

Rethinking the Mainstream Hierarchical Approach of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in International Development Practice

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<p>ABSTRACT</p> <p>This study critically examines the continuing relevance and effectiveness of the hierarchical approach that dominates the governance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in international development. Using a qualitative method through a systematic literature review spanning 2000 to 2025, the study analyzes forty key sources from scholarly journals, books, and NGO reports, complemented by a case study of local NGO dynamics following the 2010 Haiti earthquake. The findings reveal four major patterns. First, the hierarchical NGO governance system remains highly centralized at the donor and international levels, where decision-making and resources are concentrated. Second, funding mechanisms reinforce short-term project cycles and dependency among local NGOs. Third, accountability structures remain upward (toward donors rather than communities), which limits the responsiveness of aid programs to local needs. Fourth, evidence from post-disaster Haiti illustrates how hierarchical coordination led to fragmented responses, duplication of efforts, and “projectization,” undermining local ownership and long-term recovery. The study bridges post-development critiques of power asymmetry with Ostrom’s polycentric governance framework. This study offers a novel perspective on how NGO governance could be reconfigured to promote shared decision-making, flexible funding systems, and stronger local participation. The research concludes that transforming hierarchical aid structures into more polycentric and locally adaptive governance models is crucial to achieving equitable and sustainable development outcomes in the contemporary global context.</p>	<p>CONTACT umunnisahidayati@lecturer.unri.ac.id</p> <p>KEYWORDS NGOs, international development, aid chains, hierarchical development</p> <p>Received: 16/10/2025 Revised: 18/10/2025 Accepted: 22/10/2025 Online: 31/10/2025 Published: 31/10/2025</p> <p>Al-ijtima'i is licenced under a Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike Public Licence (CC-BY-SA)</p>
<p>ABSTRAK</p> <p>Studi ini secara kritis mengkaji relevansi dan efektivitas berkelanjutan dari pendekatan hierarkis yang mendominasi tata kelola organisasi non-pemerintah (NGO) dalam praktik pembangunan internasional. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui tinjauan pustaka sistematis yang mencakup periode 2000 hingga 2025 dengan menganalisis empat puluh sumber utama dari jurnal ilmiah, buku, dan laporan NGO, yang dilengkapi dengan studi kasus mengenai dinamika NGO lokal pascabencana gempa Haiti tahun 2010. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan empat pola utama. Pertama, sistem tata kelola hierarkis NGO tetap sangat tersentralisasi pada tingkat donor dan organisasi internasional, di mana pengambilan keputusan dan sumber daya terpusat. Kedua, mekanisme pendanaan memperkuat siklus proyek jangka pendek dan ketergantungan di kalangan NGO lokal. Ketiga, struktur akuntabilitas masih bersifat vertikal ke atas (lebih berorientasi kepada donor daripada kepada masyarakat), sehingga membatasi responsivitas program bantuan terhadap kebutuhan lokal. Keempat, bukti dari kasus pascabencana Haiti menunjukkan bahwa koordinasi yang bersifat hierarkis menyebabkan respons yang terfragmentasi, duplikasi upaya, dan fenomena “proyektisasi,” yang melemahkan kepemilikan lokal serta pemulihan jangka panjang. Studi ini mengaitkan kritik post-development terhadap asimetri kekuasaan dengan kerangka tata kelola polisentris (polycentric governance) yang dikembangkan oleh Ostrom. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa transformasi struktur bantuan yang hierarkis menjadi model tata kelola yang lebih polisentris dan adaptif secara lokal merupakan langkah penting untuk mencapai hasil pembangunan yang lebih adil dan berkelanjutan dalam konteks global kontemporer.</p>	

INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian crises, whether caused by natural disasters or man-made ones, have significantly impacted the development sector and have influenced how development actors like NGOs organize their complex programs, network systems, and aid chains to respond effectively (Prismakova & Smith, 2016; VanRooyen, 2013). According to Atack (1999), there are four normative categories of NGOs' involvement in development practice. The first one is NGOs that focus primarily on emergency and humanitarian relief. These kinds of NGOs mostly work to provide essential services directly at crisis sites. The second category is development-based NGOs. This group focuses on poverty reduction and the improvement of fundamental human rights. The remaining two categories involve NGOs engaged in policy formation and political advocacy (Atack, 1999). Alongside NGOs, other significant entities played vital roles as major donors, such as Western governments, multilateral agencies, and international institutions. Meanwhile, others from the Global South are often referred to as locals.

