



Brokers of Tomorrow Nursing Failures of Today

Opinion piece on partnership brokers and the shrinking of aid

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There is a new bandwagon in town - you may have noticed it. It has organisations jumping on board because they need a ride to navigate the sea of international aid cuts. To mix up the metaphors even more, this humanitarian flotilla is a diverse set of boats and ships, of all shapes and sizes. The stormy seas ahead will determine just what type of boat has the capability to ride out this crisis, what ones need rescuing, and sadly, what ones will sink.

The concept of flotilla is a good one for the global humanitarian system. It has often been regarded as an ecosystem, but I have personally found this term a contradiction. A true ecosystem is a community of interacting and interconnected organisms. In contrast, the international aid system struggles to operate as a community when there is competition for, and inequitable distribution of resources, talent, services and finance.

An isolated ecosystem over millennia of time learns to rejuvenate itself after shock events, such as a wild fire or floods. Its self-modification (without human intervention) may have winners and losers, but ultimately it maintains its diversity to support mutuality and its renewed strength. In contrast, a flotilla has limits to its mutuality, and sometimes even lacks motivation to keep its community afloat. A battleship protecting the food supply vessel will put the fire out on its own ship first before providing support to others, even if that means being without food supplies for its continued journey. Right now, it feels like we are watching the flotilla in a storm, while many onlookers wish it was a rejuvenating wild fire instead.

An example of the above is evidenced by the recent OCHA led “Humanitarian Reset”. This initiative has been driven by the reality of the drastic cuts faced by the UN system, but is much decried by voices of locally led NGOs and their lack of agency in the redesign (UN putting out the fire on its own boat first?). Another response is the growing number of INGOs and other humanitarian institutions who are moving into the space of becoming networks, alliances, and other forms of joint venture and consortia (finding tug boats to give them a lift or lifeboats to rescue them?). On deeper inspection, understanding and definitions of the word “network” and “partnership” are diffuse and occasionally contradictory. This bandwagon is only good to jump on board if you know what you want your destination to be, you understand who the drivers are, and you understand the companions who ride with you.

In the midst of all this, I have been reflecting on the role that Partnership Brokers could or should play when systems are in decline or transitioning. Where is the place of partnerships and networks in this transition? Could / should we be proactive or reactive to the changes we see and the actions of others? What is it we offer as a contribution towards meta shifts? Could / should we be drivers, chief navigators, sojourners, or even bystanders?

A ‘system’ refers to a set of interconnected elements, people, or processes that work together toward a common purpose or outcome. It's a configuration of parts with relationships that create a functional whole. Systems change, which involves altering these interconnected relationships and structures to achieve a new pattern of organization or behavior within the new system. All systems face flux, especially those that awkwardly straddle market economics and the provision of life essentials - energy sector, healthcare and education. But currently even bricks and mortar retail and print media are facing existential questions with regard to their role in society.

My reflections on systems change have been founded on a career which started in housing and homelessness, with a trajectory for international development, but which ended up at the humanitarian aid end of the spectrum. From the beginning, the dichotomy of humanitarian aid and development has always struck me as a false divide, founded on a world gone by, struggling to evolve iteratively. Just like the layers of educational approaches which pervade the UK education system, and the mish mash of housing provision, both of which are based on years of failing to end the old and only allowing the new to grow in the gaps and cracks.

My journey as a partnership broker has been 'accidental' - fundamentally driven by the profound systemic exclusion of national and locally led capacity in the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2005, which I helplessly observed. As I reflect back now, the journey which followed was probably subconsciously self-destined. I had an inner attraction to all spaces which placed the value of locally led change as the central driving agent of all decisions, participation, collaboration and ownership of new emergencies. I was driven by a passion that a community should always be able to determine its own aid outcomes at times of need, and this included being able to reduce their own risks and increase their own resilience. Ultimately, the ability to do this nearly always pointed back to the issue of the ownership of power and resources. Loud voices often cited statements of capacity and capability, which, at worst, were driven by neocolonial perspectives of how humanitarian aid should be managed.

