Change without transformation

How narratives influenced the humanitarian cash agenda

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List of figures

**Figures**

**Figure 1**  Estimated volume of cash and voucher assistance as part of total international humanitarian assistance, 2017–2022  /  12
Executive summary

Despite the humanitarian sector’s efforts to present itself as neutral and evidence-led, humanitarian crises and responses to them are laden with narratives and stories. The narratives surrounding what constitutes a ‘humanitarian’ crisis and who are perceived as the victims shape the actions of donors and aid providers. These narratives dictate why, when and where humanitarian aid is needed, who should deliver it and how, and who should receive it. Despite the sector’s professionalisation and use of sophisticated needs-assessment tools, the humanitarian system’s reliance on voluntary contributions necessitates motivating donors to act. This requirement makes narratives a central part of humanitarian responses, as communicating the urgency of crises is crucial for securing funding.

Cash assistance has had an impressive breakthrough in a sector resistant to reform – in the past 15 years, cash has gone from less than 1% to almost 20% of the total value of humanitarian assistance. This is a qualified success in a sector comprised of a large and complex group of organisations, agencies, governments and donors with very different agendas and interests. Thus, understanding how this achievement was realised, and the role different narratives played in framing arguments and reinforcing evidence, is important for other reform agendas. However, the rapid rise of cash has slowed in the past five years, despite its many advantages, and its transformative potential has not yet been reached. The narratives used in support of cash, the counter-narratives in response, and even the narratives surrounding humanitarian cash today all merit analysis, as they highlight both the successes and the limitations of reform efforts.

Narratives are stories with a purpose and are everywhere in humanitarian action. Rather than being an undesirable contrast to sober, evidence-based policymaking, they are essential in building common understandings of problems, proposing solutions and driving change. The case for cash comprised both a ‘collective weight of evidence’ and compelling narratives that formed part of advocacy efforts.

Primarily, the argument was one of efficiency and cost-effectiveness, at least for the key donors that initially drove the first expansion of cash relief in the sector. A parallel case for cash centred on its power to provide greater dignity and choice for affected people. While in many ways these two narratives were complementary, the former ultimately proved more influential, shaping cash as a primarily technical modality at the expense of prioritising user-centered benefits. Some, albeit fewer, proponents also viewed the introduction of cash as a positive, disruptive force that could deliver aid directly and circumvent the existing system.

This latter narrative has proved less successful, as cash today is still yet to achieve its transformative potential. Though explicit resistance to the idea of cash is less than what it was before its widespread adoption, the impact of narratives that centred the benefits to the aid system rather than aid users can be seen today through how cash works in humanitarian responses: a heavily monitored and siloed channel for the delivery of assistance. Such narratives have also potentially limited the future growth of cash, being seen as a debate that’s broadly been ‘won’, and an additional aspect of, rather than a challenge to, the existing humanitarian system.
There are lessons here for other agendas. A perceived ‘technical’ framing of cash as essentially ‘relief items by other means’ – as well as the frequent inclusion of vouchers as ‘cash’ – played a crucial role in advancing its adoption, helping to neutralise political sensitivities, but also contributing to the preservation of an exclusive cash community within the sector that has distanced this work from other related agendas, such as social protection. And despite the widespread adoption of cash, the fundamental narratives underpinning humanitarian action remain unchanged: the sector continues to operate on the basis of distinguishing between ‘deserving recipients’ and ‘benevolent’ benefactors. This enduring framework works to emphasise conditionality and to make gains like the adoption of cash potentially fragile and prone to backsliding dependent on the choices of the powerful, such as policymakers in major donor countries.

The intuitive simplicity of providing cash certainly helped to convince different stakeholders, but it was also the willingness of advocates to use a plurality of narratives simultaneously for different audiences, based on their interests and incentives, that helped drive adoption. When combined with ‘enough’ evidence complementing these narratives, the case of cash demonstrates the effectiveness of such an approach.

Humanitarian organisations should be more aware and reflective of the central role of narratives in all their work, as well as their own role in reinforcing and challenging dominant stories in the sector and wider media. Such a process could include:

- **Support to greater ‘narrative literacy’, and reflecting on the longer-term impact of each public-facing communication and message.** Humanitarian organisations are not passive recipients of external narratives but authoritative voices that have a central role in narrative-making. When doing so, organisations should ask: what existing narratives are being reinforced or challenged? Are the messages and advocacy consistent with the humanitarian organisation’s own commitments to supporting locally led action and greater participation of affected people, and its other stated values?

- **Engaging directly and with regularity with affected people, who should be encouraged to feed back into, and impact the design of, aid programmes.** The means by which affected people can participate in the design of humanitarian programmes and policy are extremely limited. This has contributed to an exclusive set of incentives and interests informing narratives that have set the boundaries for how cash has been adopted in the sector. Regular community feedback as a system-wide performance benchmark should be enshrined in shared policy commitments to ensure such interests are consciously considered when adopting new processes, technologies and policy.

- **Reflecting carefully on the framing of fundamentally political processes and policies as ‘technical’, which is itself a narrative.** The humanitarian sector reverts to such language for understandable reasons in situations of complex crises, but this can work to preserve an exclusive and unaccountable set of practices at odds with the sector’s other commitments. Interrogating the use of such language should be a key part of challenging dominant narratives in the humanitarian sector.

- **Building an evidence base to support new narratives.** A rigorous evidence base is essential for compelling narrative-making in the humanitarian sector. It should be balanced with an understanding of when this evidence base is sufficient to make the case for change – evidence alone is not enough.
- **Considering who speaks, and who is spoken for, in any attempts at reform or narrative change in the humanitarian sector.** Acknowledging the earlier work of those who challenged dominant narratives but who may not be recognised as ‘legitimate narrative setters’, and giving up space to the voices of those directly affected by humanitarian crises, is still under-valued but necessary in supporting more accountable and effective humanitarian action.
1 Introduction

Humanitarian crises and responses to them are – despite the sector’s efforts to present itself as neutral and technocratic – loaded with stories and narratives. What constitutes a ‘humanitarian’ crisis and which people are seen as the victims dictate the actions of donors and aid providers – why, when and where humanitarian aid is needed, who should deliver it and how, and who should receive it. Despite the sector’s professionalisation, growth and adoption of sophisticated needs-assessment tools, any system that depends on voluntary contributions to fund itself must motivate would-be donors to act by communicating the urgency of the problems it faces. This makes narratives a still central, albeit under-analysed, aspect of the humanitarian system and its reform.

