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"For them it's not the work, it's the life": humanitarian leadership development in the Global South

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Abstract

What are the leadership development needs of so-called 'Global South' humanitarian professionals? The humanitarian professionalisation agenda begun in the 1990s has evolved to include short courses and accredited programmes specifically aiming to build leadership skills. This paper explores how humanitarian professionals from the Global South understand the current context of leadership development, including its barriers of access, and potential for change to be more relevant to their lives and work. Using thematic analysis of eleven key informant interviews, the paper finds three levels of consideration: global politics and inequality, personal and professional enrichment, and practical support. The findings suggest that while humanitarian leadership training can be better tailored and made available to Global South leaders at all career stages, there is a wider, more crucial need to address systemic imbalances. This paper contributes to wider discussion on localisation and inequality in the humanitarian aid sector, and more specifically contributes to the literature on how systemic factors shape the limits of both professionalisation and expansion of humanitarian education initiatives.

Introduction

This paper explores the leadership development needs of humanitarian professionals in the so-called 'Global South'. It brings together two strands of contemporary humanitarian discourse and practice. The first is the professionalisation agenda. Beginning in the 1990s, in the aftermath of tragedy in Rwanda and Srebrenica, the professionalisation wave contends that humanitarian work *can* and *should* be a recognised profession. This led to the development of humanitarian standards, such as the Sphere Standards, as well as education and training programmes to disseminate these standards. Leadership training is a subset of the contemporary humanitarian professionalisation landscape, which aims to support the ability of humanitarians to confidently navigate the challenges of working in crisis response. This is in contrast with technical trainings, which aim to support specific aspects of humanitarian assistance.

The second strand is inequality and inequity of the mainstream international humanitarian sector. Localisation has called for humanitarian response to be 'as local as possible, and international as necessary' — yet funding flows have not met this call. Money is not the only problem, however. Barbelet et al. (2021) describe the phenomena of perpetual 'capacity development' which maintains that Global South organisations are not sufficiently able to manage funding from so-called 'Global North' donors. The capacity development narrative implies that organisations in the Global South cannot be compliant or implement projects at scale without a Global North organisation as an intermediary. Underpinning this perception are assumptions around what it means to be capable, who decides what it means to be capable, and

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who has the potential to become capable. Bian (2022), for example, outlines power hierarchies in the humanitarian sector that view whiteness as linked to competency.

The twin strands of humanitarian professionalisation and inequity join to suggest that humanitarian training and education are susceptible to the same wider patterns where (largely white) actors from the Global North decide what organisations and individuals need to become 'professional'. This paper focuses on one aspect of this problem — the leadership development needs of Global South humanitarian professionals. It does so by analysing interviews conducted with individuals working in humanitarian response from the Global South. The paper contributes to wider discussion on localisation and inequality in the humanitarian aid sector, and more specifically contributes to the literature on how systemic factors shape the limits of both professionalisation and expansion of humanitarian education initiatives. It is important to clarify at the outset that the co-authors of this paper are based at Australian and Dutch institutions, and that they conducted this research under the banner of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL) — a partnership between Deakin University and Save the Children Australia. The paper thus does not represent a Global South-led line of inquiry.

Another important point to note is that the authors do not use the terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' without some consternation. These are imperfect terms in several ways. First, the assumption of a North–South divide has been challenged in a more complex, multipolar world (Mawdsley 2017). These terms introduce an issue of binaries — the categorical bifurcation between Global North and Global South lacks nuance. Second, it is also important to note that while this paper engages with literature on localisation, 'Global South' and 'local' are far from synonyms. Thirdly, the terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' are steeped in racial categorisation — as Khan et al. (2022, p. 2) explain, 'What these divisions indicate, is the "whiteness" of wealth, including aid, given [Global North] nations are predominately white, while everyone else is not'. The authors chose to employ these terms because they are well-known and recognisable. The intention of this paper is to interrogate how professionals who face intersectional challenges — including but not limited to impacts of neocoloniality, racial discrimination, access to funding, perceived 'capacity', access to employment and training in their own language(s), and/or access to travel opportunities — understand their own development needs. The discussion also considers the terms Global South and Global North in the context of the findings, further interrogating the limitations of these widespread categories.

