



CENTRE FOR  
HUMANITARIAN  
ACTION

## DISCUSSION PAPER

# Towards facilitating local leadership in humanitarian project management

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### Abstract

Since the World Humanitarian Summit, donors and international aid organisations alike have developed dedicated localisation policies in which they commit to strengthening the leadership of local and national NGOs in humanitarian action and treating them as equal partners. Yet, voices on the ground continue to claim that these commitments are rarely met in practice as many international actors retain most decision-making power, leaving the role of national and local NGOs limited to following the lead of their international partners' pre-set plans and agendas. This discussion paper addresses project management and leadership approaches as typically implemented in humanitarian projects today as one of the underlying structural causes for the slow-moving progress in local leadership and participation of affected populations. It shows how the current approach entails a contractual hierarchy that leaves donors at the top who

often exhibit high issue-related involvement in their leadership, i.e., they engage not only in strategic but also operational decisions and the completion of tasks. Doing so they range from participatory to authoritarian leadership. Both the contractual hierarchy and the leadership styles of donors at its top impede more equal partnerships in everyday humanitarian action. Consequentially, to enable more cooperative leadership – not only between local and international actors, but also in interaction with other key stakeholders in humanitarian projects, such as aid recipients – one, donors needed to lean more towards laissez faire leadership, and/or, two, all partners needed to apply more inclusive horizontal management models. To illustrate the latter, the paper uses the example of Scrum and shows how an agile management approach can facilitate local leadership and participation of affected populations in operational humanitarian projects.

### Key messages

- Leadership styles can be categorised by using a grid of motivational and issue-related involvement by leaders. Issue-related involvement describes the extent to which leaders are interested in deciding on and engaging in concrete work-related issues and tasks. Motivational involvement describes the level of engagement leaders have with their teams.
- Typical current humanitarian project management introduces a contractual hierarchy with donors at the top. Both donors, as well as the contractual hierarchy itself, shape how leadership can be executed: Donors set the scope of the leadership styles potentially available to other actors further down the contractual hierarchy. The contractual hierarchy establishes a chain of bilateral servant-leader relationships that tend to gradually shrink the scope of leadership styles available to actors down the hierarchy and lead to leadership leaning more and more towards the authoritarian style.
- To enable local leadership and participation of affected populations, donors and other actors at the upper end of the contractual hierarchy needed to extend the scope of leadership styles available to actors lower in the hierarchy by leaning more towards laissez faire leadership. Alternatively, the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved could be redefined, transforming the contractual hierarchy to include more horizontal cooperation and allowing cooperative leadership among donors and international and local actors, and ensuring its guidance through affected populations.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of leadership has been subject to humanitarian studies and debate for a good ten years now. While largely limited to the contexts of humanitarian coordination and leadership within individual organisations (organisational development), it has resulted in a range of valuable insights. The work of Knox Clarke (2013) on “operational humanitarian leadership,” for example, identified three distinguished humanitarian leadership approaches: the exceptional individual, the structured leadership approach, and the shared leadership approach. Inspired by this and based on previous CHA research, this paper engages in an analysis of leadership approaches (or leadership styles, as they shall be called in this paper) in humanitarian project management and links this to the localisation agenda.

Doing so, the paper first introduces the managerial grid model of Blake and Mouton (1994) to define what it subsumes under the term leadership styles (Chapter 2). It then goes on to apply the grid to the context of contemporary humanitarian project management (Chapter 3). In opposition to the more homogenous leadership contexts of humanitarian coordination and organisational development that have been covered more extensively by previous research, leadership in humanitarian project management needs to address a more diverse set of actors, such as donors, intermediaries, local organisations and/or local branches of INGOs, and aid recipients who all need to effectively interact and work together to develop, design, implement and evaluate humanitarian operations, despite being all separate entities with own interests. As shall become clear in this chapter, the traditional humanitarian project management approach, as it applies in many contexts today, allows donors the power to set the leadership tone in this cooperation and define the scope of leadership styles potentially available to their partners down the project management line. Their tendency to employ high issue-related involvement to manage their work with their direct partners (mostly international organisations), ranging from authoritarian to participative leadership, shrinks the leadership options available to the latter in managing their working relations with their subordinate partners. Chapter 4 shows that this largely contradicts the localisation agenda. It asks which leadership styles would better match the agenda and how these could be embedded in operational humanitarian project management. Chapter 5 summarises the findings and concludes that, if they take their commitments to local leadership and the participation of affected populations seriously, especially international actors, including donors, must reduce the issue-related involvement in their leadership styles in one way or another and engage in more horizontal project management.

