

#4: Why Giving More Isn't Changing More:

The Hidden Barriers Between Our Donations and Real Impact



There it is again — a donation tin by the supermarket checkout. The cause changes every few weeks, but without thinking, you drop in the loose change rattling in your pocket like you always do.

Back home, you scroll past a fundraiser you once gave to, vaguely recalling the small rush when you clicked “donate.” Later that month, you need a new pair of trousers and head to the charity shop instead of Primark, because it feels like the right thing to do.

For some, these might be isolated moments. For you, they’ve always been part of something bigger — small, conscious acts of generosity that, added together with others’, could make a real difference for someone in deep crisis.

But lately, doubt has started to creep in. The headlines keep showing famine, disasters, displacement... but rarely the stories of lives rebuilt, of progress, of lasting change. Year after year, millions pour into the system, yet the problems barely seem to budge.

And so you find yourself wondering: If so much generosity is flowing in... why don't things seem to be changing?

This Why? Brief explores why, despite huge increases in funding to the UK's global development charity sector over the past two decades, real progress remains elusive — and why public trust in donating has begun to erode.

It's the story behind that contradiction: where our money goes, and how donations flow through a top-heavy, complex system that weakens the very impact they could have. A story of generosity waylaid by multiple hurdles, trapped in a structure never designed to let resources reach where they're needed most, on the terms that count.

And it's the story that pushed us to think big, to think boldly, and to believe in the power of our shared generosity to rebuild the system itself. Because together, we can channel it differently: so that giving doesn't just feel good, but truly changes lives.



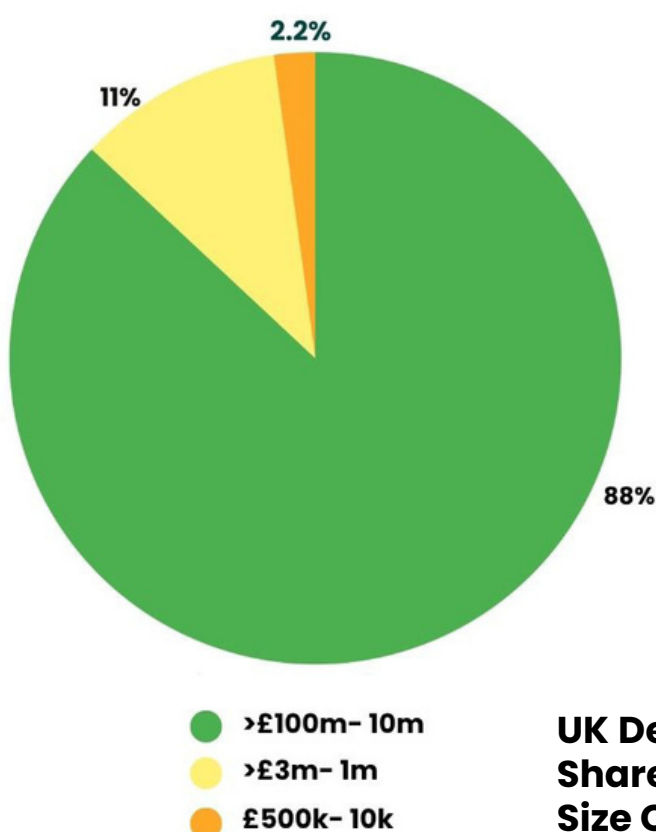
From a Wave of Generosity to a Trickle of Change

In 2015, nearly 895 UK-based development NGOs together spent almost £7 billion on international development – more than half of the UK government's official development assistance (ODA) that year.

The single biggest driver of that income was the British public. Between 2009 and 2015, people in the UK contributed nearly 40% of the sector's entire funding – more than the government (18%) and other NGOs (16%) combined. [1]

This immense flow of public donations reveals a deep well of compassion and concern for people beyond our borders. And yet, paradoxically, the transformative impact of all this generosity often feels frustratingly small on the ground. Global poverty, injustice, and inequality remain stubbornly entrenched.

So why, with so much 'giving', does the change still feel so slight?



**UK Development NGOs (2015):
Share of Total Expenditure by
Size Class**

One clue to this paradox lies in the structure of the UK's development charity sector. At first glance, it looks like a thriving forest – nearly a thousand organisations of every shape and size, from household names to tiny, volunteer-led groups you've never heard of, all working toward global development.

But look closer, and the canopy is dominated by just a few giant trees. In 2015, a mere 8% of organisations controlled nearly 90% of all spending. Meanwhile, over half of the smallest organisations together survived on only 1.2% of expenditure. [1]
See our pie chart on this page.

How these giants maintain their dominance shows why this trend is so hard to reverse. Each year, mega- NGOs pour millions into sustaining and expanding their brand. Pick any household name, open its annual report, and look at the numbers: the spend on fundraising versus the income from regular giving.

The comparison can be startling. In 2023/24, one large NGO spent an extra £20 million to boost its fundraising efforts. That year, it spent around £30 million on raising donations and legacies, while its income from regular giving was £39.5 million. Add in the costs of its retail and trading activities, and its total fundraising bill rose to £123.4 million – more than the entire annual budgets of 99% of the sector's charities.

But it's not just about money, as recent research on the global INGO family shows how Northern "parents" continue to reproduce systems that keep power concentrated at the top. Even as new Southern members gain a seat at the table, decision-making still reflects donor-driven norms.