The paper next explores the twin strands of the problem represented above in more depth. It then outlines the methodology, before exploring the findings of the thematic analysis of interviews. A discussion section following the findings considers their dialogue with existing knowledge. Finally, a conclusion presents the implications of the study.

Professionalisation meets power

The mainstream humanitarian sector began its professionalisation journey in the 1990s, following the atrocities in Rwanda and Srebrenica, among others. Media and public attention not only followed the human suffering, but also how international humanitarian systems responded to these events. Attention to the lack of standards pushed the sector to pursue greater professionalisation (Clarke et al. 2019). One response from the sector was to create and socialise sets of standards and quality controls. These include the Sphere Handbook (first published in 1998), the Core Humanitarian Competencies Framework (2012), and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (2014). The Sphere Handbook describes the standards needed for humanitarian response. It is regularly revised and updated and is a well-known resource in the sector. In 2022 alone, the Sphere website recorded over 50,000 downloads (Sphere 2022, 6). However, it is important to note that even widespread, highly adopted frameworks and standards are not without critique. One study of Sphere's standards in practice in Nairobi, for example, argued that the standards were aspirational and lacking a robust evidence base (Patel and Chadhuri 2019).

Humanitarians can enrol in bespoke, organisation-specific courses, postgraduate and undergraduate degrees, free online units, paid short courses, and simulation-based emergency trainings, among other options. Approximately 26 generalist humanitarian master's level courses are available globally, a nearly four-fold increase from 2010 (Stibral et al. 2022). These are almost all delivered in Europe, North America, and Australia, though programmes are also offered in Nigeria and India. The growth in courses mirrors the overall growth of the sector — in 2010, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) estimated that the number of professionals in humanitarian and development aid increases by 6% every year. In 2018, ALNAP estimated 570,000 field staff work in the humanitarian sector, with over 500,000 of these being nationals of the country in which they work (Knox-Clark et al. 2018, 102). There is therefore a geographic disconnect between where the growth of postgraduate courses is happening, versus where there is a growth in humanitarian staff.

James (2016) presents three potential downsides to the professionalisation of humanitarian response: a greater distance between those receiving aid and those working in aid, higher thresholds of entry into careers in the sector, and disincentives to risk and innovation. The first critique makes some assumptions around who is working in aid and who is living through crisis — they can be, and often are, one and the same. This is reflected in the effort to 'localise' humanitarian response to be only as international as necessary, with local leadership driving relief efforts.

The mainstream, contemporary humanitarian system emerged in response to changing political and social conditions, including the rise of capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism (Davey et al. 2013). It is a system with — as Davey et al. (2013) title their paper — 'Western origins and foundations'. While the vast majority of humanitarian workers are nationals of the country in which they work, current leadership structures in the sector are often dominated by external/international actors. Local actors face barriers related to education, language, and cultural differences, which can limit their opportunities to take on leadership roles (Cohen et al. 2016). Other studies have identified issues related to infrastructure, governance, and the dominance of Global North perspectives in humanitarian knowledge production (Amar 2012; Combinido and Henry 2022). In the face of these challenges, local organisations have found creative ways to establish the recognition they deserve — for example, refugee lead organisations in Kampala, Uganda, eschewed mainstream humanitarian governance structures and instead formed their own transnational networks (Pincock et al. 2021).

Localisation is not an apolitical concept, but one deeply rooted in issues of power (Spandler et al 2022). As Gomez (2021, 1347) writes, 'Not only is localisation a failed attempt to reconfigure the international humanitarian system power relations, dominated by Western actors, but also it glosses over the crucial role of the South in moulding the humanitarian action norm'. In other words, localisation seeks not to question and rebuild humanitarian norms, but to encourage local actors to acquiesce to and adopt the norms shaped by Western forces. Zadeh-Cummings (2022) describes this phenomenon as 'mirroring'. However, it is important to not ignore the impact actors outside Western hegemony and thinking have had on humanitarian norms. For example, Basu (2016) argues that Global South contributions to shaping and implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (Landmark resolution on Women, Peace, and Security) have been overlooked.

One way in which the adaptation of the local towards externally imposed norms can take place is through 'capacity building' — a controversial but ever-present term. Jayawickrama (2018, 4) argues that capacity building has colonial echoes — 'The focus on strengthening capacity is based on a fallacious assumption that perpetuates the notion that local actors and the affected population do not have the capacity, or ability, to take control of their lives'.

