

POSSIBLE / PROBABLE FUTURES MATRIX

TIME Transforming Institutional Models for Equity



Promising PROBABILITIES

Sector Reform

- Some reform gains traction through modest shifts in funding models, leadership norms, and cross-sector collaboration.
- Collaboration improves in certain areas but continues to be fragmented, siloed, and uneven.

Government & Funding Systems

- Funding remains volatile, with austerity pressures driving short-term priorities over long-term commitments.
- Regional coalitions gain visibility and strength but remain under-resourced and often overshadowed by donor-led agendas.
- Donor strategies begin to reference justice and equity, but alignment is partial and frequently subordinated to national interests.

Organizational Models

- Despite cuts, many organizations retain a core of skilled staff who adapt through multi-role responsibilities and creative problem-solving.

Narratives & Culture

- Early narrative shifts introduce more language around decolonization, equity, and solidarity, though changes are often symbolic rather than structural.

Experimentation & Learning

- Pockets of innovation demonstrate viable alternatives, but most remain at the pilot stage.
- Learning processes are still treated like projects, rarely embedded within organizational or system-wide practice.

Technology / AI

- AI tools are increasingly adopted for efficiency gains and community awareness campaigns, although use remains uneven and largely technocratic.

Promising Futures ↑

Promising POSSIBILITIES

Sector Reform

- Power begins to rebalance as local actors, grassroots organizers, and regional coalitions set agendas, shape funding flows, and lead solutions.
- INGOs transition from implementers to enablers, strengthening local systems rather than replacing them.
- Cross-sector alliances emerge, linking humanitarian, development, climate, and justice movements with shared values and mutual accountability.

Government & Funding Systems

- Governments assume stronger ownership of agendas, with donors shifting to supportive rather than directive roles.
- Philanthropy aligns into longer-term, coordinated strategies that reflect community priorities.
- South-South cooperation expands, with regional funds and cross-border collaborations offering alternatives to traditional donor dominance.

Organizational Models

- Employment models shift toward distributed teams, flexible arrangements, and South-South collaboration, creating more resilient and diverse career pathways.

Narratives & Culture

- Civil society is widely recognized as strategic, visionary, and indispensable to systemic change.

Experimentation & Learning

- Experimentation is normalized across organizations as a principle, not just as donor-funded pilots.
- Global learning networks connect communities, practitioners, and researchers, accelerating knowledge exchange.

Technology / AI

- AI enhances efficiency, policy analysis, and real-time knowledge management in inclusive and responsible ways.
- Digital platforms expand equitable access to resources and amplify voices traditionally excluded from decision-making.

→ Possible

← Probable

Constraining or Harmful PROBABILITIES

Sector Reform

- The system reorganizes without transforming — same logic, new labels, little redistribution of power.
- Movements and organizations stay in conversation mode, generating ideas but achieving limited traction.
- Civil society is forced into survival mode, leading to burnout, reduced capacity, and “brain drain” as staff exit the sector.

Government & Funding Systems

- Donor funding remains volatile, with austerity driving cuts to long-term investments in favor of short-term crisis response.
- National interests dominate donor strategies, reinforcing geopolitical agendas.

Organizational Models

- Funding volatility drives layoffs, short-term contracts, and brain drain, particularly among mid-career professionals in the Global Majority.
- The sector increasingly relies on unpaid or underpaid labor, fueling burnout and inequity.

Narratives & Culture

- Opposition is emboldened.
- Use of terms like “localization” and “decolonization” doesn’t progress with structural change behind the language.
- Public trust in humanitarian institutions erodes as visible commitments fail to translate into meaningful practice.

Experimentation & Learning

- Innovation remains extractive, with new approaches tested on marginalized communities but not co-created with them.
- Tokenism replaces genuine experimentation; donors and INGOs showcase “pilots” for optics rather than systemic learning.
- Learning is siloed within projects and lost at the end of grant cycles, preventing collective knowledge building.

Technology / AI

- AI deployment accelerates without adequate safeguards, leading to misuse and reinforcing inequities.
- Misinformation and disinformation spread faster through unregulated AI tools.
- Digital tools remain underutilized, fragmented across organizations, and treated as compliance burdens, reinforcing bureaucracy instead of agility.

↓ Constraining/Harmful Futures

Constraining or Harmful POSSIBILITIES

Sector Reform

- Reform language hardens into permanent branding, where “localization” and “decolonization” become sector buzzwords detached from practice and organizational transformation impact.
- Competing reform agendas proliferate without coordination, creating incoherence, duplication, and reform fatigue.
- INGOs retrench into survival mode, cutting field presence and hollowing out local partnerships while preserving headquarters structures.

Government & Funding Systems

- Philanthropy and private contractors dominate funding flows, but in fragmented, short-term, and unaccountable ways that undermine systemic change.
- Donor retreat accelerates, with funding tied almost exclusively to national security and migration agendas.
- South-South cooperation rises but struggles with transparency and equity, leading to new hierarchies rather than genuine redistribution of power.

Organizational Models

- INGOs collapse or merge, leading to widespread job losses and the erosion of institutional memory.
- “Brain drain” intensifies as professionals exit the sector in response to funding cuts, precarious contracts, and reputational decline.
- Local actors are overburdened with compliance demands but underfunded, resulting in dependency.

Narratives & Culture

- Retrogression of human rights accelerates, particularly in gender, sexual and reproductive health, and civic freedoms.
- Civic space contracts further, with legal restrictions, surveillance, and harassment silencing grassroots activism.
- Media ecosystems polarize: misinformation and disinformation gain traction, undermining trust.

Experimentation & Learning

- Experimentation is Experimentation becomes extractive: pilots serve donor visibility more than local impact, reinforcing inequity under the guise of “innovation.”
- Learning cultures erode, with organizations focusing on optics over substance, producing cycles of tokenism rather than transformation.
- Risk aversion spreads: fear of failure prevents bold testing or scaling of alternatives.

Technology / AI

- AI tools are increasingly used for surveillance, monitoring, and donor reporting, often without community consent or safeguards.
- Disinformation campaigns, amplified by unregulated AI, undermine democratic processes and fuel distrust.
- The “digital divide” deepens: Global South actors are excluded from shaping governance of AI and tech, reinforcing inequities in knowledge and power.