Narratives can be understood as stories and frames constructed and deployed to shape beliefs, attitudes and ultimately decisions (Saez and Bryant, 2023: 12). Utilising narratives as a way to influence and persuade is a familiar part of the job of journalists, politicians and advertisers, but perhaps less so for humanitarians, who may consider themselves separate from and maybe above such activities. Yet in the humanitarian sector, too, the effective use of narratives determines success in fundraising, advocacy and reform efforts.

The key shift within the humanitarian system over the past two decades has arguably been the growth of providing cash to people in need as opposed to purely ‘in-kind’ assistance like food. In the past 15 years, cash has gone from less than 1% of the value of total humanitarian assistance to almost 20% – a qualified success in a sector comprised of a large and complex group of organisations, agencies, governments and donors with very different agendas and interests. For its supporters, the benefits of cash are self-evident. Yet its more widespread adoption had to be campaigned for over the course of many years and, crucially, required empirical evidence from trials and pilot schemes in concerted advocacy efforts to convince sceptical donors and the majority of influential relief providers.

The arguments for cash appealed to different issues over time and among different audiences, ranging from pragmatic stories of better value for money, to more radical appeals to improve the dignity of responses and to overthrow a moralising aid system. Eventually, narratives of cash as a ‘technical’ modality, rather than a potential revolutionary shift in the system, drove reform but – as this paper argues – likely at the cost of its more transformative potential. Crucially, the argument for cash is ongoing, its case still not wholly ‘won’ for many responses and actors, and the particular manner in which it was advanced, and the scale that was achieved, has not always proven constructive for some of its original goals of making aid more appropriate and responsive to the needs of its aid-programme participants. Advocates are now concerned that progress is slowing, and a shift to becoming more transformative is needed (CALP, 2023). When seen through the lens of narratives, cash reform could be understood as a case of successfully shifting some perceptions while not yet challenging more fundamental humanitarian narratives still prevalent today.

This paper asks which narratives influenced the shift toward cash in humanitarian policy and practice, and which actors were key in driving them and why. It explores the impact that these narratives had
on the eventual shape of cash in the sector today, as well as its influence on the humanitarian sector more generally. It then goes on to discuss how the management and navigation of narratives in the cash story hold useful lessons for other reform agendas in the humanitarian sector, at a time when many of the narratives maintained by the sector for many years – around charity, vulnerability, deservingness and agency – are increasingly questioned. The paper concludes by drawing some of these key lessons from how narratives were used in cash reform and considers how they could be applied to some of the sector’s other key challenges.

1.1 What do we mean by narratives?

The overarching research question for the HPG project Remaking aid: ethics, politics and narratives, under which this study sits, asks how narratives shape humanitarian policy decisions, and how this process can be influenced to improve the sufficiency, efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid and its positive impact on people in crises. This case study on cash transfers also asks which narratives have influenced the shift toward cash in humanitarian policy and practice, who constructed these narratives and why, and what impact the growth of cash transfers has had on the humanitarian sector’s other key narratives.

This research started from a basic observation that evidence alone is not sufficient to motivate action. Instead, what drives change is political will that hinges on the ability of individuals and coalitions pushing for change to modify opinion – to collectively legitimise a set of ideas in order to make a collective understanding of the problem, and to arrive at a common representation of what the solution to that problem should be. That common understanding is what narratives seek to influence.

Policy narratives are prescriptive stories ‘about who should do what, and how, when and why they should do it in order to address policy dilemmas’ (Kaplan, 1986: 770). For everyone involved in public policy, narratives are the central tool for making a claim or argument (Fischer, 2003: 168). Narrative analysis has been applied to policy studies of environmental, health and social issues, albeit less so in the humanitarian space (Saez and Bryant, 2023: 10).

Today, concerns over the digitised spread of misinformation and disinformation makes it tempting to see narratives in a similar light, and to frame them in opposition to empirical, ‘evidence-based’ policymaking. This is not what this study is seeking to do. It instead recognises that, regardless of whether we may find particular coverage or stories ‘good’ or ‘bad’, all narratives to an extent pick particular facts and string them together to make a compelling whole, in a similar manner to a constellation connecting individual stars to make a recognisable image. Rather than being an undesirable process in opposition to empirical evidence, narrative-making is an essential part of effective advocacy and communication in the sector.

Narratives are not solely created by the news media, nor need they necessarily be ‘public-facing’ in order to be influential. In the humanitarian sector, narratives that set out the values and histories of institutions and organisations circulate between staff and bind together otherwise disparate
groupings across the world. These, too, are influential: despite the fact that it is often in the interests of humanitarians to downplay the size and complexity of their own organisations and responses – in order to raise funds and protect their independence – aid providers are not just passive recipients of external messaging but have power to set narratives of their own (Saez and Bryant, 2023). Every call for funding following a crisis is a demonstration of the sector’s power to set stories and prescribe humanitarian assistance as an effective relief to suffering.

Yet assessing the impact of narratives on decision-making, policy and practice can be difficult. As ‘the water that we swim in’ and use to make sense of the world, many foundational narratives around societies, agency and power can prove difficult to assess in any objective sense since observers, including this paper’s authors, are immersed in them (Taylor, 2021). In addition, establishing causation – saying definitively that a particular argument was responsible for a particular shift in policy – is an impossible proposition. However, through studying how such arguments were created and used, useful insights can still be drawn around respective actors and how policy change is carried out.

1.2 Methodology and objectives

This research is one of three case studies in a two-year project titled *Remaking aid: ethics, politics and narratives*, which explores both how different narratives shape humanitarian decision-making and how this process can be influenced to better serve people in crises.

Cash as a tool of humanitarian assistance is viewed as one of the few successful changes within the aid system’s policy and practice in the past two decades. This study sought to explain which narratives and counter-narratives influenced the shift toward cash in humanitarian policy and practice, as well as who constructed these narratives and why. Since understanding how the adoption and growth of humanitarian cash transfers occurred has lessons for the prospects of wider changes in humanitarian aid, the study also explored the impact of the cash debate on other key narratives in the sector, and whether those lessons could be applied to drive agendas such as ‘localisation’.