There is increasing recognition of the importance of local leadership (Khan and Kontinen 2022). Yet localisation can also present a paradox where local actors face greater risk and limited resources and are thus disempowered (Barter and Sumlut 2022). Other studies of humanitarian leadership have argued that investing in local leadership can lead to more efficient, effective, and sustainable humanitarian action (Kergoat et al. 2020). Despite this, local actors are often overlooked and underresourced by international actors, leading Robillard et al. (2020) to call for more collaborative and inclusive approaches that support local actors and communities to take a leading role in humanitarian response. The idea of the 'local' being necessary for effective and just action is not unique to humanitarianism. In peacebuilding, Paffenholz (2015) has criticised aspects of the 'local turn' for its potential to reinforce power imbalances, its neglect of national-level actors, and its attention to the broader political and economic context of peacebuilding. She further argues that while overall a positive development, the local turn has also been subject to oversimplification and romanticization. MacGinty (2015) illustrates how the local has been simplified, homogenised, and essentialised. Further, the flattening of humanitarian actors into categories like 'local' and 'international' risks creating a false binary (Roepstorff 2020). It bears repeating here that local and Global South are not synonymous. Importantly, many Global South humanitarians work in their home countries, but others do not.

Methodology

The research adopted a hybrid thematic analysis approach to explore the leadership development needs of humanitarian professionals in the Global South, aiming to incorporate reflection, positionality, and transparency throughout the study. Participants comprised current staff members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who had engaged in professional development activities within the past five years and were proficient in English.

We utilised a convenience sampling method, drawing from a list of 55 potential participants identified through the researchers' professional networks. Specifically, these potential participants were alumni of CHL courses. They were thus 'end-users' of at least one professional development initiative. Current students were ineligible due to

ethical concerns of engaging individuals who have not yet finished their study and who thus have a different power relationship with the CHL than alumni. Reflecting on the selection process, the researchers acknowledged the potential biases inherent in convenience sampling and considered its implications for the study findings. Of the 55 people approached, a total of 11 (20% response rate) key informant interviews (KII) were completed between December 2021 and December 2022. Of these, 73% ($n=8$) were conducted between September and November 2022. A standardized template was developed to guide the KII process, covering key aspects such as participant information, consent, and interview questions.

The research team employed two rounds of coding in the hybrid approach. The first was an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), which involved identifying key comments and themes emerging from the interviews and logged them into an Excel spreadsheet. The second round of coding mapped the themes from the interviews across the deductive themes, generated by the research team prior to the commencement of interviews and reviewed throughout the process for relevancy. These deductive themes are outlined in Table 1. The deductive themes were generated based on the construct of professionalisation and the practice of engaging in training/certification, as explored earlier in the paper, but without the assumption that professionalisation is inherently good (or inherently bad). The researchers tracked and collated any comments from the inductive analysis that did not fit within the deductive mapping, to ensure they were not lost.

The use of a hybrid inductive/deductive approach can support rigorous research that balances codes derived from data with codes derived from theoretical or conceptual framings (Fereday and Muir Cochrane, 2006). Thematic analysis is not exclusive to the inductive or deductive realms, and depending on the research design, can straddle continuums across data-driven and theory-driven approaches (Braun and Clarke 2012). The hybrid approach is not linear — it was an iterative, reflexive process. This included reflecting on our role as interviewers, recognising our positionality (Mason-Bish 2019), and critically examining our own perspectives and biases throughout the coding process. The approach utilised in this study allowed analysis to begin on a basis of participant experience while also ensuring the analysis retained relevancy to the professionalisation and education debate.

While the methodology effectively addressed the research question, the researchers remained transparent about its limitations. Technical challenges arose during data collection, necessitating the use of multiple applications for recording and transcribing interviews, which may have affected the accuracy of transcripts. KII were recorded and automatically transcribed using three different applications, including Zoom, Transcribe, and Otter.ai software programmes. These programmes had varying accuracy, requiring more careful adjustment of the transcripts, aided by the recordings following the interviews. Additionally, all interviews were conducted in English, limiting the inclusivity of the study. Part of the reflexive practice of this study included researchers' consideration on how to mitigate these limitations where possible, such as through careful adjustment of transcripts.

