collective leadership at the level of the humanitarian *system*, i.e. the way in which plural-member organisational units contribute to the collective endeavour to help those most in need. As such, the concept of collective leadership is closely related to that of coordination. **If humanitarian coordination is stakeholders coming together in view of realising a common goal,¹² collective leadership is the process that will arguably allow for the achievement of that goal, by engaging all stakeholders to contribute to its success as a whole.** While 'collective leadership' is not a formalised concept in IASC cluster policy documents, it matches the spirit of partnership, which is a key aspect of the cluster approach, and the notion of a shared sense of purpose that is critical to meaningful humanitarian coordination. Agencies are all part of the system's coordinated response, even if they have been assigned specific mandates by the international community. The realisation of their collective ambitions through that coordination depend on their true engagement in collective leadership, i.e.

10 Friedrich et al., 'A Framework for Understanding Collective Leadership: The Selective Utilization of Leader and Team Expertise Within Networks'.

11 West et al., 'Developing Collective Leadership for Health Care'.

12 Significantly, HERE has seen that while the overarching purpose of humanitarian coordination is generally clear in its operational/programmatic terms at the country level (prevent inefficiencies and gaps in coverage), it is less so with regard to how much strategic coordination is expected. See HERE-Geneva, 'Four Pressure Points to Improve Humanitarian Coordination - Literature Review'.

that they appropriately distinguish between leadership within one institution and leadership on behalf of the collective.

Arguably, collective leadership does not preclude leadership in the more formal sense.¹³

Through channels of accountability, one person – or one institution – can be charged with influencing others towards a collective goal. The Cluster Leadership role comes to mind here, as does that of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. For collective leadership to be possible, the more formal type of leadership needs to ensure that certain specific conditions are in place, such as trust, transparent and effective communication, accountability, shared learning, and **the understanding that success depends on the power with others, not over others.**¹⁴ This research does not directly concern the more formal type of leadership, but rather the extent to which humanitarian agencies that have committed to contribute towards the shared goal appear to engage accordingly in the process of collective leadership, accentuating the ambitions, values, and aggregate skills and knowledge of that collective.

13 Friedrich et al., 'A Framework for Understanding Collective Leadership: The Selective Utilization of Leader and Team Expertise Within Networks'. It should be noted that the argument has been made that when collective leadership is fully achieved, "there is no need for any one person to make decisions and mobilize action on the part of those assembled" (Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications').

14 Fox and Urwick, *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett* quoted by O'Neill and Brinkerhoff, 'Advancing Critical Conversations: How to Get There from Here.' With regard to the type of institutional leadership that would best forward these characteristics, see also the ALNAP paper prepared for the 10 November 2022 Berlin event; Ramalingam and Mitchell, 'Learning for Humanitarian Leadership: What It Is, How It Works and Future Priorities'.

IV. The (dis)incentives for collective leadership

Simply put, “when collective leadership is happening, [stakeholders] are internally and externally motivated—working together toward a shared vision within a group.”¹⁵ A closer look at the requirements of ‘shared vision’ and ‘internal and external motivation’ demonstrates how the commitment to collective leadership is constantly put in the shadow of individual agency preferences.

a) A shared vision?

Through simple collaboration, organisations can come together to implement programs or initiatives with specific outputs that happen to be relevant to each. And by coordinating they can exchange information and update each other on what each are doing to avoid duplication and address gaps. But when they undertake collective leadership, they coordinate around a shared desire to improve outcomes.¹⁶ Some researchers have even spoken about a collective “invisible leadership,” which takes its actual origin in the dedication to the deeply held common purpose itself.¹⁷ The idea that the common purpose is the inspiration behind the commitment to work together resonates with regard to the humanitarian system. Through UNGA Resolution 46/182, the international community indicated their common concern about the suffering of victims of disaster and emergency situations, and their conviction of the need to make the collective efforts in providing humanitarian assistance more effective. On paper, this is the essence of the common goal that the humanitarian