## 2. Leadership (styles) - a definition

Although there is a wealth of literature on leadership and “how to lead”, there is still no established general

definition of the term. Navigating the turmoil of different approaches, this paper applies the definition of Baumgarten (2019) which defines leadership as “every goal-oriented, inter-personal behavioural influence that is executed with the help of communication processes” (Baumgarten 2019, p. 9). Following this, a leadership style is “a continuous, typical and consistent imprint of leadership” that is often embedded in a certain historical era, but may equally be situation-, person-, or task-specific (Baumgarten 2019, pp. 15–16). These leadership styles involve a series of different leadership techniques, i.e. organisational and social psychological tools and methods to realise the imprints (Baumgarten 2019, p. 16).

Leadership styles can be distinguished using different scales and grids. Unidimensional scales range from the Weberian typology of “charismatic”, “traditional” and “bureaucratic” leadership (Weber 2012)) to “authoritarian”, “democratic” and “laissez-faire” leadership, as described in Lewin et al. (1939). The latter is still used today in a slightly modified version, categorising leadership styles according to the nature of their decision-making imprint from “autocratic” to “patriarchal”, “consultative”, “participatory” and “cooperative”.

However, to categorise leadership styles, this paper uses the two-dimensional managerial grid model of Blake and Mouton (1994) that builds on the predecessors just mentioned. As Figure 1 shows, it merges issue-related involvement (depicted from low to high involvement of a certain leader left-to-right on the x-axis) with motivational involvement (depicting low to high involvement of the leader top-down on the y-axis) of leaders. Issue-related involvement means that the leader is (more or less) interested in deciding on and engaging in concrete work-related issues and tasks. Motivational involvement, on the other hand, describes the extent to which a leader engages with their team.

According to this grid, leaders with low issue-related and motivational involvement perform a *laissez faire* leadership style: They are neither particularly interested in deciding how the team organises their work nor in how specific tasks are actually solved. Low motivational but high issue-related involvement expresses an *authoritarian* leadership style. These leaders are often described as “lone wolves” as they, like laissez faire leaders, typically do not engage with their team. In contrast to the former, they are, however, highly interested in solving tasks, and prefer to do so on their own.

So-called “team players” are instead found in the extremes of high motivational involvement. Leaders who practice low issue-related but high motivational involvement have a *consultative* leadership style. They strongly engage with and build on the autonomous work and decision-making of their teams. They manage teams, not issues. Leaders with both high issue- and motivation-related involvement have a *participatory* leadership style. They strongly involve their teams in decision-

making and the completion of tasks but still want to have the final say on what and how things are done.

As Figure 1 shows, these four leadership styles form a grid that allows for a variety of combinations of the four extremes in between. The following chapter applies this grid to the context of humanitarian project management.

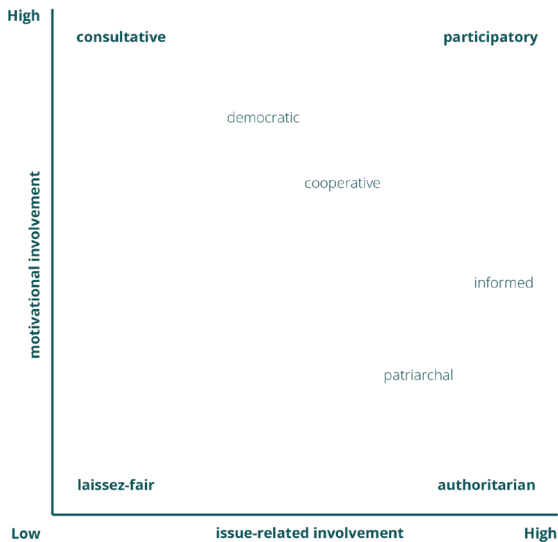


Figure 1: Leadership styles in the managerial grid model; according to Blake and Mouton (1994)

