A bridge to the future:

Essays on a new era for global development

Foreword by Cynthia Smith

Essays by Jacqueline Asiimwe, George Ingram, Kim Kucinskas, Jenny Hodgson, Eshban Kwesiga, Cathy Amenya, John Coonrod, Jenna Thoretz, Dr. Moses Isooba, Golda Fania, and Aisha Tambajang.

This compendium of essays expands on a dialogue that took place during Humentum's Bridge to the Future strategic retreat on April 15, 2025. The event created space for deep reflection and fresh perspectives on the future of global development from a diverse set of actors – both traditional and new voices from civil society, the private sector, and local government.

A subset of attendees were invited to write essays to share their perspectives on the critical changes needed to move beyond the current system.

Reimagining Development Beyond Aid

This is a moment of reckoning.

The global development sector stands at a crossroads. The long-standing scaffolding of government donor funding pipelines, top-down interventions, and compliance-driven partnerships is faltering, exposing the fragility of a system driven by profoundly unequal power dynamics and manufactured inefficiencies. The swift collapse of the sector feels chaotic, deeply unjust, and emotionally exhausting. Humentum has seen firsthand the strain on our community; civil society organizations large and small are reeling from ever-shrinking resources, growing restrictions, and an increasing misalignment between their organizational missions and models. And yet, amid the frustration and the fatigue, we see a rare opportunity to reimagine not just how development is done, but why, for whom, and on whose terms.

To better understand what this new paradigm could look like, we invited leaders with different lived experiences and perspectives to respond to a pressing question:
How do we meet human needs globally with shrinking resources and growing restrictions?

Their reflections, alongside Humentum's dialogue with over forty changemakers across the globe, surfaced critical insights about where we are and where we might go next. Taken together, they necessitate a radical reimagining of development and global solidarity.

This collection of essays is not a manifesto. It's a conversation starter. An invitation to sit with the complexities of the moment and confront the contradictions facing us.

Like our essayists, we don't have all the answers. But we believe in the power of asking tough questions and offering practical, strategic solutions. We started by holding a space for the collaborative transformation to come. What we do know is that this is a time not for certainty, but for conviction. Not for perfection, but for practice. And not for old answers, but for new alignments.

Let's begin, together.

Cynthia Smith
Senior Director, Global Initiatives
Humentum

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This compendium of essays can be read in its entirety or selectively, depending on your interest. You may access each essay by clicking on the title above.

Jacqueline Asiimwe
CEO, CivSource Africa

1. Pull together and pool together

This week, I found myself in a space adorned with African proverbs. Two of them resonated deeply as I reflected on what I wanted to convey in this article.
One states, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” The other proclaims, “One hand cannot lift a heavy load.”

These sayings resonate especially in light of two financial initiatives that nonprofit leaders in Uganda established a few years ago.

One of these was the Nafasi Multipurpose Cooperative Society (NAFASI), born from a shared understanding among Civil Society Organization (CSO) staff and associates in Uganda of the necessity for a platform to promote solidarity, financial independence, and business advancement.

Founded in April 2014, Nafasi—which means "opportunity" in Swahili—was created to empower its members by fostering financial growth through enhanced savings, investments, affordable credit, housing, and retirement planning.

Initially aimed at CSO workers, Nafasi has since broadened its membership to include staff from various corporate entities and business owners who align with its mission and objectives.

The founders of Nafasi were onto something significant! The math was straightforward yet impactful. At the time, it was estimated that Uganda had around 13,000 nonprofit organizations. If we assumed an average of 5 employees per organization, with each member saving a minimum of $20 a month—just think of where we could be today! We would have eased the burden on the system by creating our own resources to fulfill our needs.

The other initiative that nonprofit leaders established was named Ujasiri, Swahili for courage or bravery. Started in mid-2018, the vision behind the UJASIRI Fund was to cultivate a robust, independent, self-sustaining, accountable, and citizen-responsive civil society in Uganda. The aim was to nurture the next generation of Ugandan CSOs and proactive individual activists capable of thriving in a constantly evolving environment.