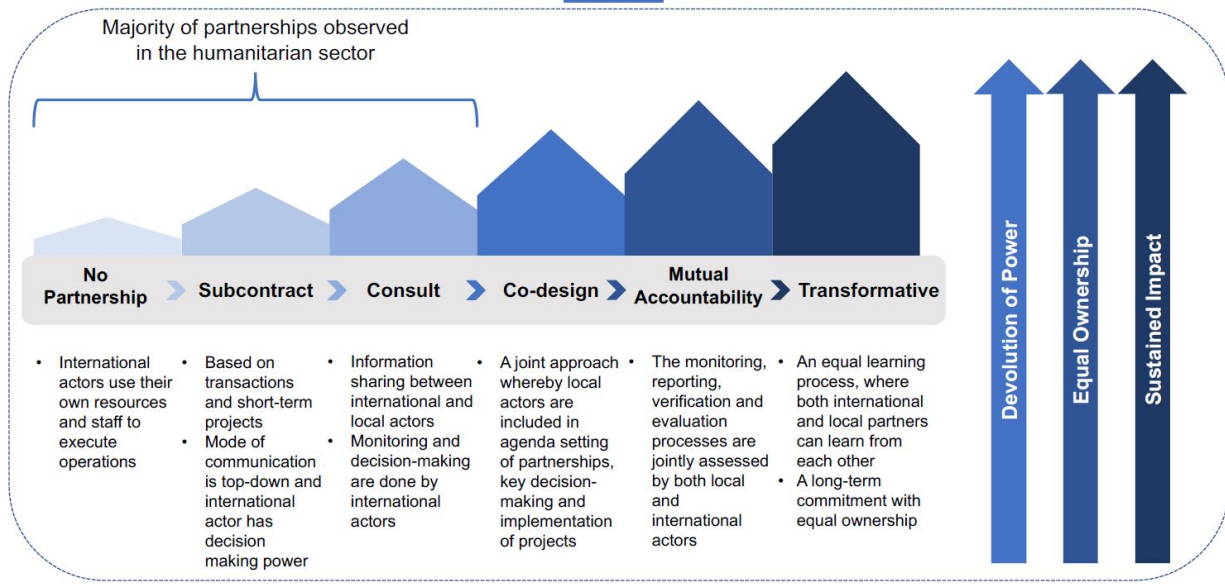
Alongside this, I also held a deep-rooted belief that all actors who held responsibility or motivation for the MDGs, then later the SDGs, were stronger together. The complexity of humanitarian need requires a multi-stakeholder approach, centered around the voice and agency of affected populations and locally-led responses. But I continued to have negative experiences in multiple countries and emergency responses across the world - from the rolling eyes of an INGO leader when a local partner based in Liberia spoke, through to complete disregard by UN OCHA in the Philippines who stated that the work of a partner I was with was 'not significant enough to require formal coordination.

My experiences forced an observation that northern management constructs often led to short-lived consortia or alliances, and sadly often revealed the subtle power play of the covert relationships that sat behind the partnerships, where those involved were only collaborating due to the requirements of funding sources. Motivated by my insights, I loosely aligned myself around a partnership typology (see Fig 1). In my various roles, I chose programmes, initiatives, and situations of influence to co-devise iterative and informal approaches to bring people together to co-design more transformative partnerships.

Figure 1. Localisation and Inclusion¹

¹ Chapter 9 - Localisation and Inclusion in Theologies and Practices of Inclusion: Insights From a Faith-based Relief, Development and Advocacy Organization; Nina Kurlberg & Madleina Daehnhardt

WHAT TYPES OF PARTNERSHIPS?



Sadly, everything from advocacy, training, research and even modelling the change we wanted to be, struggled to cut through. I became resigned to the fact that decision-making rights are held by those who owned or channelled the resources and ultimately it required behavioural change and political will to really shift agendas.