### 3. Leadership styles in current humanitarian project management

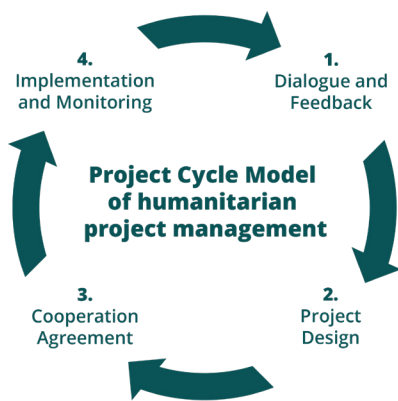


Figure 2: Project Cycle Model of humanitarian project management



Figure 3: Humanitarian actors' contractual relations in project cycle management

Humanitarian project management, as it is taught and applied in many contexts today, builds upon the humanitarian project cycle (see Figure 2). This cycle usually begins with a dialogue and design phase where crisis-affected populations' needs, local and international organisations' focal areas and capacities, and donors' funding priorities are assessed and coordinated so that they can be poured into a joint project endeavour that is further formalised, implemented and evaluated in the subsequent phases. Based on the experiences throughout these phases, further projects are planned again that follow the same process.

The dialogue phase at the beginning of this cycle structurally allows for open-ended, equal communication and negotiation among all actors involved, be it donors, international organisations (including UN organisations, Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies and international NGOs), local and national organisations (CBOs, home-grown NGOs or branches of international NGOs), or local community representatives. Since all are separate entities that have not yet entered cooperation, this phase is structurally characterised by a **cooperative leadership style**. There is no dedicated leader, instead, independent entities trying to match their interests and needs, all having the same decision-making power and engagement in managing operational tasks. Cooperation only materialises if all come together under joint terms.

As an upcoming CHA study shows, however, this is most often not the case. In practice, both, the dialogue and design phases of operational project management are heavily shaped by donors and international organisations. As interviews with over 40 representatives of local and national organisations from South Sudan and Bangladesh show, donors issue calls for project proposals often with pre-set focus areas and objectives to which international and local actors are only invited to respond. Project designs and proposals that are drafted without considering these pre-set agendas and are submitted outside specific calls are rarely successful. For this reason, many local and national NGO informants to the CHA study admitted that they mostly stick with the pre-established project framework of their international partners, not challenging it with their insights from the ground. Furthermore, despite donor calls being based on needs assessments, they are not necessarily as based on the interests of affected populations as they claim to be. Assessments are mostly drafted deductively, upon donors' or international organisations' request and hence, too, follow pre-set assumptions and logics in collecting and analysing data. However, the CHA study equally shows that some project cooperations indeed manage to establish cooperative leadership in the project dialogue and design phase, for example through open funds and proposal platforms that only have rough frameworks.

Applying the definition described above, this chapter shall now uncover which leadership styles are structurally embedded in contemporary operational humanitarian project management.

Following project cycle management, after the dialogue and design phase, project partners formalise their cooperation (see Figure 2). This is mainly done through

setting up a chain of cooperation agreements between donors, intermediaries, local organisations and other partners, as depicted in Figure 3, whereby donors reside at the top, directly contracting mostly international organisations, including UN organisations and pooled funds, Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies and international NGOs, who in turn engage in partnerships with local actors, be it their own local/national entities or other local and national organisations, and so on. These cooperation agreements define both project activities and objectives as well as the roles and responsibilities of the partners, cascading operational responsibilities down and implementing accountability upwards for the fulfilment of these responsibilities.

