

Aid and Decolonisation: Challenging Structures, Empowering Communities in the Humanitarian System

Overview

The virtual roundtable on “Understanding Aid and Decolonisation: A Local View” was held on June 23, 2025, in light of historic funding loss to the humanitarian system as it is. The roundtable was jointly organised by Humanitarian Aid International (HAI), the All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI), and Humanitarian Observatory Initiative of South Asia (HOISA), brought together experts from across the humanitarian sector to critically examine the relationship between aid and decolonisation, with a focus on local perspectives and solutions. This session was inspired by Sudhanshu S. Singh’s article on “Humanitarian Reset: A Decolonial Perspective” and sought to move beyond the conventional aid paradigm toward more community-led, equitable approaches to humanitarian response.

The roundtable was attended by over 60 participants from diverse regions and sectors, including representatives from international humanitarian agencies, local civil society organisations, donor institutions, academic researchers, and grassroots practitioners. The session brought together a wide range of voices committed to critically examining current aid structures and exploring locally led alternatives. Moderated by Khayal Trivedi of the Humanitarian Observatory Initiative of South Asia (HOISA), the discussion encouraged open dialogue and reflection, setting a participatory tone that engaged both panellists and attendees throughout the session.

Key Highlights

1. Critique of Capitalistic Humanitarianism

Sudhanshu Singh critiqued the global humanitarian aid architecture, tracing its colonial roots and current dependency on ongoing crises to justify its existence. He argued that the sector has become commodified and donor-driven, perpetuating dependence rather than fostering resilience. He called for a “humanitarian reset” grounded in epistemic disobedience—rejecting Western-centric knowledge systems in favour of local, indigenous knowledge and leadership.

“As a system, now we need problems for survival, not for seeking local solutions for communities.”

2. Call for Unity and Local Capacity Building

Dr. Nidhi Pundhir emphasised the importance of maintaining a united global humanitarian front. She questioned the framing of aid through a colonial lens and underscored that humanitarian money should not be politicised in moments of disaster. She advocated for proactive large-scale public and private investment in local governance systems, organisational readiness, and disaster response capacities that are resilient and inclusive.

“Disasters test systems—only prepared communities can truly respond effectively.”

3. Innovation Amidst Crisis

Ali Al Mokdad highlighted the systemic cracks within the humanitarian sector, framing the current state as one of “organised complexity” or “edge of chaos.” He argued that these challenges are opportunities to rethink old paradigms and adopt more innovative, adaptive, and partnership-based approaches, particularly with local and private actors.

“Innovation comes when old systems no longer solve new problems.”

4. Decolonising Philanthropy and Aid

Jaipreet Kaur challenged the deep-seated colonial logic embedded in aid mechanisms, calling for a transition from control to collaboration. She urged the sector to treat local communities as equal partners, not passive recipients, and to address root causes of crises rather than merely managing their symptoms.

“Communities aren’t problems to manage—they are partners in system-wide solutions.”

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

The roundtable concluded with **Mihir R. Bhatt** emphasising a dual-path reset: a short-term strategy to sustain ongoing aid amidst funding crises, and a long-term strategy to change the fundamental context of humanitarian action toward lasting peace and dignity.

- **Humanitarian Reset is Only the First Step to Transformation:** Beyond maintaining immediate aid operations, there is a need to structurally reform the aid system by promoting justice, equity, and community leadership towards peace.
- **Let Local Leadership Lead:** Local actors should lead humanitarian responses and be empowered system-wide with funding and decision-making authority.
- **Large-scale and Sustained Investment in Organisational Readiness:** Donors and implementers should ensure local NGOs are equipped with the systems and skills needed for timely, accountable, and effective crisis response.
- **Knowledge Hegemony Commons:** Recognise and validate non-Western knowledge systems and encourage "epistemic disobedience" to create space for alternative narratives and solutions across the system.
- **Avoid Geopolitical Fragmentation of Aid:** Aid must remain neutral and centred on human needs, rather than be tied to political, economic, or military agendas. In the end, aid must liberate the affected person from the vulnerability as well as the context that caused the vulnerability.

“We need a reset for now, and an urgent system transformation by tomorrow”.

Next Steps

1. **Reflection and Action:** Participants are encouraged to reflect on how to make their own practices less dependent on aid systems, but find synergy between money aid sources in the system.
2. **Reviving Local Histories:** Local organisations should explore and revive their traditional roles as agents of transformation before outside aid became so central to humanitarian action.
3. **Advocacy and Collaboration:** Sector professionals should collectively advocate for reform for transformation, even if operating outside traditional aid institutions.
4. **Justice in Aid:** Examine who benefits most from aid, who is left behind, and how to close these gaps, so humanitarian justice is achieved.

More discussions and actions are being planned. Be in touch at www.aidmi.org.