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Viewpoint

A Framework for Effective Collaboration with Crisis-Affected Communities

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Abstract: In 2016, a localisation agenda was set across the international aid industry with the understanding that humanitarian interventions need to be led by local actors and local communities. Despite international agreements, the localisation efforts are largely failing. This paper demonstrates the challenges that prevent effective collaboration between international humanitarian agencies and crisis-affected communities. It draws on evaluation reports to highlight an inability to learn lessons or follow recommendations from previous crises. Based on the authors' experiences, we present a novel framework for effectively collaborating with crisis-affected communities. The Communities Framework provides a pathway to establishing effective community collaboration and locally owned and led humanitarian interventions. The importance of local leadership, trust building, and local context are at the heart of the framework. In light of the need for a more localised and decolonial humanitarian response, this framework supports humanitarian actors and the affected communities in moving from a charity-led approach to one of mutual aid. The paper draws on alternative notions of compassion from the Global South of contemporary humanitarian interventions as a philosophical foundation for the framework. Caring for others and the world is central to implementing an appropriate and effective humanitarian response. There remains a largely unexplored scope regarding the outcome of resolving crises when both humanitarian actors and affected communities work as equal partners and how that will shape modern humanitarianism as we understand it today.

Keywords: collaborating; mutual aid; enabling change; co-creation; compassion; crisis-affected; humanitarian response; novel framework; ancient wisdom; Ayni

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1. Introduction

Modern humanitarianism has been shaped by an existing colonial legacy. The normalization of extreme violence despite a sophisticated international aid industry and legal and development frameworks is failing to facilitate peace and human flowering. The current power imbalance visible in humanitarian responses like in the unfolding catastrophes in Gaza, Sudan, and the Congo is a result of a system that cannot afford protection and assistance to communities affected by conflict. The exclusion of these communities from decision-making is integral to the United Nations Security Council membership structures that do not offer permanent seats to continents like Africa and Latin America [1]. This article proposes a Communities Framework that draws on wisdoms from the Global South and Inner Development as a pathway to caring for others and the world.

This article aims to raise the level of consciousness by stressing the importance of presence, trust, and collective thinking on root issues of war, violence, and disaster. As part of the theoretical underpinning of the Communities Framework proposed in this article, Goals 1, Being: Relationship to Self and Inner Development, and 3, Relating: Caring for others and the World from the Inner Development Framework, are important concepts [2]. The Communities Framework is an important contribution of the sector as it advocates for a mutual aid lens and not charity or philanthrocapitalism when understanding humanitarianism [3–5]. Through this novel framework, the traditional manner in which external

stakeholders engage with internal stakeholders is reestablished to improve humanitarian response and bring about the shift that is so clearly needed [6].

The international aid industry consists principally of five sets of actors: donor governments, including the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO); the United Nations; International non-governmental organisations (INGOs); the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement; and the media. Local NGOs, together with those communities affected on the ground, have little voice in the system [7]. Today, the humanitarian sector is a multi-billion-dollar global industry, employing hundreds of thousands of people, where agencies operate with colossal budgets, delivering staggering quantities of relief to people affected by poverty, disasters, and conflicts [8]. The operating budgets of the UN agencies and INGOs, in particular, have spiraled; for example, Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) has witnessed unprecedented rising operational budgets from EURO 421 million in 2004 to exceeding two billion EURO for the first time in MSF history in 2022 [9]. An even greater rise was achieved by the UN's World Food Programme, which rose over ten-fold from USD 1.2. billion in 1997 to over USD 14 billion in 2022, showcasing a common trend across the humanitarian industry [10]. These increases are representative of the overall industry, and not surprisingly, the number employed in the industry has expanded vastly, with the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Partnership (ALNAP) estimating there are 570,000 field personnel—not including those employed directly by donors or at headquarter level [11]. The majority of humanitarian funding is channeled through UN agencies, specifically with WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF being the three largest in terms of expenditure. Much of this funding is then filtered to international NGOs (INGOs). The 'Big 6' as the largest INGOs are commonly referred to—including Médecins Sans Frontières, World Vision, International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council, Save the Children, and Catholic Relief Services—account for almost a quarter of combined humanitarian spending reported by NGOs [11]. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) of the UN Secretariat is responsible for coordinating responses to humanitarian emergencies. It does this through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, whose members include the UN agencies primarily responsible for providing emergency relief. A coordinated, system-wide approach to humanitarian relief is essential in providing assistance quickly and efficiently to those in need [12]. When a major conflict or crisis occurs, like from the 2004 Asian tsunami to the 2023 earthquake in Turkiye and Syria, the wheels of the international humanitarian response pedal fast. The major global players in the field have largely remained the same for over 60 years. Local NGOs are playing an increasingly prominent role in delivering aid and gaining access, although one may argue that the hand of the international aid community was forced as a result of the inaccessibility of international agencies in countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, and adding the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing out international agencies and staff. However, local NGOs and those communities affected on the ground have few decision-making responsibilities or control over resources.