community has committed to achieving, and which has been supplemented with more specific commitments over the years – to centrality of protection, to localisation, to accountability to affected people, etc. In line with the idea of the “invisible leadership”, it could then be argued that working together to ensure the best outcomes for those most in need is the common purpose that has laid the foundations for collective leadership in the humanitarian community. And indeed, it appears that humanitarian actors generally identify very strongly with this purpose: they see it as the *raison d’être* of their profession and the organisations they work for,¹⁸ and it is what seems to have pushed the humanitarian architecture through several waves of transformations, each aiming to improve the system and sharpen its tools.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the key informants that HERE interviewed have also largely indicated that they do not believe that there is a true ‘masterplan’ or overall shared vision with regard to *how* to get to the goal. **The system is ripe with examples of where an overall end goal is provided without sufficient shared agreement or clarity in regard to the specific steps that will lead there.** For example, while the 2005 Humanitarian Response Review suggested new ways for coordination, strengthened leadership, and improved funding mechanisms, it did not explicitly elaborate on how these different pieces connect, i.e. which exact role should be played by whom, to achieve what specific result. The strategic role of the standards and policy functions are still not sufficiently elaborated in IASC cluster guidance.¹⁹

15 O’Neill and Brinkerhoff, ‘Advancing Critical Conversations: How to Get There from Here.’ See also Brinkerhoff, Murrieta, and O’Neill, ‘Advancing Collective Leadership: Activating the Gifts of Your Team.’

16 For a discussion around the difference between collaboration and collective impact, see for example <https://www.strivetogether.org/the-difference-between-collaboration-and-collective-impact/>

17 Hickman and Sorenson, ‘Unmasking Leadership.’

18 See <https://here-geneva.org/the-role-of-mandates/>.

19 HERE-Geneva, ‘Four Pressure Points to Improve Humanitarian Coordination - Literature Review’; UNICEF, ‘Evaluation of UNICEF’s Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)’.

Similarly, during the World Humanitarian Summit the Secretary-General and eight UN Principals, together with the World Bank and IOM, agreed to work towards collective outcomes across silos, over multiple years, based on the comparative advantage of a diverse range of actors, including those outside the UN system. 'Collective outcomes' were defined as concrete and measurable results that humanitarian, development and other relevant actors want to achieve jointly, usually over a period of 3-5 years, in a country to reduce people's needs, risks and vulnerabilities and increase their resilience.²⁰ However, as raised in the latest State of the Humanitarian System report, beyond bringing key actors together, the value of the collective outcomes as a practical framework for collective action remained unclear. Rather than driving real systemic or programmatic change, they have remained "an umbrella for existing or disparate programming... The lack of monitoring processes meant that there was no joint accountability for these collective outcomes and little incentive for achieving them."²¹

20 https://agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2019/Dec/Operationalizing_Collective_Outcomes_DraftV3.pdf

21 ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System 2022', 44.

Both examples above highlight that while the stakeholders in the humanitarian system have made a start at collective leadership by committing to working together on priority actions to help those most in need, there is a lack of follow-through as they lack a shared common vision and understanding of the concepts underpinning humanitarian action. Agencies define needs and prioritise interventions from their own perspective and are reluctant to compromise on their own mandate. While it has been argued that the commitment itself can be incentive enough for actors to work collectively,²² HERE's research indicates that this is not the case in the humanitarian system, as **individual agencies do not internalise and/or institutionalise collective commitments or do so too little or too late.**

b) Internal and external motivation?

The fact that members of a group have a common interest or concern does not mean that they will automatically act in order to maximise the gains for the whole group.

With regard to public service provision, it has even long been argued that on the contrary, rational actors are self-interested, and when desired outcomes have to come about as a result of the effective participation of many actors, they are rather motivated to contribute less than they otherwise would, or access benefits without contributing, if they can

22 Herfeld, 'The Motive of Commitment and Its Implications for Rational Choice Theory'. See also Robertson and Tang, 'The Role of Commitment in Collective Action: Comparing the Organizational Behavior and Rational Choice Perspectives.'

