

AID SECTOR IN TRANSITION: CHALLENGES, ETHICS AND ADAPTATION

This paper is authored by **Uma Narayanan**, Independent Consultant, and published by **Community World Service Asia (CWSA)**. CWSA is committed to continuing these critical conversations by providing platforms especially for NGOs across the globe to share experiences, tools, and strategies to navigate the ongoing transition in the aid sector. For more information or to engage in future discussions, please contact qa.support@communityworldservice.asia



**PRACTICE PAPER:
REFLECTIONS
FROM THE
GLOBAL SOUTH**

FEBRUARY - MAY
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1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The aid sector is under immense strain. Abrupt donor withdrawals, shrinking budgets, and shifting geopolitical priorities have forced organisations to scale down, exit programs, and lay off staff. These changes ripple across entire systems disrupting services to communities, undermining staff morale, and eroding the trust painstakingly built over years.

This practice paper draws from the lived experiences of over 450 aid professionals - captured through a sector-wide survey and a six-part webinar series (February – May 2025) hosted by Community World Service Asia (CWSA) with support from ACT Church of Sweden. The initiative created space for national actors, particularly from crisis-affected contexts to voice how these shifts are unfolding on the ground.

Many global debates on accountability and aid sector in transition remain inaccessible to frontline practitioners - hindered by time zones, language barriers, limited access, and lack of representation. This paper seeks to bridge that divide, bringing forward the insights, challenges, ethical tensions, and urgent calls to action from aid workers across the Global South.

Their message is clear: the aid sector is undergoing a critical transition, and our collective response will shape whether we simply endure the crisis or emerge stronger, equitable, resilient, and accountable.

"The shift in funding priorities is having devastating consequences for the communities we serve, as well as for the dedicated frontline workers and organizations committed to service. They are grappling with profound feelings of betrayal and frustration toward institutions that have vowed to uphold accountability and dignity. Now more than ever, we must listen to the voices of those directly affected and respond with integrity, accountability, and principled decision-making. This is not just a challenge but an opportunity—to reaffirm our commitment, to stand by those in need, and to lead with actions that truly honour the values we pledge to uphold."

Shama Mall, Deputy Regional Director, CWSA

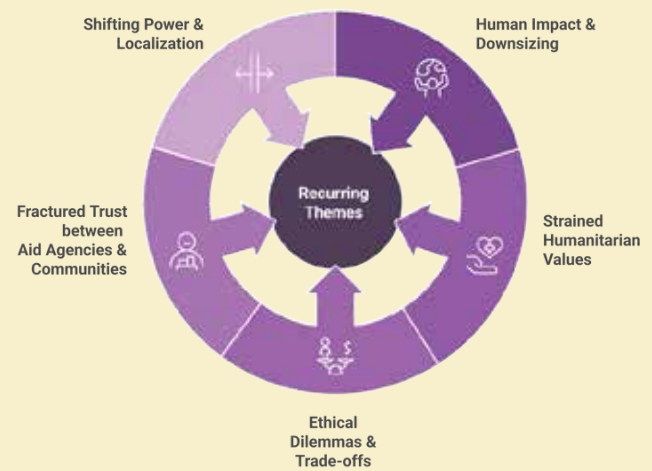
Kindly use the following link for interactive access to the survey responses dashboard:

Power BI
Dashboard
Access



2. RECURRING THEMES

The insights are structured into the following thematic areas that highlight the human impact, institutional gaps, and power imbalances, influencing the aid sector's response to ongoing disruption.