The sub-contracting cascade affects leadership styles potentially available to the actors involved. Through contractual agreements, the responsibility to fulfil objectives, activities and tasks - i.e. operational responsibility - is posted down from one actor to another. Still, objectives – and in some cases also activities and even simple tasks – must be approved by the supervisory actor. Hence, accountability responsibility is bottom-up. The need for approval points to a **high issue-involved leadership**. However, it may **range between authoritarian and participatory**: Donors that considerably factor their partners' voices into their decisions apply a participatory approach. Others might lean towards a more authoritarian style, neither explaining their decisions nor involving anybody in their making and pre-defining projects from objectives to each simple activity and task, just ordering implementation. A good example of the former is when donors issue country- or crisis-specific calls for proposals but do not further narrow down eligible sectors or target groups. The more detailed the requirements (e.g. funding projects only for affected women, only in the health sector, only in a certain geographical area, only for a certain time period, only worth a certain amount of money, etc.), the more authoritarian the donor project leadership.

The cascading sub-contracting model furthermore implies that **donors at the top of the contracting hierarchy shape the leadership style for the whole project cooperation** as their leadership leaves only a certain range of styles available to their sub-contractors. Whereas an authoritarian donor only allows for authoritarian intermediary leadership, which in turn only allows for authoritarian local leadership, a participatory donor enables intermediaries to pass this higher motivational involvement on and also engage in participatory leadership with their local partners, and so on. However, intermediaries (and subsequently other sub-contractors down the management line) may also choose to get less motivationally involved in cooperation with their subordinates, moving leadership slowly towards more authoritarian styles. In this way, a participatory leadership style applied by donors to coordinate with their direct contractors (intermediaries) does not necessarily cascade down to affected communities. **Motivational involvement easily shrinks, eventually leaving less and less**

**room for involvement (i.e. participatory leadership options) of actors at the end of the contractual line**, such as local organisations and affected populations.

An example of this effect is projects that are discussed, designed and formalised in participatory – maybe even cooperative – leadership between donors and their direct partners (mostly international organisations) but are passed on to local organisations and other partners only later in the project cycle, in the implementation stage, then already including a restrictive pre-set framework where workflow and activities are already spelled out in great detail. As soon as the cooperation between donors and intermediaries is formalised in a cooperation agreement, the objectives and terms of engagement are set for all actors down the cooperation cascade. Adjusting these at the request of local actors becomes hard, if not impossible (Christian Aid et al. 2019, p. 13). Despite some major donors and international organisations showing increased flexibility within the scope of overall project objectives, local organisations' room to contribute their perspectives and requirements or to react to sudden changes remains limited after the project formalisation phase. Project leadership thus becomes very authoritarian. All changes in the project logic typically entail lengthy administrative processes, involving the whole contracting chain and require a lot of time and staff capacity as approval is needed from each actor up in the line.

Another often-mentioned example of the shrinking motivational involvement of leaders down the contractual hierarchy is that international organisations often engage their local partners in annual contracts only, despite they themselves receive multi-year funding (ALNAP 2022, p. 259). Interviewees of the upcoming CHA study additionally reported intermediaries applying stricter accountability requirements in their cooperation with local actors than they receive from donors. International organisations may, for example, request their local partners to send them monthly reports that are much more detailed and often required to include all supporting documents before sending reimbursements or monthly allowances. At the same time, they themselves may only be asked to send quarterly or bi-annual reports to their donors to receive regular pre-scheduled instalments. This increased pressure may cascade down until reaching operational managers in affected communities who may then feel the need to “push” their communities to fulfil project targets as requested by their “bosses” above. These findings and experiences seem to confirm the notion of a reinforcing, ever higher issue-related, and lower motivational involvement of leaders down the contractual hierarchy.

Summing up, in the project dialogue and design phase, contemporary humanitarian project cycle management structurally allows for (but not necessarily entails) cooperative leadership between humanitarian actors. However, with the signing of cooperation agreements,



a contractual hierarchy of roles and responsibilities is established between humanitarian actors, with donors at the top and affected populations at the bottom (see Figure 3). Through their position at the top, donors set the scope of leadership styles potentially applied by their partners down the contractual line. Hence, their leadership is key to the whole cooperation. They often lean towards high-issue involvement that may range between participatory and authoritarian leadership. Cascading the scopes of leadership through cooperation agreements, leadership styles, however, tend to tighten up, moving from high to low motivational involvement of subordinate partners, towards more and more authoritarian styles, typically leaving actors at the end of that chain with little room for leadership.