The interaction among those actors is often influenced by several factors, such as political origin, histories, cultures, and ideological orientations (Atack, 1999; Fentahun, 2023). Therefore, it is no surprise that while large and well-established Western NGOs continue to receive steady funding to implement their programs, smaller and local organizations in the Global South struggle with chronic funding shortages and limited support.

Easterly (2006) highlighted how Western development aid failed to improve the quality of life in the developing states due to a lack of accountability. According to him, accountability has become a critical concern, especially when billions of dollars have been poured into hierarchical aid systems and development governance. Scholars like Escobar and Anthony Bebbington also highlighted criticisms over the power relations and approaches within the development industry, raising concerns about how effectively these systems overcome the very challenges they claim to tackle (Easterly, 2006).

The notion of the critics is that the current hierarchical system in multilevel non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is sustained primarily by the abundant cash flow of the funding and is driven mainly by a "top-down" approach from a Western standard, which overlooks the social process and the effectiveness of the project itself at the grassroots level in the Global South (Easterly, 2006). The concerns about the effectiveness and relevance of such systems grow in respect to the increasing complexity and dynamism of global development practice. It is contended that rather than fostering community adaptability and empowerment, many development projects have been

less successful, resulting in adverse outcomes such as aid dependency, the emergence of social conflicts, and other shifting social dynamics within communities (Bebbington, 2005; Easterly, 2006; O'Reilly, 2011).

Therefore, this article asks how the mainstream hierarchical NGOs, as we know them today, produce more disadvantages than effective outcomes. This paper explores the following questions: How do persistent gaps remain between international NGOs and local NGOs in this hierarchical system? How is its impact on communities relatively limited or, in some cases, a failure? To address these questions, the results and discussion of the paper are organized into three parts. The first part will examine the mainstream hierarchical system of NGOs and provide critiques of the current model. The second part evaluates the effectiveness and relevance of this system in humanitarian development settings, particularly related to power relations and funding mechanisms. Finally, the last part presents a case study of local NGO dynamics in post-disaster Haiti as evidence to support the analysis and broader argument. Overall, this paper aims to contribute to exploring possibilities for reconfiguring the hierarchical model to enhance its effectiveness and relevance for contemporary development challenges.

This study uniquely contributes to the literature by offering a longitudinal analysis of hierarchical NGO governance across twenty-five years (2000–2025), which provides insights into whether the top-down model has adapted to contemporary humanitarian and development challenges. This research not only explores the normative donor-INGO-local NGO hierarchical relations but also grounds its analysis in the post-disaster Haiti case to reveal how this system perpetuates dependency and inefficiency. Therefore, the study applies a hybrid theoretical framework combining post-development critiques of power asymmetry (Escobar, Bebbington) with Ostrom's polycentric governance theory to evaluate how hierarchical NGO systems distribute power, accountability, and decision-making. The key indicators used include decision-making structure (top-down and bottom-up), accountability mechanisms, and professionalism with respect to funding distributions.

METHODS

Given the broad nature of development practice, this paper limited its scope to examine the relationships between multi-level NGOs in their responses to funding and decision-making. We employed a qualitative method with data primarily obtained from desk research. The literature reviewed spans from 2000 to 2025, with a selection of key sources from notable post-development and polycentrism theorists such as Bebbington (2005), Kilby (2006), and Ostrom (2010a; 2010b).

This paper also engages with debates on power and agency in development interventions, referencing scholars like Easterly. This period is critical because the early 2000s marked the expanding role of NGOs and the development aid chain through global agendas such as the MDGs and SDGs. Approximately 40 sources were drawn primarily from Scopus and book chapters using keywords such as “hierarchical development” and “NGOs aid chains.”