Ujasiri Fund emerged as a response to the lack of an independent, locally based funding mechanism for civil society in Uganda. Its establishment demonstrated the commitment of civil society leaders to the long-term independence and viability of the sector in the country.

Jacqueline Asiimwe
CEO, CivSource Africa

Beyond providing an alternative funding source for member organizations, the Fund aimed to generate and supply financial resources for crucial organizations, initiatives, ideas, and individuals.

When it was first launched, Ujasiri had only a handful of subscribing members. The goal was to grow the fund by attracting more civil society leaders and organizations to contribute.

Looking back, I am amazed at our foresight and courage during that time. We had created entities that would enable us to pull together by pooling our resources. I wish we had stayed committed to this path. Together, we could have traveled both far and fast in our journey of traveling together.

In these challenging times, we need these home-grown, home-owned initiatives focused on fostering both financial support and solidarity. In my opinion, and guided by the wisdom of our ancestors, both are essential.

Resources without solidarity are dry. Solidarity without resources makes us wither.
I hope this pivotal moment in history serves as another wake-up—and indeed, a shake-up—call. We often discuss radical solidarity. Now is the time to embrace it fully, "no ifs, no buts."

I genuinely hope we rise to the occasion, for the solutions we seek have always been right in front of us.

George Ingram
Senior Fellow, Brookings Institute

2. From aid to agency: Why locally led development must define the future

Cold War dynamics

The inexplicable, disruptive Trump Administration's shuttering of USAID, termination of some 10,000 aid programs, and firing of USAID employees puts the spotlight on what has been a growing need to update the global aid architecture.

During the construction of the current global aid architecture, over the second half of the 20th century, there were two dominant elements: the global geopolitics driven by a polarized struggle between the United States (and its allies) and the Soviet Union, and the concept of development dividing the world between relatively wealthy, developed countries, and wealth-deficient, developing nations.

The world has changed

It is no longer the world we inhabit in 2025. Geopolitics has become multipolar with influential players, not just governments, but corporations and civil society. The global challenges are no longer just poverty and economic growth, although they remain salient issues, but historic levels of migration, climate change, new infectious diseases, looming debt burden, ever-rising costs of humanitarian relief, and slow economic growth.

It is no longer a world divided by developed and developing countries, but a mix of wealth and poverty along a non-linear continuum with many countries along the lower end having the talent, capability, and will to drive their own progress. In fact, the mixed achievement toward the SDG objectives so far pinpoints that all countries face development challenges.

Aid is shrinking, development must evolve

Along with this changing global context, Official Development Assistance (ODA) declined 7.1% to $212.1 billion in 2024, down from $223.3 billion in 2023 marking the high point for development assistance. A range of factors – rising costs of defense, aid to Ukraine, and refugees, concern over budget deficits, changing political priorities – have driven eight major donors (U.S., UK, France, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Norway, Switzerland) to reduce funding for foreign assistance in the last several years.

With this changing face of "development," major donors stepping back, a more capability fit Global South, and a diverse set of global challenges that affect all countries, what does this harbor for the global architecture of development?

George Ingram
Senior Fellow, Brookings Institute

First, the issue is no longer the "aid" architecture but the architecture of "development" – meaning that the scope, or practice of development, must be expanded beyond just aid to other elements that affect national and global progress. Elements such as trade, investment flows, diaspora remittances, philanthropy, the role of the private sector, financial markets, government regulations, and the premise that economic and social progress cannot claim neutrality from a country's political dynamics.

Second, it means that components of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness that have been partially honored – especially ownership, results, and mutual accountability – need to become the dominant trait of development cooperation – with the emphasis placed on collaboration.

In particular, locally led development must become the lodestar. To put it in market terms, we need to move from "supply-side" development to "demand-driven" development. This requires governments and stakeholders in the Global South to take charge, as some are already doing. They need to set the priorities and terms of the relationship, with donor countries and institutions in the role of partner, advisor, and financer, but not in the one determining priorities or assuming the primary role in activity design and implementation.

Further, the decline in the prominence of official donors opens the door and places greater responsibility on private philanthropy, civil society organizations, and the private sector to deploy their ability to innovate and lead to play an enhanced role in the next phase of global development.