#### 4. Towards local leadership in humanitarian project management

Signatories of the Grand Bargain 2.0 committed to providing “greater support [...] for the leadership, delivery, and capacity of local responders and the participation of affected communities in addressing humanitarian needs” (Priority 2 of Grand Bargain 2.0, Grand Bargain Secretariat 2021). But what does leadership of local responders and participation of affected communities actually mean in operational project management?

Applying the leadership style grid introduced in Chapter 2 and considering the analysis of Chapter 3, participation of affected communities seems to be a structural reality already. Donors could continue to execute strong issue-related involvement and show high motivational involvement of their subordinate partners, applying a **participatory leadership style**. Intermediaries then needed to pass this leadership style on to their subordinate partners and so on until it reaches affected populations.

Participatory leadership, however, only implies that partners’ voices are heard and considered, not necessarily acted upon. With this leadership style, decision-making and final orders still lay with leaders alone. In this way,

participatory leadership, when confronted with the contractual hierarchy established by the cooperation agreement cascade in the project formulation phase, still leads to steadily decreased room for leadership trickling down all the way to affected populations because the subordinates in each bilateral cooperation are only involved in the decision-making, without decision-making power.

Participation with more room for decision-making for actors lower in the cooperation agreement line would hence need **less issue-related involvement** of all superiors, beginning with donors, leaning more towards **cooperative or democratic leadership**. The challenge to implement this in practice, however, lies with the sub-contracting system of project management, where there is no continuous joint coordination with all humanitarian actors involved in a project. The chain of cooperation agreements subdivides leadership in humanitarian project management into several bilateral “servant-leader” relationships. In this way, the outcomes of cooperative leadership in the upper part of the contractual chain (developing and implementing ideas together on equal terms) might still challenge perspectives from below. This explains why, despite the deliberate commitment of the Grand Bargain Signatories to support local leadership, the ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System report still finds that 72% of practitioners interviewed feel the opportunities for leadership and participation of local actors in decision-making forums in their context were either “poor” or “fair” (ALNAP 2022, p. 241).

Supporting the leadership of local responders (and affected populations) in the sense of “goal-oriented, inter-personal behavioural influence that is executed with the help of communication processes” (Baumgarten 2019, p. 9) hence needs to further expand the space for leadership of local responders and affected populations beyond their direct higher-ranking partners. In the current project management setup, this can only be done if leaders that reside higher in the contractual chain all applied a **laissez faire leadership style** and let local responders and affected populations organise and decide freely for themselves before adding their own interests and needs, hence enabling “leadership from below”.