RESULTS

The study has conducted a literature review of academic and scholarly publications across twenty years (between 2000 and 2025), which reveals persistent structural and operational disparities in the hierarchical governance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in international development. Although we have seen the implementation of global development agendas like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Grand Bargain, these issues have not been eliminated. The distribution of power and resources in the NGO system remains uneven. There are four major findings that emerged from the literature and the case study examined in this research.

A. The Structural Hierarchy of NGO Governance Remains Highly Centralized

Most decision-making authority and financial control are concentrated at the donor and international NGO (INGO) levels. Funding usually flows in a vertical chain. It starts with donors, moves to INGOs, and then to local NGOs (LNGOs). Local actors (LNGOs) used to have limited autonomy to influence decision-making (Roberts, Jones & Frohling, 2005; Oloruntoba & Kovács, 2015). Local NGOs primarily act as implementing partners, not more. In contrast, donors and international agencies largely dictate program design, agenda-setting, and evaluation. This hierarchy reflects enduring power asymmetries and often misaligns project priorities with the actual needs of affected communities.

B. The Hierarchical Funding Mechanism Reinforces Dependency among Local NGOs

Findings show that local organizations rely heavily on short-term project grants tied to donor priorities. These grants or funding also come with rigid accountability frameworks (Banks et al., 2015; Pantuliano, 2008). When donor funding ends, many local NGOs face operational collapse because they lack sustainable financial strategies. Initiatives like the Grand Bargain (2016) encourage direct funding to local actors. However, evidence indicates that less than 10 percent of total international humanitarian assistance reaches them directly (IIED, 2019). Therefore, this

pattern perpetuates financial insecurity and prevents local NGOs from building long-term institutional capacity.

C. The Accountability Structures within The Hierarchical System Remain Upward-oriented

Most NGOs are more accountable to their donors than to the communities they serve. Donor requirements often emphasize technical reporting, measurable indicators, and budget efficiency. These take priority over participatory evaluation or social outcomes (Kilby, 2006; Easterly, 2006). As a result, accountability mechanisms privilege managerial efficiency and risk control. Community empowerment is less emphasized. This imbalance weakens local ownership and limits the responsiveness of development interventions to local realities.

D. The Case of Post-disaster Haiti Illustrates The Practical Consequences of These Structural Problems

Following the 2010 earthquake, more than 13,000 NGOs operated in Haiti. Fewer than 10 percent were local organizations with direct funding access (VanRooyen, 2013; IIED, 2019). The influx of international actors led to fragmented coordination and duplication of efforts. It also caused the marginalization of local NGOs within the humanitarian system. Many local organizations became dependent on external resources and short-term projects. This dependence resulted in "projectization" and institutional fragility. Emphasizing the quantity of aid over the quality of engagement further limited sustainable recovery and community empowerment.

Overall, the findings show that hierarchical NGO governance continues to reproduce dependency, inequality, and limited local participation, even after reform initiatives. Centralized funding, upward accountability, and restricted autonomy persist. This underscores the need for a more balanced, adaptive model of NGO coordination. Local actors must become equal partners in the international development architecture.

DISCUSSIONS

The existing international development governance system has created disparities and injustices by disproportionately favoring Western-based and larger international NGOs (INGOs) over local organizations in recipient countries as development actors. The concentration of power and resources at the highest levels (here, we meant international NGOs) often results in decisions that are not aligned with the realities and needs of affected communities. Consequently, this system has contributed to the growth of local organizations with limited experience, whose existence is often

driven by access to aid funding from large INGOs or donors. The nature of local NGOs frequently depends on financial support from international NGOs (INGOs) for their operations. It is therefore not surprising that when larger international NGO programs are discontinued in one location, many local NGOs cease their operations and become unsustainable due to a lack of funding.