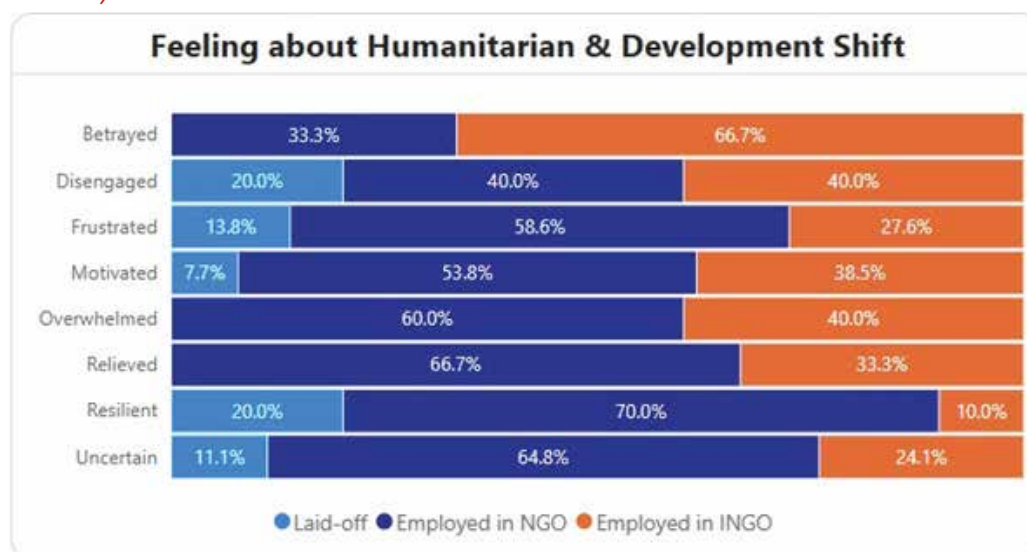


Made with Napkin

THEME 1: THE HUMAN IMPACT: EMOTIONAL AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF DOWNSIZING

The most palpable cost of the sector's current contraction is human. Aid workers – especially at national and local levels – are bearing the emotional, ethical, and economic fallout of funding cuts and abrupt program closures.

The survey findings underscore a significant emotional toll across the sector. INGO staff reported the strongest sense of betrayal, reflecting discontent with leadership decisions or organisational responses. NGO staff exhibited both high resilience and pronounced frustration, indicating a complex blend of endurance and strain. Among laid-off respondents, feelings of betrayal and disengagement were most common, though some also demonstrated resilience, suggesting that while they feel let down, they are still trying to rebuild and move forward despite setbacks. (See Chart: "Feeling about Humanitarian & Development Shift")



Feelings of Betrayal are predominantly felt by those currently employed in INGOs (66.7%), followed by those laid off (33.3%) – suggesting perceived organisational failure or disillusionment at the international level. Frustration is most notable among NGO staff (58.6%), indicating stress or dissatisfaction with how shifts are affecting local operations. A smaller percentage of laid-off staff (13.8%) also expressed this. Uncertainty is widespread, particularly among NGO staff (64.8%), pointing to instability in the sector's direction. This is also reflected among INGOs (24.1%) and a smaller portion of laid-off staff (11.1%).

Resilience is strongly expressed by NGO workers (70%), suggesting a coping and adapting mindset, despite sector turbulence. Some laid-off staff (20%) also reported resilience. Motivation and Relief are most common among current employees especially in NGOs, indicating that despite the challenges, some still find purpose or a sense of clarity in the changes. Disengagement is evenly split between NGO and INGO staff (40% each), with 20% of laid-off individuals also feeling this, potentially reflecting burnout or alienation. Overwhelm is most prevalent in NGO staff (60%), due to increased workloads or shifting expectations, followed by INGOs (40%).

“I gave ten years to this organisation, and they let us go over a two-line email. That broke something in me.” - Survey respondent, laid off from an INGO

Respondents described an environment where layoffs were implemented hastily and with little transparency. For those who lost their jobs, the biggest challenge was financial insecurity, affecting over 77% of laid-off respondents. Issues like career uncertainty, loss of professional identity, and limited organisational support followed distantly behind. (See Chart: *“Challenging Aspects of the Transition – Laid Off Respondents”*)

“It was not just the job—we lost health insurance, stability, our sense of being needed. We were just dropped.”

- Webinar participant, South Asia

These findings highlight a significant ethical deficit in the sector. Over 90% of survey respondents emphasised that organisations have a responsibility to treat affected staff with dignity – through timely notices, fair financial support, and access to mental health services. This is echoed by the webinar participants. Furthermore, 80% called for honest communication and transparency in decision-making when programs are scaled down or exiting regions.



