Rethinking Humanitarianism
Episode 2
Humanitarianism: The Making Of

Jeremy Konyndyk: The humanitarian system we know today was not really designed to be a system. In fact, it wasn't designed at all. It evolved from a ragtag community of small aid initiatives into what is now a $25 billion industry. The major institutions that we know and love today didn't set out to become these billion dollar enterprises.

Heba Aly: And so how we ended up with the humanitarian response model that we now have really has everything to do with its origins. Many people feel that the current structures the world uses to deliver aid aren't fit for purpose. But to understand why, you really have to go back to those early days.

Konyndyk: Recording from Geneva and Washington, this is Rethinking Humanitarianism, a 10-part podcast series co-hosted by The New Humanitarian and the Center for Global Development. I'm Jeremy Konyndyk, senior policy fellow at the Center for Global Development.

Aly: And I'm Heba Aly, director of The New Humanitarian. We are your co-hosts for this series, where we are rethinking the future of humanitarian assistance at a time of potential transformation.

Konyndyk: In our first episode, we explored with Danny Sriskandarajah, the CEO of Oxfam, Great Britain, some of the problems that the sector faces today – the ethical, financial, and operational limitations that we are increasingly reaching. In this episode, we're going to be looking back at how we got to this point.

Aly: But before we dive in, we're gonna hear some reactions from a few of our listeners to episode one. Per Heggenes, CEO of IKEA Foundation, found the discussion about how needs are changing from aid delivery to social justice to be quite interesting. But his question is, if we would need a different set of organisations to advance that latter mission of social justice. Jeremy, what do you make of that?

Konyndyk: Well, you know it's interesting when a lot of the big international NGOs that dominate the sector now do have a pretty explicit social justice component to their mission, but it tends to be much smaller emphasis than their operational focus. So you know, most of the attention is paid to fundraising and programmes and all of that. On the UN side, you know, most of the UN organisations to0 they came out of what you could call a social justice mission, or you could call a social mandate, you know, UNHCR's mandate is to protect refugees, much more so originally than to provide billions of dollars worth of programmes. So I don't know if it's a different set of organisations, but it's certainly a kind of reorientation of focus amongst the organisations we have.

Aly: And probably a skillset that might be a bit more challenging. I remember speaking to the Assistant High Commissioner of the UN Refugee Agency, who said, you know, in this new era, where what UNHCR really needs to do is negotiate with governments for the rights and well-being of refugees. That's not a space that they're used to operating in. You know, they know how to hand out mattresses, but they don't necessarily know how to convince right wing governments that they should prioritise the refugee agenda. So I think it does demand quite a shift, and one that humanitarians haven't historically always been very comfortable with, under the veil of neutrality and impartiality.

Konyndyk: We also heard from Tara Nathan, Executive Vice President of MasterCard, who leads the company's work on digital solutions for development. She wrote to say that the idea of international NGOs playing less of an operational role resonated with her. She asked: Can we embrace this model that seeks to create a streamlined operational entity that crowds in the private sector, in addition to traditional local and global NGOs, and execute based on that kind of core competency, efficiency, and sustainability, not on incumbency or sector mandate? So, you know, getting beyond just the traditional big INGOs and UN agencies, who are the biggest players now, and begin bringing in some of these new entrants who have been more prominent in the system in the last few years.

Aly: Yeah, and I've had conversations with Tara about this actually, and she's always pretty frustrated that there are a lot of contexts in which humanitarian aid workers are doing things that others could do better, faster, cheaper, and would free up humanitarians to go to those places where only humanitarian agencies would operate. And I think that makes a lot of sense – that there are places in which the private sector could do the job better. I think that raises a whole bunch of questions about, again, humanitarian principles, but there hasn't been nearly enough willingness to have that conversation.

Konyndyk: And I think there's a big question she gets to there about the way the business model works now about the fact that most of the opportunity and most of the resources tend to flow to the big traditional organisations who are best positioned to receive it, and that that does create barriers to entry for non-traditional organisations. I think that holds very much with local NGOs. You can see that over and over. With the private sector, I'm a little more sceptical. I mean, I think, you know what MasterCard has been doing is great. But it stands out because it's so unique and unusual. You know, we don't see that many other private sector entities that are really trying to get into the space that the NGOs are in, or that are investing in becoming part of that space. I think if you had companies doing what MasterCard did on a wider scale, and tried to join clusters, and so on, that would be really interesting. But we're not seeing that. So I don't know, on the private sector side, is it that they're being kept out? Or is it that they're not, for the most part, trying that hard to get in?