Was I expecting too much? Probably.

Was I naive at how entrenched systems and procedures were to prevent change? Definitely.

And blindsided by the place of the legislative environment which perpetuated where power was continually held? Most certainly.

I sought comfort from systems change thinking, which helped me accept that my place in empowering change could never be fully defined, as I would never have the full understanding of the interconnectedness and dynamic nature of aid flows. I resonated with the concept that systems change takes many years of slow iterative evolution, interspersed with catalytic moments of targeted shifts, but ultimately a system could change if the right enablers and behaviours were in place. I attempted to shape my consultancies around what role I could play to ensure this type of change could progress, or at minimum how I could contribute towards an enabling environment for change.

But then a watershed moment happened. I was posed a question via TedTalk². “*What if you can’t fundamentally change big systems?*” I sat up and listened. “*What if every system was inclined to self-preservation - the dominant system will crush, absorb or dominate*” any attempt at alternatives. These questions shifted my inner theory of change via the two loops model. This will not be new for

² TedTalk: How I became a localist by Deborah Frieze <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jTdZSPBRRE&t=4s>

many partnership brokers, but for me, it gave a new lens on my PB role within the humanitarian sector during this 'shape-shifting' season.

Figure 2 (below) provides a simple visual of the Two Loops model references in the Tedtalk, and how I can see it applying to the current shift in the humanitarian system. The grey curve is the evolution of the current system which launched with a rapid rise, and then with slower growth marked later by challenges and disruption. The red dots are those who walk out of the system trying to create alternatives approaches to the system they feel confined by. In recent years, we have seen these 'walk outs' (as Deborah Frieze refers to) illustrated through the launch of the NEAR network - a southern based alternative offering to how aid flows are distributed. We have also seen this in Start Network and their disruptor perspective of risk financing for anticipatory action (i.e. money before a crisis hits). These collaborative initiatives which have vision for scale also sit alongside countless other small-scale initiatives, who are using digital innovation for connection and disruption of old business models. On their own, these "walk outs" hold no significant impact, but when they are convened and coordinated, they can emerge as the basis of a new system (see yellow curve in Fig 2).

Figure 2: Taken from Ted Talk "How I became a localist"