To answer these questions, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with cash experts and key informants across donor/government representatives, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies, and supplemented them with a desk review of academic and grey literature.
2 The use of narratives in humanitarian cash reform

2.1 The context: cash in the humanitarian sector

This paper does not aim to give an exhaustive history of the evidence base for cash, which can be found elsewhere (Bailey and Harvey, 2015; CALP, 2021; Gentilini, 2023). Rather, it focuses on and makes explicit the often neglected study of the other side of successful change; namely, how that evidence was used and framed. This chapter sets out the wider context and particular moments in the past two decades that helped shape many of the narratives used by advocates and detractors in the cash agenda. Figure 1 illustrates the growth of cash and voucher humanitarian assistance as a share of overall international humanitarian assistance between 2017 and 2022.

Figure 1 Estimated volume of cash and voucher assistance as part of total international humanitarian assistance, 2017-2022

Source: Adapted from CALP (2023: 32)
Note: Based on current prices.
While cash was arguably still a fringe agenda within the international humanitarian sector in the 2000s, this was far from the case for social protection schemes across the world. At this time, large-scale cash schemes for low-income households had been recently launched by progressive governments in Mexico (Oportunidades, later renamed Progresa) and Brazil (Bolsa Familia), in a validation of much of the foundational work of economists including Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen who argued for small-scale cash transfers to individuals for poverty reduction and empowerment (1989).

There had also been instances of cash distribution in earlier crisis responses, such as famine relief. The Red Cross during the Franco-Prussian war in the 1870s and colonial British authorities in Sudan in 1948 provide isolated examples of cash being disbursed as part of aid provision, though humanitarian assistance has remained confined largely to the direct provision of food and in-kind goods and services in the previous century (Keen, 1992; Harvey and Bailey, 2015). In the 1990s, international humanitarian organisations like ActionAid (in Ghana in 1994) and Save the Children (in Bangladesh in 1998) began to carry out small-scale cash disbursement initiatives.

Larger-scale humanitarian responses since 2000 have been seen as conducive to an acceleration of cash adoption in the sector. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami remains one of the world’s deadliest disasters; the availability of unearmarked funding and the presence of functioning markets in its aftermath cultivated the optimal environment for experimentation with cash-based interventions (Doocy et al., 2008). In this period, the British Red Cross and other organisations pioneered the use of cash assistance, leveraging favourable conditions to demonstrate its viability and effectiveness (Harvey and Bailey, 2015). The success of these initiatives was drawn on in arguing for cash within the sector, and helped set precedents that showed that cash could work at scale.

The early 2010s proved pivotal, with two large-scale responses prominently featuring cash assistance: a Somalia-centred famine in the Horn of Africa in 2011, and the Syrian refugee response centred on Lebanon and Jordan. In Somalia, the World Food Programme (WFP)’s inability to operate in areas controlled by al-Shabab drove alternative approaches, leading to the adoption of cash programmes by some NGOs and on a smaller scale through the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (Dunn et al., 2013). This crisis marked a turning point for cash, helping it gain ‘a degree of respectability’ among donors (in the words of one interviewee), and demonstrated its potential as a versatile tool in complex emergency situations. The success of cash interventions during this period prompted donors to consider their applicability in other crises. Indeed, what was the United Kingdom (UK)’s Department for International Development (DFID) at the time played a pivotal role in the expansion of cash through its initiatives targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan in the early years of the Syrian conflict (Bailey and Harvey, 2017a). DFID’s involvement not only showcased the scalability of cash interventions but also highlighted the approach’s adaptability to protracted crisis contexts (ibid.).

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) was the first high-level policy forum of its kind for the sector. Tangible commitments from many of the largest organisations acted as a vehicle for momentum over the subsequent five years, with preparatory documents setting much of the prevailing tone for the summit itself. Most prominently, the language used by then-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon – ‘why
not cash’ – became a rallying cry for many cash advocates. Arguably, much of the momentum had been established prior to the WHS: the value of assistance delivered in the form of cash and vouchers between 2015 and 2016 had increased by 40% (CALP, 2018). But the summit provided added impetus for many of the sector’s commitments and subsequent crisis responses, eventually leading to cash featuring far more prominently as a default in the large response to the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022 (Rieger, 2022).

These crises and the responses that followed them are seen as important markers that drove forward the cash debate. Urgent and large-scale needs were met with increased resources but also a greater tolerance for experimentation and perceived ‘innovative solutions’. These crises have been framed as part of the ‘enabling context’ or ‘environmental factors’ for cash in the aid system (Kreidler and Taylor, 2022: 8). While not disputing these factors, this study also adds that the case for cash was not self-evident and that the agenda had to be actively driven by cash advocates.

### 2.2 Key narratives and what worked

Narratives that sought to increase the use of cash in the humanitarian sector included arguments that its adoption would be positive for both pragmatic and more idealistic, or moral, reasons. This section makes these narratives explicit and highlights (where possible) the context in which they were used and by whom. Their successes and respective impacts are harder to determine – a key challenge of narrative analysis more broadly. Yet, as we outline, the way cash is understood today in the sector gives an indication as to how influential these proposals and framings were in advocating for it.

#### 2.2.1 ‘Cash is more efficient than in-kind assistance’

This narrative posits that cash assistance, by virtue of its flexibility, enables programme participants to access a wide range of goods and services, thereby enhancing the overall efficacy of aid delivery. According to Venton et al. (2015), comparative studies have consistently demonstrated that cash is more cost-effective than in-kind distributions, and is uniquely placed to enable value-for-money gains in the humanitarian system, often resulting in significant cost savings and reduced logistical overheads. In other words, it usually costs less to give people cash than food (ibid.). In addition, since cash provides a flexible means of buying food or other essentials to meet needs in crisis, this avoids the common process of people selling food aid in order to receive cash to then buy something else (ECHO, 2009; Bailey and Harvey, 2017b; Hellberg, 2018). This builds upon earlier studies emphasising that lower overhead costs for the aid provider and avoiding the costs at each stage of the in-kind process all improve efficiency (see, for example, Ali et al., 2005).

The narrative of cash as a more efficient form of aid began gaining traction within major donor agencies and governments, particularly within DFID. From 1997 until its closure and replacement by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in 2020, the role of DFID was highlighted as a forward advocate, funder and thought leader in promoting cash transfers as part of a broader strategy to enhance the impact and efficiency of humanitarian aid. Interviews with FCDO staff suggested
various narratives were drawn on and utilised through the initial advocacy stages for cash assistance, emphasising the significance of both internal and external narratives in pushing for greater adoption. Arguments that were used by these UK donors to persuade agencies and humanitarian actors centred around value for money and efficiency. This external narrative was partially driven by the desire to ‘trim the fat’ within the humanitarian system and gained traction among UK ministers, particularly around cutting waste and involving the private sector more heavily in humanitarian aid. While evidence from both the literature and pilot schemes suggested that the potential cost-efficiencies of cash could mitigate perceptions of waste within the humanitarian sector (Harvey, 2007: 54), United States (US) donors with their strong links to the powerful US agribusiness lobby and WFP – the primary delivery organisation for in-kind assistance globally – were described as being far more hesitant (Clapp and Fuchs, 2009; Provost and Lawrence, 2012). There, the transition to cash was much less straightforward, and according to one interviewee, ‘not an easy thing to support’, given legal blockages and the strong concern of a potential backlash.