Aly: And finally, Bill O'Keefe, Executive Vice President for Advocacy at Catholic Relief Services sent us this feedback.

Bill O'Keefe: Episode One focused on the role of intermediaries. But I think without adequately distinguishing between those who add value and those who don't, change is not happening at the rate all of us would like. But many NGOs have made significant strides towards meeting their World Humanitarian Summit commitments and aspirations, and turning over responsibility,

resources, and power to local groups. I hope foreign aid advocates will shift from the defensive mode that we've been in for years to boldly calling for more funding, and for changes in donor and UN policies and practices that impede the localisation agenda.

Konyndyk: Yeah, there's no question that the biggest obstacles to localisation are on the donor side rather than on the international NGO side. And I do think there's a lot more that donors could and should be doing to induce and to encourage their partners, their international partners, to partner more respectfully, and to kind of drive that conversation about the sort of intermediary layer we need. I think there's also more that the international NGOs could be doing to chart the course for that, to lay out examples for that. There's nothing that is preventing international NGOs from using partnership as their default mode and direct implementation only when necessary, but that's still not what we see.

Aly: Thanks to everyone who sent in their thoughts, and we look forward to hearing your reactions to today's discussion.

Konyndyk: So today, we're asking, if the humanitarian system is a kind of flawed superhero. What is its origin story? Which problems was it originally set up to solve? And how different are those from the problems of today? How does some of the dysfunction that we see today reflect that history? And does that illuminate why efforts at reform have so often faltered in the past?

Aly: We've got a great lineup for you today. So I'm going to introduce first Antonio Donini, a research associate at the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies in Geneva. And one of those people who has experienced and observed the ins and outs of the sector's evolution for years, including at senior positions at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Hi, Antonio.

Antonio Donini: Great to be here.

Konyndyk: We're also very lucky to be joined by World Food Prize Laureate and former head of the World Food Programme, Catherine Bertini, who led WFP through a period of profound transformation after its separation from the FAO. Welcome, Catherine.

Catherine Bertini: Thank you, Jeremy.

Aly: And finally, we've got with us, Jessica Alexander, a former aid worker and the editor of The New Humanitarian series on rethinking humanitarianism. She's also the author of a memoir called *Chasing Chaos: My Decade In and Out of Humanitarian Aid*. Hi, Jessica.

Jessica Alexander: Thanks for having me.

Konyndyk: So I'm really excited to have this line-up today, because I think we've got a group of people who have seen and experienced the humanitarian sector from a lot of different angles

and perspectives, but also have the ability to go beyond just their own institutional experiences as they look at it, to think really critically about what is and isn't working. Suddenly, we're going to have a great discussion.

Aly: So before we dive into the topic of the day, we are going to ask you a question that we ask every guest on our show, as we try to rethink this sector. And that is, what is one weird quirk in the humanitarian sector that makes absolutely no sense to you? Antonio?

Antonio Donini: It's the well-fed dead. It's the fact that protection is always the orphan of humanitarian action. And that we've seen this from Sarajevo to Aleppo. We're good at delivering stuff. But we're not so good at protecting lives.

Konyndyk: Catherine, how about you?

Bertini: It's the abuse of young staff members by managers of all these big agencies not wanting to deal with a process that is transparent and allows for hiring and management of staff in normal ways. They have a system called consultancies. They leave people in difficult duty stations for years on end. They have no job security. They have no security against harassment or anything else.

Aly: Jess, what about you?

Alexander: Mine is, how is it with all of this money for the years that the sector has been around, all of this investment in professionalisation, that we still don't have a way to reliably and accurately measure our effectiveness and our impact. I've been a monitoring and evaluation officer in a number of contexts and often the best we can do is report on outputs. So, how many tents we delivered, how much water we provided, how many trainings we've offered, without really any other metrics to demonstrate whether those were a good quality, the impact that they had for people, and what change they brought really meaningfully to people's lives. I think in any other multi-billion dollar industry, I wonder whether that would be acceptable or enough?