One must question whether a typically Eurocentric and US led humanitarian system can effectively enhance the wellbeing of communities and facilitate planetary health [13,14]. Prashad [1] argued that despite modern sophisticated structures like the United Nations, international legal frameworks, and numerous declarations and treaties, the world has only experienced 26 days of peace since 1945. It is, therefore, necessary to examine current mainstream approaches to humanitarianism and the implications of sidelining alternative notions of compassion within global affairs. Furthermore, colonialism seeps through humanitarian approaches, showing a system that perpetuates inequality by excluding community input—not recognizing local communities as equal partners. Regardless of the expansion of modern science and the advancements in technology, the current fragmented approach to peace in part stems from a separatist approach that has alienated humans from each other and nature [15]. This article refers to the term Western as representing the philosophical foundations and practices that have been 'made' universal through the colonial and neo-colonial projects, not by geographical divisions [16], and

similarly, development is understood as involving mainstream concepts and interventions based on capitalism that stem from Eurocentricism [16]. These broad definitions have shaped the purpose of the Communities Framework, which aims to unite key actors rather than place further divisions based on external characteristics. This framework supports collaboration between the outsider humanitarian organisations and the insider-affected community through harnessing creative expression to shape and imagine alternative futures [17–21]. The Communities Framework acknowledges the international aid industry is at a disadvantage. In order to enhance innovation, a space must be created to facilitate learning from ancient wisdom and traditional knowledge systems to solve modern-day challenges. It is from within this gap that the proposed Communities Framework (presented further below) acknowledges the many harmful outcomes of engaging with communities from the 'expert's' standpoint. A demonstrable example of this has been the violence that has come from the same organisations that abide by the 'Do No Harm' principle. In the case of the 2010 earthquake and cholera outbreak in Haiti, the emergency response was widely accepted within humanitarian circles as inadequate [22]. The catchy tagline'build back better' is an example of the expert lens that tramples on local expectations and input, rendering the humanitarian actors free from accountability. A key question is whether the case of Haiti showcases the failure of the mainstream international humanitarian system as a whole or an exception?

1.1. Tipping Points: Chronological Major Changes and Transitions of the International Aid Industry

Despite the slow adaption by the main global humanitarian actors, the rules have evolved. The international humanitarian architecture has undergone several major reforms, each aiming to improve the effectiveness of the response. In the 1990s, we saw more standardisation and technicalisation introduced through the SPHERE guidelines and the embedding of external evaluations as standard practice led through the creation of ALNAP in response to the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the findings from the multi-donor Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda [23,24]. The evaluation highlighted the humanitarian response following the genocide was characterised by poor coordination, ineffectiveness, lack of accountability, and mechanisms for ensuring NGOs adhere to certain professional standards. The SPHERE handbook emphasised that agencies encourage the participation of aid recipients. In addition to SPHERE and ALNAP, the principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) were established. The GHD principles include the idea that organisations should engage 'beneficiaries in the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian assistance' [25]. Joint evaluations were set out as good practice but were not common practice unless a response reached a high level of magnitude. It was over a decade later before another system-wide evaluation was launched to examine the 2004 Asian tsunami humanitarian response (the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition). The evaluation found a lack of coordination and coherence, a lack of local involvement in decision-making and responses, and a lack of transparency and accountability to affected populations throughout the international humanitarian response [26]. Evidently, a decade later, the lessons from the 1994 Rwandan evaluation had not been learned.

The industry once more called for change to improve efforts. The UN Cluster approach, which was undergoing an early trial in 2004 and was aimed at creating a global shift in how the international community coordinates and shares information, seemed to offer the solution to the previous failures. In 2005, the UN Cluster system was officially introduced following the Humanitarian Response Review to improve the coordination of humanitarian aid, and whilst this empowers international actors, it largely excludes local players. The Cluster Approach is a set of structures, processes, principles, and commitments to coordinate humanitarian action when a national government requests international support. It aims to make the humanitarian community more organised and more accountable to crisis-affected people [27]. The cluster approach comprises eight clusters at the global level. In addition, two service clusters and four cross-cutting issues relevant to all the clusters

were introduced. Each cluster is assigned a cluster lead embodied by a UN agency (see Table 1) [28].

Table 1. The Global Cluster approach.

Clusters and cross-cutting issue and their lead/focal agencies at the global level
Clusters for response areas:
Agriculture Cluster (FAO)
CCCM Cluster (UNHCR/IOM)
Early Recovery Cluster (UNDP)
Education Cluster (UNICEF/Save the Children)
Health Cluster (WHO)
Nutrition Cluster (UNICEF)
Protection Cluster (UNHCR)
WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) Cluster (UNICEF)
Service Cluster
Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (OCHA/WFP/UNICEF)
Logistics Cluster (WFP)
Cross-Cutting Issues
Age (HelpAge International)
Environment (UNEP)
Gender (Co-chairs of the IASC Sub-Working Group on Gender currently UNFPA and Winrock International)
HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)

(Source: *ibid*).

The cluster system has had mixed reviews; however, the evaluation findings from the international response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake canvassed some serious shortcomings. One evaluation report acknowledged that humanitarian assistance may have even caused harm [29]. A lack of coordination, communication, and cooperation amongst the international agencies significantly hindered the response. The ground realities and local needs were disregarded during the planning and implementation of the response [28,30]. Common failures in responding to an international humanitarian crisis were present, namely, poor coordination, communication, and cooperation amongst the international actors themselves and between the international agencies and recipients of aid.

In 2016, we had the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit, where bold commitments were made to shift the financing model, diversify the donor base, and improve efficiencies [31]. Whilst some initiatives gained momentum, in particular more cash transfer programmes [7,32], we have witnessed inadequate long-term funding and little progress in supporting localisation, both of which were listed as part of the 24 transformations in the Agenda for Humanity that were agreed upon at the Summit [33]. It was apparent to all the international actors that were collaborating and engaging effectively with disaster- and crisis-affected communities that they were the missing ingredients necessary to respond effectively to a humanitarian crisis. Local ownership and effective communication with local communities are agreed upon across the humanitarian and development fields as critical for effective, efficient, and sustainable interventions. Yet, despite the knowledge and agreement across the industries, it continues to be absent in humanitarian interventions [34]. Why do international humanitarian agencies, with decades of experience and learning in the field, continue to fail in effectively engaging and communicating with crisis-affected communities?