To support that argument, we divided this section into three parts. First, it provides critiques of current hierarchical models of NGOs by discussing the limitations and challenges of existing hierarchical structures in NGOs and how top-down approaches could marginalize local voices. Reflection on power imbalances between INGOs and local NGOs and how this affects aid effectiveness and accountability will also be assessed in this part. Second, it evaluates the effectiveness and relevance of these systems in humanitarian development, especially in how power dynamics and funding mechanisms embedded in hierarchical systems can create dependency, distort priorities, or undermine local NGO autonomy. This part also examines how funding timeframes and donor requirements impact project sustainability. Lastly, a case study of local NGOs' dynamics in post-disaster Haiti will be provided as evidence to support the analysis and argument.

A. Critiques of the Current Mainstream Hierarchical Development Models

Oloruntoba & Kovacs (2015) argued that the hierarchical structure of NGO operations reflects the dynamic power imbalance in global development governance. This governance refers to the flow of funds from international donors to international NGOs and then to local NGOs at the implementing level. It reflects the administrative mechanisms and the complex interdependencies between them. INGOs used to have a strong network with resources. They hold a dominant position in determining program agendas and priorities. On the other hand, local NGOs were often subordinated due to limited access to financial resources, human resources, and decision-making spaces, leading to an asymmetric relationship among them.

Today, global development governance forms a structured and interconnected operating system across multiple levels. This operating system encompasses thousands of development organizations worldwide, from donors (mostly from wealthy countries) to local actors in developing countries. According to Roberts, Jones, & Frohling (2005), this interconnectedness originated from a hierarchical pattern of approaches (which we used to call the top-down and bottom-up models). The "top-down" approach is a traditional hierarchical model with the center of power and resources at the highest level. This approach indirectly creates a vertical power

structure and often reflects global inequality between countries in the Northern and Southern hemispheres (Girei, 2016). Decision-making processes for development programs in developing countries are typically centered on elite groups (donor agencies, NGOs, and Western governments), so programs are often far removed from the realities of the lives of the target communities. Many experts have criticized this approach for its paternalistic and exclusive nature, often neglecting local knowledge and community experiences (Lane, 1995; Kanyamuna & Zulu, 2022). In contrast, a “bottom-up” approach has the primary goal of empowering local NGOs and communities by valuing their own knowledge and skills in program management (Lane, 1995). The initial idea of this approach is participatory development, where direct community involvement gives them a sense of ownership over the results. However, under the mainstream system, the local NGOs are often restricted to obligations to comply with various donor regulations (Girei, 2016; Banks et al., 2015).

Local NGOs often find themselves in a difficult position, having to bridge the gap between international NGOs and communities. They have two primary responsibilities: following the rules and expectations of donors while maintaining a keen understanding of the real needs and conditions on the ground (Girei, 2016). Typically, information from communities is conveyed through meetings, reports, or training activities and then passed on to the international level to influence broader policy (Roberts, Jones & Frohling, 2005). Unfortunately, this process wasn't always smooth. The information conveyed was sometimes truncated, filtered, or incomplete, so the goal of sharing knowledge and empowering communities isn't always fully achieved.

Several recent studies have shown that the issue of NGO funding has a paradoxical side. On the one hand, substantial funding could have helped local NGOs grow rapidly during crises (Yu, 2016). But on the other hand, that funding was often volatile and tied to donor interests or short project timelines. Many NGOs thrived during emergencies but struggled to survive after the crisis ended (VanRooyen, 2013; Pantuliano, 2008). Bebbington (2005) argued that there was a complex relationship between power, institutions, and the roles of individuals within NGOs. He also points out that the rigid implementation of a project could marginalize local communities and give them little room to participate in decision-making.

There was an alternative governance model that Ostrom (2010a) calls polycentric. This governance model advocates a system where decisions are made not by a single entity or organization, but by multiple actors collaborating at various levels. This can be considered an alternative, but several studies have revealed that implementing this approach still faces various

obstacles, such as rigid donor policies, irregular funding flows, and a technocratic organizational culture (Gasu & Agbley, 2022). Elinor Ostrom's thinking remains crucial today, particularly in her critique of overly centralized governance systems. She argued that when all decisions are made solely by the central government, the results are often ineffective, especially when the role of local institutions and long-term engagement is neglected (Ostrom, 2010b). Therefore, Ostrom advocated a more open and distributed governance model, also known as polycentric governance. In this model, power is divided among several decision centers to allow for faster, more flexible, and more tailored responses to problems (Ostrom, 2010a).