Konyndyk: Those are three fantastic answers. It's always fascinating to hear the range of answers you get to a question like that.

Aly: I was just gonna say, very different answers as well, which also kind of points to just how many problems there are to solve in the current humanitarian response system. So, how did we get here? Antonio, I want to turn to you, to kind of go back to the origins of modern day humanitarianism, which for many people was the famine in the Biafra region of Nigeria in the late 1960s. Take us back to that time, what humanitarianism looked like then, what it was trying to do back then.

Donini: Well, actually, I would disagree with that origin of organised humanitarianism. I think organised humanitarianism started in earnest after the end of the Second World War. That's when we had the Geneva Conventions, the convention of refugees that gave structure to

activities that had been going on for a long time. I mean, the humanitarian impulse exists in all cultures. We've seen states intervening in famine situations going back to China in the 1200s. You know, the Choctaw Indians sent $170 to the suffering Irish during the famine in the 1840s. The preservation of life has always been a concern that we see in all cultures.

What happened at the end of the Second World War, I think is important because that's where the structures came into being. Some people would argue, me included, that the system hasn't changed that much since the end of the Second World War. The basics are still the same. That's the basics are in kind of northern Western oligopoly of donors of mainly Western – at least in origin, NGOs – and the UN system and the Red Cross movement kind of working together in different ways to address humanitarian need, where it shows up. The problems haven't changed that much. It's the plight of civilians in conflict, the plight of people suffering from so-called natural disasters, it's displacement, it's the protection of civilians, which is one of the areas where I think there hasn't been much progress in the last 70 years.

So, what has changed, I think, is first of all the institutionalisation and proceduralisation and bureaucratisation of the system. But it's also the size, it's grown exponentially. By growing exponentially is gone through various teething problems first, and then growth crises. And we can pinpoint moments where there have been changes in the system, like Biafra, like Cambodia, like the establishment of OCHA, which was established after the outcome of the Iraq war. All sorts of things have been added to the system. But the basics, the fundamentals, haven't changed.

Now, of course, that's the dominant system. But there's all sorts of other systems that, until recently, we hadn't noticed. I mean, there's a long history of non-Western humanitarian traditions, whether it's in China or in Africa, or what the major religions have been doing for 4,000 years. So I think, what we have is a disconnect between the sort of universal aspirations of a system that was set up essentially by the West, and the reality that there are many types of humanitarianism out there. And that some, as we're seeing more and more, are trying to fight to get a bigger place at the table, or who are splitting off and doing their own thing separately.

I think now there's much more awareness that the foundations on which the humanitarian system is based are a bit shaky. The processes, institutions, and concepts, or narratives that we've developed since the Second World War are now in crisis because new centres of power are emerging. China, India, and even in Africa, where different traditions or different ways of looking at how to address the issue of assisting people who are in dire straits are emerging or are strengthening. So I think that's one of the big challenges for the future, you know: How does our past equip us to deal with problems, not to mention COVID, and, you know, the survival of the species that are coming down the pike, that we will likely be very unable to address with the tools of the past.

Konyndyk: It's a very Northern-dominated system traditionally, as you're saying, you know, the traditions from other parts of the world have not factored as much into the structure. And you can kind of see that even in the make-up of who we have in the discussion today, and kind of where we all come from. But I want to go back to those early days that you're talking about. And you know, Antonio, you're saying the structure is, the crises haven't necessarily changed – crises are crises in some ways – but the way we think about structures has. And so Catherine,

on that point, when we go back to the origins of these agencies, UNHCR didn't set out to be a multi-billion dollar agency, it set out to be a three-year programme to resettle refugees in Europe. The office that I used to run at USAID, which now is a multi-billion dollar office was a coordinator, a secretary, a desk, and a telephone when it was set up. I've heard you describe WFP's origins as a surplus food disposal agency. Tell us a little bit about that history. And how did WFP start out? What was it set up to do?