Putting "demand development" into practice

Putting developing country stakeholders in the driver's seat can be done at two levels. At the country level, national stakeholders must set the agenda to define donors can engage with them. At the global level, donors and partners must operate as peers. One way to executed this is by following the recommendations of the panel led by Mary Robinson in 2017 for the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), to become a joint donor/partner servant leader or energizing the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation to the intended vision of an effective donor/partner collaboration.

Another possibility is that, while many question the role of INGOs and development contractors in locally led development, with donors and partner countries setting the appropriate ground rules, there are a range of supportive roles they can perform – from providing knowledge, to back-office support functions, access to global networks, and finance.

George Ingram
Senior Fellow, Brookings Institute

The architecture of development cooperation must embrace the broad scope of factors affecting a country's progress. It should be built on the foundations of peer relationships and country stakeholders setting the agenda for their country's development. And yes, we must recognize that we live in an interconnected world that flourishes best when we care for one another as fellow human beings.

Kim Kucinskas
Director, Global Initiatives, Humentum

3. Meeting the moment: A network weaver's perspective

This moment demands a radical reimagining of aid, development, and global solidarity. The urgency for change is not new—but it has become impossible to ignore. From global pandemics and rising authoritarianism to climate breakdown and geopolitical volatility, we are facing interrelated, nonlinear crises that expose the limitations of a development model rooted in 20th-century thinking.

And yet, amid the collapse, cracks in foundations can also be openings. This is a catalytic moment.

I am most interested not in prescribing what the future should look like, but in how we meet this moment. There is no shortage of smart ideas about what needs to be done. Some call for radical departures from old systems; others iterate thoughtfully from what already exists. Much of the wisdom we need has long been present if we know where—and with whom—to look.

As a network weaver, this is what I know: To move forward, we must make sense of what is happening now and why it matters. We must engage in futures thinking—holding possibility alongside probability—and find practical ways to bridge the divide, asking not only "what can I do?" but "what can we do?"

We cannot ignore that this moment is also deeply personal. For some, it brings grief, identity crises, fear, and uncertainty; for others, it sparks a rallying cry for urgent and long-overdue change. Many find themselves holding both realities at once, grieving what is being lost while also embracing what could be rebuilt.

From my conversations with changemakers, leaders, and practitioners, a few truths emerge:

1. **Multiple futures are possible,** with parallel aid systems likely to emerge. Development must become both bigger—expanding beyond aid to include governance, justice, and structural change—and smaller, rooted in hyper-local, contextual solutions.
2. **There will be different ways to name and approach the challenges ahead.** Some paths may lean toward regression—renewed paternalism and self-interest—while others move toward justice, autonomy, and co-creation. Both may unfold at once.
3. **Different roles will be needed across the ecosystem,** from experimenters, visionaries, and disruptors to builders, guides, weavers, caregivers, and storytellers.

Most important, at the deepest level, we are more connected by shared values and purpose than we often recognize.
We are stronger together. And building the contextualized, values-aligned networks we need will be essential to any future worth fighting for.

Jenny Hodgson
Executive Director, The Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF)

Eshban Kwesiga
Knowledge Weaving and Influencing Manager, The Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF)

4. Light in times of darkness: Community philanthropy offers a way forward

"A basket woven by many hands will never hunger because those who share its threads guard its abundance as their own."

"We should never have allowed ourselves to get into this situation." This was a sentiment expressed more than once by partners of the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) during a series of online conversations we hosted following the USAID stop-work order back in February. The reliance – even dependency – of large sections of southern civil society on international donor funding has long been an uncomfortable truth in our sector. A truth that has been easy to bat away, a can kicked down the road, tomorrow's business. All of it perilously resting on the assumption of the current funding paradigm.

The collapse of USAID has thrust the entire system of international and humanitarian development aid into chaos. The specific circumstances surrounding the dismantling of USAID have been extreme and even brutal. However, when it comes to who funds civil society and – the increasingly urgent need to support alternative forms of social finance, the writing has been on the wall for some time. Firstly, the global rise of populist right-wing, anti-pluralist movements, as well as other recent shifts in global politics, have already led to previous significant cuts in foreign development assistance. As a result, there has been a slow erosion of previously held norms as to the humanitarian, political, or moral purpose of aid.