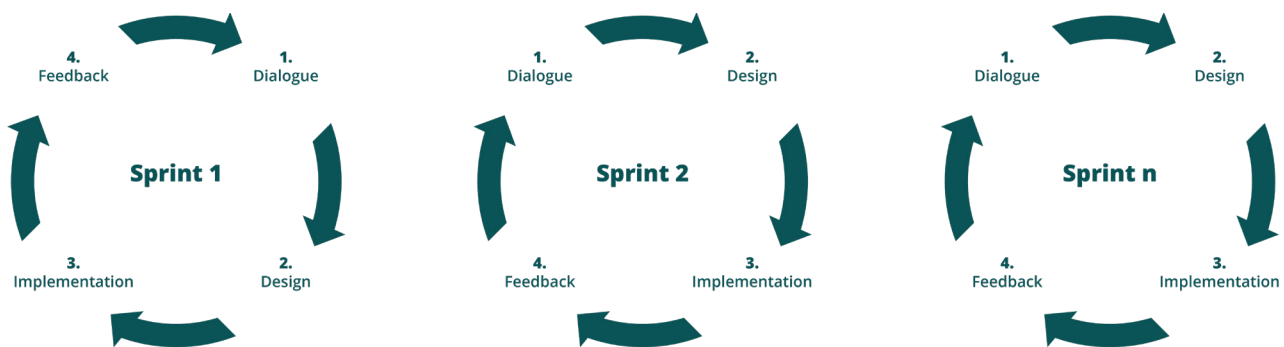


Figure 4: Agile model of humanitarian project management

Indeed, many local actors call for and appreciate less issue involvement from their international partners. However, few donors and intermediaries want to give up their control and decision-making power and want to retain at least a say on how humanitarian projects are designed and implemented. This is supported by the recent State of the Humanitarian System report of ALNAP, which found that, apart from a considerable increase in 2020 in response to COVID-19, donors did not increase unearmarked or softly earmarked funding recently, in fact, quite the opposite. In 2021, only \$2.7 billion - 13 percent of the overall UN funding – fell under flexible funding (ALNAP 2022, pp. 257–258). The study of Worden and Saez (2021, pp. 9–10) adds that despite some donors indeed starting to apply more *laissez faire* leadership and loosening their earmarking, 65 percent of those interviewed continued to earmark at least some of their funding at the project level.

One solution could be to **allow *laissez faire* leadership in project design** by introducing open funds, where local organisation could post their proposals without restrictions and then **“managing up” expectations, interests and needs in a cooperative leadership style** as designs get formalised. This is already practiced, especially in cooperations between local organisations and private foundations, and, indeed, enables “locally led” humanitarian action, where “local and national actors are at the centre and are the primary determinants of how resources are invested and how crises are prepared for and responded to” (Guyatt 2022). In these cooperations, local organisations bring their project ideas and anticipated designs to the table without having to use specific forms or follow tight application procedures. If the informally expressed project idea is interesting to the foundation, the two jointly establish an individual framework for their cooperation, each introducing their requirements and needs.

Another solution would be to change the project management setup from a servant-leader contractual hierarchy to a more complex, **horizontal management approach** that allows for **locally led cooperative leadership** without the restrictions posed by contractual hierarchies. If all project stakeholders are part of a joint engagement, the scope for motivational and issue-related involvement would not shrink as leadership is passed on, but remain the same for all.

A management model that suits these requirements is **agile management** (see Figure 4). Complying with the demands of Knox-Clarke et al. (2020, p. 81), it moves away from a “linear [...] process – first policy, then roll out, then change – to a more holistic process where action, amplification, and change in the humanitarian environment are seen as mutually reinforcing and take place simultaneously”. Agile management, as it is described by Häusling (2020) and depicted in Figure 4, replaces the top-heavy analysis part of project cycle management (an extensive but structurally cooperative project design phase and authoritarian implementation phase) with an **iterative approach, introducing more frequent coordination cycles**. Doing so, it does not develop nor

respond to fixed, jointly agreed-upon overall objectives. Instead, it uses an undefined number of smaller consultation-design-execution-learning cycles (so-called “sprints”) to produce a range of interim results that are not pre-determined but flexibly built up on each other until they finally make up end result(s). Hence, (interim) results are discussed and agreed upon anew for each sprint by all actors involved. This very flexible project management approach **reopens leadership scopes** again and again for each sprint, providing the opportunity for stricter, authoritarian leadership styles in some phases and more consultative leadership styles in others.

In industry, this practice of subdividing a project into several minor cooperation agreement cycles has been found to produce higher-quality end products as every single project phase, from design to evaluation, becomes the result of intense communication and collaboration that involves all relevant stakeholders. If obstacles emerge on the way, it is always possible to fall back to the previous stage.

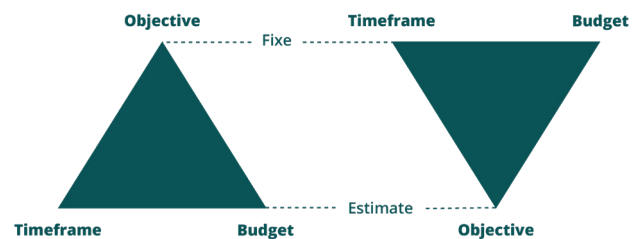


Figure 5: Traditional versus agile iron triangle (adapted from <https://www.visual-paradigm.com/scrum/classical-vs-agile-project-management/>)

The key difference of this approach compared to traditional project cycle management is that the latter pre-defines a certain set of objectives, results and activities and then develops budgets and schedules in accordance, for example by using a so-called LogFrame. In contrast, agile management typically starts with a pre-set timeframe and budget and then explores which objectives (outputs) can be achieved within this framework using step-by-step cooperative leadership (see Figure 5).