Bertini: There were joint resolutions of the General Assembly and the FAO Council in 1961 to set up a department at FAO, to be supervised in the field by the UN, which meant UNDP, and in Rome by FAO, in order to take surplus commodities from wealthy countries and move them to people in need in other countries. George McGovern was then the head of Food for Peace in the Kennedy White House. And he and some brilliant academics from Europe put together this idea, and got it passed reasonably quickly. So they began operations in 1963. Moving food by ship from the US or from Europe or Japan, Australia, Canada, and then deciding what countries could best use that food. So it was development. It wasn't emergencies. There weren't that many at that time. And it was used to help with food for work programmes, with programmes for infant feeding, with some school programmes, with programmes to help develop dairy in some countries, and other kinds of small-scale farming.

So that's that's what it was for some time, then some countries started donating more than in-kind. And the in-kind was, you know, fish from Norway, cheese from Denmark, meat from Germany, grains from North America and Australia. And over time, as more needs arose and as some countries said, well we can't get food, they started giving cash. And then eventually, certainly, by the mid 1900s, there was no such thing as surplus, it was all contributions, either in-kind or cash. In the 80s then, there started to be some more crises that WFP was asked to respond to. There were a couple before then, but they grew and grew in the 80s, and especially after the end of the Cold War. Then, WFP was asked much more to be involved in emergency operations. It had this one really, really good thing going for it. It was a very efficient transport operation globally. So it built on that to build a big logistics operation and communications operation, and was out front on technological changes and improvements in the system. And those things helped grow WFP exponentially.

Konyndyk: So it was really set up with a very different focus and a very different set of tools than what it uses now. I'm fascinated by this idea that, you know, you might have American grain and Norwegian salmon in the original WFP food baskets. I'm probably overstating that, but...

Bertini: We did! For a while those high price commodities were actually good for things like exchange for weapons after a ceasefire, for instance. You know, good old wheat or corn wasn't going to do it, but maybe some nice cans of meat or fish or cheese would make a difference. But it's actually the Nordics who decided that that wasn't the best use of funds because the amount of food that could be purchased with cash would be a lot larger than what could be donated, given the kind of products that they donate. And that, plus an interest that a lot of European donors had that the Americans were sending food but not sending cash to cover the overhead pushed the system further.

Konyndyk: Some of that transition, then, that evolution in the mission, was driven by the donors.

Bertini: Yes, it absolutely was especially about using the most cost effective commodity that could reach the most people. That was the first round, a later round was there should just be more cash. And now there's certainly primarily cash, but used for a lot of different things, not just purchasing of food by the organisation.

Aly: Jess, while we're kind of thinking about what the system quote unquote, and I think many people have said it's not a system, looked like in those early days, this year is The New Humanitarian's 25th anniversary and you have done this deep dive into 25 years of data to look at how the sector has changed in that last quarter century. What was your main takeaway from looking at that data across a whole bunch of different kind of vantage points?

Alexander: Well, there were a number of takeaways. And I think the intention with that piece was to try to find numbers to put on some of the narratives that we tell ourselves in the sector. So, you know, there are more people in need today. Well, what do the numbers actually show? There are more people who are living in urban centres versus in camps? Well, what actually do the numbers reveal about that narrative? And some of those narratives, when we actually tried to find them in the data, we couldn't find data or information that backed up those narratives. So it's these kind of tropes that we tell ourselves about the growing needs, or how the place of aid has changed that we either don't have accurate or reliable data to back up, or we may be stretching those narratives.

But I think what the data showed us, and what I think is the most obvious thing, and what both Catherine and Antonio have touched upon is this massive expansion over the last 25 years. Just financially, we've gone from around $2 billion in 2000 to over $24 billion today. And that's just figures from OCHA's financial tracking service, there's other figures that show even larger growth. But the bottom line is that the sector is roughly grown, you know, at least 12 times from, you know, 20 years ago. And I think what that means is there's obviously more of us running around, there are more people and positions in the sector; there are more organisations who are trying to solve these problems and address needs.

But what it also shows is that we throw money at this sector, and we pump resources into it expecting that that will solve problems. And now it's expanded to this point where it's extremely big, it's this multi-billion dollar industry, some would argue, and I think Antonio has said in the past that it's too big. What I think is revealing, though, too, is what the data didn't show is that sure we're bigger, but does that necessarily mean that we're better? We've changed but have we improved?