Among those who remained employed, many spoke of being overburdened and morally conflicted, tasked with delivering aid with fewer resources and less clarity. Burnout and moral stress were recurring themes, particularly for managers forced to implement cuts they did not agree with.

“We are told to do more with less. But at what cost? Our teams are exhausted, and communities notice when we pull away.”

- NGO staff member, Myanmar

“Staff and communities deserve better than silence or spin. Ethical downsizing is not optional—it’s a minimum standard.” - Webinar Participant

The human cost of this transition cannot be reduced to numbers alone. It is about relationships severed without closure, values compromised under pressure, and trust – both internal and external – that may take years to rebuild.



THEME 2: UPHOLDING HUMANITARIAN VALUES UNDER STRAIN

For many aid workers, the current transition has not only disrupted their roles – it has tested their values.

While nearly half of survey respondents stated they remain deeply committed to humanitarian principles, a significant portion admitted that this commitment is under serious strain. Roughly 20% reported they were struggling to uphold core values in the face of funding cuts, unclear mandates, or mounting workloads. An additional 13% said they were actively re-evaluating their place in the sector.

“We are being asked to do things that contradict everything we say we stand for.”

– Survey respondent

One field coordinator shared how the closure of a long-standing project in a conflict zone was decided in a global meeting – without consulting staff or communities. **“It was done quietly, overnight. We didn’t even get to say goodbye,”** they said.

Such exits not only erode staff morale but also undermine the trust built with communities over years of presence. Many described the emotional burden of making impossible choices – cutting programs, letting go of colleagues, or delivering substandard services because the resources were no longer there.



This slow erosion of principled action is not dramatic, but corrosive. It creates what one webinar participant called **“ethical fatigue”** – the cumulative weight of working in contradiction to one’s professional ethics. The longer it continues, the more aid workers either burn out or disconnect emotionally from their work.

“How do you ask a community to understand that your entire gender program was cut because your donor changed focus last quarter?”

– Regional Programme Manager, Asia Pacific

Some organisations have tried to hold the line – prioritising transparency, offering internal debriefs, or publicly acknowledging limitations. But these remain the exception, not the norm.



“We know we cannot always control funding decisions. But we can control how we communicate them – with honesty, respect, and courage.” – Webinar Participant

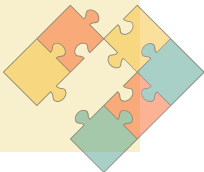
In the face of uncertainty, staff are looking not just for job security but moral clarity. They want to know that their organisations will stand by the principles they preach, even when it is inconvenient.

THEME 3: FRACTURED TRUST BETWEEN AID AGENCIES AND COMMUNITIES

When organisations scale down or withdraw, the impact extends far beyond budgets and staff. It reverberates through the communities they once served. The survey and webinar series revealed deep concern about how sudden exits, suspended programs, and reduced presence are eroding trust with affected populations.

“Communities notice when we stop showing up. And they remember.”

– Survey Respondent, Southeast Asia



Respondents recounted how long-standing programs – some running for over a decade- were abruptly closed with minimal or no consultation with affected communities. Commitments to continuity were abandoned, leaving frontline staff to justify decisions they neither influenced or endorsed.

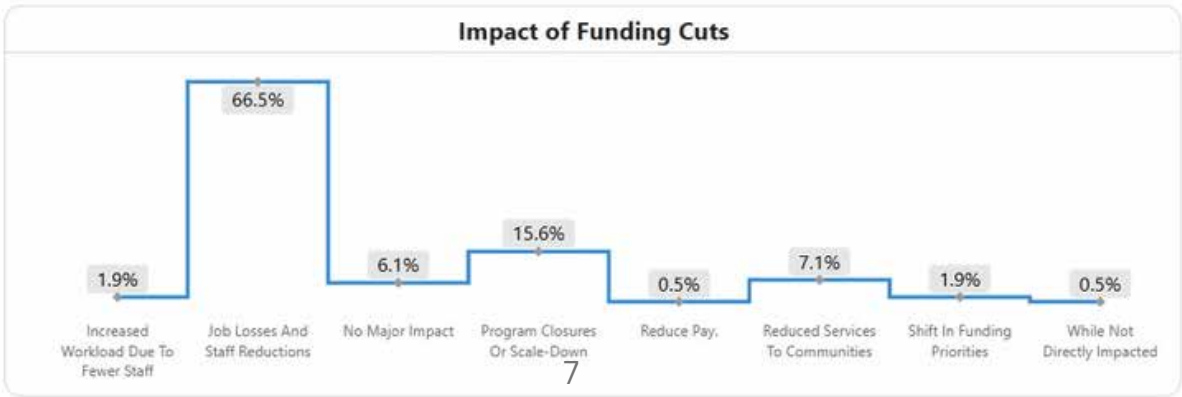
“I was the face of the organisation in that village. I could not even tell them we were leaving until the trucks arrived to pack up.”