Findings

The humanitarian leadership situation in the Global South is complex and multifaceted. While there are many committed and capable leaders working in this region, they often face a range of challenges and barriers that can impede their ability to respond effectively to crises and disasters. The findings of this study highlight the perceptions and expectations of local humanitarian leaders in Global South contexts. The results showed that Global South leaders require more resources, access to training, and opportunities for education to better serve their communities. They also highlighted the importance of context-specific approaches and the need for more inclusive and equitable initiatives that consider the political and social contexts of the communities they serve. The findings also emphasise the importance of empowering Global South leaders to enable them to develop and implement sustainable solutions that address the unique challenges faced by their communities.

Table 1 Deductive themes

Major professional development challenges facing leaders in Global South
Examples of impactful/useful professional development interventions
Examples of not impactful/useful professional development interventions
Value of degrees and certifications
Relevance of professional development initiatives
Application of learnings from professional development courses/accreditations

Global politics and inequality

The study revealed that the political context in many countries in the Global South poses significant challenges for humanitarian leaders of the Global South. Participants highlighted there are critical political factors that work at high levels where they don't have any power. In other words, participants highlighted systemic issues they felt they could not change. These political factors manifest on large scales, impacting how organisations work, and also impact individuals and their quality life. In the latter case, participants highlighted salary discrimination — where international staff are paid more and receive different benefits to local/national staff — and short-term employment contracts as issues. Moreover, discrimination in funding allocation was identified as a concerning issue, particularly between local, national, and international organisations. The disparity in funding opportunities and salary discrimination creates tension and undermines the collaborative efforts of Global South humanitarian actors. Participants raised important points when comparing resources available in Global North emergencies compared to Global South emergencies. For example, one participant (KII8) noted that North-based organisations have a longer history involved in emergencies, wider networks, and greater capacity to mobilise resources, thus providing an advantage to secure resources to support education and training. One person highlighted the resources mobilised for the Ukraine crisis compared to other crises in Global South contexts:

> *It was nothing compared to what we've been able to raise….. for Ukraine right, let alone, you know something like the Horn of Africa and the hunger crisis or you know anything like that, so it's just about it the wealth that's available in the Global north. That to me is the biggest distinction because I think there's crises happening all around the world. (KII4)*

Moreover, participants unpacked deeper political challenges of resource allocations/ funding for local or national NGOs. Participants highlighted that applying and securing funding for humanitarian projects for their own local NGOs are one of the most important or crucial needs for local NGOs' development. Moreover, local NGOs often do not get donor-funded projects directly as grantees for humanitarian interventions, as most of these funds are only open to applications from international NGOs (INGOs). Additionally, interviewees noted that Global South humanitarian local organisations face challenges in establishing and utilising effective networks. Poor connectivity with the broader system hampers their ability to collaborate with others and secure funding. Furthermore, some funding opportunities exclusively favour INGOs and UN organisations, excluding local NGOs (LNGO) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from accessing crucial funding opportunities. One participant noted,

> *Most of the funding is only available for the INGOs and UN organizations, not for the local NGOs. Most of LNGO has poor utilization – difficult to get in contact with someone. (KII3)*

The participants also highlighted that they felt they were not competitive in funding proposal applications. They explained that INGOs are technically sound, well-trained, and experienced on how to write and secure grant proposals for funding humanitarian projects, especially in comparison to their Global South counterparts. The volatile and unpredictable nature of politics can hinder humanitarian access to affected populations and limit the ability to advocate for the needs and rights of those populations. Participants also highlighted that they don't get any of these opportunities to enhance their skills on writing proposals and bidding for funding opportunities by competing with others.

> *First of all, most staff don't have knowledge, so people who have done it come and submit proposal documents. People need to be trained on the proposal design, how to collect ideas/data on the field to inform good proposal development in a difficult context... (KII3)*

Moreover, participants noted the painful situations in which, due to their limited capacity in applying for and securing funds directly, LNGOs often play a role as the implementers at field level by working as sub-recipients or implementing partners of INGOs. As INGOs receive funds for programmes and projects, many of the key resources — including salary packages, facilities, and skill development opportunities — belong to INGOs rather than LNGOs. INGOs open bids for LNGOs at the local level to implement some aspects of an emergency response, mostly as service providers, which means that LNGOs may get limited opportunities to lead a programme or project to enhance their leadership skills in humanitarian responses.

