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Future of Aid 2040

Unpacking the aid system: laying the groundwork for transformation

2025 Aid Sector - Causal Layered Analysis

This is the first paper in a series of publications summarising the outputs of the Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation study. In this paper, the outputs of the first seminar consultation and survey are summarised through a Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). The next publication will be the Future of Aid 2040 scenarios, which will be published in a foresight report in September 2025.

Executive team

The Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation project is co-lead by the Inter-Agency Research and Analysis Network (IARAN) and the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL).

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The Steering Committee is a core advisory group that includes the Asociación Salto Ángel, Croix Rouge Française, Fondation de France, Futuribles International, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC), NORCAP, Organisation for Sustainable Development Africa (OSDA), Pastoral Social Colombiana - Caritas, Pujiono Centre, Rädda Barnen, Rural Movement Organisation (RMO), Save the Children Italia, Start Network, The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre, United Edge and Welthungerhilfe (WHH).



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Introduction

The aid sector is in a period of intense upheaval. The unprecedented cuts in overseas development aid and humanitarian assistance in 2024 and 2025 have reverberated through the system, resulting in significant staff redundancies and program closures.¹ That the aid system is in crisis is impossible to ignore, but the funding shock has also precipitated a deeper conversation about what aid is and where it should go next.

While aid continues to support hundreds of millions of people throughout the world, there have long been reflections on the sector being ‘broken’, unable to fulfil its promise of localised decision-making and community led responses. However, in digging deeper into the systems and structures of aid, it becomes clear that it is not ‘broken’ at all.

“ *The system is working in the way that it was intended when it was set up in its modern incarnation. It keeps power in the hands of a few and while it addresses the results of vulnerability, it does not invest adequate resources or political capital to address the causes that create it.*

To realise lasting change the aid sector must wrestle with its origins and challenge the institutions that comprise it to work differently.

[Humanitarian aid] Feels like someone always on the verge of drowning and asking for help from the persons who pushed them first in the water without safety vests—Female, International NGO, Lebanon

As part of the Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation project, hundreds of people have contributed through a month long consultation process. 38% of the people consulted have lived experience

of crises, 40% work for local/national organisations and 69% come from countries with middle and lower economies.¹

This group came together to share their stories, insights and perspectives on the aid sector and the challenges it faces. Through a process of structured analysis, they explored the systems, structures, worldviews and stories that characterise aid today. They have also crafted an outlook to 2040 — creating a set of scenarios that outline how they see the world and aid action changing and a typology of crises — as well as a categorisation of the most prevalent types of crises to which aid actors will need to respond. This paper outlines the outputs of the discussions, and unpacks the aid sector today, with the understanding that to learn how to transform a system, you first need to understand what that system is and how it has been structured.²

Beneath the surface – a deep dive into aid

To better understand the structures, principles and incentives that characterise the aid sector it needs to be decomposed into its different component parts. *Causal Layered Analysis* (CLA) is a tool developed by Inayatullah in the late 1980s. It is a theory of change founded in poststructuralism that allows us to break systems down and create transformative spaces for rethinking and redesign.ⁱⁱⁱ It prompts us to consider systems at four different levels, the litany (the headlines), systemic causes (the underlying drivers), worldviews (the perspectives and assumptions) and myths and metaphors (the deep stories).ⁱⁱⁱ By exploring the underpinnings of the aid sector, we better understand where changes need to occur to be transformative at scale. As part of the Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation project we asked participants in the Future of Aid 2040 consultations to respond to how they saw each of these differing levels of analysis. Their responses are summarised into a CLA below.

¹ These consultations were led by the IARAN team. The survey was made available in Arabic, Bahasa, English, French, Spanish, Hindi. Seminars were held in French, Spanish and English with additional translation for particular groups on request.

² The outcomes of the foresight exercises, the scenarios and typology of crises, will be published in full in the *Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation* report in September of 2025.

A litany refers to a day-to-day reality as seen in news headlines, or continuous events that describe the current situation in the aid system. Although litanies shape the vast majority of what we see, listen or perceive, they represent the results of deeper hidden structures.