Apart from steadily reopening leadership throughout the different project phases, agile management also proclaims **different leadership styles** per se. It strongly builds upon a highly self-organised project team that fulfils tasks on its own and, in doing so, is guided by two leading roles, one **facilitating leader** making sure that the team can work to the best of their capabilities, and one **operational leader**, defining objectives and success. These roles are spelled out differently across the various agile management models that develop over time. In the remainder of this chapter, this paper uses Scrum according to Mundra et al. (2013) to illustrate these leadership roles and their potential for locally led humanitarian project management in more detail.

Originally developed by Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986), Scrum was first applied in the software industry (Beedle

et al. 2001). However, as it provides a lightweight model of project management that performs well in all kinds of quickly changing uncertain environments, it has been applied throughout several industries, from technology to marketing.

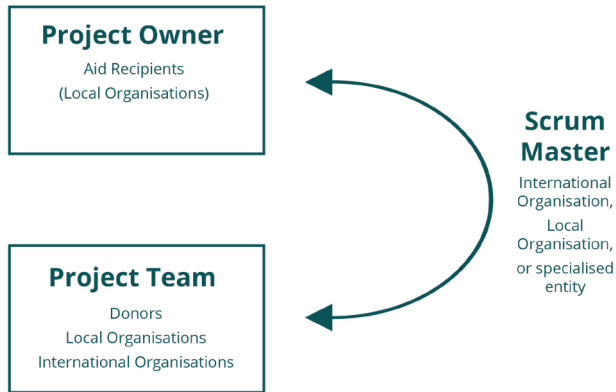


Figure 6: Project management roles in Scrum

As Figure 6 shows, in Scrum, a project is operationally led by a so-called project owner (Bass et al. 2018) who has the vision for final project results (still a vision, not a clear picture!). It is first and foremost the **project owner** who decides whether a certain sprint is completed successfully, after which the team may move on to the next set of tasks. Hence, the project owner clearly has strong **issue-related leadership** and may decide how far they want to use it. In locally led humanitarian action, this would be a role ideally taken by aid recipients themselves. However, as it might be difficult to involve the whole population of at times very remotely situated affected populations in regular sprints, this position could provisionally also be taken over by humanitarian staff who have a strong connection to affected communities, e.g., community workers, who reside with the targeted population and are hence closely informed about their priorities.

The project owner can rely on the expertise and work of a whole **project team** – experts, working towards the delivery of the owners' vision. In the humanitarian sector, this team would typically include technical experts such as WASH and nutrition specialists, logistics, security advisors, etc., but also accounting staff and monitoring and evaluation specialists. These roles could be situated in a local organisation. However, if required to guarantee the product owner's satisfaction with (intermediary) project results (and in compliance with the humanitarian principles), it could be complemented by external support, for example from international organisations.

What is new in this picture is that the financing role (i.e. the donor) is also part of the Scrum team. Hence, donors would participate in regular sprint meetings, making sure that current product owners' needs and requirements are in line with the agreed budget and timeframe. They could place their requirements in sprint meetings in the same way as any other team member, for example in the form of a user story: "as a donor, I need... so that...". The

proposed task would then be added to a task list where all tasks from the team are collected and jointly worked upon in a **cooperative leadership** approach according to their jointly defined priority. The participation of donors in these meetings, in combination with the application of handy agile management software where all team members can post new user stories (tasks), transparently showing real-time project progress to all team members, would replace time-consuming text- and forms-based donor reports and make sure that interim monitoring and evaluation are "customer" (i.e. affected populations) centred. At the same time, it would keep donors closely informed about the real-time project progress.

Finally, in complex projects with many stakeholders, Scrum introduces the role of the **Scrum master** (Bass 2014; Shastri et al. 2021). This is a leadership role focusing solely on **motivational leadership**. The Scrum master facilitates constructive exchange among all team members and the product owner and makes sure that everyone has the information and tools needed to fulfil their tasks. This involves the facilitation of meetings and trainings, as well as solving conflicts of interest as needed. As they are suitably placed between affected communities and donors, this role could be taken by international or local organisations or, alternatively, by external specialised entities.