> *How do we lead these projects in emergency response, development, different stages of responses, if it is a relief, its development stage, how do we lead these responses? So such training is still quite a number of national organizations which work closely with these international NGOs. Like in Kenya you will find that mostly the national NGOs are at the implementing end. You find that if it's Save the Children, they will be having a number of local NGOs they're working with for actual implementation. So*

aspect of training, widening the humanitarian training, as in, how do they manage these projects locally would still be beneficial because sometimes an international NGO comes in or opens up the bid if they want to have some kind of intervention. (KII6)

Additionally, a Global North perception of corruption and mismanagement of resources occurring in the Global South was mentioned as a factor contributing to tension in humanitarian contexts:

There are many demands from NGOs, from International NGOs straight forward and see things as if doing on the field, the mentality of taking it for your own purpose. (KII3)

In summary, our findings shed light on the global politics and tension prevalent in humanitarian contexts. The political context in the Global South poses unique challenges for humanitarian leaders, affecting their access to affected populations and advocacy efforts. Funding discrimination and systemic biases can lead to tensions between different organisations. The unpredictable nature of humanitarian crises and perceived corruption further complicate the humanitarian landscape. Understanding and addressing these findings are crucial for fostering effective and collaborative humanitarian efforts worldwide.

Professional and personal contexts

Professional context

Participants emphasised the importance of developing leadership capacity in the humanitarian sector. In their professional lives, participants highlighted how Global South organisations are well-placed to respond to the needs of their countries. National organisations were perceived as having more experience and awareness of local needs, highlighting the need to invest in leadership training for professionals:

Let me be the voice of national organizations because national organizations are more experienced, and they are somehow aware of their needs... (KII2)

Moreover, building trust and fostering team spirit were identified as critical factors in creating a cohesive and effective organisation. Lack of trust and disconnect among team members can lead to tensions and hinder successful project implementation:

Generally, a whole organization is one unit to implement projects in the Global South. If trust is not existing, the team spirit is not existing, so everyone will feel themselves that they are disconnected, and sometimes, the department will start a war under the table between each other. (KII2)

Furthermore, power dynamics and hierarchy within organisations can influence decision-making and collaboration. Improving governance and stakeholder engagement were identified as essential elements in leadership training:

Need to give emphasis on capacity building on governance also...generally how we relate with stakeholder engagement, because when you look at this in Kenya now, we have tried the aspect of developed governance so at any stage, there has to be, if it is non-stakeholders, religious stakeholders. So, such kind of training on governance and how we engage with stakeholders would also be beneficial for a greater impact in terms of intervention. (KII1)

Given the challenging locations in which humanitarian professionals operate, mental health programmes for staff were highlighted as necessary to ensure well-being and effective work:

The mental health programs for staff, especially given many are working in such difficult locations, to pay attention, to have hope to continue the work. (KII3)

These findings shed light on potential areas where leadership training can support Global South humanitarians — trust-building, governance, and mental health support. However, as highlighted in the point on mental health, the personal cannot be wholly separated from the professional. In another example, completing professional courses and acquiring certificates were seen as valuable assets for individual career development. Such achievements enhance credibility and open up opportunities for personal advancement:

You want that sort of credibility on your CV, you know, because it just speaks more volumes when you're trying to apply for a job that you're interested in. (KII4)

Professional development efforts target individuals but have a collective impact. Participants expressed how increased understanding of humanitarian standards and best practices benefits the entire sector:

The main benefit to the sector more broadly was collective improvement in the professionalization through greater understanding of issues such as the humanitarian architecture and awareness of humanitarian-wide standards. (KII11)

This study highlights the significance of both professional and personal contexts in humanitarian leadership. As one participant noted — 'For them [people in the Global South with lived experience of humanitarian crisis] it's not the work, it's the life'. (KII5) Developing leadership capacity, building trust and team spirit, addressing power dynamics, and providing mental health support are crucial aspects for effective humanitarian work. On the individual level, acquiring certificates and engaging in career development contribute to collective professionalisation in the sector. Additionally, contextualising training programmes to address regional challenges and cultural factors are essential for successful learning outcomes.