Sector-wide discussions about involving the private sector and cutting waste were coupled with broader concerns about the sustainability of humanitarian funding. When taken together, efficiency became a key selling point for cash transfers, aligning with wider governmental and donor priorities focused on maximising the impact of limited resources. This perspective was reinforced by global developments that led to increasing numbers of prolonged humanitarian crises (UNHCR, 2021). Where humanitarian needs exceeded available resources, the narrative was that more people can be reached using the same means (Tappis and Doocy, 2018: 121). As these ideas gained currency, they influenced policies and operational strategies across the humanitarian sector, leading to a gradual but significant shift towards cash-based interventions (OECD, 2017). The primacy of the efficiency argument was repeatedly emphasised by interviewees, who highlighted the contrast between the often externally facing focus on more ‘moralistic’ arguments and more pragmatic internal narratives. As one interviewee described: ‘We only talk about dignity and empowerment as this trump card but efficiency and innovation from [the] perspective of donors is the main thing.’

2.2.2 ‘Cash delivers choice and agency’

The narrative that cash provides choice and agency, unlike in-kind aid, has been prominent in humanitarian literature for decades. Early works for the sector by Peppiatt et al. (2001) and Oxfam (2001) highlighted the advantage of cash assistance in providing their programme participants with choice. This perspective suggested that people who receive cash are better able to participate in community life and to do so with greater dignity. The notion that cash enables decision-making power and autonomy for aid-programme participants, inherently offering a more dignified approach, gained further traction in subsequent literature, though its association with ‘dignity’ – a far more complex and contentious concept to tie to any aid programme – is now looked at far more critically (Ali et al., 2005: 11; Harvey and Bailey, 2011: 61).

International NGOs, particularly Save the Children and Oxfam, have been at the forefront of promoting cash assistance as choice (Devereux and Jere, 2008). Comparisons likening recipients to customers
collecting money from banks, as opposed to the image of participants of inherently disempowering aid programmes receiving food, have also been cited as reinforcing this image of cash transfers (Harvey, 2007: 40). This capacity of cash to restore choice and agency has been cited by advocates as the most morally compelling argument for the rise of cash (CALP, 2021). Unlike with arguments around efficiency, this narrative shifts the focus from the humanitarian sector to the affected communities in need, emphasising their autonomy and capacities. Such a perspective is integral to debates on programme quality and localisation, described metaphorically by one interviewee as a ‘Trojan horse’ that redefines aid delivery priorities by centring affected people.

Practical benefits, too, can also be reframed as being beneficial in similar ways. Scholars such as Pugh (2011) and Jabri (2013) suggest the usual in-kind approach ultimately stems from a colonial outlook within the humanitarian and peacebuilding sectors, and that colonial practice to remove agency from ‘subjects’ has been carried forward into international norms that govern how international actors plan interventions and programmes. This works to portray affected people as helpless and incapable of making their own decisions. In contrast, the flexibility of cash assistance may increase efficiency and ‘value for money’ for donors, but also translates into choice for ‘consumers’ as opposed to a distant system assuming, or at least distantly assessing, what needs are (ECHO, 2009; Bailey and Harvey, 2017b; Hellberg, 2018). Cash enables affected people to act as independent economic agents, thereby increasing their decision-making power and providing a ‘dignity of choice’ (Bailey and Harvey, 2017b).

Seeing people in need as ‘clients’ or ‘consumers’ of services rather than as ‘victims’ prompts a fundamental shift in thinking around humanitarian aid. Barnett (2005) argues that this perspective promotes less predefined aid and more choice in services, empowering programme participants. Whether through an envelope of cash, a plastic card or a digital money transfer, cash programmes respect and enhance the freedom of choice for affected people (Kent et al., 2013). Such rationale aligns with a consumerist logic: that dignity is reflected in the ability to consume according to individual preferences, with cash providing people with more control over their lives. Here, cash acquires the meaning of freedom, individual choice, and often dignity, connecting with discussions on how cash transfers are part of the wider marketisation of the humanitarian sector (Barnett, 2005, 2011; Hopgood, 2005; Carbonnier, 2015; Fiori et al., 2016).

In considering the relative influence of this narrative in driving forward the sector’s cash debates, it is helpful to consider both timing and audience. The majority of interviewees tended to emphasise that it was the more ‘pragmatic’ narratives of efficiency that arrived in influential spaces earliest, with these more ‘moral’ arguments only gaining prominence later. Some suggested even a ‘retrofitting’, whereby claims to choice, agency and empowerment were only added once efficiency and access had successfully framed cash as a technical modality. However, more than timing, it is audience that appears the main determinant of whether these more moral narratives were most prominent. Cash in the humanitarian sector had its pilot schemes in primarily international NGOs that tended to emphasise their potential for greater freedom of choice and so ‘delivering dignity’ to respondents. The primary barrier crossed was the scale delivered by far larger humanitarian entities like UN agencies and donors,
which, though sympathetic to such moral arguments, were ultimately ‘won over’ by efficiency, for at least one interviewee. Amongst this process, benefits to dignity and choice ‘were part of the debate, but did not win it’.

2.2.3 ‘Cash will transform the humanitarian system’

The humanitarian system, despite its extensive reach and impact, has faced ongoing criticism for being overly paternalistic, bureaucratic and ambitious in its goals (DuBois, 2018). Scholars such as Allen et al. (2018) identify a prolonged and public identity crisis within the sector, highlighting persistent obstacles that undermine its effectiveness. In response to increasing demands for more efficient, effective and professional humanitarian aid, organisations have faced pressure from both internal critiques and the political agendas of donor governments to become more rational and streamlined (Barnett, 2011; Carbonnier, 2015).