– NGO staff member, Afghanistan

Many aid workers described the personal guilt and shame of having to walk away from communities they had built trust with, especially in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas. The emotional weight of these withdrawals is carried not by global headquarters, but by field teams who live and work among those affected.

Survey data shows that nearly two-thirds of all respondents felt uncomfortable with how their organisations handled community communication during transitions. Several described community relationships as transactional or conditional, where trust lasted only as long as the funding did.

These reflections align with survey data showing that over 15% of respondents directly experienced program closures, and nearly 66% faced staff reductions disruptions that were rarely accompanied by meaningful communication with communities. (See Chart: Impact of Funding Cuts).



“We talk about accountability all the time, but when programs are cut, who is held accountable for leaving people behind?” – Webinar Participant

Webinar participants highlighted how some organisations, upheld accountability during challenging transitions by holding community meetings, ensuring timely communication, sharing handover plans, and collaborating with local partners to sustain services. These efforts were often led by committed individuals and teams, demonstrating what is possible when accountability is actively practised, not merely pledged, even amid crisis.

What is lost in these moments is not just programming. It is credibility. And once lost, trust is difficult to rebuild. They welcomed us into their homes, told us their stories, allowed us to document their lives. And we left without closure. That is not just poor planning. That is a breach of trust.” – Former Programme Officer, South Asia

As one webinar speaker puts it: ***“Our accountability ends where our funding ends. And that is the problem.”***

THEME 4. SHIFTING POWER AND THE FUTURE OF AID

A recurring demand echoed across the survey and webinar discussions was clear: shift power to local actors. While this conversation is not new, the urgency has intensified amid increasingly volatile global funding and centralised decision-making that continues to erode relevance and long-term sustainability.

“We have been having this conversation for decades. The real issue is not lack of tools. it’s lack of trust.” – Webinar participant

Participants challenged the continued dominance of international actors in decision-making spaces often far removed from the realities on the ground. They called out the **“passive colonialism”** still embedded in how priorities are set, whose knowledge is valued, and who holds the purse strings.

“Local partners are brought in after decisions are made. That is not partnership – it is subcontracting.” – National NGO representative, Southeast Asia

The push for localisation was framed not as a compliance checkbox but as a political and ethical imperative. It is about reversing extractive relationships, dismantling gatekeeping behaviours, and redistributing decision-making power to those closest to the communities served.

At the heart of this call is a deeper critique: the commodification of aid. Executive Director of Humanitarian Aid International, Sudhanshu Shekar, echoed by many participants, raised concerns that humanitarian and development efforts are increasingly driven by donor branding, competitive bidding, and measurable “returns” often sidelining community priorities and undermining dignity.

“We have commodified aid. It is now something to be sold and reported against not a relationship of solidarity or care.”

– Sudhanshu Shekar, Webinar Speaker

This commodification hollows out the values the sector claims to stand for. When aid becomes a deliverable, and local actors are seen as extensions of global brands, accountability is focused towards the donors, rather than to the affected people.

Survey respondents and webinar participants emphasised the need to:



But localisation alone is not the end goal. The deeper call is to redefine accountability in ways that are shaped by, and answerable to, the communities themselves. This means reframing who aid serves, how decisions are made, and what “success” looks like.

At its core, this is about reclaiming the ethical purpose of aid and placing people, not institutions, at the centre of our models and mandates.