A recent piece of research (Bond et al 2025) on one major INGO's localisation reforms found these were upstaged by skewed accountability structures that prioritise donor systems rather than local needs. These donor systems are endlessly replicated down the chain to satisfy Northern funders and protect INGOs' business models — minimising risk and maximising market share, even when it means compromising accountability to values and to communities on the ground. [2]

This is how the biggest players consolidate their position, securing visibility and donor loyalty on a scale that smaller NGOs could never match. Over time, this reinforces public trust in the "Goliaths," who dominate nationwide campaigns and capture government grants. But their size also creates distance from the communities they claim to serve, as we saw in Why Brief #2.

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Digging further, we uncover another layer of the problem: the growing intermediation of funds in the UK NGO sector. Instead of flowing directly to the frontlines, donations must pass through a chain of intermediaries. At each stop, costs are added, time is lost, and agendas can shift.

By the time a few pounds from a well-meaning donor finally reach a community-level organisation abroad, they have been sliced, diced, and whittled down. The result is a kind of trickle-down aid, where grassroots

groups are forced to depend on larger players for resources.

This might keep the big charities busy — even thriving — but it raises uncomfortable questions. How much agency do community organisations really have when decisions are made several rungs above them? And most importantly: how much of the original gift is still left by the time it reaches the people it was meant for?

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The implications for grassroots movements are profound. We often talk about empowering local leaders and localising solutions — "nothing about us without us," as the saying goes — yet only a tiny fraction of international funding reaches community-based organisations directly.

Globally, in 2022, just 1.2% of all humanitarian assistance went straight to local and national actors — roughly one penny in every pound of aid. In the UK's domestic context, the picture is no better: in 2022–23, only 4.5% of philanthropic funding from major grantmakers supported social justice, and a shockingly low 0.2% reached grassroots organising work. [3]

These numbers are grim — evidence of systemic failure. But they are also motivating, because they reveal the vast untapped potential waiting to be unlocked if we can rewire how generosity flows. In forest terms: the soil is fertile, but the roots are starved of sunlight and water.

Closer to the Ground

Over the decades, the aid industry has become increasingly professionalised, mirroring the hierarchies and biases of the wider world. Critics argue that this traditional model preserves the status quo more than it changes it. Derek Bardowell puts it bluntly: institutional charity has too often been a model for preserving control, not transforming systems.

That problem is now widely recognised, and new solutions are beginning to take shape. One example is Kuja, a set of initiatives designed to connect community-based organisations directly with funders — meeting donor requirements without forcing them into Northern moulds. Alongside this sits the planned *Proximate Fund for Africa*, which aims to shift decision-making power closer to the continent itself. [4] Both reflect Bardowell's principle of proximity-based giving: placing trust and resources directly in the hands of people closest to the problems, while funders step back. [5]

In short, flipping the script — listening more, controlling less. In this frame, giving becomes not pity, but an act of solidarity and justice.

These steps are still unfolding and far from perfect, but they matter. They signal a growing recognition that the old model of aid is broken. The true power of generosity is only unlocked when paired with trust and power-sharing. Otherwise, systemic barriers — bureaucracy, funding biases, lack of accountability to local people — will continue to blunt even the kindest intentions.

For too long, the old charity model kept donors and “beneficiaries” at arm's length: one side giving, the other receiving, intermediaries in between. But what if giving were not a top-down transaction, but a partnership among

equals? That shift requires humility — especially from those in wealthy countries — to accept that they may not know best, but they can stand alongside and support those who do. This is the shift — from charity to solidarity — now taking root in conversations about “decolonising aid” and reimagining philanthropy. And it is the shift that sets the stage for how One World Together envisions the way forward.

A New Way to Give

At One World Together (OWT), we've been working to live out this shift in mindset and build a different kind of funding model. One that is lean, direct, movement-based, and powered by trust .

In the current system, money flows from many donors -- to a few big NGOs -- to smaller NGOs -- and eventually, to communities. At every stage, impact is lost. That's why we've rewritten the formula:

Generosity + Proximity + Trust = Transformation

Generosity on its own can only go so far in broken systems. But add proximity and trust — empowering local people and believing in their solutions — and it becomes transformative.

We don't aspire to be another large NGO with endless layers of management.

Instead, we act as a bridge. We pool micro-donations — whether £1.25 a month or one-off solidarity gifts — and channel them directly to our locally run partner organisations around the world.

This approach cuts out needless intermediation, funds those who live and breathe the struggles daily, and places trust at the heart of the relationship. It gets generosity directly

to where it can have the most impact. We don't tie our partners up in red tape or hand them rigid project plans. We give them the resources and the trust to act on what their communities need most. Then we listen, learn, and grow together — seeing firsthand how powerful generosity becomes when it's set free.

Because we're building a global movement, OWT isn't writing cheques. We're cultivating a community of givers who see themselves not as distant donors, but as allies.

Generosity isn't failing us. The system is. When generosity flows freely, it reaches the forest floor — nourishing the roots, strengthening the whole, and unleashing its full transformative power.

Be the Change

Will you join us in unlocking the true potential of generosity? 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 draws particularly upon:

N. Banks and D. Brockington (2020) 'Growth and Change in Britain's development NGO sector (2009–2015)' [Development in Practice](#).

Bond, G et al (2025) 'Claiming agency and creating change: shifting power in international non-government organisations' [Development in Practice](#).

Civic Power Fund, 2023. Funding Justice 3: The Data. Available at: <https://fundingjustice.civicpower.org.uk/report/funding-justice-3/the-data/>

Adeso, 2024. Kuja Platform. Available at: <https://kujalink.org/>

Bardowell, D. 2022. Giving Back: How to Do Good, Better. London: Dialogue Books