In this regard, some proponents viewed the introduction of cash as a transformative force within this paternalistic system, signalling a third set of potential narratives that were used during the cash debates. Like arguments over dignity and choice, such arguments highlighted the inequities of the current system, but rather than focusing on only benefits for programme participants, it emphasised the system itself as being in need of disruption. By challenging the traditional ‘supply-side’ model of aid, which is often dictated by the political and economic interests of donors and the set mandates of aid actors rather than the actual needs of affected communities, cash transfers offered a break to this conventional model, moving away from in-kind assistance towards a system that empowers participants with the autonomy to decide how best to meet their needs.

The transformational potential of cash assistance is highlighted by its ability to disrupt established practices and structures within the humanitarian system. Peppiatt et al. (2001) have previously highlighted this dual potential of cash, pointing out the contradiction between rhetoric of empowerment with the reality of needs being dictated by external agencies and donors. As noted by DFID and the Cash Learning Partnership (CALP), cash transfers were seen as a tool for transformation, particularly in the period leading up to the WHS in 2016 (Bennett, 2023). This was an internal narrative for some key donors, acknowledging that while cash could significantly improve efficiency and timeliness, it also posed a challenge to traditional power dynamics and operational models within aid organisations. This was seen as desirable – a means to circumvent what was perceived as a bloated and inefficient aid system that had opaque and often seemingly arbitrary ways of measuring need and distributing assistance. In contrast, interviewees argued that cash transfers were framed as offering the means to foster a more responsive and adaptable humanitarian system and, potentially, to eliminate the need for large aid actors altogether – since cash distribution could be taken on by, for example, financial institutions.

Many of these more disruptive avenues for cash are still being explored, including links to social protection schemes as well as anticipatory action and locally led climate-adaptation initiatives. These include community cash grants, a key channel by which climate-adaptation funding can be shifted to
a more local level. Those advocating for such transformation through cash can take comfort from the idea that the humanitarian sector’s firm hold on cash was not always guaranteed. Yet at key moments, pushback from humanitarian agencies proved fierce – for example, following propositions by DFID and the European Union European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) to separate out assessment, delivery and monitoring functions in cash programmes in Lebanon, which would have effectively opened the door to a broader range of actors than the traditional humanitarian agencies in the cash space.

The promise of system transformation through cash proved an influential narrative for some of the key actors that initially pushed for change, such as DFID and ECHO. Yet as evidenced by how cash programmes work today in the humanitarian system, its disruptive potential has not been realised to any significant degree, and the narrative of ‘cash as transformation’ has certainly diminished since the highpoint of the WHS. That it has lessened in importance is at least in part a consequence of effective counter-narratives that influenced much of the debate around cash reform, and continue to shape how cash programming is done in the sector today.

2.3 Counter-narratives and the case against

Despite the growing support for cash in the humanitarian sector over the years, numerous counter-narratives have emerged either before pushes for reform, or as a response to some of the arguments that were used to lobby for the wider adoption of cash assistance in the system. These counter-narratives reflect a range of concerns from various actors about the efficacy, practicality and ideological foundations of cash, and they reveal the complexities of transitioning from traditional models of assistance in a system that is overly reliant on bureaucratic processes. Many counter-narratives stem from genuine concerns about aid effectiveness and are still active debates. Others must be seen in the context of resistance from powerful actors whose operating model was threatened by a wholesale shift to cash.

Harvey (2007) noted that the question of why international relief remains dominated by in-kind assistance is not new, and indeed a ‘resilient suspicion’ of cash support was cited as far back as Drèze and Sen (1989). One of the earliest and most persistent counter-narratives revolves around the concern that cash will be misused and misspent by programme participants. Critics argued that affected people might spend cash on non-essential or harmful items such as alcohol and drugs. Elements of this were strongly gendered, with the accusation that men were far more likely to spend money irresponsibly and tended to have far greater autonomy over spending decisions than women in families. Overcoming this narrative, for cash advocates, was attributed to a ‘collective weight’ of various studies, such as those by Devereux et al. (2005) and Evans and Popova (2014), that worked to shift the dial on the perceptions of participant spending, showing strong evidence that affected people generally make careful and strategic decisions to meet their needs, and that concerns that cash will be used on so-called ‘temptation goods’ are ‘unfounded’ (ibid: 14; Harvey, 2007). Evidence from interviews shows that while there is a general sense that this concern has indeed declined in prominence as a serious argument among donors and UN agencies, it is still put forward as an argument against cash by various actors, including host governments and those outside the humanitarian sector.
That cash in and of itself constituted an inappropriate means of spending aid money, regardless of how participants spend it, was also a counterargument that briefly gained mainstream prominence. A 2017 Daily Mail article framed the rollout of a cash relief programme in Pakistan as ‘exporting the dole’ and led to then-Prime Minister Theresa May highlighting the ‘robust systems in place to make sure that they are not being exploited for fraud and corruption’ (Mail Online, 2017; Merrick, 2017). At the time (and prior to the effective media engagement of GiveDirectly, which has found global audiences for humanitarian cash in the Economist, Washington Post and New York Times more recently) it was a rare example of a mainstream media outlet noting the humanitarian cash agenda. The Daily Mail remains an influential voice: as of 2024, its related website is the world’s sixth most visited news website, with 370 million monthly views (Majid, 2024). It is also still an influential voice for UK political and policymaking audiences, with the ‘Daily Mail effect’ acting as a real or perceived brake on progressive policymaking, and whose interventions can suddenly sway the opinions of ministers. In this case, this story remains a one-off outlier and, though detrimental, was not overly influential in changing the overall trajectory of cash adoption in the sector. Indeed, interviewees involved in advocating for cash expressed their surprise that there was not more pushback from such sources. They attributed this to not only a lack of a concerted campaign by media sources as had been seen with other humanitarian issues, but also the robustness of the response by the government, which had already been convinced of the value of cash in delivering efficiency while matching rigorous accountability standards.

That cash was considered a modality of aid more prone to being misused was a key barrier to the willingness of major donors to fully embrace cash initially, according to some interviewees. Such an argument also extended beyond the levels of individual households to geopolitics, and a more general concern as to the likelihood of cash being diverted to undesirable groups such as terrorist organisations and corrupt regimes. Interviewees spoke of countering these accusations with both careful use of the ‘collective weight of evidence’ but also emphasis on the rigour and extent of monitoring and evaluation processes around spending to mitigate such diversion, a process that quickly became easier with the adoption of digital money transfers that could more readily be tracked. In this way, it is also worth considering the extent to which such a counter-argument was ‘overcome’ at all. Concerns around misuse and diversion continue to frame a sector-wide focus on quantifying impact and reporting outcomes, as well a large third-party monitoring industry (Diepeveen et al., 2022). That cash is also subject to those processes demonstrates that many of the initial concerns of diversions from donors have been accepted and mitigated, rather than necessarily challenged.