'free ride' on the contributions of others.²³ The parallel between public service provision within a country and the humanitarian system is not a straight one – the humanitarian system is an international, horizontal organisation of actors coming together, not a vertical system of internal governance – but it is still relevant in that it highlights the idea that all actors involved in a collective endeavour are still primarily motivated by their own self-interest. This does not mean that humanitarian stakeholders – be they governments or agencies – have not made their collective commitments in good faith. As put by one key informant, *"it is not a lack of willingness, but is working for the collective really worth it in the long run? For the people in crisis probably, but for the agency profile and funding? It's a grey zone."* Several overlapping and interacting factors appear to disincentivise contributing to collective leadership, in favour of the perceived individual agency interest.

i) Mindsets

First of all, it appears that agencies' motivation to engage in collective leadership is undermined by their institutional mindsets. Particularly when they have received a mandate from the international community, but also when their mission is 'self-imposed', **agencies tend to frame their approach to the humanitarian system more or less exclusively from the point of view of their own mandate**, and with the conviction that they are the appointed 'leaders' of the international community in

this particular sector or area of activities.²⁴ However, collective leadership hinges on the very idea that all stakeholders take an interest in the achievement of the shared goals, and that the process is co-constructed in a way that effectively and appropriately distributes elements of the leadership role. Conversely, a key requirement for collective leadership in the humanitarian system is that all stakeholders involved take responsibility for its success as a whole – not just for their sector. In summary, the widespread mandate-focus works against collective leadership from two angles: the agencies in question do not pay sufficient attention to responsibilities that they perceive as lying outside of their mandate, and at the same time, they do not allow for the co-construction of leadership from other agencies when it comes to topics that touch on what they see as their field of expertise.

ii) Funding

In all likelihood, agencies' emphasis on their mandates is largely due to a deep conviction that they know best how to do and manage issues in that particular field, but it also appears to be the result of a competitive environment. Historically, the main incentive for agencies to coordinate and work together has been funding, and the process of making a common appeal through combining their response plans. At the same time, once that appeal has been made and donors have pledged funding, agencies go after the money separately. As seen in previous work carried out by HERE, agencies constantly strive to guarantee their funding, and justify

²³ Herfeld, 'The Motive of Commitment and Its Implications for Rational Choice Theory'. See also Robertson and Tang, 'The Role of Commitment in Collective Action: Comparing the Organizational Behavior and Rational Choice Perspectives'.

²⁴ Collinson and Schenkenberg, 'UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings'; UNICEF and Save the Children, 'Review of Education Cluster Co-Leadership'; Montemurro and Wendt, 'Unpacking Humanitarianism'.

their existence.²⁵ More often than not, they appear to **enter a context asking the question “how can we frame our added value here” rather than asking “do we have an added value here, and if not, who does.”** In this sense, humanitarian agencies have been described as being – or behaving as if they are – trapped in the dilemma of wanting to do good for others but needing to do good for themselves to justify their existence.²⁶

In terms of funding and removing barriers to collective leadership, it should also be noted that the concept of (UN-managed) humanitarian pooled funds, be it the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) or the country-based pooled funds, have been put in place to promote collective action under the guidance of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). The Humanitarian Coordination function is a collective leadership function per se, represented in one person. This not a command-and-control role, far from it. They need to ensure constant buy-in from the members of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), or, in fact, ensure that these members feel that they can lead. In this sense, pooled funds have the tendency to push agencies to think collectively. However, the idea that the HC decides on pooled fund allocations to the agencies can both strengthen and defeat collective leadership. It can strengthen it when these decisions are made based on complementarities (which is different from keeping everyone happy), but also defeat collective leadership when the HC takes these decisions too much in

isolation. However, they may have good reasons to take these unilateral decisions, for example because the needs in a certain sector are of higher priority than in another.

Meanwhile, one overlooked issue is the impact of donors’ bilateral funding on collective leadership. While, as we have seen, pooled funds have the potential to strengthen collective leadership in terms of working towards a common goal, they are only a small part of the total of humanitarian funding. In 2007 the CERF and CBPFs together accounted for 8% of reported contributions in humanitarian emergencies.²⁷ The situation does not appear to have improved over the years: in the last decade, only close to 6% of humanitarian funding from government donors went to CERF, CBPFs and other pooled funds.²⁸ With the majority of humanitarian funding being bilateral, there appears less to be an incentive for agency heads to think collectively.

iii) Rewards

The competition with others also appears to trigger a reluctance of agencies to incentivise work which does not primarily appear to benefit the agency itself from the point of view of its mandate. HERE has seen that agencies may buy into collective processes and outcomes on paper – and even be cluster leads – but still internally first reward that which is done for the individual agency, not the work that is carried out for the collective. The CLARE II evaluation for example found that while many UNICEF cluster coordinators had done a remarkable job, they tended to feel isolated and

25 Egger, ‘Just Part-Time Lovers? Competition, Coercive Coordination, and Friendship among International INGOs’. See also Ramalingam and Barnett, ‘The Humanitarian’s Dilemma: Collective Action or Inaction in International Relief?’

