

#2: Why the global funding system fails to build lasting change



The Broken Bridge

The global aid system presents itself as a *bridge* between the 'core' of wealth and the 'peripheral' need. But what if that bridge was never built to reach the people it claims to serve?

With a closer look, we find gaping holes in the bridge's structure. Instead of connecting the world's wealth to its most urgent needs, the global aid architecture resembles a one-way overpass which is skewed in its design and suspended above the realities on the ground.

It moves money, but rarely shifts power. It builds impressive impact reports, but never resilience.

A bridge is only as strong as the ground it was built on. The global funding system is not building strong or sustainable change - because it was never designed to. Instead, it props up a system which overtly carries donor expectations but rarely community realities. It funds ease, not agency.

This isn't just a problem of inefficiency, it points towards the foundational problems of the aid and charity system, whose cracks run deep.

NGOs at a Crossroads

NGOs - we might prefer to call them charities, though this represents one distinct legal form - have spread exponentially in scale and numbers since the 1990s. Commanding a larger share of foreign aid than ever before, they have risen to become central players in the aid industry. They came to be seen as the community-oriented "sweethearts" of development given their innovative potential and connections with communities.

Yet, their ability to fulfill their '*raison d'être*' - representing these communities and their needs in ways that advocate for and move towards real social justice and long-term transformation - has steadily eroded. Over the years, their contributions have been restricted to being 'palliative' rather than transformative.

The current aid system championed by NGOs has grown too large, professionalised, risk-averse and too disengaged from communities to deliver the very transformation it had always claimed to champion. These are not new critiques. As far back as the late 1990s, scholars warned that foreign aid was reshaping NGOs away from engines of social justice and into



convenient delivery arms for donor agendas.

Fast forward, and the picture has worsened. The “rising tide of technocracy” that has swept through the aid industry has shifted its focus from long-term transformation to short-term performance. Buzz words like “value for money,” “impact,” “measurable results,” and “deliverables” dominate the vocabulary and have taken over genuine care.

Most NGOs today operate under heavy constraints – politically, financially, and structurally – that tether them to the priorities of their own donors. This cuts them off from the very communities they were founded to serve. These demands have redefined what NGOs are *allowed* to be, within the existing system: efficient service providers rather than agents of long-term social change.

Demands for professionalization and measurable outcomes pulled NGOs away from transformative action and catapulted them into “the service delivery trap”. They mastered trendy jargons and invested heavily in people and systems to meet strict accountability standards. In theory, they represent “civil society” but in practice, they often operate as middlemen for external agendas.

Aid has become a mask for maintaining order, enabling Northern donors to control development processes and priorities, and NGOs have been woven into it.

Who should decide?

Early champions of NGOs warned them not to forget their community links, which formed the basis of their *greatest strength*.

Yet community actors and their development agendas have been left from the table, seen as ‘too risky’, ‘too complex’ or not sufficiently ‘professional’. The aid industry overwhelmingly privileges those who speak the ‘right donor’ language, whether or not that’s the language that makes sense to communities doing the work. Their comparative advantage? Being ‘safe’ intermediaries. But safe does not equal transformative.

The tragic irony is that these excluded actors – the ones closest to and deeply embedded in communities – are precisely the actors most capable of driving lasting transformative change.

At the heart of the issue is a simple but radical question: who decides what development is and should be? Who should decide on core priorities and appropriate solutions to these? In the current aid system, the answer is not communities themselves, but the broader aid system.

The system is good at masking this reality. One of its greatest triumphs is the language of “participation” – the idea that communities can participate in the decisions and programmes that shape their lives. But, in reality, participation has been hollowed out. Performed rather than practiced. It is scripted, monitored and treated as an administrative checkbox.

Real participation, the kind that builds power and reshapes institutions, is a radical idea for the current funding system, and one that it consistently avoids.

Without real change, we’re left with the haunting irony that a system built to address inequality has been painstakingly structured to reinforce it and to resist change (as we will see in the next Why? Brief).

The system that we have – that chooses who gets funding and how funds are spent – is not accidental. It is constructed, piece-by-piece, by an aid system that puts risk at its centre and seeks to control decisions and outcomes in response. We have created a system that prioritizes speed, scale, and control over real and lasting community-centred change.

Rebuilding the Bridge: A Vision We Can Walk Together

But it doesn't have to stay this way. All over the world, quiet revolutions are showing us what a better way looks like. They rarely make the headlines, but they're there, humble yet powerful.

Our partners are shining examples of this. Whether that's Community Savers in Manchester, playing a core role in building a coalition to drive a campaign for social housing in the context of 19,000 households on the city's waitlist. Or *Muongano wa Wanavijiji* in Nairobi, where groups of young people are coming together to take climate action in their neighbourhoods and to bring their communities with them.

These stories matter because they prove something vital. That when people are trusted to lead their own solutions and when solidarity is channelled, change doesn't just happen, it lasts.

Around the world there are countless examples of local movements and organisations who aren't waiting for permission or pity. Who are quietly doing the work that counts. Yet it's these organisations we hear least about and who face the biggest hurdles when it comes to accessing funding.

At One World Together, we believe in building a bridge worth crossing.

We're not interested in charity that makes donors feel good, but leaves recipients voiceless. Or that gives funds with such tight conditions that it doesn't enable them to do the work that most needs doing. Or that privileges risk to such an extent that we risk the change and the transformation that we're all behind.

What if the measure of success wasn't just how much money moved, but how much power did?

That's the future we're building at One World Together, and you can be part of it.

We see the cracks in the bridge. We're not working to repair it by patching up the old structure. We're rethinking it entirely. We believe that the path to lasting change runs through trust, solidarity, and local agency, not through saviorism.

Because bridges that connect us are only as strong as the ground they are built on – and that strength comes from us. Together.

* Learn more about our solidarity-based giving, and take your first step toward being part of this change <https://oneworldtogether.org.uk/join-us/>.*

Did you know that One World Together emerges from our co-Founders' academic research and long work experience in the aid sector? Our Why? Briefs series brings this to life, spotlighting the decades of knowledge and experience that have shaped what we do and why we do it.

This *Why? Brief* gives an overview of the salient points that have shaped One World Together from the following paper :

Banks, N., D. Hulme and M. Edwards, 2015, 'Still Too Close for Comfort? NGOs, Donors and Civil Society Revisited' *World Development* 66: 707–718.