The State of the world’s cash report highlights that ‘explicit resistance’ to cash among donors is becoming increasingly rare today (CALP, 2023: 37). This is supportive of the idea that some of the key counter-arguments are less prominent due to arguments being effectively ‘won’. In analysing narratives, however, it is important to differentiate between arguments put forward by organisations into wider debates and those that remain internal. The idea that ‘public’ objections around, for example, misuse hid more self-interested objections was a common theme in interviews. This included not only a desire to preserve mandates and market share, but perhaps also a deeper ideological though ‘rarely acknowledged’ belief that aid agencies see themselves as better positioned to determine what people in crisis need than affected people do themselves (Harvey, 2007: 54). For one NGO interviewee, this belief
is expressed in many of the humanitarian standards that work to reinforce notions of aid actors as ‘custodians’, and the more widespread attempts to exclude sectors like shelter from the cash debate on the grounds that predefined goods and services are perceived as more reliable (CALP, 2023). Though many of these objections to cash continue to exist in the sector, any arguments appealing to self-interest obviously had limited use outside of humanitarian organisations themselves.

Understanding the range of counter-narratives put to cash advocates is important because it offers lessons as to how the sector perceives change and adapts. For cash, it is certainly the case that more ‘moralistic’ objections on how recipients spend money appear to have declined in prominence and are rarely raised overtly in established humanitarian forums. Whether this is a product of this narrative being effectively challenged or actually accepted and accounted for within a monitored aid system is less clear.

2.4 The impact of narratives on cash now

Analysing the relative importance and success of narratives in this case is significant for both understanding better what works in a complex system resistant to change, and also how it has shaped current approaches to humanitarian cash. Considering the legacy of these narratives on humanitarian cash today raises two key points: the degree to which cash has been effectively subsumed into an existing humanitarian system, and the perception of cash as a largely ‘settled’ debate that has been ‘won’, with both likely impacting cash’s future place and growth in aid.

Whether cash has proven transformational to the humanitarian sector was disputed among interviewees. On the one hand, the scale of cash adoption across the sector in a relatively short period of time is indisputable and its beneficial impact on aid-programme participants recognised, even in circumstances previously considered too difficult for cash including in circumstances of protracted conflict or with low levels of enabling technology adoption. Previous organisations considered holdouts to cash adoption by many interviewees are now its largest deliverers. WFP’s adoption of cash has expanded dramatically from $10 million in 2009 to $2.1 billion in 2019 (Slim, 2022: 162). UN agencies account for 66% of the total cash and voucher assistance distributed in 2022 – albeit with the caveat that a lack of downstream tracking of funding means the contributions of local actors are often hidden (CALP, 2023: 33).

On the other hand, the ability of cash to change the fundamentals of the humanitarian system and facilitate a new, more equitable model of delivering assistance has been far less successful. The sector’s more deep-rooted narratives remain undisturbed by the adoption of cash; its ‘systemic issues’ are still entrenched (Kreidler and Taylor, 2022: 5). Narratives of deserving and grateful ‘recipients’ benefitting from the altruism of enlightened aid providers remain and may have simply been reinforced, such as in suggestions that cash ‘bestows dignity’ on people. Cash in its current form still centres the aid giver as the agent of change, and in a sector entirely dependent on voluntary support and discretionary donations from governments, will remain so as long as this model endures.
Among the strongest indication that cash has been transformed into a tool of the humanitarian sector are choices around language and categorisations. Indeed the ‘exceptionalism’ of the sector, which conveys the idea that exceptional crisis events require self-contained humanitarian responses provided by an exclusive group of actors and that sit above and outside politics, is a long-standing and highly resilient narrative. It has proven so effective that the idea of currency – something that, aside from some limited examples, is common to every human society across recorded history – is referred to as ‘humanitarian cash transfers’ in the sector’s crisis response, duly monitored and measured for appropriate spending (Saez and Bryant, 2023: 20). This has strangely persisted despite ‘cash’ in the form of physical paper banknotes being largely left behind in favour of digital transfers. For interviewees, explanations as to why these terms remained were varied, but some suggested their utility as initial group identifiers helped drive a critical mass that proved important in the early years of narrative-setting. However, this was also seen as a limitation, with ‘cash experts’ being framed as a technical set that worked to isolate ‘humanitarian cash’ from complementary initiatives and functions. This is now especially critical, as social protection schemes in many countries far surpass any humanitarian programme in scale but their channels often remain distinct from the sector, limiting eventual handover and expansion.

Categorisation decisions also illustrate the humanitarian sector’s shaping of cash narratives. Combining cash – in the language of the sector, sometimes ‘unconditional cash transfers’ or ‘multipurpose cash assistance’ – with vouchers (restricted tokens to be exchanged with specified vendors, some exchanged for fixed quantities of assistance) remains common in reporting. It works to conflate an effectively separate means of in-kind assistance, in which the advantages are largely to the benefit of the aid providers, with cash, whose case was driven forward at least partly by the proposition that these systems provided choice and dignity to affected people. Despite the disaggregation of cash and vouchers being considered a minimum requirement when tracking, their frequent conflation works to confuse the assessment of progress, including in the overall sector-level adoption of cash (CALP, 2023: 34). This conflation also allows governments to provide assistance in the form of restricted vouchers, even in cases where markets are functioning and, in the words of one interviewee, ‘the case for cash is clear’.

Perhaps one further indication of cash’s limited transformative effect has been its framing as ‘a modality, not an outcome’ (i.e. it is one way to meet humanitarian needs and not inherently ‘good’). This has been used in defence of the direction of cash within the humanitarian system and, while accurate, has continued to frame cash as a fundamentally technical tool divorced from the debates around power inequities that were a feature of the first arguments for cash adoption in the sector. The observation that the sector’s largest organisations remain the same before and after the expansion of cash is indicative of a lack of system transformation, as is the idea that the key demands in sector reform – greater accountability to and participation of affected people in aid programmes, and more support and funding for local actors – remain the same over two decades since they rose to prominence (Saez and Bryant, 2023). The system still lacks sufficient consultation with communities of affected people (CALP, 2023: 17). Such ‘non-transformative solutions’ have been compared with the...
technocratic solutions proposed to alleviate the climate crisis (Saez and Bryant, 2023: 15). That cash is now considered a ‘channel for reform, not reform itself’ is also indicative of a particular direction for cash reform that potentially traded scale for transformative potential (Bennett, 2023).