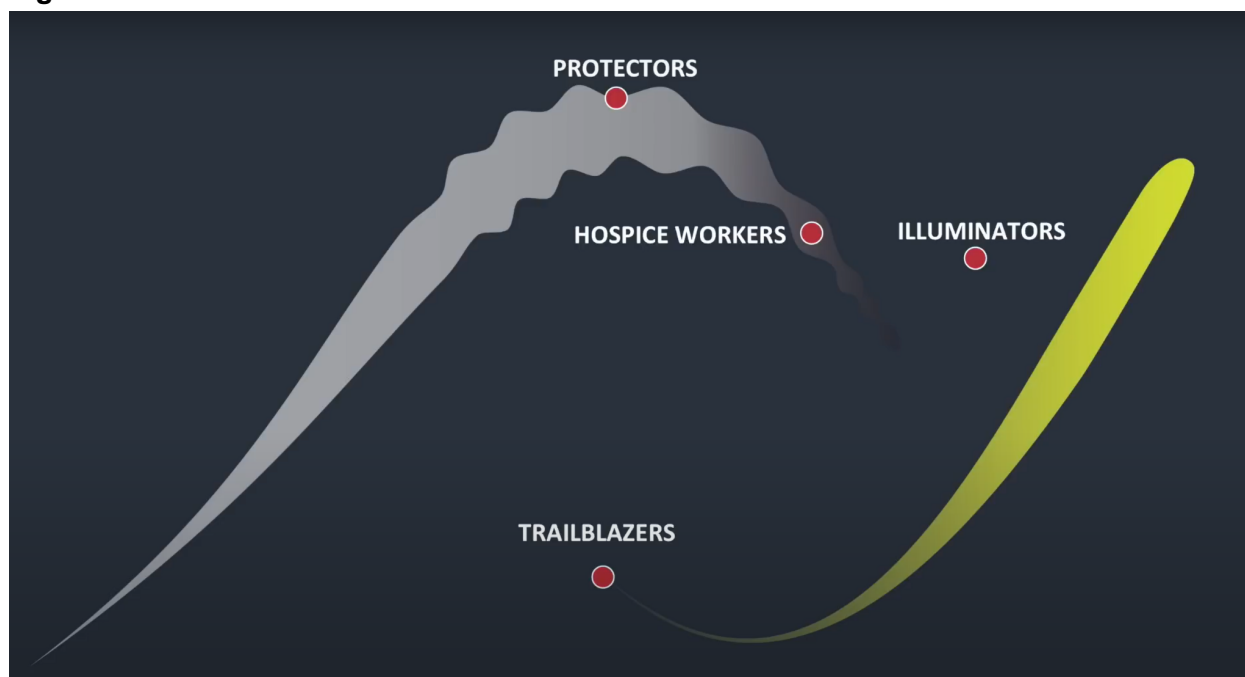
However, when reading more around the model, I noticed some variations³. For some commentators, the end of one system was spoken of as 'composting for the new', but others used stronger terms and spoke of the 'death of the old system to enable the space for the new'. New questions began to emerge on knowledge and learning - could and should the old system compost the new? Would the seeds be brand new variants able to take the best of the old and bring it into the new? Or would it actually re-cultivate the old negative legacies and perspectives? For the humanitarian system, neo-colonial approaches have often helped perpetuate power domains which have repeatedly held the system back. I am sure many partnership brokers have spent long hours debating deeply held

³ <https://www.sfu.ca/complex-systems-frameworks/frameworks/strategies/two-loop-model.html>

perspectives on power and poverty in an effort to transition the positions of aid consortiums and multi-stakeholder humanitarian programmes.

But it was the types of people, the aptitudes and talents needed, that had me hooked on the Ted Talk model (see Fig 3). These are the roles which are key to support and enable the transition from old to new. Their definitions felt insightful, they were clearly articulated and resonated well with my experiences.

Figure 3: Taken from Ted Talk “How I became a localist”



To unpack these roles some more:

- The protectors - sitting within the current system in places of influence. These are dedicated and thoughtful revolutionaries, who protect the space for those who give birth to the new, often using their influence to create the breakout of trail blazers, supporting their path
- The hospice workers - sitting within the current system observing its demise. These nurses choose to stay inside the failing systems, thoughtful and compassionate in attending to the dying to help them focus on the transition ahead, and preparing them to let go.
- The trailblazers - part of the “walk outs” they turn their back on the old system seeking the new. They are innovators who are lonely, isolated, but driven to be free of what has held them back and determined to find a new path away from the traditional and perceived system norms
- The illuminators - part of the early adopters of the new. They are spokespeople and persevering communicators who shine a light on the new, bringing to light the work of the trailblazers, challenging the old, including in the face of criticism

Over recent years, I have witnessed and could name people who were, and are, playing all these exact roles in the current transitioning of the humanitarian system. Sometimes these colleagues play these roles sequentially, sometimes they blend them, but nonetheless they distinctly and almost intuitively align themselves with these exact descriptions. For me, I needed to understand more

where my aptitudes, skills and talent could contribute to the current humanitarian shift, and surprisingly it was the language of death and hospice workers which kept drawing me in.

Many years ago I lived with a friend who was a hospice nurse. I learnt so much from her - how to respect death and the bereavement process, and not to assume that bereavement was linear or homogenous. It was a game of snakes and ladders, sometimes feeling you had navigated your grief and that you could move on, before hitting another obstacle and sliding back down again. This is so true for the huge attempts time and time again to change the humanitarian system. It has long been called not “fit for purpose” and we have had both protectors and trailblazers create iterative pathways and moments, from localisation through to disaster risk financing. There is glamour, heroics and revolution with the trailblazers, illuminators and their protectors, but the importance of the hospice worker should not be underestimated. Like the hospice workers in real life, they are not given the place in society as they deserve, because we struggle to accept, acknowledge and understand the reality of death. It still holds a taboo, but mainly due to the sadness and heartache it can bring. No one enjoys living or feeling like this on a permanent basis.