Kilby (2006) also criticized another problem that was significant to NGOs' challenges: "professionalism." He argued that if the system is too top-down (technocratic), it tends to marginalize the critical knowledge and experience of local communities, which are the beneficiaries of development. This can lead to a feeling that programs implemented for the community do not belong to the community itself, even though they are involved. Kilby called this the "paradox of professionalism," a condition in which NGOs operate more efficiently but become less sensitive to community needs. Communities are often perceived as passive recipients of aid, even though they possess local perspectives and wisdom (Bernhagen & Vetter, 2020). Furthermore, local NGOs often lack the funding, capacity, and expertise to manage large projects (Suárez & Gugerty, 2016). As a result, they struggle to create truly impactful change, especially because grant funding often comes and goes, resulting in short-lived projects (Oloruntoba & Kovacs, 2015).

In conclusion, the current mainstream of international development governance remains hierarchical, characterized by both top-down and bottom-up approaches. These two approaches have their own characteristics in practice and their respective weaknesses. Therefore, a change in working systems is needed to make them more open, flexible, and adaptive to local conditions.

B. Evaluating the Effectiveness and Relevance of the Hierarchical Model in Humanitarian Development

In this subsection, we discussed whether the NGO hierarchical system was effective and relevant in international development practice. Many of the local NGOs became overly dependent on donor funding (Mendoza-Arana, 2015). Critics argued that short funding periods neglect longer-term efforts such as community engagement, institution strengthening, and systemic change (Banks et al., 2015). This pattern created a repetitive cycle of short-term projects and difficulties for locals to build stable structures, retain expertise, and develop more sustainable programs (Pantuliano, 2008).

Scholars argued that such structures reinforced dependency, distorted local priorities, and weakened the autonomy of local NGOs, thus compromising their stated goals (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010; Banks et al., 2015). Easterly (2006) criticized the top-down planning and a tendency for elite-centered decision-making. Hierarchical decision-making and funding flows reinforced asymmetrical relationships between international actors and local organizations. Donors and international NGOs (INGOs) typically controlled funding flows. They also imposed strict conditions, reporting requirements, and short-term project cycles that shaped local NGOs' strategies and priorities (Redeker & Martens, 2018; Harju, 2019). For example, in conflict-affected regions such as South Sudan and Syria, studies have shown that the ability of local NGOs to respond flexibly to rapidly changing circumstances was severely limited by rigid donor frameworks and bureaucratic requirements from international partners (Stephen, 2017; Pantuliano, 2008). Furthermore, another factor influencing effectiveness was the funding horizon. Humanitarian-based projects were often designed around short-term emergency cycles, limiting the scope for local organizations to build more stable relationships with affected communities (Pal et al., 2019; Brun, 2016). These time constraints exacerbated project fragility and led to what some scholars call "projectionism" by local NGOs (Banks et al., 2015).

Debates over accountability have led donors to adopt short-term funding cycles to maintain control and to ensure funds are used for urgent needs (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). There were some adaptive funding models, such as pooled funds and results-based financing, that were proposed to provide NGOs with stability and autonomy in achieving development goals (Nwogu et al., 2021; Mendoza-Arana, 2015). Take a look at the Grand Bargain initiative (2016), for instance. Although it emphasized direct funding and long-term commitments to local organizations to increase aid effectiveness, the transition to long-term funding remained difficult due to bureaucratic hurdles and other significant constraints (Harju, 2019). Funding reforms attempt to address structural challenges, yet power imbalances within the hierarchical NGO system continue to dictate who makes decisions and whose voices are being heard. In practice, international NGOs and donors often dominate strategic forums, while local NGOs and grassroots communities are marginalized despite the promotion of participatory discourse (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010; Banks et al., 2015; Ramalingam et al., 2013).