And I think another piece of that analysis was this overview of buzzwords over time. And I think that showed that you see this rise in different themes that gained traction and popularity within the lexicon of the sector. So things like gender, localisation, resilience, they become very popular, and then either they fade away or they kind of maintain as part of our discourse. And usually what we do is we kind of tack a position onto those themes. So we have a gender advisor, a resilience officer, an accountability specialist. You know, and we think that that will

solve the problem, but it doesn't really do much to change some of the underlying issues that are at the root of some of these problems.

And this expansion I also want to just say has, inadvertently I think, pushed us away from some of the origins, I mean, away from some of the people that we were meant to serve: The bureaucratisation makes it harder for them to enter our system, if that's what we're calling it. And it's almost so big and bureaucratised now that it prevents us from undoing some of those things that hold us back. So it's making us less nimble and less able to adapt to today's challenges, and ultimately perhaps making us less relevant today.

Konyndyk: I think that's really interesting. And particularly this observation about the evolution of buzzwords and how we then attach positions to buzzwords and that things will change. When you think about the relief to development continuum, or spectrum, or resilience, or linking relief for reconstruction and development, I mean, that sort of concept, every five years, there's a new buzzword, and yet, we haven't really changed that much about it over the years. And that's what I think makes some of the aspects of WFP's history really interesting, because, you know, so many efforts to change the system over the years haven't really touched structure. They haven't really touched money. They've been buzzwords, they've been guidance, they've been hiring a new officer with a new title. But yeah, the experience with WFP, and you know a lot of this now is 30 years old, so it's not to say that WFP is perfectly up to date today. But I think it's an interesting case, WFP's separation from FAO, as its mission changed, and one of the rare examples in the system of an agency's mission getting out of step with what it was being called to do. So Catherine, tell us a little bit about what went into that, you know, what was the impetus for pulling out WFP and making these huge structural changes?

Bertini: As WFP started growing, I think there was a little bit of jealousy on the part of the parent, FAO. And also, later, as emergencies started growing and money was following emergencies, FAO and many other agencies, UNDP being one of them, ultimately said, ‘oh, we have to get in this business too, because that's where the money is’. So there was more interest in hanging on to WFP. Nobody ever wants to give up part of their bureaucracy, anyway.

But Jim Ingram, who was my predecessor, who was for 10 years the executive director of WFP, an Australian person from their foreign service, he pushed for his whole 10 years in office to try to separate WFP from FAO. So, it took a long time. And of course, that was a governance issue. I mean, he had to ultimately convince governments to vote both in the FAO governance process and in the UN governance processes: WFP was set up jointly by the two entities. They had to both vote to allow WFP to separate. So, since 1992, WFP became an agency more like UNICEF or UNFPA, where it was more independent, but it's still a funder programme of the UN. The difference is, it's still jointly governed. So, for instance, the head of WFP is jointly appointed by the secretary-general, and the director-General of FAO. And there's a few other things like that, but it is separate.

Why did it have to be separate? FAO is a bureaucracy like WHO is a bureaucracy and UNESCO's a bureaucracy, And that operates on normative schedules. And they couldn't react to fast-moving emergency operations. So WFP had to be separate because before they couldn't make their own personnel decisions, their own finance decisions, budget decisions, and even decisions about where to go and what to do, and the bureaucracy around FAO didn't

understand it, and took too long to deal with it. So, it was just not going to be possible, again with the changes coming in the late 80s and the 90s. And this change officially took place at the end of 1991.

So, I came into that job in April of 1992, with a whole new set of operating systems that I could create. So, we had a chance to start from my day one to totally change the way we looked at WFP. And that's, I think, one reason why we were successful in significant reforms of WFP, starting in 1992, based on the work that was done at FAO.

Konyndyk: And how would you describe what that enabled WFP to do differently? So there's a fascinating component to this which is just the politics of how you do that, and I want to touch on that in a little while. But in terms of the impact of this, in terms of what WFP was able to do better or differently than what it could do under FAO, you know, why was it important from an outcome perspective to invest the blood, sweat, and tears that Jim Ingram did in separating WFP out?