1.2. Lived Experiences

This paper provides a viewpoint by drawing on the lived experiences of the authors, supplemented by evaluation reports of major international humanitarian crises. Lived experience can be defined as personal knowledge of the world gained through direct participation and involvement in an event or phenomenon [35]. Lived experience refers to human activities that are immediate, situated, and daily, which are lived without thinking

about or paying attention to them [36] Dr Rose has been collaborating and co-creating solutions with crisis-affected communities in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East for over fifteen years. Dr Adler is a woman from the Global South who has experienced being a child refugee and comes from a collective upbringing. Such experiences have influenced their understanding of communities as complex and resistant. There are sections that discuss ancient wisdom with concepts like Ayni (discussed later) that are part of the authors' understanding of compassion. Notions of empowerment are an element of the proposed framework and methodology. ALNAP hosts an online library with all publicly available humanitarian evaluation reports. This includes multi-donor, global evaluations. The authors utilised the lessons learned and recommendations from these evaluations to support the findings.

2. The Inability to Engage and Collaborate

Effectively engaging crisis-affected communities is challenging. Each community has its own politics, classes, castes, divisions and allegiances, traditions, and cultures that outside agencies must understand and navigate to effectively engage. However, the international aid industry has long acknowledged the importance of collaborating with crisis-affected communities and local stakeholders to deliver an effective humanitarian response. One of the earliest acknowledgements to advocate for greater participation of affected communities in assessments was noted in the independent evaluation of the Disaster Emergency Committee expenditure for the 2001 India earthquake response. (Development Initiatives, 2001). Collaboration with disaster and crisis-affected communities was later emphasised as one of the eight key principles of the Good Humanitarian Donors Initiative. The move to modernisation, Walter Mignolo [37] argues, uncovers the challenges to incorporating the contributions from the Global South into a modern solution. The framework proposed makes a case for the inclusion of non-mainstream knowledge and non-missionary humanitarian approaches marginalised due to colonial projects [38]. The framework also draws on principles of collective action and wellbeing over individual interests. At a meeting in Stockholm in 2003, 17 donors endorsed the Principles and Good Practice of Good Humanitarian Donorship. Principal seven states:

> Request implementing humanitarian organisations to ensure, to the greatest possible extent, adequate involvement of beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response.

There are currently 42 members of the GHD, including the United States of America, Germany, the European Commission, and the UK, the top four donors of international aid in 2022. The importance of community participation was further catapulted to the fore for all international humanitarian agencies by the 2004 Sphere Handbook. The first common standard boldly states:

> Common standard 1: participation. The disaster-affected population actively participates in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme. [23]

The need to actively engage and collaborate with crisis-affected communities was evident, and the concepts became embedded in language in the international aid industry. Yet, despite the agreement and sense of urgency to collaborate with communities and ensure their participation, the ground realities were in stark contrast, and this has been evidenced through the waves of evaluation reports over the last twenty years. The global evaluation [27] of the 2004 Asian tsunami (Tsunami Evaluation Coalition) concluded with a series of lessons learned for future responses, which included the limited participation of the affected populations, which hampered the response. The final recommendations of the report included greater local ownership of disaster responses and the provision of aid according to need rather than a limited view of disaster-affected populations. Similar lessons learned and recommendations are echoed relentlessly in countless other evaluations. The international community acknowledges that to develop an appropriate, effective, and

efficient humanitarian response, it must be in collaboration with crisis-affected communities whereby they are engaged from the onset in every aspect of the design and implementation. How then, do we continue to fail in effective community collaboration and participation? What is missing in order to implement such an approach? Local staff are critical in the process as they house the insider community knowledge and understanding but lack the voice and decision-making authority. Ultimately, outsiders need to step aside and promote the role of local staff and organisations.

2.1. What Has and Has Not Changed after the 2004 Asian Tsunami and the 2010 Haiti Earthquake Emergency Response?

Much has happened after the unfolding of the 2004 Asian tsunami disaster response by international humanitarian aid organisations. The devastation from the massive earthquake that struck off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia on the 26th of December triggered a series of destructive tsunamis that devastated vast coastal areas across the Indian Ocean. Unlike most humanitarian responses that struggle with funding, incredible support from governments and the international community secured funds surpassed the estimated economic cost in damages and losses of US 10 billion [39]. Despite the generosity and solidarity displayed, the competition and chaos resulting from so many international actors lacking in expertise, but adjusted to secure funding, draw on the institutionalisation of the humanitarian system. This was a scene also repeated in the 2010 emergency response to Haiti. The responses to both the 2004 tsunami and the 2010 earthquake and cholera outbreak in Haiti are key case studies that underline the core critiques that are discussed throughout this article.