Practical support for skill development

The study participants frequently cited the need of skill development and training or higher education for them to build sustainable leadership practitioners in the Global South. There is limited opportunity to build a strong academic background in humanitarian studies at the undergraduate or postgraduate level. Global programmes tend to rely on Global North experts who are academically qualified and professionally sound because of both their academic and professional experience working in diverse areas of humanitarian response, from project development to implementation. By contrast, LNGO staff have limited opportunity to build such expertise, especially in light of the previous exploration on implementation and funding. Given the background of current need of skill development, one participant reported,

> *....we have the international organizations, INGOs which is basically operate within let's say, let me use the example of the Horn of Africa, but then these organizations, mostly I would refer it like it's a two-tier operation in the sense that we have mostly expatriate staff coming from the Global North or the developed world who have the skills then, I am not disputing that locally the skills are lacking, but there is that of need still to train more within let's say Kenya and the developing world to train more on the aspect of humanitarian leadership. (KII1)*

The need for contextualising training programmes emerged as a key theme. Professionals emphasised that training should be adapted to address specific regional challenges, cultural factors, and local needs:

> *...from my perspective for the leadership, I think they [Global South leaders] are looking for more practical rather than academic – things that they are passionate about, the things that affect them. (KII5)*

Interviewees noted that it is critical to recognise the needs and priorities of local leaders to tailor effective initiatives through designing context-specific training and education interventions. A number of issues were identified that influenced the development and delivery of professional development courses. A key barrier identified was the language in which programmes were delivered. In Latin America, the main languages are Spanish, French, and Portuguese with few courses delivered in languages that meet the needs of the Latin American community, which is a 'big barrier to participate in international events and courses' (KII5). Similarly, translation of courses to local languages from English commonly use direct translation, potentially missing out on correct meaning through a more nuanced translation or adaptation.

> *It's just like the literal translation from English to this in the local language, but not reflecting the same meaning in the local language, not using the right terminology (KII7).*

The alignment of professional training programmes to the strategic intentions of organisations was also identified as a challenge. Another issue raised was mixed cohorts of participants spanning those from novice-level practitioners to experienced practitioners, thus impacting on the learning experience.

> *We need to stratify this kind of training to look for what is needed in the short-term skills needed in the short-term. I do believe they are there, what is needed in the medium-term and what is needed in the long-term. (KII2)*

Participants discussed their expectations around how they think humanitarian leadership programmes could be designed and offered to the Global South humanitarian practitioners to build their leadership skills. First, they discussed the need for designing three levels of training sessions for three levels of practitioners and needs for programme and project management at the ground level including short-term, medium-term, and long-term in terms of practitioners' positions and needs for serving the field-level humanitarian work.

> *...I think that there are a number of trainings which can also fall under long-term and medium-term in the sense that when we look at also most of the interventions happening in the Global South, that is the developing countries, you find that mostly we have these three stages of interventions where something happens in Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, there is a volcanic eruption, the first step is rushing there to save lives, then the second have the*

long-term now aspect of building resilience now, so that the affected individuals can return back to normal and grow. (KII1)

Our interviewees also highlighted the importance of bottom-up training and learning design approaches, where practitioners should learn by closely involving communities in humanitarian crises. The need to involve communities in learning and continuous improvement was highlighted by four participants in terms of learning the actual real-world problems and lived experiences of people rather than only learning theoretical knowledge. The importance of receiving feedback from communities is noted as a key manner of learning about humanitarian responses. One of the participants noted:

the beneficiaries always want to also give their feedback on the kind of interventions we are giving and the kind of approaches they would also want to see the project take and this is something which I have seen out of the professional trainings, this is something which I have seen improve tremendously within me and also amongst colleagues in the sector...it's also still a continuous process, we learn, and also improve. [KII1]

The need for understanding the community level's transformation in terms of what is going in the humanitarian sectors, what factors interact with each other, and how situations are adopted at the ground level have been well articulated by the following interviewee as:

We also need people to understand the transformation that is going on in the humanitarian sector – not just the leader – it also needs to be people at a lower level. Therefore, I need workshops to raise understanding transformation in the system eg: Gender-Based Violence (as many people are victims but we don't know how to express themselves), Child protection (in the Cameroon crisis children not going to school and not everything the means to go to other towns); shelter, food. For the training the learning is really about what is going in the field, secondly, the design based on beneficiaries' needs and what is really going on. (KII3)