Another challenge is related to fairness and inclusivity in the decision-making processes. Many international NGO-led coordination bodies actually made it difficult for local NGOs to participate due to several factors, such as limited funding, language skills, or political influence (Pantuliano,

2008; Siddiqi & Rohwerder, 2020). It contradicts the primary goal of "localization," which aims to provide more space for local communities to play an active role. Critics argued that without real changes in the distribution of power, localization would remain a mere slogan, not a truly meaningful change (Macrae & Harmer, 2021). Power imbalances in the NGO world weren't just about who attends meetings or makes decisions, but also about who controls information and knowledge. Typically, NGOs or international organizations have extensive access to data and reports, allowing them to determine how a crisis was told and what evidence was considered important (Kayamuna & Zulu, 2022; Shah et al., 2022). Some researchers argued that power could shift and be negotiated depending on the situation (Bernhagen & Vetter, 2020). For example, some local NGOs were becoming more adept at leveraging collaboration and advocacy to gain a greater international audience (Bauhardt & Eweje, 2020). On the other hand, international NGOs were also beginning to realize the importance of working together and involving all parties, even though the practice had not always run smoothly (Roche & Kelly, 2012). Nevertheless, the structural constraints imposed by donor funding cycles and accountability mechanisms often limited the extent to which power can be genuinely decentralized. Donors' emphasis on risk management, measurable outcomes, and compliance tends to reinforce top-down control, leaving little room for local actors to innovate or challenge established hierarchies (Banks & Hulme, 2021).

Despite numerous challenges, we argued that the hierarchical aid system could be improved through various reforms. These reforms could be implemented through measures such as giving local NGOs a greater voice in decision-making, creating more flexible funding systems to adapt to needs on the ground, and providing long-term support to strengthen their capabilities (Mendoza-Arana, 2015; Hu & Shu, 2024). The use of technology could also help open up access to information and make the role of local NGOs more visible, although issues such as disparities in internet access and digital literacy remain barriers (Bennett et al., 2020), even though conflicting interests remain difficult to reconcile (Banks et al., 2015).

In conclusion, the embedded power dynamics and funding mechanisms in hierarchical NGO systems frequently undermine local ownership and sustainable development outcomes. To enhance effectiveness and relevance, there was a pressing need to rethink funding paradigms, to foster genuine power-sharing arrangements, and to design longer-term flexible support systems that empower local actors as equal partners rather than passive recipients.

C. Case Study: Dynamics of Local NGOs in Post-Disaster Haiti

In this subsection, we provided an analysis of the 2010 Haiti earthquake as our case study to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of hierarchical models in humanitarian practice.

Long story short, in 2010, the catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti devastated the capital, Port-au-Prince, resulting in over 220,000 deaths and affecting more than three million people with widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure (VanRooyen, 2013; Altay & Labonte, 2014). In response, the international humanitarian organizations mobilized rapidly. Within only weeks, over 400 organizations were on the ground, and within months, the number of NGOs operating in Haiti swelled to over 13,000 (most of them were locals) (VanRooyen, 2013). The unprecedented influx of aid actors highlighted the urgent need for coordination but simultaneously exposed critical weaknesses embedded in the dominant hierarchical network system.

During that crisis response, one of the primary challenges was the fragmentation and lack of coordination at multiple levels. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) established the Cluster Coordination System to streamline efforts (to provide basic needs in emergency settings). The condition was difficult. This system has struggled to accommodate the surge of actors. Many of them were untrained and lacked professional humanitarian experience (VanRooyen, 2013; Nabi, 2014). The result was a chaotic operational environment, with duplication of efforts and inefficient resource allocation undermining the overall effectiveness of relief and recovery operations.