26 Polman, ‘What’s Wrong With Humanitarian Aid? A Journalist’s Journey’.

27 Stoddard, ‘International Humanitarian Financing: Review and Comparative Assessment of Instruments’.

28 ALNAP, ‘The State of the Humanitarian System 2022’, 57.

unsupported in their roles.²⁹ Generally speaking, the interviews HERE has carried out showed **a pattern of disconnect between the political leadership and operational level within humanitarian agencies: staff at the working level of agencies who are in positions where there is inter-agency consultations tend to see the benefit of exercising collective leadership much more than their superiors.**

Several respondents highlighted that they had never in a performance review been asked about their engagement with other actors in the system, but that the focus would be on the programmes and projects of the specific agency and their targets. While the success of these agency-specific projects would of course likely depend on coordination efforts on behalf of agency staff, that issue was never directly raised. As put by one interviewee: *"the key incentive is to deliver for your agency: it's something you can assess, something you can track."* And by another: *"people are not going to be promoted because they saw the big picture. On the contrary, they would probably be penalised: why are you letting us look bad compared to others?"* Agency operational staff may be convinced of the need to work through and for the collective to realise, for example, centrality of protection, accountability to affected people, and localisation of aid. At the same time, the leadership within these agencies are accountable to Boards that look essentially at individual agency performance and growth. Little credit is often given for how much the agency has worked with others to realise the collective leadership of the sector. Governing

boards of NGOs rarely ask the Chief Executive about their collaboration with other humanitarian partners outside the NGO federative network. Admittedly, HERE has heard from donor respondents that they are increasingly coordinating their participation, for example in the UNICEF Board, the EXCOM of UNHCR, and the Executive Board of WFP, but with some exceptions³⁰ it has yet to bear fruit in terms of Boards truly holding the agency leadership accountable for its contribution to collective ambitions.

iv) Processes

At a very practical level, HERE has also seen that within agencies, **the motivation to take part in collective leadership is significantly hampered by internal processes.** No doubt also as a result of the points above, agencies have their own strategies, budget cycles, and appraisal systems, and prefer to carry out their own needs assessments, planning, and monitoring.³¹ Progress has been made in the last few years, notably with the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF), which aims to improve the way humanitarian actors jointly plan and respond to crises.³² Nonetheless, certain agencies remain big enough to continue focusing inwardly, and to do things their own way.

Not only do these internal processes distract energy and efforts from the collective ambition, but – more worryingly – many of

²⁹ UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.

³⁰ Working collectively can now be found in UNICEF's new corporate strategy.

³¹ For an interesting discussion on the way in which traditional project management and leadership approaches impact negatively on change with regard to local leadership and accountability to affected people, see CHA's paper for the Berlin event (Pellowska, 'Towards Facilitating Local Leadership in Humanitarian Project Management!')

³² See <https://www.jiaf.info/>.

V. Concluding remarks: how to 'fix' the incentives

them do not align with the commitments made. For example, as highlighted by several interviewees, agencies commit to localisation while their internal functioning and due diligence requirements simultaneously make it very difficult to even work with local partners. Similarly, the timing and indicators of UNHCR's internal budgeting and planning process is not aligned with Refugee Response Plans.³³ Adjusting agency-specific processes to fit the collective leadership space is a cumbersome task that demands resources and time and requires that agency leaders be held to account for collective commitments.

As mentioned, these issues overlap and feed into and off of each other. Agencies prefer to stick with their own processes to emphasise their specificity and justify their mandate vis-à-vis those of their competitors. The leadership of agencies prefer to reward that which is done for the agency itself for the same reasons, but also because they are stuck in a path dependency created by the fact that the agency's work is dictated primarily by its own internal processes.