Hence, most of the participants noted the importance of simulation in a training program, which can provide participants with an experiential learning experience mimicking a crisis context. This allows participants to learn leadership skills and expertise by doing or implementing theoretical and technical learning from the training or course on humanitarian leadership. Participants also stressed the importance of tailoring course delivery to cater to diverse learning styles and contexts. Ensuring courses are practical, engaging, and provide opportunities for active participation was considered crucial. As one said:

...simulation is very important. Having a coach who monitors you and gives you feedback is also something very unique because in every training or in most of the training, you will just get the lecture or the lesson or the class and do some practical exercises (KII2)

The need for participants' focused training design has been also highlighted by the interviewees. Our participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of conducting a comprehensive needs assessment that considers not only their reasons for and goals during a humanitarian leadership training, but also the unique concerns of each individual. One example is the need to teach participants how to deal with the mental health issues faced by those who work closely in a crisis setting:

training to collect information, how to design and how to help people. We also need to put mental health for staff because when they come out of the field are disoriented because it is very difficult – need more training in the area also. (KII3)

Finally, participants noted the need for regular coaching and mentoring programmes. Participants highlighted that through personalised guidance, participants gain not only specific skills and knowledge but also a profound understanding of effective leadership styles and decision-making processes, fostering holistic professional development. This personalised approach contributes to enhanced problem-solving abilities, increased self-confidence, and improved communication skills. One noted:

Need to organise coaching/mentoring to help change staff mentality. We have a problem of 'humility' and dignity - you realise that people are not working for the passion for what they are doing, they are working for another purpose. Working closely with a coach or mentor provides opportunities to discuss challenges and receive guidance on effective problem-solving approaches. Moreover, regular feedback and encouragement contribute to increased self-confidence, empowering individuals to take on more significant roles and responsibilities. (KII4)

Discussion

The findings highlight three key areas of needs for Global South leadership professional development. While some of these findings reflect findings of previous scholarship, the contribution of this piece of research is the specific framing of understanding humanitarian leadership

development. The first finding is the need to address larger issues of global politics and inequality. This is not unique to leadership development — in fact, it can only be addressed by moving beyond leadership development into wider, structural issues both within and outside of the humanitarian sector.

The need to address larger structural issues of global politics and inequality is beyond the scope of any single training provider. Yet it is important for learning designers, particularly those in the Global North, to actively consider how their programmes potentially reproduce or encourage power imbalances, as well as how their programmes grapple with questions of inequity, racism, and coloniality. A recent study of 4679 humanitarians working for local organisations found that 'operating environment' was the second most reported challenge to humanitarian work — preceded only by 'coordination' (Bollettino et al. 2023). This serves as a reminder of the deep contextual nature of humanitarian work, which informs the particular socio-political experiences of humanitarian leaders in different countries and regions.

Khan et al. (2022) argue for reconsidering the Global North/Global South dichotomy. One recommendation of their paper is to use more useful distinctions such as income or specific geographical distinctions. The findings of this study suggest that one area driving inequality and creating barriers between people is proximity to donors. Organisations based in countries that are themselves donor states, or that have strong understanding of donors' mindsets, processes, and preferences, have an advantage over organisations for whom reporting, outcomes, and perspectives of donors are less familiar. This positions funding-based inequity as both a quantitative — where money actually goes — but also qualitative problem.

The second finding is the need to address the personal, the professional, and the blurred lines between them. Mental health was a notable aspect of this theme. Humanitarians in high-stress situations tend to regard work colleagues as trustworthy sources of support (Stevens et al. 2022). This further cements the importance of contextualised, robust mental health components being core to leadership training, as well as the importance of duty of care. Ethics of care is centred on the importance of giving good care by individuals, organisations, and institutions, through which the themes of relationality, mutual learning, multiplicity of perspectives, and collective problem solving can emerge (Burnier 2023; Clark-Kazak 2023). Ethics of care provides relevance to humanitarian, educational, and not for profit organisations since it involves the provision of care to people and places, locally and globally (Burnier 2023). Components of care ethics have been offered by Tronto (2010) and include notions of Caring About (the attentiveness to notice need for care); Caring For (taking responsibility to meet the identified need); Care Giving (the provision of care); and Care Receiving (evaluating the care provided).