Bertini: We had to be able to essentially, as any organisation would, establish its own mission, establish the way it was going to meet the mission, deal with our governing body, not a big larger governing body made up of all governments to try to do those kinds of things, and then, ultimately, as I said, recreate every system within the organisation. So it couldn't have been possible in a bigger bureaucracy of governance, but it could be possible in a small one. That's why all the UN agencies that handle humanitarian work have small, well, if 36 is small, small governance structures compared to at least the General Assembly, and why the organisations are voluntarily funded, which is another key point in terms of what we had to do.

We felt we had to prove to our donors who were all voluntary that giving funds to WFP, or food at the time, was worth that decision on their part because we were going to produce. If I can add one other thing back to what Jessica was saying, I asked at WFP a few years ago: Why is it that if you compare 2002, which is when I left, to 2016, we're working in the same amount of countries and serving the same amount of people, but your budget is three or four times what it was at the time. So what's the difference? The answers were, well, the food is better, because it's more nutritious food that we look for and provide. Many of the people that we serve are in need for longer periods of time, like Syria or Yemen, where the situation is going on longer, therefore, over time, it's more expensive. The transport is more expensive. The security is outrageously higher than it was before.

Aly: A good investigative project for us to look into, whether all that new money has actually resulted in better aid. I want to turn to Antonio because I guess the example we're trying to explore with the example of WFP is: The world is changing around us, and to what extent are the mechanisms and the architectures that the world depends on to deliver aid also changing to adapt to that changing world? So, you know, Catherine, you just gave this example of how WFP had to evolve to kind of meet the changing times. And I suppose the question is kind of how often that really happens. And Antonio you said, crises haven't really changed, I would dispute that. I think we have a very different landscape today than we did when the modern international humanitarian architecture began, which is that crises are lasting much, much longer, they're much more complex, they're at a bigger scale. And as you yourself have written, they are now increasingly transnational problems that can't necessarily be solved by multilateral institutions.

So I just wonder how you see that kind of bigger picture of a changing world, and the degree to which the institutions that were set up in a very different world have been able to keep up?

Donini: You're right about the transnationality of the crisis we're now facing, and maybe that's the significant difference of the past 10 to 15 years that is affecting humanitarian action. What's clearly happening is that the multilateral system, being a collection of states, is no longer able to address transnational problems that are larger than the capacity of even the most powerful states to address. I think one other change that hasn't been mentioned so much is that, yes, the system has grown exponentially. But with the growth, the transaction costs, and the cost of the superstructure of the system, have also grown. And I think they've grown faster, in proportion. The extent of traffic, of email traffic between headquarters and the field has just grown exponentially. I remember when I started in this system, you know, you didn't have all that. When you were the head of a sub-office in the country, you were basically on your own, and even your relationship with the country office was sometimes very distant. So, we now have quality and accountability initiatives, which are important, I agree. We have all sorts of institutions that have grown around the system. All these superstructure elements have a justification in their own right. But the overall picture is one where, you know, some sociologists would say that the humanitarian system has changed from being a means to an end to becoming an end in itself.

Konyndyk: Yeah, I think, Antonio, your comment earlier about, there's some continuity in the crises, but the structures with which we approach them and what we're trying to do in them has really shifted. I think that's interesting in light of what Catherine described about the difficulty that goes into actually changing these systems. And, you know, when you try to change that structure, it runs into a lot of politics and a lot of bureaucratic complexity. What do you see as why it's so difficult? Why do we cling so much to the structures that we have, even as they become increasingly, or even as they become decreasingly, fit for purpose for what we're trying to do in the crises of today?

Donini: Yeah, it's a bit like the reform of the Security Council. It's becoming more and more impossible to reform the Security Council. And I think that the vested interests in the humanitarian system are such that it's also very difficult to make change. Now, you know, traditionally, historians have pointed out that major change in international institutions happens only after major wars. Fortunately, we haven't had a third world war. And maybe COVID is, in a sense, one of these defining moments where there will be a before and after, but the odds against major reform in the humanitarian system are formidable, basically, because of the way in which it's structured: Where's the power in the system? Who controls the money? Who controls the narrative? And are the people who control the money and the narrative – that's the major donors, the major Federation's of NGOs, and to a large extent, the UN itself – are these sources of power and the network power that they create around them, are they amenable to letting go of some of this power? Is it possible to delink the humanitarian system from the power sources that set it up? You know, I think it's American poet, Audre Lorde, who said that you can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools. Change will only come when there will be a sufficient counter-power that will challenge, and we're seeing some of this today, you know, the way in which the debate on the decolonisation of the system, on sexual exploitation and abuse, it's showing that there is a kind of counter-system that it’s voice is being heard a bit more than in the past. You know, is humanitarian action, the mechanism, the tool, the concept that is going to take us out of some of the crises that we are in. Maybe in the context of climate