Secondly, governments around the world - from Brazil to Uganda to India - have been getting increasingly creative with policies and legislation to restrict the flow of international money to civil society in the Global South. The Trump regime is merely the latest on an already well-worn path of weaponizing nationalism and "foreign agent" narratives aimed at criminalizing civil society and restricting the flow of external money.

In the mainstream system, however, attention has been elsewhere. The much-vaunted localization agenda, which emerged out of the recognition of a system failure, has been focused on getting more external money to local organizations to deliver projects and programs directly. It has increased the water pressure in the funding "tap" to local actors, where success depends on an organization's ability to mirror the structures of compliance and accountability required by the international system to keep the money coming. So, while localization has been about the acceleration of external funding flows, little attention has been paid to the importance of supporting organizations to build their own independent resources and autonomy.

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In short, to ensure their credibility and local accountability as trusted and credible actors in their domestic contexts.

In a system shaped by big money, "burn rates," time-bound programs and upward accountability to external funders, there has been little interest in the role, actually, even the idea of local resources as a pathway towards civil society sustainability and true local ownership. That they might be harnessed and blended with other different kinds of resources to combine the "cold money" of the international donor system with the "warm money" of communities. "Cold" because some professionals working in donor agencies only see their role as that of moving money. "Warm," because a contribution made by a community member represents a deliberate choice made, another expense forgone, a demonstration of trust, faith, solidarity, dissent, collective action towards the issues that matter to them.

For local civil society, international aid has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has cushioned local organizations from the immediate anxieties of resourcing their work. On the other, it has overshadowed and undermined the existence of local resources, perpetuated power imbalances and alienated organizations from local constituencies.

Since 2006, the GFCF has partnered with over 300 organizations in 75 countries around the world to support local organizations to grow community philanthropy —not just as a matter of money, but as a proposition rooted in ownership, participation, and power. Our network includes multiple examples and practices that speak to the power of community philanthropy in action, from Tewa, the Nepal Women's Fund, which has a base of over 8,000 local donors in Nepal, to 40-40, a Ugandan organization supporting early education with over 400 local donors. Or FASOL, a socio-environmental fund in Mexico supporting communities to mobilize local resources in response to forest fires.

Community philanthropy lies at the heart of the #ShiftThePower movement, whose Manifesto for Change, calls for a shift away from a system "premised on and organized around the transfer of funds," and invites a vision of a system that "recognizes, respects and builds on local resources and assets, rather than overlooks, undermines or displaces [them]." It does not seek to replace international resources, but rather to co-mingle them with local ones. By doing so, it creates new forms of horizontal power and flattens power dynamics.

As we reflect on transformation, we must consider the future of civil society cannot be merely bankrolled from without. International organizations must follow where local organizations want to go. To build alternative local resources, we must blend them with international money, so that civil society can be co-owned, co-funded, and less fragile.

Cathy Amenya
Program Manager, Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD)

John Coonrod
Founder and US Chair, Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD)

5. Vision 2035: Strong local communities in a Post-ODA world

In recent years, the development sector has recognized the need for change. Overall, human progress ground to a halt after 2015 in the face of armed conflicts and other shocks. Project-based approaches funded by Official Development Assistance (ODA) were too piecemeal and unsustainable to achieve population-level progress.

Various conversations have been underway for more locally led development, yet always as incremental change within the existing top-down, ODA framework.
Now that ODA has dramatically declined, our sector requires a fundamental reimagining of development approaches. The current disruption presents a critical opportunity to address colonial legacies and top-down power imbalances in development practice and put the world on the path to achieve better lives for everyone.

Vision 2035

Instead of tinkering with the old paradigm, let's go back to basics. Human society lives in communities. Communities need the resources, skills and organizational capacity to be resilient. In fact, resilience is fundamentally a community-level attribute – it is always people in the community who are the first responders to any shock.