- Following the key findings of a case study that examined the impact of humanitarian aid from the perspective of local stakeholders in Sri Lanka following the 2004 tsunami, aid distribution by INGOs aggravated existing social tensions [40] (Lee, A.C.K, 2008). The proposed Communities Framework in this article outlines the importance of 'influencer collaboration & critical users' as a first stage process. In practical terms, the outsider community can overlook cultural and social structures that disrupt networks of coexistence. For example, the international aid organisations working in the region of Ampara in Sri Lanka divided the aid recipients into 'tsunami-affected' and 'non-tsunami-affected'. This did not make sense to the communities, and what became problematic was that those in the category of 'affected' were young, able-bodied men who were part of the fishing cooperatives, which exacerbated divisions of income inequality [40]. The complexities of communities are too readily simplified, unacknowledged, and more worryingly disregarded by the imposition of aid that can, on many occasions, do more harm than good. Thus, the premise of this proposed framework is not to idealise a harmonious and smooth working relationship between humanitarians and the affected community, but rather, this article acknowledges that from the outset, suffering and chaos are the norm. The environment of working in such conditions is harsh. Furthermore, the framework establishes the division between both from the outset, underscoring a process of coming together. Thus, there is a need to establish core structures to minimise and prevent unnecessary harm and ineffectiveness [41]. The lessons learned from the tsunami response and those reported in the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) report (2007) expand on a central critique of the humanitarian system, which is the tendency to undermine the capacity of local and central governments.

Without trust building, community development, and notions of empowerment, the most marginalised people suffer greatly [42]. Effective and successful humanitarian responses need to be evaluated in accordance with collaborative efforts that prevent damaging local relief efforts [39]. The question persists on whether this is being executed effectively or if the sector is still struggling to implement the necessary structural changes that became so apparent after the 2004 and 2010 emergency responses. It is widely acknowledged that the 2004 tsunami was a turning point in disaster preparedness on how the global

aid community would coordinate emergency responses following a disaster. Many of the lessons taken forward come from those difficult reflections and multi-agency evaluation reports, like the one from Care International [43]. Perceived risks around community competency and decision-making were important misconceptions that continue to prevent a collaborative approach. The importance of cash transfers and the positive benefits of allowing people to buy what they needed locally and within an appropriate time frame was a further lesson identified. Issues around the application of humanitarian values such as participation, sustainability, and coordination are as relevant today as they were after the evaluation of both these case studies. The inefficiency or duplication of efforts by international agencies remains a central critique of the humanitarian system. Following the Humanitarian Response Review of international responses to humanitarian emergencies in 2005, the Cluster Approach was adopted to address gaps in effectiveness, accountability, responsibility, and coordination, to name a few [44]. In addition, and voiced by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the issue around the principles of neutrality and impartiality is whether the cluster system is undermining these core principles. At times, humanitarian intervention appears to be involved in state-building, like in the case of Afghanistan, whilst continuing to exclude local and national organisations from coordination activities [41].

Although one can argue that the 2004 tsunami emergency response unfolded in a time of disjointed effort by the humanitarian sector, extending this grace to the 2010 Haiti response is difficult. Structural inequality and power dynamics that perpetuate the disablement of affected communities were a central critique of the 2010 Haiti response. Local capacity was again side lined, and what emerged was a fierce neo-liberal approach to humanitarianism (Vinbury, 2017). The commonalities between both responses draw on an *impulse* to be on the ground with little thought towards the impact that a sudden influx of outsiders has on an affected community grappling with a crisis [42]. An underpinning analysis throughout the article is that affected communities are complex, and standard approaches to emergency responses miss those crucial cultural, political, economic, geographic, and social characteristics that ought to dictate humanitarian efforts in a manner that makes sense to aid recipients.

Despite the major reform of 2005, the architectural inequities and colonialist approach to humanitarianism remain. The current trend of countries limiting foreign aid intervention, like in the case of Morocco when hit by the deadly quake of 2003, marks a point of departure in *choosing not to choose* [45]. The Red Cross spent USD 500 million on the emergency response in Haiti, claiming they built 130,000 homes; however, the number of permanent homes the charity built was six. The Red Cross informed communities they would build hundreds of homes with living rooms and bathrooms; instead they left a string of poorly managed projects and questionable spending [46]. Even with the introduction of the 2005 cluster system and the establishment of the Grand Bargain, localisation and accountability to the affected communities continues to undermine the efforts of humanitarianism on an international scale [31]. Parallels can be drawn across international humanitarian crises from the 2015 Nepal earthquake where European donor governments leaped into action sending planes with aid, but not bothering with Nepalese Government consent, they returned unable to land [32]) or the ongoing crises in countries such as Syria and Sudan, in which international staff and international organisations continue to hold the resources and decision-making powers.

2.2. Alternative Notions of Compassion in Contemporary Humanitarianism

The sophistication of the humanitarian industry has grown to embody key global actors and governing structures and guiding principles and approaches. Like most industries, formal mainstream humanitarianism is engulfed within modern consumer capitalism, and within this dominant economic structure, passive aid recipients are an essential component to sustaining the status quo [8]. Alongside the major reforms within the humanitarian sector, as discussed above, helpful approaches like the 'Do No Harm' principle are gospel in the current Western ethical frameworks. Yet, these approaches largely trample on local

ethical values, knowledge, and practices. Humanitarianism evokes a compelling transnational morality held by the principle of humanity. The principles of humanitarianism are impartiality, neutrality, and independence from political constraints, cornerstone to the ICRC (the International Committee of the Red Cross) [47]. But can such principles uphold the historical context from the post-Cold War period shaping humanitarianism? The international aid industry as we understand it today is embedded within the "political, economic and military inference in the domestic affairs of a state", humanitarianism has always existed and predates the trend of commoditising humanity for political influence [47] p. 451.