change and the survival of the species, we need a much more political way of looking at transformation, and including the transformation required to save and protect lives.

Aly: The fact that humanitarianism may not be the right tool, the fact that the problems today are transnational, and the tools we have are multilateral, the fact that power has been at the heart of a lot of the problems, I want to take that to you Jess, you did this piece for, for us at The New Humanitarian looking back on a lot of the turning points in the sector's history, and all those efforts at changing and reforming. To what extent were those efforts, solving for the right problems, i.e,those problems we've just listed: power, structural design, etc.?

Alexander: Well, I think what everyone who I interviewed including, you Antonio pointed to is, you know, crises are moments of change, right. And it's only after these crises, where flaws in aid's delivery mechanisms or our approach are revealed, that we then flurry around to try to get our acts together to fix that problem. And so we're always kind of reacting to a problem that has been identified or uncovered, or bad practice like we saw with recent sexual exploitation and abuse allegations – people are running around now to try to patch up that problem as opposed to a real organic look at the system itself and why it's not working.

The fundamental premise on which aid was founded is still applicable, the desire to help humans in times of need, and to alleviate suffering. And those intentions and underpinning values were universally agreed upon, and still are relevant today. But it's the means by which we go about them which I think have become objectionable, and I think have been revealed with today's moment as being inappropriate for solving today's problems. So these assumptions that rich gives to poor, rich knows what's best for poor don't necessarily hold true and have been sort of exposed in this current crisis and also with the Black Lives Matter movement.

And so past changes after each crisis have been more technocratic. They've tinkered at the margins, they've introduced the cluster system so that we're better coordinated, they've introduced better leadership so that we have more accountable leadership, they've had, you know, these tweaks, but as someone I interviewed, you know, said, you know, we're tinkering at the branches, we're not addressing the structural roots. So I would say that, you know, it's not that past changes haven't been successful. In fact, many of them have been. I mean, we are better coordinated today. We are better professionalised today. We do have stronger leadership and greater accountability. I believe we do. It's that we set out to try to address problems that aren't the ones that I think need the most addressing.

Konyndyk: And what I think is really interesting, Jess, is your observation that we have been solving for some of the wrong problems, and we've been trying to use technocratic solutions, not fundamental solutions. Yeah, we have been kind of trimming the hedges, not replanting the trees. And so we, you know, we're always stuck with the same basic power dynamics and slightly with slightly different window dressing.

Alexander: Yeah, and I think localisation is a key example of that. You know, we thought we could fix it by giving more money to local actors. Well, one, we haven't, you know, that goal of 25% by 2020, well passed and not even close. But it doesn't really mean anything, it's meaningless, because it's not really about the money. I mean, it's about how we partner with

organisations not as implementers, but as recognising them as innovators and groups who add significant value to operations. You know, they still have to implement programmes that we, as the international sector, dictate, not the other way around. That's just one example. But until we kind of go about it in a more meaningful human way, trying to give money or these technocratic changes isn't going to solve some of these more basic human dignity level issues.

Aly: So if we agree that, to date, efforts to improve the humanitarian system to make it more viable for the realities of this world have failed because they haven't been addressing the right problems. What are, for each of you, your kind of million-dollar ideas for what would fix the humanitarian sector – the most kind of radical unimaginable thing that if you could wave your magic wand you'd put in place?

Konyndyk: Throw out politics, throw out the budget constraints? What would you do?

Aly: Antonio?