We need an approach to development that supports communities everywhere to be places where every person is respected, where everyone has the opportunity to develop their full potential, and where basic human needs are met within a sustainable natural environment. We must build a post-ODA world where communities lead their own development without international dependency. That is what MCLD calls "Vision 2035," and achieving it requires a three-pronged strategic framework.

Strategic Framework

1. **Responsive, adequately funded local government**

A wise politician once said, "All politics is local." Nearly every national government has given the constitutional mandate for basic human services to decentralized local governments, yet local governments are often starved of public resources and decision-making authority. Too often INGOs or bilateral projects have bypassed local government, essentially letting local government off the hook.

A sustainable future for communities must be built on democratic local governance, within a national system that follows principles of subsidiarity – moving decisions as close to people as is practicable. The principle of subsidiarity is indeed the only form of social organization consistent with human dignity.

Cathy Amenya
Program Manager, Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD)

John Coonrod
Founder and US Chair, Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD)

Local governments must possess either sufficient tax authority to meet basic needs or sufficient devolved funding from the center that is transparent and predictable. Outside funders who wish to support countries must partner with countries in strengthening the capacities of local governments as the foundation for sustainable progress.

Wherever we witness successful progress out of poverty – be it Kerala, Brazil, or Kenya - we see a significant shift in resources and decision-making to local government, often involving participatory planning and budgeting and mandatory mechanisms for social accountability.

2. Civil society resilience

Civil society is under attack globally through restrictive legislation, shrinking civic space, and disinformation campaigns. Yet again, where we see successful societies, we see a thriving partnership between local government and local civil society.

Civil society is the only way historically marginalized groups — women, men, ethnic and religious minorities — can ensure their basic human rights. Civil society is not merely a "watchdog" to government – it is a profoundly important implementing partner for local governments – mobilizing local energies for local solutions in health, education, nutrition security, family incomes, and environmental protection.

Civil society will only thrive when it is able to carry out activities with its own resources. Groups must create domestic resource mobilization (DRM) models, develop protective mechanisms for civic space, foster connected networks, and counter misinformation that undermines civil society's legitimacy.
To combat misinformation, civil society must develop and disseminate counter-narratives to challenge false news, launch campaigns both online and offline to raise awareness of the dangers of disinformation, and provide guides for verifying information sources.

3. Community mobilization

Responsive local government and vibrant civil society are the pathways through which citizens achieve their aspirations. Tools like Citizen Charter and regular public accountability forums depend both on mandates on local government and the energies of local civil society to mobilize participation of their members.

Both local governments and local civil society organizations can "federate upwards" through existing networks for mutual support and empowerment. Many of these associations have online tools that enable community-to-community exchanges and mutual capacity strengthening.

Cathy Amenya
Program Manager, Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD)

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Implementation approach

For community mobilization to be achieved, all relevant stakeholders will need to focus on that goal while avoiding dependency-provoking actions that undermine it. We see that a future of vibrant communities can be built on four pillars:

- **Shared vision:** This vision of vibrant communities must become widely shared, not just among funders and civil society organizations, but among governments. In 2023, the UN finally came to realize that the majority of its targets can only be met through local action and established Local 2030 as a vehicle to accelerate its efforts. The African Union Charter on decentralization has come into force, but there is little national advocacy for decentralization. Those standing for this change need to generate a much more powerful communications campaign at all levels to make Vision 2035 a reality.

- **Strong local and regional networks:** The current crisis in ODA has revealed the utter necessity of working through networks from the local to the global, rather than as competing individual entities. Every country in the world has existing civil society networks, many of which are able to not just support the communities where they work but also to co-create national strategies to promote the changes needed. These networks need to be identified and nurtured.

- **Strategic investment:** Until the first three pillars are firmly established, there is a strategic role for external support – through ODA, multilateral institutions, or philanthropy. This support needs to focus on strengthening civil society for supporting community mobilization, rather than projecting them to bypass and take over the service delivery responsibilities of local governments.

- **Metrics:** What doesn't get measured, doesn't get done. If we are serious about Vision 2035, not only do we need a roadmap to it, but we need metrics to measure progress. For example, in 2015, MCLD adopted a target first proposed in the 1992 UN Human Development Report: that 20% of public resources should reach the grassroots. Various organizations have tried to track this from time to time, but now it is time to make it a reality.