Under those circumstances, local NGOs were forced to work under stringent donor requirements, including complex financial reporting, monitoring standards, and compliance measures that favored larger INGOs and international institutions. A survey by IIED (2019) found that less than 10% of international funding was directly channeled to local organizations, underscoring the systemic funding inequity. Not surprisingly, this dependence on external funding and short-term project cycles fostered aid dependency and “projectization”. This term refers to a condition where local NGOs operated on precarious, unsustainable bases, unable to plan beyond immediate crises. There was high in staff turnover and limited capacity building, which further weakened institutional sustainability (Banks et al., 2015; Brun, 2016).

Professionalism and accountability were crucial factors for an effective humanitarian response. Inexperienced staff, lacking adequate networks or familiarity with humanitarian principles, could contribute to inefficiencies and, in some cases, could harm beneficiaries (Kilby, 2006; O'Reilly,

2011; Tan & von Schreeb, 2015). Additionally, questions arose regarding the transparency and accountability of partner selection processes, with allegations of corruption and nepotism linked to funding opportunities, further complicating outcomes (Suárez & Gugerty, 2016).

The Haitian experience thus exemplifies the inherent ineffectiveness of hierarchical development networks: while facilitating large-scale funding mobilization and international coordination, these systems often marginalize local actors, limit their autonomy, and undermine long-term development goals. The “aid quantity over quality” dilemma emerges prominently, where the volume of aid delivered overshadows considerations of relevance, sustainability, and local ownership (VanRooyen, 2013).

In light of the increasing complexity of humanitarian crises, the relevance of the traditional hierarchical model is increasingly questioned. New actors, especially indigenous organizations, have emerged with the potential to transform humanitarian practice, but they remain hampered by limited experience and professionalism within rigid funding and managerial frameworks. Yet, if these hierarchical systems are thoughtfully restructured, embracing principles of polycentric governance, decentralization, and genuine power-sharing, they could harness local capacities more effectively and promote social change aligned with community priorities (Ostrom, 2010a; Banks et al., 2015).

The Haiti case underscores the urgent need for donor reforms that expand direct funding to local NGOs, simplify compliance requirements, and incorporate local actors in strategic decision-making. Efforts such as the Grand Bargain commitment to channel at least 25% of humanitarian funding directly to local organizations mark progress, but genuine transformation demands deeper shifts in power relations, accountability, and coordination mechanisms (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2024; Pantuliano, 2008).

In conclusion, the post-disaster dynamics of local NGOs in Haiti vividly illustrate the limitations of hierarchical models in delivering effective, relevant, and sustainable humanitarian outcomes. They also highlight the promise of reimagined development networks that prioritize local agency, equitable partnerships, and adaptive governance to meet the evolving challenges of contemporary humanitarian development.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has critically examined the hierarchical structures that dominate the governance of development NGOs, particularly in humanitarian settings. Through theoretical critique and an in-

depth case study of the 2010 Haiti earthquake response, it has become clear that while hierarchical systems facilitate large-scale mobilization of resources and coordination. These power dynamics often translate into donor-driven agendas, fragmented coordination, and a disconnect between decision-makers and the affected communities, ultimately undermining the effectiveness and relevance of development interventions.

The Haiti case study illustrates how local NGOs, despite their contextual knowledge and vital roles on the ground, are marginalized within hierarchical funding and managerial systems. Issues such as limited direct funding, exclusion from strategic decision-making, and burdensome donor requirements constrain their ability to lead sustainable development efforts. Moreover, the predominance of short-term project funding fosters dependency and instability, limiting long-term impact. These findings underscore the necessity of rethinking conventional hierarchical models to better accommodate local voices, foster genuine partnerships, and promote adaptive, context-sensitive humanitarian responses.

Moving forward, the development sector must embrace reforms that challenge entrenched hierarchies by decentralizing power and funding, enhancing accountability to local actors, and fostering polycentric governance models that balance global coordination with grassroots autonomy. Only by transforming these structures can humanitarian and development interventions become more effective, equitable, and resilient in the face of increasingly complex crises. The experience of Haiti offers both cautionary lessons and hopeful examples, reminding us that the path to meaningful development lies in empowering those closest to the challenges rather than reinforcing distant, top-down control.

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