3. CROSS-CUTTING DILEMMAS: VALUES, SURVIVAL, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

But localisation alone is not the end goal. The deeper call is to redefine accountability in ways that are shaped by, and answerable to, the communities themselves. This means reframing who aid serves, how decisions are made, and what “success” looks like. Across all themes, a set of recurring tensions emerged – contradictions that aid workers are forced to navigate daily. These dilemmas are not about individual failure, but about a sector struggling to uphold its values under pressure. Donors, INGOs, and local actors alike are operating within a system that often rewards risk aversion, speed, and visibility sometimes at the expense of solidarity and accountability.



Staff Welfare vs. Community Service

One of the most painful dilemmas shared by respondents was the perceived trade-off between caring for staff and serving communities. Reduced funding has led to job insecurity, heavier workloads, and emotional strain. Many described being torn between meeting community needs and protecting their own well-being.

“We are told to keep showing up for others, but no one is showing up for us.”

– Programme Officer, Southeast Asia

Managers described the moral stress of implementing layoffs or scaling down services while trying to preserve dignity, both internally and externally. Aid workers at all levels are bearing the emotional and ethical weight of decisions made far from their realities.



Survival vs. Solidarity

Many national and local organisations especially smaller NGOs are forced to prioritise organisational survival over the long-term values they believe in. The current system favours those who can write winning proposals, tick compliance boxes, and deliver visibility to donors, rather than those embedded deeply in their communities.

“We spend more time adjusting to donor moods than responding to what our communities need.”

– Webinar Participant

Respondents expressed deep concern that solidarity is being sacrificed in the name of competition and positioning. The cost is not only ethical it weakens local systems and sidelines contextual knowledge.

Short-Term Relief vs. Long-Term Reform

A common tension exists between responding to urgent needs and addressing the systemic reforms the sector claims to pursue. Survey participants noted that localisation, accountability, and ethical reform often get deprioritised during a crisis despite being most needed at the time.

“We use the crisis as an excuse not to change, when it should be the reason we must.”

– Webinar Speaker

Some respondents questioned whether the sector is truly committed to change, or simply waiting out the storm until funding resumes and business-as-usual can continue.

Community-centred Accountability vs Institution-centred Accountability

The dilemma of accountability featured in almost every discussion. While organisations publicly commit to community-led approaches, the reality on the ground often prioritises accountability to donors. Reporting requirements, visibility demands, and risk aversion shape decisions far more than feedback from affected people.

“Communities are consulted. Donors are obeyed.”
– Webinar Participant

Respondents did not reject donor accountability – but they called for balance, honesty, and courage in advocating for community voice. They reminded us that accountability as outlined in the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) is not about systems alone – it is about organisational culture, leadership, relationships, power, and trust.

4. WHY ACCOUNTABILITY STILL FALLS SHORT

Despite decades of investment in accountability frameworks, standards, and training, many aid workers shared a sobering view: the rhetoric of accountability often does not match the reality on the ground. Communities are consulted, but rarely in ways that shape decision-making. Staff are asked to adhere to principles they are not supported to uphold. And when crises hit, accountability is often the first thing to be compromised.



“We tick the boxes, but people do not feel heard. That is not accountability.”

– Survey Respondent



Several respondents reflected on how accountability mechanisms from complaints systems to participatory assessments are too often implemented for compliance or visibility, not to empower affected people.

Others noted how accountability becomes selective or performative, used to justify decisions rather than to shape them. Communities may be asked for feedback, but only after the major decisions have been made or only in formats that serve donor reporting needs.

“We ask for feedback on a project that is already been designed, funded, and branded. That is not meaningful.” – Webinar Participant

Even when tools exist, organisational culture and power dynamics frequently undermine their impact. Staff are often afraid to speak up internally; community feedback is sometimes dismissed as anecdotal or politically sensitive; and field-level concerns are rarely escalated to decision-makers.

“People do not need another feedback form. They need to know that what they say changes something.” – Regional Accountability Advisor

Another critical gap raised by participants was preparedness. While many organisations have policies and standards in place, they often lack the readiness to activate, adapt, or sustain

accountability practices during moments of disruption or transition. Systems may exist on paper, but when funding is cut or programs close, these mechanisms often disappear with them.