There is a need to break this self-reinforcing cycle, and to push the agency incentives in the direction of collective leadership.

The power dynamics in the system make it resistant to change. In line with rational choice theory, the actors in charge or at the top tend not to want to devolve that power to the collective.³⁴ As highlighted by one interviewee, *"the cluster system empowered some agencies and organisation to run the resources and does not empower the collective, it gives the hegemony to certain agencies."* And indeed, the 2022 State of the Humanitarian System Report confirms that "[o]ver the past four years, almost half (47%) of humanitarian aid reported to the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) was initially absorbed by just three UN agencies: WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF."³⁵ These major players have little incentive to change a system that significantly rewards them. As one interviewee explained: *"There's a lot of resistance from Cluster Lead Agencies [to initiatives around settlement approaches or area-based coordination] because it's a threat; it questions the model and the fundraising around it."*

In terms of 'who' would be able to transform incentives, and better allow for collective leadership, a noteworthy divergence of perspectives was seen in the additional interviews specifically carried out for this paper: while donor representatives highlighted that they hoped the findings in this research would provide them with leverage to push agencies in the direction of collective ambitions, agency representatives – be they UN or INGOs – argued that only donors have the leverage needed to begin with. In their view, donors could for example make funding dependent on collective achievements, or focus more exclusively on pooled funding.

³³ Collinson and Schenkenberg, 'UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings'.

³⁴ Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications'.

³⁵ ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System 2022', 58.

Arguably, **the task of better incentivising collective leadership and action should not fall on only one group of actors in the system, but on all of them, as part of the collective.** Fundamentally, it appears from HERE's research that collective leadership hinges on the need for all stakeholders to see the shared goal as being in their own individual interest, and not only in the interest of the collective. There has to be a common recognition that what is good for the collective is also good for the individual agency. How to bring about that change in mindset?

Collective action theory research has seen that genuine cooperation thrives primarily on non-material incentives like trust, reciprocity, and reputation.³⁶ The argument is that incentives – understood as the internal and external motivations of the parts of the collective – depend on the opportunities and constraints arising from economic and political relationships. These relationships are influenced by an agency's reputation. Ensuring a culture of trust and reciprocity works to build the importance of a good reputation.³⁷ The willingness to uphold (or improve) that reputation in turn helps bolster responsibilities and mutual accountabilities of the stakeholders involved, in their own best interest.³⁸ The political economy of the humanitarian system appears to dictate the opportunities and constraints of collective leadership. Accountability is often sacrificed. For the IASC Principals, there is a need for an articulated balance between working as friends – based on trust and common

experiences – and distance for holding each other to account. For collective leadership to be realised, concerted activity is required at multiple levels. First, at the individual level, each stakeholder/agency has to feel inclined to truly contribute, also because it perceives that to be in its own best interest. Second, the different stakeholders should have shared expectations built around their respective strengths in view of their common goal, leading to the formulation of roles and responsibilities. Third, at the systems level stakeholders have to agree on priorities and common rules with regard to accountability.³⁹

j) Recognise that what is good for the collective is good for the individual agency

With regard to the first level, there is a leadership challenge which is to create a culture within the organisation that sees the collaborative advantage and value of the collective. CLARE II found that the lack of internal support for UNICEF's CLA role was not necessarily a matter of unwillingness, but the result of the agency still needing to recognise that its work for the collective may in fact have a greater impact in terms of achieving its humanitarian mission than the narrow pursuits of its individual agency mindset and focus. A series of recommendations were made towards adjusting this perspective, including reformulating UNICEF's interests in terms of a broader common good, and restructuring internal guidelines and systems accordingly.⁴⁰

36 Tembo, 'Improving Service Provision: Drawing on Collective Action Theory to Fix Incentives', 285. See also Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications'.

37 Ostrom, 'Collective Action and Local Development Processes'.

38 Tembo, 'Improving Service Provision: Drawing on Collective Action Theory to Fix Incentives', 281–82.

39 The construction of these three levels is inspired by Raelin, 'What Are You Afraid Of: Collective Leadership and Its Learning Implications', citing Center for Ethical Leadership, 'The Collective Leadership Framework'.