> "Above all, always be capable of feeling deeply an injustice committed against anyone, anywhere in the world" Che Guevara (1928–1967)

The human impulse to help echoes through ancient wisdom and is found in religious, philosophical, indigenous, and local principles and expressions. From a Global South context, ancient wisdom arises within the contemporary context of resistance from peasants to indigenous peoples and affected communities that continue to endure systemic violence from conflict and disasters inflicted by oppressive structures laced with coloniality [1]. It is difficult to separate the political, economic, and military interference that has annexed itself to mainstream humanitarianism. It is within this emerging landscape of humanitarianism that the importance of local notions of compassion are essential in order to understand local contexts and gaps within mainstream humanitarian approaches. The trail of Western political destabilisation of countries in the Global South is shielded from public outrage with humanitarian and development interventions [48]. In this same vein, the humanitarian sector is ever-growing and expanding in areas of research and advocacy that encroach on the already suffocating space of affected communities and limit opportunities for them to assert themselves as the experts and contributors to the humanitarian sector [49]. In this lies the inescapable relationship between power and knowledge, between the rise of hegemony-seeking versus a subjugated knowledge in local traditions and knowledge systems [50]. Following this Marxist analysis that uncovers the powerful interplay of power relations, contemporary tensions and critiques of humanitarianism are precisely linked to unrequested interventions justified by the media and the major actors as being altruistic [47] Through the analysis of ancient wisdom and concepts of compassion, the contemporary transnational morality in humanitarianism is argued in this article as having a darker side that reproduces unequal power relations between the developed West and the Global South [37]. Similarly, the vulnerability paradigm that shapes the worldview of affected communities is argued to be, at best, unhelpful and, at worst, counterproductive [51,52].

The philosophical grounding of the framework has been influenced by three main concepts: Andean concepts of reciprocity, as well as Ubuntu and Buddhist ecology. The Indigenous Andean understanding of reciprocity "Ayni"—*today for you, tomorrow for me to this day*—is a common saying in many Latin American households. In addition, the ancient African philosophy of Ubuntu—*I am because we are*—encompasses concepts of oneness and mutual aid as distinct from charity and philanthropy, providing alternative paradigms. To conclude, Buddhist ecology offers a methodological pathway to incorporating nature as part of us [53]. In this, the Buddhist perspective on deep ecology is guided by the three aspects of the dhamma: wisdom (prajna), meditation (dhyana), and morality (sila) [53]. The current discourse of the Anthropocene era is argued to be problematic when positioned as an era in which humans are the engineers of the planet [3]. In rejecting the notion of an Anthropocene era, one can establish humility, compassion, and collectivity at the centre of humanitarianism [54]. The establishment of alternative notions of compassion contradicts the implicit and Western epistemological dominance that 'others' the many knowledges and sciences that exist [37]. By acknowledging the existence of knowledges, we desist from repeating the invisible and unintelligible assumptions of communities that operate beyond the modern margins of society [50]. The community framework explicitly addresses the coloniality within modern humanitarianism and the 'backwardness' that has enveloped it both materially and ideologically. Including the participation of affected communities,

enhancing wellbeing, and facilitating a reimagination of alternative futures reinvigorates the local notions of compassion from the Global South as viable pathways with which to move beyond the North–South paradigm.

3. 'Ayni' within a Humanitarian Context

What does the Quechua word for mutuality *Ayni* really mean? And how can it be applied within a humanitarian context? Its translation is alive in Latin American households, including one of the author's who is Colombian-born. The Spanish translation 'hoy por ti, y mañana por mi' is said often whenever you are in times of hardship or witnessing distress. It is a thank you and a please; it is a reminder that we all face challenges and suffering [52]. Both the giver and the receiver repeat the phrase to one another, establishing an equal footing in understanding that the pendulum swings at both ends. The order in which this phrase is constructed is equally significant, placing emphasis on giving first and then receiving. Ayni reminds us that humility is a central concept in collectiveness, and without unity with others, we are left vulnerable to the inevitability of life's calamities [52]. This article takes on an anthropological definition of suffering as argued by Kleinman [52] p. 101.

"There are routinised forms of suffering that are either shared aspects of human conditions—chronic illness or death—or experiences of deprivation and exploitation and degradation and oppression that certain categories of individuals (the poor, the vulnerable, the defeated) are especially exposed to and others relatively protected from."

By accepting suffering and challenges as an innate part of the human experience and acknowledging that some groups are subjected more to routinised forms of suffering, the revival of alternative concepts of compassion provides an alternative to the dominant rhetoric of 'saving' and 'salvation' [55]. As argued by Candler [56], there is an ambiguity and flexibility built into Ayni, establishing between the two parties a commitment to serving one another. Drawing from the communities' conceptual framework in Figure 1, trust building and the transformative phase that comes from working with communities as equal partners is key to the framework. The framework looks beyond the customary transactional relationship or short-term engagements that are part and parcel of the humanitarian sector. The Communities Framework advocates for a long-lasting relationship, a key characteristic of Ayni. The values of cooperation, co-creation, and collaboration are tried and tested principles rooted in ancient wisdom from around the world.

Unlearning Corporate Collaboration—The Transformative Aspects of Trust and Relationship Building

Terms like 'rethinking humanitarianism', 'decolonizing aid', and 'reforming humanitarianism' are all indicative of a growing dissatisfaction with mainstream humanitarianism and traditional aid response that struggle to implement a community-centred approach. According to the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), localisation "enables the meaningful engagement and leadership of local and national actors in humanitarian response, enhancing capacity exchange and increasing direct funding" [6] (p. 1). Many of the issues regarding the current status quo that also impact other institutions aside from humanitarianism, like the health and education industry, are due to the endless pursuit of growth through the current economic model [53]. Inevitably, tension emerges in how to reconcile a business model approach to humanitarianism that dominates in scale and structure through UN agencies and non-mainstream approaches operating on concepts like mutual aid [4,5]. The morphing relations created when trust is established are examined closely and linked to the cornerstone idea of what it means to be humane.

