

Re-enchanting humanitarianism for our Precarious-Interdependent Age

Author: Dr Simon Western, April 2023

We are entering a new epoch, a Precarious-Interdependent Age emerging from the environmental emergency, the technological revolution and resulting rapid socio-political change.

Humanitarian responses to this increasingly precarious world are hindered by a modernist mindset that organises aid in a centralised, top-down and paternalistic way. This manifesto proclaims that a new age of humanitarian is urgently needed which we call Eco-Mutualist Humanitarianism.

Guiding Principles for Eco-Mutualist Humanitarianism

1. Eco-Mutualism aspires to bring mutual benefit and mutual value to all.
2. Eco-Mutualist humanitarianism is radically decentralized.
3. Eco-Mutualism moves from dependency cultures to interdependency.
4. Eco-Mutualism shifts power from hierarchical control towards horizontal engagement .
5. Aid beneficiaries are not regarded as dependent recipients, but as mutual participants.
6. All participating actors have agency.
7. Leadership from the edge (LEDGE) leads to viral change.

Outcomes of Eco-Mutualism

- Humanitarian aid and development are co-produced.
- The 'Eco-Mutualist turn' means that internationalism and centralized position-power are no longer considered the dominant force.
- Building civic society is always a by-product of Eco-Mutualism because collaborative engagement and participation are the heartbeat of a healthy civic society.
- Eco-Mutualist approaches address multiple crisis and complex aid and development challenges, with ecosystemic, mutualist, collaborative, adaptive and pluralistic responses.



Eco-Mutualism: A New Direction

The pairing of 'ecosystems and mutualism' brings two powerful concepts together that can guide humanitarianism into a dynamic future. The aim is to unlock the talent, energy and power of collaboration that lies dormant within our humanitarian ecosystems.

Ecosystem

Ecosystem approaches undo the linear, top-down and centralising behaviours that have plagued humanitarian aid and development. In an ecosystem there is no top or centre. Each individual, organisation, technology and environmental/social context are active participants in a dynamic and interdependent whole. Turning away from the obsession with results-based thinking, ecosystemic approaches open our mindsets to engage with new possibilities, new resources, new knowledge and different ideas. Voices from the margins are encouraged to take leadership, and through connecting to local and global ecosystems can make empowered contributions.

Mutualism

Mutualism guides the humanitarian work towards acknowledging mutual agency, recognising that everybody has a part to play. Co-creating mutual/shared value challenges the binary power divide between aid-giver and aid-recipient. Mutual accountability challenges the dependency model of aid, moving towards an interdependency approach where all participants take responsibility and thus experience being engaged citizens.

Eco-Mutualist

Eco-Mutualist thinking produces more engaged collaborations that utilise the hidden resources in our ecosystems, which create more impactful and sustainable outcomes. Better results are achieved from a more purposeful, participatory approach that maximises the ecosystemic opportunities.

Eco-Mutualism is an emergent, not a prescriptive, approach. It is an unfolding process, where each local context co-produces its particular Eco-Mutualist behaviours.

Note: This manifesto was written as part of a wider report 'A New Age of Humanitarianism: From Paternalism to Eco-Mutualism'. The report was commissioned by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy and authored by Dr Simon Western, CEO, The Eco-Leadership Institute.