40 UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.

A humanitarian organisation by nature cannot thrive on competition⁴¹ and there is a need to distinguish between leadership within one institution and leadership on behalf of the collective – these two aspects provide for different dynamics at both local and global levels.⁴² The Boards that hold agency leadership accountable need not only management skills and experience, but also, crucially, in-depth knowledge of development and humanitarian action, the nature and significance of collective commitments, and humanitarian principles. Boards also have to exercise critical thinking with regard to the agency's own mandate and govern in view of ensuring that it fits into a bigger picture of collective action.

ii) Strengthen the collective around its shared purpose

HERE's research has also unearthed a number of immediate steps that could be taken to boost the second level, i.e. the relationship between the collective leadership stakeholders, built around their common interest. One respondent suggested for example that the mindset shift can be helped by no longer speaking in terms of agency mandates, but in terms of issues. In meetings and publications, instead of focusing on what is UNHCR's mandate, speak of protection; instead of speaking on behalf of WFP or FAO, speak on behalf of the food security cluster. In the words of this interviewee, *"you need to socialise certain concepts so organisations*

take ownership of them to better focus on them." An interviewee who made a similar argument found that *"a lot of things that could be done to change the culture. Look at footballers – it's not a perfect analogy but some of them playing for their club but also for their country."* As suggested in HERE's Roadmap to the future of humanitarian coordination, it would be important for those in coordination leadership positions to ask the question 'why are we here?'⁴³ from time to time. OCHA could, for example, organise meta-consultations within cluster/inter-cluster/HCTs once or twice a year on stakeholders' expectations in terms of coordination outcomes, what they expect to bring, and what they expect to achieve as a return on their investment. Another concrete suggestion would be to continue the progress that has been made when it comes to more closely considering the skills and approach of HCs when appointing them. One respondent emphasised that *"you need persuasive skills to bring agencies back on the collective track"* and explained that three qualities are crucial: interpersonal skills, knowledge of the clusters and their themes, and understanding of the different cultures and mission of NGOs. At the same time, and as emphasised by the ALNAP paper provided for Berlin event,⁴⁴ care should be taken not to over-emphasise the importance of strengthening individual leadership capabilities, at the expense of institutionalising leadership within the way the sector operates as such.

41 Thanks to Marc duBois for the pertinent reference to the work of Paul Skinner (Skinner, Collaborative Advantage: How Collaboration Beats Competition as a Strategy for Success.) and for sharing his experiences from humanitarian Board governance training.

42 HERE-Geneva, 'Buddha, Hercules, and Others in Humanitarian Leadership Note on the HERE-Organised Round Table on Humanitarian Leadership, Geneva, 25 October 2019'.

43 HERE-Geneva, 'Future of Humanitarian Coordination Roadmap'.

44 Ramalingam and Mitchell, 'Learning for Humanitarian Leadership: What It Is, How It Works and Future Priorities'.

iii) Define strategic priorities and ensure accountability for them

In terms of the third level, the emphasis on strategic vision is essential. There is no question that the humanitarian system has been created around a deeply felt common conviction of the need to help those most in need through international cooperation. Crucially, the middle ground of how to get to the shared goal has to be better investigated and formulated. It has been argued that “[i]neffective leaders try to make change happen. System leaders focus on creating the conditions that can produce change and that can eventually cause change to be self-sustaining.”⁴⁵ Priorities need to be defined, and there has to be a clear framework for shared accountability that ensures contributions to the collective ambition. Formalising the idea of ‘collective leadership’ in IASC cluster policy documents would be a start in terms of filling an existing gap. Incentives for collective leadership can only be served through a big-picture, system perspective:⁴⁶ if each agency focuses only on its mandate in isolation from how they all interact, there cannot be collective leadership, and attaining the shared goal will be all the more difficult.⁴⁷ Using a system perspective provides a significant challenge however: very rarely do individual agencies set out to improve their own performance in isolation; they require different actors at different levels to