Dr. Moses Isooba
Executive Director, Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF)

7. Resource on the decline: How will NGOs deliver on their mission priorities?

The last couple of months have witnessed a seismic shift in internationalism. The USAID freeze which was triggered by President Trump's Executive order turbocharged a domino effect which saw other Western donor countries roll back their budgets – all under the wrap of wanting to bolster their military and defense capabilities.

The disdain which many hold against aid is no secret. Yet this does not lessen the impact which upending eight decades of internationalism and humanitarian aid is having on the development sector.

These are difficult times for the sector, especially when European capitals have all joined the race to the bottom. While President Trump and his coterie decided to feed USAID to the woodchipper, the UK Premier became an energetic entrant in the race to the bottom by slashing and rolling back the development aid budget so as to boost the UK's defense and military capabilities. As many have argued, making the world's most vulnerable people pay for the UK's defense is not only reprehensible but also callous.

While we have always known and pointed out that aid was not always for us in the Global South but for the furtherance of donor interests, what has happened in the last couple of months is an unashamed, naked, unapologetic, and callous display of these interests. In the triad of "development, defense, and diplomacy", development had been sacrificed at the altar of defense. With it, the varied communities that have depended on the development sector for survival, sustenance, and hope are now on their own. The result will be worsening social indicators.

Those who depend on food parcels will in, all likelihood, starve to death. Cases of malnutrition amongst children will worsen. The same will happen with vaccinations, whose lifesaving and life-changing benefits are unlikely to reach millions of children who have depended on aid to access them.

Young people, men, women, persons with disabilities and others whom donor funding had supported to organize into social movements and other critical groups — those that challenge local corrupt and exclusionary practices which perpetuate poverty and inequality — will have to find a way to do this without relying on donors from the West.

We witnessed similar abandonment not long ago. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the West went into an overdrive of selfishness and decided to starve the Global South of vaccines. They forget one thing, when we are not safe, they are not safe. Well, the pandemic is over, and we are here. The development aid cut is no different from the vaccine apartheid we witnessed during the pandemic days.

Dr. Moses Isooba
Executive Director, Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF)

Yet the effects of this abandonment and betrayal will have a negative effect on Western donor countries as well. Unlike aid from countries which only relate with governments, Western aid has had the positive attribute of working directly with affected people, thus building a direct relationship of mutual respect, understanding and empathy between peoples. With the abandonment, the soft power which the West has nurtured via this approach will likely be lost.

Where does this leave us? True, chopping development finance and assaulting internationalism in this age of global connectedness is a poor and reckless decision. Yet, this does not mean it's a doomsday or an apocalypse for our communities. We are resilient people. As for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), sector strength and resilience are our greatest collective assets. We shall rise from the ashes!

Rising from the ashes!

We are acutely aware that it shall not be business as usual, and, as a sector, we are already starting to make some tough decisions.

We have always known that communities have assets such as resources (albeit small), skillsets, knowledge, and relationships. It is now going to be imperative to leverage these resources as a way of triggering community voice and power. With increased citizen agency, communities will start working differently with their local governments in the provision of public services. As a sector, our survival will depend on our ability to leverage local resources to drive the community development agenda. Local philanthropy shall not be an add-on but the main menu in resource mobilization.

How do we ensure resilience among the affected entities? We may not have a one-size-fits-all answer to this, but as a sector, we are steaming ahead to find cost-sharing and cost-cutting approaches. For example, sharing spaces with entities that may have difficulties affording rent may be an option. With sharing resources comes sharing of utilities, and this will drastically plummet the organizational operation costs, enabling the different organizations to stay afloat.

As the headwinds beat against development financing and with USAID — the largest aid apparatus now resting in the aid cemetery — CSOs must change their modus operandi and learn new rules of engagement with donors. The sector shall not die, but will rise from the ashes.