As noted by Policy and Outreach Senior Advisor at CHS Alliance, Bonaventure Gbétoho Sokpoh during one of the webinar series, accountability must be seen as a process of continuous improvement - not a fixed outcome or compliance task. Too often, organisations fail to embed accountability in staff inductions, exit strategies, or contingency planning. As a result, when staff leave or programs end, affected communities are left without information, recourse, or closure.



5. RECOMMENDATIONS: PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH

The following recommendations emerge from survey responses, webinar reflections, and the collective experiences of aid workers navigating a sector in flux. They are not technical fixes but ethical and practical shifts to restore trust, uphold accountability, and put people at the centre of decision-making.

a. Communicate with Courage and Clarity

- ▶▶ Be honest with staff and communities when scaling down or exiting. Do not wait for final approvals to begin conversations.
- ▶▶ Share what is known and acknowledge what is uncertain. Silence erodes trust faster than bad news. Avoid hiding behind language like “restructuring” or “realignment”, name the impact on people and communities.

“People understand challenges. What they cannot accept is being left out of the conversation.”

- Webinar Participant

b. Plan for Ethical Transitions - Not Just Program Closure

- ▶▶ Treat exits and layoffs as a process that requires dignity, documentation, and debriefing.
- ▶▶ Embed ethical transition protocols in project designs and contingency planning.
- ▶▶ Allocate resources for responsible closure including community communication, partner handovers, and psychosocial support for staff.

c. Safeguard Humanitarian Values When Under Pressure

- ▶▶ Make space for staff to reflect on ethical tensions. Support them to uphold values not just deliver outputs.
- ▶▶ Strengthen leadership capacity to navigate ethical decision-making during crises, not after.
- ▶▶ Create internal feedback loops so field teams can raise concerns safely and influence direction.

d. Invest in Trust, Not Just Tools

- ▶▶ Accountability must be relational, not just procedural. Invest in listening, follow-up, and transparency.
- ▶▶ Avoid checklist-driven accountability that focuses on documentation over dialogue.
- ▶▶ Prioritise building trustworthy systems, not just systems that can be externally verified.

e. Shift Power with Resources and Respect

- ▶▶ Move beyond rhetoric and provide direct, flexible funding to local actors—especially those led by women, youth, and historically marginalised groups.
- ▶▶ Avoid extractive partnerships. Co-design from the beginning and share risks, decisions, and recognition.
- ▶▶ Recognise and resource the leadership already happening in local contexts.

f. Safeguard Humanitarian Values When Under Pressure

- ▶▶ Focus on shared responsibility and relational accountability.
- ▶▶ Create accountability systems that are meaningful to communities - not just donors.
- ▶▶ Prepare staff and partners to practice accountability even in times of disruption or uncertainty.



6. REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS: RECLAIMING THE PURPOSE OF AID

These questions are offered not as a checklist, but as an invitation to pause, reflect, and ask whether our actions align with the values we claim.

For Organisations and Leaders

- What proactive measures have we implemented to ensure ethical transitions, rather than waiting for funding cuts to dictate our actions?
- Are our accountability systems built to function under stress or only effective in stable conditions?
- Do our organisational incentives support principled decision-making or do they primarily reward visibility and procedural compliance?
- How are we safeguarding community trust during program closures or organisational shifts?

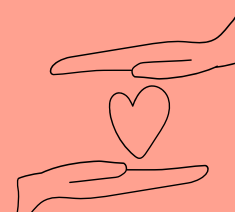
For Program and Field Teams

- When have we had to act in ways that felt ethically uncomfortable? Were we able to name it and be heard?
- Are we supported to uphold humanitarian principles or expected to deliver regardless of conditions?
- How do we talk about power and trust inside our teams? Do we have space for dissent and learning?



For Funding Agencies

- How do we respond when partners raise ethical concerns or request flexibility?
- Are our funding structures reinforcing extraction or enabling equity?
- Do we hold ourselves to the same accountability standards we ask of others?
- What does it mean to share power - not just shift risk?



Question For All of Us:
Who is missing from our conversations about change?