Through the consultations in the Future of Aid 2040 project, participants raised headlines relating to the increasing levels of armed conflict and rates of endemic poverty across the world, with climate change as a crisis multiplier leading to escalating levels of need. The crisis in aid funding was also a frequently listed response.

Systemic causes³ focus on the underlying drivers causing the day-to-day litanies. As such systemic causes often fall into well-known and studied structural forces, they can be tracked through academic evidence, historical facts and patterns of change across a medium-short period (years). Through consultations, participants highlighted the following systemic causes that are impacting the aid system:

- Climate change, water scarcity and environmental degradation
- Poverty, including absolute poverty and relative poverty
- Violent conflict, extremism, crime and terrorism, armed conflicts, terrorism, organised crime
- Migration and displacement
- Geopolitical shifts and power realignment
- Economic, social, racial inequality
- Digital technology, including AI, cyber security, digital divides, regulation and infrastructure
- Aid funding and donor dynamics
- Power shift and localisation
- Aid culture and ethical shifts. The evolution of humanitarian values, decolonisation of aid, localisation mindset, shifting moral philosophy of aid

Worldviews uncover strong beliefs, culture, values and perspectives that, although not as visible as systemic causes, frame how the system operates. Worldviews lead with what are often unsaid but persistent ideas, thoughts and competing ways to perceive the world and can be found behind the discourse of analysis of key actors' shaping the system.

Many worldviews were represented across the consultations; and different worldviews underpin different areas of the system of aid. **The key finding is clear: the sector is undergoing a shift, grappling with challenges to core structures and a revaluation of the dominant paradigm.**

Through the Future of Aid 2040 consultation participants highlighted:

- 1) **Colonialism and imbalances of power, white saviourism and inequality.** Many responses focused on the continued influence of colonial power dynamics and capitalist structures that are reflected in the aid sector and have entrenched imbalances of power between stakeholders. The idea of a 'white saviour' which puts greater emphasis and importance on role of aid workers from countries in the global north, assuming that they have more knowledge and expertise than those with lived experience of crises, is a concept that encapsulates this corrosive worldview. Pervasive inequality (in all aspects – economic, race, religion, gender etc,) both globally and within the aid sector underpin this dynamic.
- 2) **Geopolitics vs. sustainable development.** Responses focused on the dichotomy of aid used as a tool for geopolitical gain and short-term nationalist ambition versus that of a genuine resource for fostering sustainable development efforts and long-term peace and prosperity. Decisions made from a worldview of geopolitics result in very different priorities than if community wellbeing is at the centre.

³ These were the most important drivers identified by the Future of Aid 2040 community. The most uncertain of these drivers have been selected to define the framework of the Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation scenarios that will be published in September 2025.