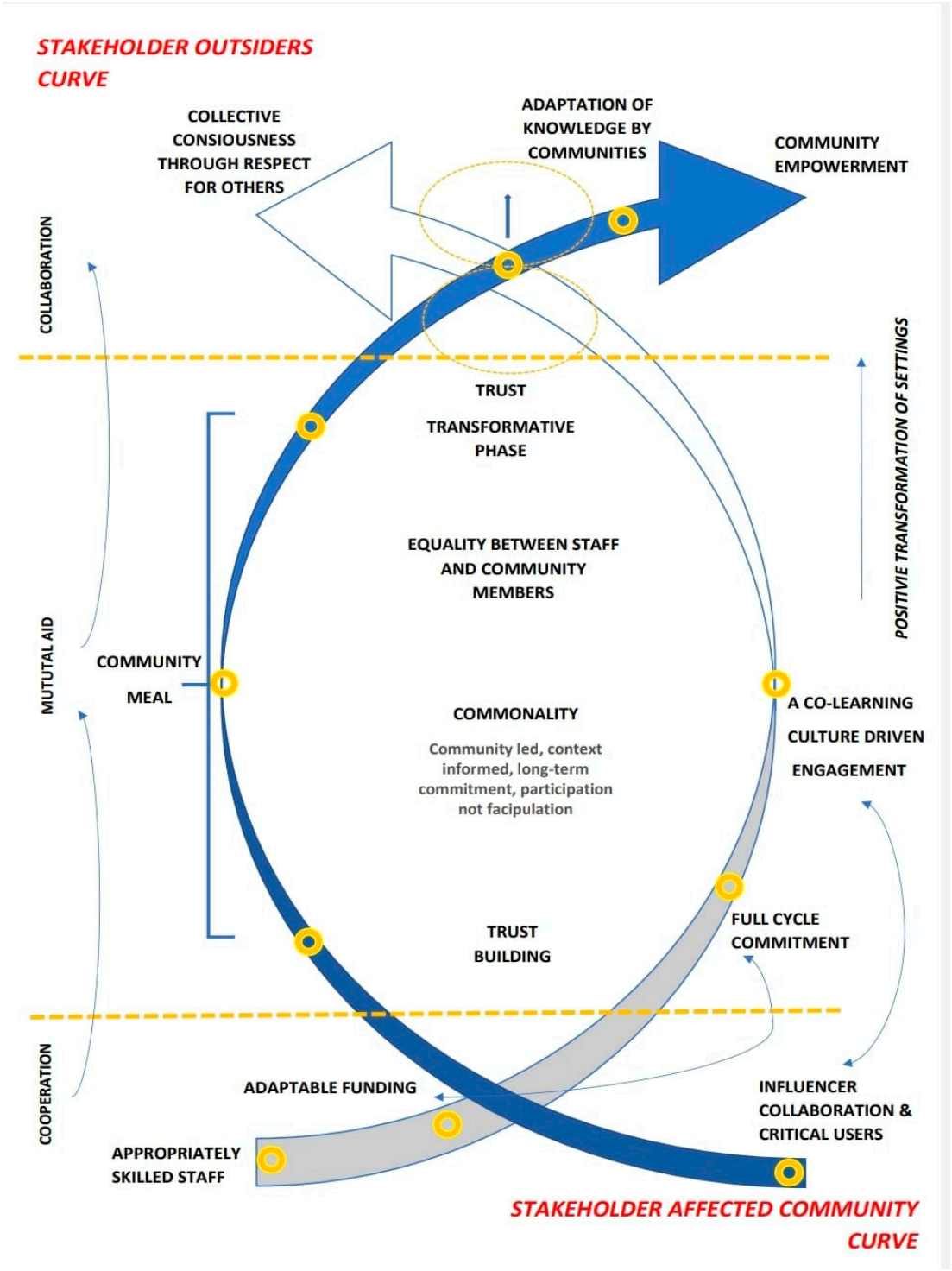

Figure 1. Communities Framework. (Source: Authors own, 2023).

Who decides what localisation looks like? Professionalism sets the rules of play between the outsider organisation and the insider group of affected people. The tribalistic nature and rituals that sustain communities are rarely honoured, understood, or incorporated as part of one's learning process when operating under the guise of professionalism. In the proposed framework, a central meeting curve encapsulates both the humanitarian organisation and the affected community in an intimate collaborative phase [4], facilitating an intentional learning space to shift power dynamics away from a professional standpoint that requires dependency on collaboration and adaptation of knowledge. The lingering

remnants of a missionary-driven humanitarian approach continue to drive a Global-North impetus to save the vulnerable through elaborate speeches and grandiose pledges that slowly trickle down to the affected population like scraps that fall from a royal table [57]. Can unlearning corporate collaboration happen without dismantling the UN system and agencies? And in the process of unlearning and relearning collaboration based on mutual respect and equal partnership, what structural changes need to take place in what is now a multi-billion-dollar industry? [10]. These are complex and provocative arguments aimed at the current mainstream humanitarian system that, in one way or another, is missing the opinions and input of aid recipients. The straitjacket delivery approach to the mainstream humanitarian discussions around reform, decolonisation of humanitarian aid, and localisation are abstract arguments and intellectual debates that are removed from the lived experience and context of the communities. For this reason, Table 2 provides a practical adaptation of the framework to allow humanitarian actors to implement actions that can allow them to transcend the extractive tendencies of aid. The framework does not assume that the outsider stakeholder has the capacity to engage with the affected community. Equally important is flexibility within the funding. The framework emphasises creativity through co-learning and co-creating. To achieve this level of engagement, there needs to be a commitment from the outset, and this needs to be supported by the donor to see through the humanitarian intervention until a positive transformative outcome is reached. Development within the Western context is argued to have been imposed by the West with little to no room for ownership and local context.