Jenna Thoretz
Senior Program Manager, Humentum

6. Focusing on the movement, not the map: A bridge builder's perspective

Why the future of global development depends on tearing down false geographic divides and operating as one global civil society sector

At Humentum's Bridge to the Future retreat, I expected discussions about future funding models, partnerships, and organizational structures. I did not expect one fundamental question to emerge so sharply:

What is the sector, really?

Depending on where you sit, the answer varies dramatically. Is it USAID and its traditional INGO implementers? Is it grassroots NGOs in the Global South? Is it something else entirely?
Since then, I've been reflecting deeply on what this definition means and how the way we conceptualize and fund "the sector" is holding us back at a critical moment.

The reality is that the systems driving human suffering—wealth inequality, rampant greed, authoritarianism, systemic racism—know no borders. They oppress people everywhere, in every country. And ironically, the aid industry has often replicated these same patterns of exploitation within its own structures.

In the face of USAID's collapse and declining official development assistance globally, we have a choice. We can scramble to prop up old models, or we can build something truly different that fights these systems.

It's time to act as one global civil society. No more competition or artificial distinctions between INGOs and NGOs, between a domestic 501c3 in the US and a community organization in Uganda. We are all civil society organizations, acting in the interest of human dignity.

To unleash the power of the collective, we must resource it. In a true global solidarity model, anyone, anywhere who shares our values can contribute to change.

Jenna Thoretz
Senior Program Manager, Humentum

We don't have to rely solely on governments or traditional philanthropy.

We can unlock new sources of capital through local giving movements, cross-border partnerships, aligned corporate allies, and private sector investments.

1. **Fund the movement, not the map.**
2. **Fund the ecosystem.**
3. **Fund the connective tissue.**
4. **Fund the network of networks.**

This isn't idealistic thinking. This is the practical, necessary future of civil society—reimagined boldly and built collectively.

Golda Fania
Global Health & Digital Transformation Strategist,
Independent Consultant

8. Unlocking Africa's health potential through solidarity

Are we failing Africa's health potential?

Despite comprising 14% of the global population and bearing 20% of the global disease burden, Africa receives just 1.6% of annual impact investments—an alarming disconnect that undermines its health potential.

The current healthcare crisis

Africa's health systems have long relied on external aid, but this model has reinforced dependency rather than building self-reliance. The recent suspension of U.S. foreign aid has further exposed the fragility of health systems across the continent, with 83% of USAID programs cancelled. Now, as the future of many essential health services hangs in uncertainty, the scale of the crisis becomes clearer. According to WHO-Africa:

- Over 200 million people face high out-of-pocket healthcare costs.
- Nearly 150 million have been pushed into poverty due to those expenses.
- Millions in rural and remote areas still lack access to essential services.

What happens next? With shrinking resources and increasing global restrictions, the time has come to radically rethink how we finance and deliver healthcare—not just in Africa, but globally.

From charity to solidarity: A paradigm shift

For decades, global development operated through a top-down, charity-based model where wealthy nations delivered aid to so-called "needy" countries. This outdated approach is no longer fit for purpose. The future lies in solidarity—not charity—between global partners and local African voices leading decision-making. Development efforts must reflect local values and knowledge to achieve lasting impact.

As Alima Begum, CEO of Oxfam GB, argues, "the sector must decolonize aid by shifting power and resources to the Global South."
I believe this shift demands bold action:

- Allocate 65% of program budgets to national actors by 2027.
- Empower local leaders with real decision-making authority.
- Reduce administrative overhead by 35% to direct more resources to communities.
- Plan exit strategies that build long-term, local capacity.

Golda Fania
Global Health & Digital Transformation Strategist,
Independent Consultant

Innovative approaches to healthcare delivery

Traditional aid often falls short in meeting Africa's complex healthcare needs. Social enterprises offer a compelling alternative, integrating business acumen with social objectives. These entities can generate revenue while addressing critical healthcare needs.
Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have also shown promise in facilitating infrastructure development, service delivery, and technological innovation in healthcare.

Notable examples include:

- PATH's Digital Health Ecosystem Project, which connected 45 African governments with local tech implementers, reducing digital solution deployment costs by 70%.
- Bayer Foundation collaborations, which scaled 22 diagnostic innovations for non-communicable diseases across eight countries.