But ultimately, hurting people hurt people. They fight to defend their cause and protect their identity. They are messy, awkward and prickly to deal with. They often use power and status to perpetuate their cause and their corner. Well thought through and evidenced arguments will never be received rationally when their core beliefs are being challenged. The value of a hospice worker to bring love, compassion and kindness into the space where the concept of humanitarian imperative dominates should not be underestimated. It has the power to de-escalate and provide those quiet moments of rest and recognition. Used alongside the power of listening, care and empathy are tools in a partnership brokers toolbox which are less used, and often less explored. And yet, in light of the humanitarian shift which we are witnessing, it may help soften and expedite the transition to the emerging system. It could also prevent the compost from rejuvenating old habits.

Recently, Partnership Brokers were requested to participate in IARAN research on the future of Aid 2040⁴. The resulting scenarios (See Figure 4) painted a very clear picture of the disruption to the current system, but less of an emergent outcome.

Figure 3: First phase results of Future of Aid 2040 research

⁴ [The Future of Aid 2040](#)

Future of Aid 2040 Scenarios



These scenarios should not be seen just in the realms of aid and development. They are also cognisant of political economies globally and the impact of geopolitics based on the reemergence of populist and identity politics. The scenarios summarise how they will impact the direct of the global aid and development system:

- **Aid on Many Paths:** Potentially the most optimistic, the aid is broken up as a buffet of options. It is diverse providing space for new interactive partnerships which are multi-stakeholder, nuanced to context. Nonetheless geo political power blocks will dominate the different narratives.
- **Patchwork Solidarities:** The aid system will have strength at lower levels of engagement, giving the greatest opportunity for locally led approaches. Potentially it could suffer from lack of resources, short term approaches and recurring shifting alliances depending on where resourcing comes from leading to ineffective and negative competition.
- **Empires of Aid:** Geopolitics at its worst, dominating humanitarian response with soft aid, with INGOs often used as a tool, perpetuating power away from the agency of affected communities and national civil society.
- **Age of Fortresses:** The most difficult scenario of closed borders, and huge population movements as whole communities are forced to displace due to chronic lack of access to basic humanitarian aid. Solidarity and collaboration are significantly and consistently undermined.

There is a lot to be digested in this research for Partnership Brokers. There is a recurring reference of cooperation, partnerships and alliances which could and should elicit curiosity for brokers - for both better and worse. Recognising the power plays across international political relations, and use of aid agencies and tools and vehicles of power, speaks to the heart of brokering brave and strong partnerships for a fair and flourishing society.

If you asked me to place a bet, I believe we will end up somewhere between Patchwork Solidarities and Age of Fortresses, driven by the agenda of the survival of the fittest. However, while empirically

likely, none of these emergent scenarios are the aspiring new system I aspire for. I suspect I am not alone in this. Ultimately, scenarios 2,3 and 4 are not emergent systems at all, they are based on perpetuating the current power dynamics. They are eating and subsuming the emergence of a new architecture. While the trailblazers, illuminators and the protectors clearly will play an emerging role of 1,2 and 3, I would argue that unless there are more hospice workers, there will be a limited space for any new emergent system. The questions Partnership Brokers could and should be asking themselves include:

1. What are the ethics of supporting, or even proactively facilitating, 'end of life' thinking within the brokering roles or positions of influence they hold?
2. What are the end of life signs a broker should be looking out for which suggests the work they are supporting is part of the dying system and not supporting the new?
3. What skills are needed to be an effective hospice worker? How does a broker nurture them?
4. In the world of brokering, are hospice workers enablers or disrupters, or even more drastic destroyers?