Table 2. Practical application of framework.

Framework Stages	Cooperation	Practical Applicability
	This first section of the proposed framework requires a semi-independent reflective process that can be facilitated by the humanitarian organisation and taken further through independent reflection. Much of the critique on the current humanitarian system is the impetus to secure funding first and then evaluate whether the expertise matches the needs on the ground and expectations. Therefore, in order to enter into a meaningful stage of cooperation there needs to be appropriately skilled staff.	• The outsider community should develop a pre-evaluation and reflective activity before accepting or entering into a crisis-affected community. • Establishing contact with influencers, collaborators, and critical users is a step in acknowledging that the humanitarian organisation lacks expertise and needs to be led by the affected community. • Adaptable funding is a crucial first-stage process because it manages community expectations and establishes a commitment from the outset. • Questioning the suitability of the facilitator in this framework goes largely against modern mainstream practice.
	Mutual Aid	**Practical Applicability**
	By drawing on mutual aid rather than a typical missionary approach to charity, power imbalance is shifted. Mutual aid establishes a grounding in humility with the intention for the affected community to outgrow a dependency cycle.	• The second stage of the proposed framework is the beginning of a learning relationship between both the outsider and insider community. • This stage can be strengthened by working together on a shared ethical code of conduct that draws both communities together to establish clear guidelines. • Holding focus group discussions and interactive sessions that inform cultural, social, political, and economic structures can inform aid initiatives. This stage is an exploratory one, and depends on the specific context.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Collaboration	Practical Applicability
The final stage within the framework is the culmination of trust building. Within a collaborative phase, both the outsider and insider work towards an adaptation of knowledge. There is a change in relations between the facilitators and the affected communities. Positive change in circumstances for the affected community is an important indicator of a relationship that has morphed into mutual collaboration. Both walk side-by-side as they embark on a learning experience.	• This framework emphasises motion, which is attributed to the concept of empowerment and progress. And although there is a point of departure, through trust, their remains a relationship that is open to future collaborations. • The adaptation of knowledge for both is the creative element that is missing from streamlined humanitarian approaches that disable communities.

> 'My children go to the school for the free school meals. They do not need to learn English or school, my son will look after the cattle and work our farmland'.
>
> (South Sudanese Mother, during UNMISS, authors' field notes, 2005)

> "They came with teddy bears and Western psychosocial workers and asked us to talk about our traumas. We wanted to go to the Temple but had to stay and answer their questions. They went as fast as they came once the money had dried up".
>
> (Nepalese earthquake survivor, authors' field notes, 2016)

4. Is Building Trust the Missing Link?

An underlying thread to this article is in bringing together the involvement of the outsider community and insider community for a positive transformative outcome, as shown in Figure 1, whilst preserving the ownership and empowerment of those affected. A common distinction that sets both of these actors apart is the experience of 'affected', and whilst the outsider community is not commonly impacted by loss of life, loss of livelihood, displacement, injury, or food insecurity, among other consequences of disaster and conflict, we perhaps ought to rethink how we understand what we term here as the unaffected. The relevance of drawing on ancient philosophies like the Andes concept of Ayni and the ancient African philosophy of Ubuntu is because the unaffected actor does not exist in their model of humanitarianism. Within mainstream humanitarianism, the role of solidarity is overlooked and assumed by the involvement of organisational structures that dominate our present moral discourse through humanitarianism [58,59]. In many ways, humanism is replaced by protocol whilst solidarity is traded in for the complex landscape of moral, economic, and political appetite afforded by a crisis. The affected communities are judged based on lingering remnants of colonial dominance that assume unprofessionalism as unintelligent and disempowered [38]. The emphasis on building trust and relationships as a process through which the outsider community can shed its unaffected stance and move towards a humanist space is an underlying objective of the proposed Communities Framework.

> 'We see the international staff go for parties at the different Embassies, wearing short skirts and drinking alcohol. The UN live in their blue bubble compound, never venturing out, then need to go on R&R to recover. For them, this is fancy story, but it is our lives, our children's lives and our future'.
>
> (Local humanitarian worker, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2014)

The gated communities and closed compounds that keep at bay the unaffected from the affected is not only a geographical separation but also an epistemological and ontological one. Members of the affected community are bound together by a shared experience [4]. This article argues that despite the outsider not having physically experienced the dev-

astation of the said crisis, this does not necessarily need to halt the channels of outsider community compassion, which becomes an extension of those affected. As argued by Kleinman [52] p. 232:

> "The moral implications of violence at a distance are even more disturbing when we consider the change in social experience that is occurring in society. The appeal of experiences of suffering to mobilize solidarity and social action are transformed via the media into a dismay of images."