Donini: I think a minimal thing would be some consolidation of the system. I mean, why do we have this salami-slicing machine where, if you're outside a country, you're coordinated by UNHCR, and if you're inside the country, you're coordinated by OCHA. Let's merge IOM, UNHCR, and OCHA and have one major UN humanitarian agency. It will be economies of scale. Maybe you could throw in bits of UNICEF, some bits of WFP. This actually was an old idea that Jim Ingram came up with 20 years ago. That was one idea. His other idea was, let's internationalise the ICRC. There was some logic there, you know. Let's have a separate, non-UN organisation that's in charge of, you know, doing things according to humanitarian principle. So I think that's, you know, the salami-slicing of survivors of people who need assistance and protection into IDPs, ISPs, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, etc.

Aly: What is an ISP?

Donini: International Stuck Person.

Aly: I've never heard that one before.

Konyndyk: New to me.

Donini: We use it a lot. People who can't move out of the country, like people in Aleppo, were ISPs. So you know, why do we have to have all these labels? I'm not saying we should throw out the Refugee Convention, but I'm saying that, you know, even by respecting the Refugee Convention, there's no reason why we should have these turf battles.

Konyndyk: And I think what's so notable about that is that those different categories, those different distinctions, don't necessarily mean their needs are really fundamentally different. And

that means we serve them in very different ways often. Jess, over to you what's your, you know, if you had a magic wand with your million-dollar idea, or trillion-dollar idea?

Alexander: Imagine if every political leader, whether it's a senator or a parliamentarian, a president, prime minister, before they start office, they have to sleep in refugee camp for up to a week, right – they have to sleep under the tents, they have to eat the food that's provided, that we slap our labels on. It can be overseas, but it also can be, you know, a leader in Greece living in Moria camp, it can be a president in the US living on the US-Mexico border. But anyway, they need to, they need to really live there and experience what it's like to be a vulnerable person. And I know that that may seem tokenistic just for a week, but I think it can do a lot to open people's eyes to what that means. And similarly, for aid workers as a prerequisite for starting any job, they need to live with affected people for some time, and to stand in the lines under the sun waiting for a bag of rice, to sleep in the tents with holes that we give them, to make complaints that don't get answered, and to just have a taste of what they experience.

Konyndyk: Catherine, how would you answer that question?

Bertini: Well, let's start from the beginning of this discussion. What is the purpose? And I would take a blank slate and say, let's define what our purpose is globally for humanitarianism, and then what that means in terms of people and where they are, where they might be, how they're organised, and then what do we need in order to help them. And then I'd say, do we have anything here in our current system that answers any of those questions, or should we start over again? But that requires governments to make a really big commitment to, to really think through. But just cobbling around the edges of what exists now, just because it already exists, is the easy, timid way to try to handle it – it takes no fortitude. And that's why it still continues.

Aly: Burn it all down, she says.

Konyndyk: Burn it all down and start from the ground.

Bertini: I wouldn't burn it down until we know what we want. We might want pieces of what exists, but I'd start with a clean slate.

Konyndyk: Well, this has been a fantastically rich discussion. And we were hugely appreciative to all three of you for your insights and for joining us today. It's been really interesting to look at the history of this system and kind of how we got to this point. And, you know, as you said, Catherine, it's kind of easy and maybe timid, but not necessarily all that effective approach if we're just tinkering on the margins. And if we want to change, we've got to look at something more fundamental. So thanks so much to all of you for joining us today.

Konyndyk: Every episode, we're going to include listener reactions to our previous shows. We're really interested to hear your thoughts on what we've discussed today. Why do you think previous reform efforts haven't delivered? How do you think the sector's origins help to explain some of the current challenges? Tweet your comments or your questions to us @CGDev and @newhumanitarian, with the hashtag #rethinkinghumanitarianism, or send a voice recording to

RHPodcast@thenewhumanitarian.org, and we'll play some of them and respond in the next episode.

Aly: The rethinking humanitarianism series is hosted on The New Humanitarian's podcast channel. To make sure you get all future episodes, search for "The New Humanitarian" via your favourite podcasting platform. And if you like what you hear, please do review and share it.

Konyndyk: To learn more you can head to www.thenewhumanitarian.org for a series of articles on rethinking humanitarianism, or check out www.cgdev.org for research by my team at the Center for Global Development on humanitarian reform.

Aly: Thank you for listening to Rethinking Humanitarianism. See you again soon.