

HUMANITARIAN AID, DECOLONISATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Hosted by Dr. Philip Proudfoot | Feminist Leadership Convening 2025

At the core of Feminist Leadership lies the question of power - how might we shift power in ways that establish more equitable, horizontal relationships while respecting the agency of those involved? We explore this question in various contexts, particularly within the funder-grantee landscape in civil society, where resources tend to flow from one party to another, creating an inherently imbalanced power dynamic. In light of this, we explored the intersections of Feminist Leadership principles with humanitarianism.



This session was hosted by [Dr. Philip Proudfoot](#), an experienced researcher with deep expertise in humanitarianism, conflict and development, and over a decade of field-based and policy-focused work in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and beyond. He is currently based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex.

Key takeaways

This session centered on unpacking four core values that have shaped humanitarianism - neutrality, humanity, independence and impartiality - and how these values intersect with colonialism and imperialism. The following key insights emerged from this session:

- Simply put, humanitarianism is the active belief in the equal value of all human life and the consequent action to assist others, protect their rights and accept and promote their agency and worldview. However, different scholars have theorised that humanitarianism often favours particular communities and groups - those deemed as 'deserving victims' - and its values do not extend to all in the same manner.
- Humanitarian aid is often Global North-led and tends to flow in a top-down, hierarchical system, which feeds into the existing power imbalance established through colonialism.
- This hierarchical relationship is not restricted to only economic aid, but it also extends to political and cultural colonialism, wherein humanitarian actors (mostly from the Global North) are positioned as experts to shape the political landscape of the country-in-crisis. This often reduces people to as 'victims' or 'resilient recipients' of aid, leading to the erasure of localised knowledge, culture and agency.

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How the four values of humanitarianism stand true in today's sociopolitical context:

- While the humanitarian systems adopt a position of impartiality and neutrality, historically speaking, humanitarian aid has often been political in nature to the extent that it is largely driven by the global political landscape and interests of those in power.
- For example, in the context of Gaza, we have witnessed a consistent blockage of humanitarian aid with little to no counteraction from global powers such as the UK, the US and Germany, due to political allegiances with Israel.

"We actually are communists in an emergency... the reason why we talk about emergency communism is that... if we are answering the question of what is human nature like, we are imagining when everything is stripped away, as in an emergency, we see the truth of who we are. But if the truth we see of who we are in an emergency is that we collaborate, we disagree ... we try and meet each other's needs and support the needy in our communities, then that tells us something about who we actually are as humans..."

Dr. Philip Proudfoot (Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex)

On the need for an activist-humanitarian framework:

- We need to move away from the traditional understanding of humanitarianism and recognise that humanitarian aid is inherently political in nature.
- The activist-humanitarianism framework views aid as a political act of solidarity that bears witness to the atrocities and refuses neutrality in the face of impunity
- It calls upon stakeholders to build linkages with anti-colonial movements, labour solidarity and feminist organising to recognise the interlinkages of challenges that different movements face.
- Lastly, it seeks to prioritise the dignity, rights and agency of all communities by promoting refugee- and community-led initiatives

Reflection exercise

During the session, participants were invited to discuss the following questions:

- What would and should humanitarianism look like if we truly accepted the equal value of all lives?
- Why does the idea of valuing lives equally mean we must be 'neutral'?

You can access the full recording of this panel in the Feminist Leadership Hub.
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