At the beginning of this article, the key actors within the humanitarian ecosystem are listed, with the role of media suggested as one of those key players. Our experiences of the suffering of others are mediated by explosive advertising campaigns, news, and social media platforms that provoke momentary anxiety and strong emotions of despair at the suffering of others [4]. The preferred outlet to show solidarity with the affected communities is to donate money to the same organisational structures that separate the affected from the unaffected. Spectator fatigue, resulting in mental health issues for the outsider community, is becoming increasingly widespread, with people taking breaks from social media and news. The owners of our channels of compassion are in dangerous moral waters as the commoditization and consumption of others' suffering become normalised. Drawing from the ancient philosophies that underpin the proposed framework, compassion is not just an external practice [60]. With this in mind, our compassion towards the affected is altered as we see in them our own precarious futures. Thus, to focus solely on the vulnerabilities is impractical at best and, at worst, harmful because the agency and capacity of the insider community are cast to one side [61].

> 'They gave us fishing nets and boats, we wanted our well restored. We would not go fishing for a long time. That day the sea died'.
>
> (Somali fisherman following the 2004 tsunami, authors' fieldnotes)

The quote of the Somali fisherman following the 2004 tsunami depicts the gap that can exist between needs of the affected communities and intervention by the humanitarians. The context of the affected community, when overlooked, is an important contributor to the success of the humanitarian intervention. From any side from which one wishes to discuss equal partnership within humanitarianism, it is a necessary ingredient to capacity building of the humanitarian agencies. To infer that humanitarian agencies are in more need of capacity building is a daring remark, but it is substantiated by the repetitive pattern of context displacement that misses the needs of the communities to tick the donor box instead [58]. The UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines the meaning of localisation as the enablement of meaningful engagement and leadership between local and national actors within humanitarianism that increases capacity and direct funding [6]. The ownership element that is largely missing from mainstream humanitarianism is enshrouded within the proposed Communities Framework presented below. Practical examples of this are when humanitarian workers explain the importance of using latrines and safe water sources and expect these communities to fall in line and be grateful for the intervention. It is these emerging findings that have informed the conceptual framework. The three-phase process of this framework is represented by a cooperation phase, a mutual aid phase, and a culminating collaborative phase. The framework acknowledges that there are external differences and practices between both key stakeholders. The cooperation phase works as a suitability stage. It is not assumed that because the outsider key stakeholder comes from a professional context, they have the necessary capacity to work as equal partners with the insider community. The framework establishes the affected community as experts and first responders [4]. The first stage also emphasises understanding the key influencers and critical users and using this as the basis to facilitate a co-learning culture-driven engagement. Trust marks the start of mutual aid, and from an ethical lens, the principle of Do No Harm sets a base level that research and humanitarian intervention need to comply with [59]. The issue with staying only within the cooperative phase is that both key stakeholders focus on their external differences. Building trust requires presence, deep listening, and

humility [51]. Otherwise, the invisibility of the insider key stakeholder continues to be replicated by the dominant power structures [58].

The framework emphasises transformative processes within the intervention outcome and the relationship between key stakeholders. The main pillars of operation remain grounded within concepts of cooperation, mutual aid, and collaboration that unite the various actors within the humanitarian ecosystem, placing the affected communities as equal partners. An example of the practical implementation of the framework is ensuring appropriately skilled staff and adaptable funding are available from the beginning. The inner workings within a crisis context are dynamic, and transformation is occurring at all times. If not evident within the external environment, the affected communities are continuously adapting, creating, and forging new realities and relations; this continues to be a largely unexamined aspect of affected communities. Solnit [4] p. 10 examines the word 'emergency' that comes from the verb 'to emerge', capturing a rebirth following the calamity and devastation faced by people. Unfortunately, the international community has been slow to understand this complex dualism of suffering and emergence. The final phase of the framework depicts both key stakeholders as emerging anew; there is no sole beneficiary within this framework. Despite the affected community being at the forefront of the crisis, co-learning and creativity are important characteristics of the framework, and they establish humility. To conclude, the relationship forged between both key stakeholders signals a continued process that remains despite the ending of the humanitarian crisis intervention.

Practical Step-by-Step Example of Applying the Community Framework

Table 2 below explains the various stages and parts of the Community Framework. The main two arrows of the framework purposefully drive upwards, symbolizing the mutual growth and increased capabilities of both international agencies and crisis-affected communities. The framework emphasises the role of community Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL), promoting the development of culturally appropriate and context-specific M&E criteria and the local ownership of data and information.

5. Conclusions

Time is of the essence to change the narrative of an international humanitarian response. This paper highlights the critical need to effectively engage and collaborate with crisis-affected communities in order to co-design and co-create a humanitarian response. Only through collaborating as equal powers will we achieve an appropriate and effective response. Crisis-affected communities are survivors and experts in their lives. As the international community, we are outsiders and need to approach humanitarian crises with humility and willingness to learn and engage with the communities. This paper does not hold a romanticised notion of working with crisis-affected communities, and we acknowledge that this comes with its own challenges. Communities can be chaotic and hold their own hierarchies and politics, not dissimilar to the international aid industry. Yet, in order to achieve an effective humanitarian response, we must embrace these challenges. In addition, the essence of the proposed community framework is the creativity that can be forged by working as equal partners. The external differences between the humanitarian responders and the affected community can seem extreme, but through a process of mutual aid and greater conscientisation, our shared humanity can lead to finding sustainable solutions to some of the world's most pressing issues within a disaster and crisis context. The grounding philosophical tenets of this framework capture the commonalities rather than the differences to facilitate human flourishing.

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