Clark-Kazak (2023) argues that care ethics focus on relational aspects and engage in meaningful dialogue at the local level, rather than imposing of rules, so as not reproduce harmful power dynamics, by foregrounding relationships and encourages consideration of one's positionality, privilege, and power and highlights the importance of centering care with others to amplify and uplift in solidarity and actively prevent harm rather than simply reduce it, thereby integrating into practice approaches that actively dismantle power structures. When applying this lens to humanitarian leadership development, humanitarian leadership training must work to challenge the structural barriers that exist through deep listening, collective curriculum co-design and programme delivery.

Similarly, there is a need for Western-based, donor-proximate humanitarian agencies to consider their positionality and how they may perpetuate the power disparities, through ongoing epistemic inequities. Drawing on experience of decolonising global health education, a key question to ask in curriculum development is "can the subaltern speak?" — in other words can the marginalised voices be heard and given credibility, so that a plurality of understandings and interpretations can be employed (Bhakuni and Abimbola 2021). Similarly, in humanitarian leadership development, the learning recipients must be actively engaged in curriculum development, so the power, problems, and particularities of the context are understood (Tronto 2010).

The third theme focused on the need for skill development to be strongly practical. Participants reflected positively on the use of simulation, echoing the literature on experience-based learning which asserts that a cycle of concrete experiences, reflection, conceptualisation of abstract ideas, and experimentation can be transformative for learning (Kolb 2015, 52). Also applying an ethics of care lens, reflexivity to the provision of care requires individuals and institutions to reflect upon the care provided, if needs have been met or new needs have emerged (Baker and Naidoo, 2023). Coupled with the first finding theme, the study suggests that strong practical elements should be balanced with geopolitical conceptual analysis and foundations that incorporate that realities of working in and with the mainstream humanitarian sector.

Conclusion

What are the leadership development needs of 'Global South' humanitarian professionals? The humanitarian professionalisation agenda begun in the 1990s has evolved to include short courses and accredited

programmes specifically aiming to build leadership skills. This paper explores how humanitarian professionals from the Global South understand the current context of leadership development, including its barriers of access, and potential for change to be more relevant to their lives and work. Using a hybrid thematic analysis of eleven key informant interviews, the paper finds three levels of consideration: global politics and inequality, personal and professional enrichment, and practical support. The findings suggest that while humanitarian leadership training can be better tailored and made available to Global South leaders at all career stages, there is a wider, more crucial need to address systemic imbalances. The findings thus provide implications for humanitarian education, as explained below, but also highlight limitations on education and training constructed by the systems in which it takes place.

This study has a number of implications for providers of humanitarian leadership training, especially organisations based in the Global North purporting to support colleagues in the Global South. The research team derived the following recommendations for training providers from the findings:

1) Support improvements to accessibility of education programmes — such support must address funding and resourcing issues; as well as provide courses in local languages that are developed in the relevant language, or sensitively translated and delivered.
2) Ensure all training programmes contain practical applications that connect to theory and geopolitical analysis, such as implementation of tools, case studies, peer learning, and simulations.
3) Consider ethics of care throughout learner experience — before, during, and after interacting with a training — and throughout design of programming.
4) Enhance mentoring and coaching throughout and following training to support learning and development of learners.
5) Contextualise training programmes and acknowledge the lived and work experience in diverse humanitarian, development and peace building contexts (i.e., the nexus).
6) Be sensitive to the importance of the development of accountability, integrity, and honesty in many contexts, particularly where issues of politicisation and corruption are evident.
7) Support the delivery of professional development programmes that use a partnership or consortia-based approach — this could include Universities, INGOs/LNGOs, government, regional bodies, and CSOs.

However, the findings also highlight that no amount of training programmes alone can address the needs of Global South humanitarian leaders. Power, inequity, and barriers to funding play a key role. This paper thus joins the chorus of analysis that calls for change in the mainstream humanitarian sector.

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Authors' contributions
MS designed and executed the thematic analysis approach, and wrote up the findings. NZC wrote the background and discussion sections. MAM conceived of the project, secured funding for the project, and supported participant recruitment. SB conducted interviews and contributed to analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data (interview transcripts) is not publicly available.

Declarations

Competing interests
Though not a competing interest per se, it is important to acknowledge that authors all have current or previous employment at the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, a Deakin University/Save the Children Australia partnership. CHL provides leadership training. This research hopes to support the design of leadership training, including but not limited to that offered by CHL.

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