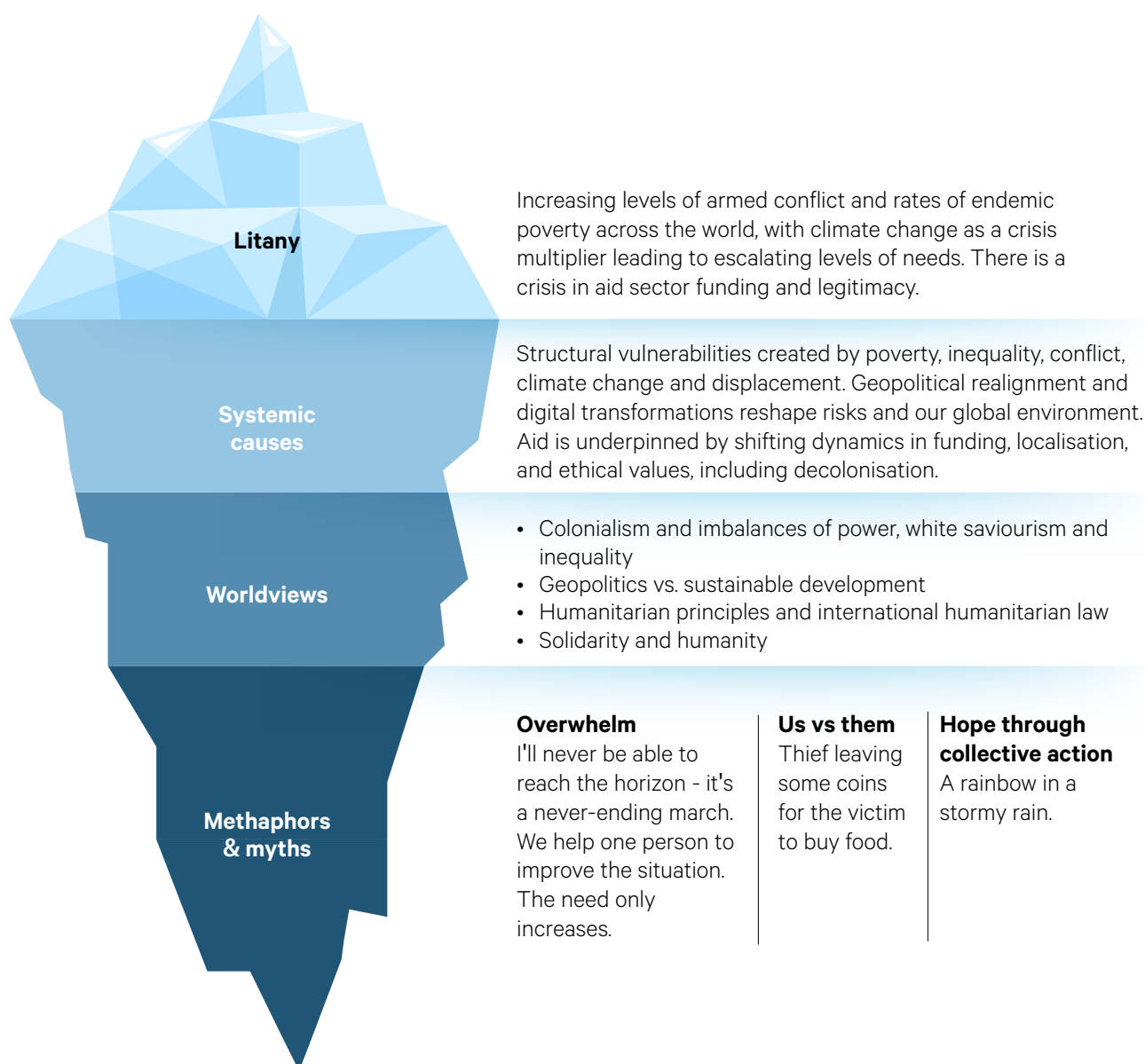
- 3) **Humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law (IHL).** Humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence are Dunantist principles of humanitarian assistance and have been the dominant paradigm of aid for many decades.^{iv} Responses to the survey outlined a mix of support for humanitarian principles and a “return to basics” as well as those who challenged their efficacy in an increasingly polarised world and advanced a proposition that other (less Eurocentric) guiding principles should be considered as equal in importance. In a similar way there was a diversity of perspectives in relation to international humanitarian law (IHL).^v Some reflected on the importance of IHL as a driving worldview behind the aid sector and others stressed its waning influence given the high-level of noncompliance.
- 4) **Justice, solidarity and humanity.** Throughout many responses and interventions, humanity was reflected as the most critical belief

underpinning the aid sector. More frequently at local level, participants stressed the prevalence of **solidarity and humanity** persisting even in the most challenging contexts.

Myths and metaphors are the most powerful element of CLA analysis, as they point directly to the emotional responses, narrative archetypes, images or stories that sustain the systems in the area of study. The stories that were shared through the Future of Aid 2040 consultation revealed different perspectives on the question of how we see aid, employing more emotional and evocative language and foregrounding aspects of the system which can be obscured by more structured analytical language and questioning.

The stories and images that were collected were as diverse as the community who contributed them, but three categories of stories or images became clear: overwhelm, us vs them and hope through collective action.

Fig 1. Causal Layered Analysis



Myths and metaphors unpacked

While every level of the CLA reveals a different facet of aid, the myths and metaphors that were used by the Future of Aid 2040 community to describe how they see aid in their own words were intense and powerful. To share more from the community directly, a wider selection of stories and images from those in the Future of Aid 2040 community

with lived experience of crises are presented below. Narrative analysis allows for the stories to become the raw data;^{vi} it provides the opportunity for us to contextualise the responses to other questions and develop a deeper understanding of the identity of the aid sector.