I can't ask these questions yet - my journey is ongoing, but I have some theories. Irrespective of whether they are a funder, an INGO worker, a local aid provider, anyone who has ever worked with an embedded humanitarian, knows how inspiring, driven and equally entrenched they can be. Viewing their journey of change from the perspective of Theory U, they often need guidance in sensing and letting go, to enable that journey of bereavement, and for some, it will actually feel like a genuine death of their belief system and value base. Right at this moment in time, many are reluctant and confused with the prospect of a power dispersed new aid order. They see the greatness of the past and feel the fear of loss of income and vocation. On this basis, there is a more of a demand right now for partnership brokers to be hospice workers, bringing a new depth of compassion and bereavement care. Hospice workers need to grieve with them for a loss of their hopes and dreams, and where appropriate, helping them realise their hold on power will embed scenarios which are unpalatable for the future of disaster affected communities.

In the midst of this new world order and the compassion required for a dying system, there is something else partnership brokers should be mindful of - the wolf in sheep's clothing. Let's go back to the bandwagon and the fit for survival as described in the research. I have witnessed a rush for organisations and initiatives to move into the world of networks, partnerships and alliances, driven by operational imperatives. They see economies of scale and an opportunity to anchor themselves in the midst of a storm, believing their mandate entitles them to continue their journey. Rarely driven by true purpose and a desire to disrupt and change, they use the language of networks and partnerships to shore up their status and positioning within the system. Returning to our flotilla, instead of charting a new course, they are roping themselves together. Partnership brokers will need to ground their discernment to ensure that the support they provide to trailblazers, illuminators and protectors, is not just protecting the place or power of the past. True trailblazing initiatives will be vulnerable to be subsumed back into the old system. New alliances, under the guise of collaboration and solidarity, are also vulnerable to masking where knowledge and power is held. Mapping trailblazers and their protectors will be a key part of how partnership brokers can continue to nurture the emergent new system.

So where does this leave me? The roles within two loops have helped me reflect on my niche, the values I hold, and subsequently the way I tailor myself to the consultancies I secure. Some

consultancies have pre-conceived definitions and perceptions of their part in the humanitarian system, the end place they want to be and their role in it. Ultimately, such defined parameters are hard to push up against. In contrast the parameters of some consultancies are a gooey mess. Wherever possible, I have sought out where I could influence and shape positive perceptions of collaboration, and expose where partnerships were perceived as equitable but in reality were far from it. I still find myself striving for a meta space where real creation could take place.

I am also seeking how to support the emergent, without being attached to a short term consultancy contract. I have recently observed that many non-executive directors, those who are decision making volunteers - often brought in to perpetuate an old hierarchical approach to the system - are not being taken on the same journey of transition. In moments of spare time, I am scoping to see where I can facilitate discourse between these hidden decision makers and influencers, recognising the space for reflection is very limited for these key stakeholders. Giving them the space to stop and observe will be part of the journey of letting go, giving them insight to embrace the ambiguity and emergent, while being very clear of the types of scenarios ahead.

Ultimately, I am optimistic for our flotilla. Actually yes, I sense the critical mass of small boats, charting a different direction out of the storm. These “walk outs” are “sail outs”, fast paced and agile, they will leave the cruise liners, tankers and battle ships behind. They will use the winds of change to drive them faster than engines which require increasingly reduced fuel supplies to drive their highly regulated over professionalised engines. To end as I started, mixing my metaphors, it is these cruise liners, battleships and tankers which will need the broker as a caring and compassionate hospice worker.

Further Reading

- [“If not a Humanitarian Reset, then what”: The New Humanitarian](#)
- [Reckoning and Renewal: A future ready humanitarian system: ALNAP](#)
- [From Poverty to Power: Oxfam Blog](#)
- [Practical Steps to Unlock Systems Change: ALNAP Commentary](#)