Today, the extent to which cash is considered a broadly ‘settled’ debate within the sector is also illustrative of how narratives at play during its initial adoption have impacted how it is currently framed. A common concern among interviewees was that the argument for cash was broadly perceived to have been ‘won’ in the humanitarian sector, with counter-arguments against its adoption limited to either newer donors in the sector or host governments. The broad consensus was characterised as ‘it’s a morally right thing to do, and should be tried wherever possible’. Indeed, some criticism was levelled at cash advocates seen as over-selling its importance: its presentation as a ‘silver bullet’ for all of the sector’s injustices are seen as inaccurate. Whether perceiving cash as a ‘settled’ debate stifles the potential for future growth is not clear, but concerns over it being de-prioritised and its rate of adoption now less closely monitored appeared accurate when put to interviewees representing several key humanitarian donors.

The terminology and categories used by the humanitarian sector around cash may appear technical but are still full of normative content that suggest narratives remain influential in framing dominant opinion on issues of deservingness and control. Yet this is not an academic exercise, because leaving such narratives around concepts like conditionality intact – for instance, inferring that aid-programme participants are deserving because they will make wise spending decisions – makes cash vulnerable to new narratives, perhaps involving abuse of aid or diversion, and thus susceptible to being taken away again. The continued prominence of the populist right in the democracies of the world’s largest donors means a possible return to governments raising more ‘moralistic’ objections to cash, such as on recipient spending habits, as grounds to shift back to in-kind assistance.
3 What can we learn from this example of narratives and reform in the humanitarian sector?

The story of cash adoption within the humanitarian sector does have some unique elements that limit the applicability of its lessons to other agendas. The particular configuration of advocates within humanitarian organisations, its ‘collective weight of evidence’, and complementary narratives around efficiency and dignity helped drive it forward. This may prove a difficult combination to recreate in other agendas, for example in localisation, which has its own unique narratives around power in the humanitarian system that has influenced who its narrative-setters are and its willing audiences. Yet there are a number of more general takeaways from the experience of cash that serve as lessons for using narratives for reform in the sector more generally. They include the trade-offs of a ‘technical’ over political framing, the relative simplicity around messaging, the use of and reference to evidence, and the multiplicity of narratives at work depending on audience.

The cash agenda was driven forward by narratives appealing to both improved efficiency and greater dignity and choice for affected people. Yet the general consensus among interviewees was that the latter narrative became less influential within the sector for key powerful entities, and that a more ‘technical’ framing of cash, rather than one emphasising its transformative nature, became dominant and still impacts how the sector carries out such work today. During its initial period of relatively rapid growth in the sector, this technical framing worked, such as its framing as a practical solution to food aid restrictions in Somalia in 2011. There, cash continued to be framed as a technical and pragmatic fix to a problem, rather than an inherently good transformation. This shift in emphasis continued to have benefits in framing cash as a less threatening agenda to actors who correctly recognised that a more radical pivot away from in-kind assistance had the potential to threaten the fundamentals of their operating model and the size of their budgets. In fact, the balance may have gone too far in the opposite direction for cash: a lack of frankness around such a change not necessarily being positive for everyone, and that skilled specialists could lose roles and the sector could lose money, was judged to not be effectively communicated with cash, to the agenda’s detriment (Tholstrup, 2023).

Replicating that technical framing with other reform agendas in the humanitarian sector is likely to be a more difficult proposition. For example, participation and localisation agendas confront injustices around power inequities far more directly. Among frequent criticisms of the sector’s progress on such agendas are that they have been effectively ‘depoliticised’ and relegated to tick-box processes during projects at the expense of ‘shifting power’ and more dramatic systemic change. Like them, cash adoption shows the sector’s preference toward limiting political conflict and continuing operations by not rocking the boat and instead improving ‘at the margins’ (Gentilini, 2023). Overcoming the instinct to revert to a technical process is likely to be very difficult within a complex sector like the humanitarian sector.
system without significant ‘external’ pressure from donors and new disruptive forces, but the risk of not doing so is arguably on display with how cash is now utilised in the sector, with its transformative potential not yet realised.

The simplicity of messaging around cash was cited as a key positive attribute for driving the agenda forward. ‘Just giving cash to people’ was intuitive and appealing to both audiences sceptical of a bloated aid industry and those interested in furthering the choices and agency of crisis-affected people. The degree to which that can be replicated for at least some of the sector’s other pressing reform agendas is likely limited. The audience in the case of cash could also be characterised as more ‘within’ the sector, such as in the case of donors, though ministers and other lawmakers were seen as a key non-specialist audience won over through this intuitive messaging.

What makes understanding the effectiveness of straightforward messaging interesting in the cash example is the degree to which the debate largely took place away from mainstream media attention. Excluding occasionally reactive stories of ‘exporting the dole’, mainstream coverage was limited, ‘notable by its absence’ according to one interviewee. This likely allowed cash advocates greater freedom in which to shape a compelling case rather than needing to react to externally driven narratives. Whether greater news coverage is always necessarily better for humanitarian interests and driving change is ambiguous: vital for fundraising or public advocacy, it can also lead to a more erratic reform process that can quickly lose momentum once attention has dissipated. In other areas, such as in advocating for an increase in humanitarian funding in the case of Germany, simple messages put into the public space around ‘aid to stop migration’ proved counterproductive in the longer term (Kreidler et al., 2023). By contrast, the case of cash appears relatively insular, which, though advantageous in building a common understanding more easily, may also again have contributed to a less transformative outcome than initially envisaged.

The role of evidence in the cash debate also likely carries with it lessons for other change agendas in the humanitarian sector. The evidence base for cash was described by interviewees as fundamental in driving the legitimacy of the argument for its greater adoption. While individual studies and reports were very influential during particular moments, it can also be seen that a kind of ‘collective weight of evidence’ became itself a supportive element of the pro-cash narrative that likely carried more than the sum of its parts. For arguments relying on increased efficiency, this was especially important, and when combined with high-level policy advocacy this collective evidence drove change.