Overwhelm

What I use to see on *Aljazeera* is now a life experience and seems like a dream I will never wake out of it.
Female, Community Based Organisation, Cameroon

It [aid system] does not address the underlying causes of inequality. So, the image I have is that of a brief relief.
Female, Unaffiliated, Ecuador

Pouring water into a broken, leaking bucket!!! Doing the same things over and over and expecting a change - can be insane!
Female, International NGO, Zimbabwe

Us vs them

Us (aid) vs Them (recipients) on two different planets.
Female, International NGO, Palestine

Double standards.
Male, International NGO, UK

A giant hand holding out a package to a miniature person who is visibly weakened and has no choice but to refuse or ask for more.
Female, National NGO, Democratic Republic of Congo

Hope through collective action

The Gardener in the Wildfire

Humanitarian aid is like a gardener tending to a scorched landscape after a wildfire has swept through. The wildfire represents a crisis after which the land is left barren and communities charred with despair. The gardener steps in with a toolkit: seeds of hope, water of relief, and the careful hands of compassion. The seeds are food, shelter, and medical care - necessities to start anew. The water symbolises the emotional support and protection needed to nurture resilience. The gardener works tirelessly to replant, replenish, and rebuild, even as embers smoulder and new flames threaten the horizon.

But the gardener faces challenges. The soil in some places is infertile, hardened by years of neglect or conflict. The tools are worn or insufficient, a reflection of limited resources. The gardener must work quickly but also wisely, knowing that planting too hastily could lead to fragile growth, easily swept away by the next storm. Over time, sprouts emerge—small, fragile, but full of potential. The gardener knows they can't restore the forest overnight or prevent every fire, but their work is vital. It's a reminder that, even after devastation, life can grow back.

Male, Local NGO, Turkey

The Lifeline

Imagine a vast river, swollen and raging after heavy rains, representing the many crises that Afghanistan faces—conflict, poverty, displacement, and natural

disasters. In this turbulent water, many people are struggling to stay afloat, overwhelmed by the currents of uncertainty and despair.

The Lifeline

The humanitarian aid system is like a lifeline thrown from the riverbank. It is a rope of hope, connecting those in desperate need to safety and support. This lifeline is not just a simple rope; it is woven from compassion, resilience, and the shared humanity of people across the globe who care about the well-being of others.

Strength and Support

Just as a lifeline offers strength to those who grasp it, humanitarian aid provides critical resources—food, shelter, medical care, and education—that empower individuals and communities to survive and rebuild their lives.

Connection

The lifeline symbolises the connection between those who give and those who receive. It represents the solidarity of the international community, local organisations, and individuals working together to reach out and help those in need.

Challenges of Reach

However, the lifeline must be thrown carefully. The currents of politics, security, and cultural understanding can make it difficult to reach those who need it most. Sometimes, the lifeline may not reach everyone, and some may struggle to grasp it due to barriers of access, mistrust, or fear.

Male, National NGO, Afghanistan

The Banyan Tree and the River

There was a huge river next to a village. Every year during the rainy season, the river overflowed its banks, drowning many houses in the village, destroying crops, and starving the poor. In the middle of this village stood an ancient banyan tree—alone, but strong.

Every year when the flood came, this banyan tree would hold the soil with its roots, as if to prevent erosion. Homeless people would take shelter in the shade of the tree, birds would take shelter in the gaps between its branches, and the hungry would survive by eating its fruits.

One day, some people in the village realised that just as this banyan tree was keeping everyone safe, if we stood by each other, we would be able to survive. They came together and planted new trees on the banks of the river, built dams, and started standing by the weak.

From that day on, the banyan tree was not alone. The entire village fought the flood together, helped each other, and gradually gained strength to face the disaster.

This story shows that aid is not just a donation, but a process of empowering people—so that they can find a way to survive on their own.