With this setup, in Scrum, the leadership lies predominantly with the project owner and the Scrum master, while the project team coordinates itself by applying a cooperative leadership style. Project owners decide upon a sprint failure or success (executing issue-related leadership). Scrum masters facilitate the process (executing motivational leadership). With these features, Scrum has the potential to introduce the leading role of aid recipients (Auswärtiges Amt 2019, p. 10; Osofisan 2020; Rejali 2020; Bennett et al. 2016, p. 11; Participatory Revolution Workstream 2017) as well as the facilitating leadership role, often requested of international organisations (Caritas international 2021, p. 3; Rights Co Lab 2021, p. 14; Bennett et al. 2016, p. 11).

Summing up, facilitating the participation of affected communities in humanitarian action in traditional humanitarian project management is already possible and often already a reality. However, due to cascading subcontracting setups and a tendency of actors that reside higher in the contractual hierarchy for high issue-related involvement, this does not leave much space for leadership of local organisations and affected populations at the lower end. To address this, first, donors and other actors at the top end of the hierarchy needed to show **less issue involvement**, moving more towards a laissez faire leadership approach. This finding is nothing new and has been requested and proclaimed many times, including the Grand Bargain commitment for more "quality funding" (less earmarked, more flexible, multi-year, etc.). However, as many international actors, including donors, shy away from living up to such commitments, another option is, secondly, to subdivide project management into several coordination cycles and re-open



communication and leadership again and again as the project progresses. This would enable donors to **adjust their leadership styles**, tightening and reopening their control as the project develops. Finally, the best option for locally led, cooperative leadership is to introduce a management model, which leaves behind the contractual hierarchy of traditional project management. This could be done, for example, through using agile models, where **motivational and issue-related leadership are separated from financing roles** and donors join a team of experts organising themselves in cooperative leadership, facilitated, for example, by a Scrum master and guided by the operational leadership of a project owner.

## 5. Conclusion

The above discussion has shown how the equal, cooperative leadership of humanitarian projects between independent partners is, at the latest with the signing of cooperation agreements, highly shaped by donors and other actors that typically reside at the top and the upper end of an emerging **contractual hierarchy**. The hierarchical sub-contracting setup introduces a **chain of bilateral servant-leader relationships**, which cascade the scopes for leadership top-down. This tends to gradually limit the decision-making power of actors down the line, typically local organisations and affected populations.

To reconcile humanitarian project management practices with claims for local leadership and participation of affected populations, there are two entry points: One is to **address donors as leaders** on the top of the contractual hierarchy and ask them to show less issue involve-

ment in their leadership, hence allowing other actors lower in that hierarchy more leadership space. The other is to **address the contractual hierarchy** itself. This can be done by subdividing projects into **smaller cycles** of coordination, implementation and evaluation, where all actors get the opportunity to introduce their interests and feedback on equal terms more often. In addition, **roles and responsibilities among all project stakeholders** could be redistributed, for example by applying an agile setup that sees donors as part of a self-organising project team that largely leads itself in a cooperative manner (supported by a facilitating leader) and is operationally guided by the needs of affected populations.

What all these approaches have in common is the **need for actors higher in the contractual hierarchy to give up issue-related involvement**, at least to some extent. This has been proven to be highly difficult to achieve in practice. However, as this analysis showed, if all stakeholders involved in humanitarian projects want to allow local leadership, there is no way around it.

Admittedly, local leadership and more participation entail a variety of challenges, including compromises with timeliness and efficiency. More detailed involvement and equitable cooperation of more actors at the table indeed require time, capacity, and energy – all of which are highly valuable goods in a context of heavily increasing humanitarian needs and stagnating, if not shrinking, humanitarian funding. Experiences from other industries, however, show that more horizontal, agile management processes can bring about more valuable outputs. In this way, it can lead to more effective and sustainable humanitarian action.

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