This has lessons for other agendas because it reinforces the idea that evidence is necessary but not sufficient for policy change. There is also a risk that, while evidence can be enabling, calls for more evidence can also be used effectively as brakes on ambitious policymaking by those who may be invested in retaining a status quo. The fact that cash had to overcome what was described as a particularly high bar to prove its worth compared with the alternative in-kind aid demonstrates that the impact of new initiatives should also be balanced with similar assessments of current ways of working. There continue to be calls for more evidence on the impact of cash (Trako and Jeong, 2022), perhaps highlighting the need for advocates to draw a line under evidence-gathering processes and know when a case is made (Tholstrup, 2023).
A further lesson that could be learned from the cash experience is the need to embrace a plurality of narratives to drive reform with a diverse group of powerful actors. While this work had initially intended to plot how narratives have changed around cash over time since it was proposed at scale in the sector, the relationship between particular narratives and their prominence over time appears prohibitively complicated to try to ascertain any lessons for other agendas. Narratives clearly take time to propagate among large global audiences and this happens at different speeds. For an issue like cash away from mainstream media and involving a relatively small audience, narratives were generally slow to gain prominence, and this makes isolating particular narratives in time a difficult task. Even prominent counter-narratives, such as objections to cash on the basis that recipients will spend money irresponsibly, are almost certainly less prominent among some key humanitarian stakeholders but were reported as persisting today among other audiences such as host governments.

Rather than one narrative changing over time, it is apparent that different narratives were at work simultaneously, depending on particular advocates, and what mattered far more was audience. For supporters like DFID, that cash could be a disrupter proved a compelling message as part of a wider transformative agenda, while humanitarian organisations emphasised dignity and choice in their own internal advocacy. Influential policymakers in donor governments heard and contributed to a balance of narratives that tended to emphasise arguments of efficiency but also drew on longer-standing ideas of ‘empowerment’ of aid users as a beneficial secondary impact of cash. A key strength of the agenda was that it was able to draw on both groups of narratives simultaneously, even though they had different emphases. It carries lessons for other agendas that, while all narratives should be informed by evidence and be consistent with humanitarian values, multiple stories at work at once can have a positive role in convincing diverse audiences.

In analysing what works for using narratives effectively for change, it should also be acknowledged that who is setting, reinforcing or challenging narratives is often central to how successful they will be. Narrative change has been described as depending on the ability of individuals and coalitions to modify opinions, to ‘collectively de-legitimise one set of ideas and legitimise an alternative set’ (Hudson et al., 2018). It cannot be avoided in analysing this process that the voices themselves can often be perceived as having varying degrees of ‘legitimacy’ in different forums, and this is especially prominent in the humanitarian sector, where the impact of neocolonial and racist attitudes and structures continues to be felt even as such inequalities are becoming more prominently highlighted. This too is of central importance for understanding narratives since established notions about who is considered a ‘humanitarian’ and who can uphold principles like impartiality – on the whole, white international staff from western countries – also inform which voices are legitimate in discussions around policy reform and innovation. Some interviewees proposed that it was only when international NGOs and donors co-opted already existing narratives and evidence common to the broader humanitarian community that substantive progress on cash was made. For those staff members working in the system, that cash has since retained much of the humanitarian terminology and apparatus of the sector is evidence of a lack of transformation and instead highlights that the shift has happened with the consent, and the benefit, of existing powerful actors.
4 Conclusion and recommendations

While the particular narratives around cash have unique elements that cannot be easily replicated for other agendas, it is also the case that simple, compelling messaging, the use of and reference to evidence, and different narratives at work simultaneously were all great assets in driving the change forward in the sector. That cash has risen from a negligible amount to almost 20% of the value of international humanitarian assistance in a relatively short period of time is a considerable achievement for cash advocates, researchers and policymakers across the humanitarian sector who have had to confront ingrained narratives around mandates, crisis-affected people and the identity of the humanitarian sector itself.

The cash agenda has lessons for more ambitious ones like participation, localisation, decolonisation and evolving humanitarian strategies for the climate crisis, because it has both successes in terms of scale and also trade-offs in terms of its transformative potential. It demonstrates the ability of the humanitarian sector to adapt and co-opt seemingly existentially dangerous threats to its current way of working. Yet, the way in which ‘humanitarian cash’ works today is suggestive of a less transformative shift than what was initially debated. The relevance of this is twofold. First, the way the aid system absorbs seemingly disruptive reforms raises questions as to whether it will ever willingly concede power to the extent required for ambitions like localisation. Second, change without transformation is fragile. An adoption of another modality that does not challenge underlying narratives – in this case, deep-seated ideas in the humanitarian sector that are grounded in old ideas about benevolent providers changing the lives of passive and grateful recipients – has the risk of backsliding in the case of a change in political priorities in donor countries.

Deeper narrative change takes far more time than individual campaigns and this makes it especially difficult for a humanitarian sector reliant on short-term funding and high staff turnover. Enacting such changes requires moving above the default means of assessing success in the sector – measurable, quantifiable project outcomes – and engaging with ‘a more radical transformation of the rules of the game’ (Taylor, 2021: 49). Starting such a process could include organisations working to:

- **Support greater ‘narrative literacy’, and reflecting on the longer-term impact of each public-facing communication and message.** Humanitarian organisations are not passive recipients of external narratives but authoritative voices that have a central role in narrative-making. When doing so, organisations should ask: what existing narratives are being reinforced or challenged? Are the messages and advocacy consistent with the humanitarian organisation’s own commitments to supporting locally led action and greater participation of affected people, and its other stated values?

- **Engage directly and with regularity with affected people, who should be encouraged to feed back into, and impact the design of, aid programmes.** The means by which affected people can
participate in the design of humanitarian programmes and policy is extremely limited. This has contributed to an exclusive set of incentives and interests informing narratives that have set the boundaries for how cash has been adopted in the sector. Regular community feedback as a system-wide performance benchmark should be enshrined in shared policy commitments to ensure such interests are consciously considered when adopting new processes, technologies and policy.

- **Reflect carefully on the framing of fundamentally political processes and policies as ‘technical’, which is itself a narrative.** The humanitarian sector reverts to such language for understandable reasons in situations of complex crises, but this can work to preserve an exclusive and unaccountable set of practices at odds with the sector’s other commitments. Interrogating the use of such language should be a key part of challenging dominant narratives in the humanitarian sector.

- **Build an evidence base to support new narratives.** A rigorous evidence base is essential for compelling narrative-making in the humanitarian sector. It should be balanced with an understanding of when this evidence base is sufficient to make the case for change – evidence alone is not enough.

- **Consider who speaks, and who is spoken for, in any attempts at reform or narrative change in the humanitarian sector.** Acknowledging the earlier work of those who challenged dominant narratives but whom may not be recognised as ‘legitimate narrative setters’, and giving up space to the voices of those directly affected by humanitarian crises, is still under-valued but necessary in supporting more accountable and effective humanitarian action.
References


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