Female, Community Based Organisation, Bangladesh

Probing these deep stories and worldviews demonstrates both the challenges and the absolute necessity of aid. The stories of hope through collective action tap into a deep drive for assistance in its purest form – an extended hand to support those in need. The stories that focus on the overwhelm outline the scale of the challenge facing the aid community, the moral imperative of the sector to respond despite the chronically insufficient resources. Stories that delve into the us vs them dynamic pick up on the strong emphasis in the worldview responses that focused on colonialism and inequality – a fundamental barrier that must be dismantled for progress to take root at the most foundational level.

“To achieve true transformation, to reconstruct an aid sector where all see its foundations as a story of hope through collective action, uncorrupted by the us vs them dynamic and with sufficient resources to overcome the overwhelm, it is necessary to be honest about the underlying worldviews and motivations which have created the dynamics that we are seeking to alter.

Conclusion

That formal aid in its modern incarnation is inextricable from the history of western nations is not in doubt.^{vii} The fact that western professional culture still permeates decision-making and defines success and power is born from this reality and trickles down through the sector. That the structure and culture of the aid sector itself perpetuates imbalances is also seen at the individual level. The role of racism in the aid sector is not well acknowledged or challenged. In a survey conducted in 2020, “three quarters of all respondents who identified as belonging to a racial or ethnic minority said they experienced racial discrimination in the previous 12 months”.^{viii} Less than half reported the incident and of those who lodge a formal complaint, three quarters were not satisfied with how it was managed.^{ix} These failings are the symptom of a deeper illness, it not unique to the aid sector but critical to rectify.

Technical solutions have been proposed for many of the commitments that have been made around the power shift, localisation and the move towards cash. Many of these technical solutions have been

structured to address issues at the litany and systemic causes levels.

They range from commitments with no action which seek to shift the headlines without changing the systems beneath, to good faith efforts that are endeavouring to revolutionise a sector but are kept at bay, touching only the edges.

As we go deeper into the CLA we see many of the beliefs and assumptions that underpin the fundamental imbalances in the aid sector. Reflections from the Future of Aid 2040 community demonstrate that true transformation of the sector will remain out of reach, unless organisations reckon with the worldviews that are creating a system defined by unequal access to resources and decision-making power and overwhelmed by the needs of the present day because it cannot (or will not) make significant investments to address the drivers of vulnerability. We need to converge on a future built from the vision and experience of those whose foundational stories of aid are hope by collective action, and work to translate that into our lived reality.

Phase 2: Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation

The full results of Phase 1 of the *Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation* project will be released in a foresight report in September 2025, at which point consultations for Phase 2 will begin. Phase 2 of the study will challenge the dominant paradigm of aid by beginning where forces need to converge: with local actors. We will first convene with local organisations to explore the 2040 scenarios and the typology of crisis, aiming to co-design an ideal response system, grounded in local knowledge and capacities. This includes identifying local actors' robust value-chains that can make them effective, efficient and resilient.

Next, we will engage international actors to consider how their roles (and value-chains) can evolve to complement,

rather than compete with these locally led systems. This stage will not be about "fitting" local actors into a pre-existing global framework, but about reimagining organisations serving and amplifying community-led responses. Finally, when local and intermediary profiles of organisations have been determined and stress-tested across the 2040 scenarios, we will engage with private and public donors to explore how financing and incentive structures can shift to support these locally anchored pathways.

The aid community is in a period of intense upheaval. A lack of adaptability and resilience in the economic model of most aid actors means that the impacts of the fluctuations in funding are severe. The question now is whether we use this moment to move decisively towards the future we say we want and put communities at the centre of decision making, or if we scale down the existing ways of working while retaining the same old power dynamics.

In the Future of Aid 2040 project, the participating community are building from the present day and working to anticipate the changes to come over the next fifteen years. True change and transformation can take time—by working to a longer timeframe, we will help aid decision makers to embrace the needed changes and make investments in working differently rather than having to react to the inevitable crises ahead. Laying the groundwork for an aid system where community leadership is not only a rhetorical commitment, but a structural reality, is the goal.

“If transformation is painful, let it at least be purposeful; if disruption is inevitable, let it lead us closer to a system that truly serves those at the centre: vulnerable communities and the local organisations that serve them.

Please follow along at <https://iaran.org/future-of-aid> for more information about the project.

ENDNOTES

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