Building resilient healthcare systems: Key success factors

Transformative healthcare systems in Africa require more than just funding. Successful models include:

- Stage-appropriate flexibility to adapt to varying country contexts.
- Outcome-linked accountability using cost-per-life-impacted metrics.
- Tech-enabled efficiency that supports, rather than replaces, human providers.

Funding models must evolve. Instruments like social impact bonds, diaspora investment platforms, and blended finance mechanisms can enable dynamic, data-driven allocations based on real-time health outcomes. Remittance flows to Africa have doubled in the past decade, reaching $100 billion since 2022—an important potential resource for sustainable funding if even 5% were redirected toward health infrastructure.

The critical role of African governments

Dr. Githinji Gitahi, CEO of Amref Health Africa, underscores the need for strong government leadership. African states must increase healthcare funding, in line with the Abuja Declaration's target of allocating at least 15% of national budgets.

But it's not just about more money—it's about smarter, more efficient investments that are responsive to people's needs and accountable to the communities they serve. This is Africa's opportunity to lead a new era of healthcare grounded in sovereignty, sustainability, and African-led solutions.

Golda Fania
Global Health & Digital Transformation Strategist,
Independent Consultant

Call to action: Designing a new health future

The transformation of Africa's healthcare systems requires collective effort from donors, investors, NGOs, and governments.

Key priorities include:

- Institutionalize solidarity-based funding to support locally led initiatives.
- Embed community leadership at every level to strengthen national capacity.
- Advance diaspora-led financing alongside national digital infrastructure and data governance.

The future of global health is not being shaped in boardrooms or donor capitals—it's being built in African communities. This transformation demands rethinking traditional aid, while recognizing that global partnerships, when rooted in equity and shared leadership, remain powerful levers for systemic change.

Now is the time to back African leadership with bold, sustained, and collaborative action.

Aisha Tambajang
Senior Program Manager, Humentum

9. Bridging the focus gap: A perspective from in-between

At this point in the sector's evolution, I often find myself navigating two parallel conversations.

In many global spaces — particularly among large INGOs and donors — the conversation is centered on sector transformation: how to rethink models, shift power, and "do more with less." These discussions are timely and important. They reflect a recognition that the current development architecture is no longer fit for purpose.

At the same time, I live in The Gambia and have worked alongside civil society actors in areas like governance, transitional justice, and public health. In these spaces, work continues — not because systems are in place, but often despite their absence. Funding has declined, institutional support has shrunk, and yet communities remain engaged. Awareness campaigns, citizen participation, and movement-building efforts haven't stopped. They've adapted.

For those of us who sit in between — globally engaged but locally rooted — this moment brings both clarity and responsibility. The shift in donor priorities and the fragility of international systems have shown that local actors are not only capable but are already leading. The work that is being done is grounded, relevant, and often more responsive than the frameworks that once tried to guide it.

So perhaps the real task isn't to rebuild what was, but to reframe what we value. The opportunity lies in amplifying what already exists, supporting what has endured, and resisting the urge to recentralize power in new ways. This isn't about co-creation on old terms — it's about acknowledging that many in the Global South have carried the work forward, with or without external backing.

As the sector shifts, it's becoming increasingly clear that how we show up needs to evolve. Across different contexts, people have continued the work — often with fewer resources, and often without external support. The role of traditional institutions and donors is changing.

Supporting progress today means recognizing what's already in motion, and choosing to engage differently — with humility, intention, relevance and respect for what's already working.

About Humentum

Humentum strengthens social good organizations by providing strategic solutions, networking, and curated resources. We focus on improving the effectiveness of funding and finance, organizational structure, and people processes.

Our decades of experience working with hundreds of organizations translate into a deep understanding of organizational needs and better results.

We strengthen your organization through:

- Facilitated leadership team workshops to guide strategic change
- Expert consulting delivered by a global team with decades of sector experience
- Individual, group, and organization training
- A robust community for peer-to-peer networking, resources, and problem-solving

Want to talk through strategic pivots at your organization?

We're here to help. Whether you're exploring a new operating model, navigating structural change, or just want to talk—we're always happy to connect.

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