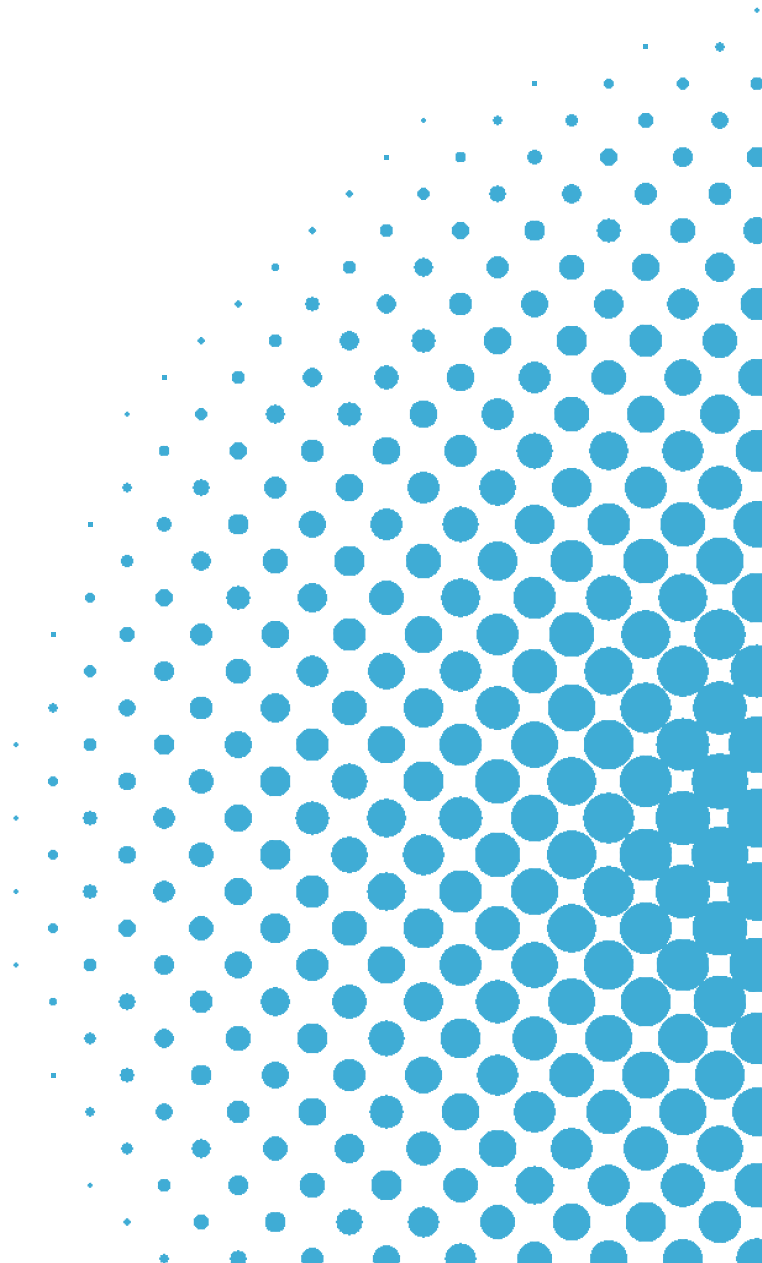
45 Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, ‘The Dawn of System Leadership’.

46 For insight regarding efforts directly help RCs/HCs and their teams advance progress on a complex, cross-boundary challenge of their choosing in light of systems leadership, see the report provided by KONU and Dalberg for the Berlin event (KONU and Dalberg, ‘Systems Leadership in the Humanitarian Sector: Findings from Field Leadership Labs’)

47 Levine, ‘System Failure? Why Humanitarian Assistance Can’t Meet Its Objectives Without Systems Thinking—and Why It Finds It so Hard to Use It’; Barresi, ‘Systems Thinking in Humanitarian Response: Visualization and Analysis of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s Architectures for “The Cluster Approach”’.

coordinate and consensually shift their ways of working. Given how difficult it already is for one organisation to change its own systems and attitudes, it is understandable that each agency prefers to focus inwardly. However, while it is true that many, if not most, levers for change are outside of the control of the humanitarian actors themselves, there is one which they do control: their own contribution to the collective action, and their willingness to ensure the system becomes more than the sum of its parts.⁴⁸

48 ALNAP, ‘The State of the Humanitarian System 2018’.



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