Charity Model and Humanitarian Action in Nigeria: A Systems Analysis

Emenike Umesi, PhD, CEM®

African Centre for Disaster Risk Management, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies a systems-thinking framework to examine the architecture, dynamics, and transformative potential of charitable and humanitarian action in Nigeria. Drawing on development economics, political science, and humanitarian studies literatures, the study maps the key actors — international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), faith-based organisations (FBOs), diaspora philanthropic networks, the private and corporate philanthropic sector, the Nigerian state, and community-based organisations — and the flows of resources, information, and authority that connect them. The analysis identifies four dominant reinforcing feedback loops — the dependency trap, accountability displacement, the donor attention cycle, and corruption feedback — that collectively trap Nigeria's humanitarian system in short-cycle, relief-oriented, externally-driven responses ill-matched to its protracted crises, and examines how these loops interact with one another to produce a self-reinforcing overall system dynamic. Applying Meadows' (2008) hierarchy of leverage points, the paper identifies five pathways for systemic change: multi-year funding reform, genuine localisation of power, formalisation of the zakat-humanitarian interface, investment in state accountability mechanisms, and a fundamental paradigm shift from charity to rights-based solidarity. The paper closes with practical implications for donors, international agencies, the Nigerian state, and local actors, and with an agenda for the primary empirical research needed to test the propositions advanced here. The analysis concludes that incrementalism within the current system architecture is insufficient; durable humanitarian progress in Nigeria requires restructuring the incentive architecture of the system itself.

Keywords*:* humanitarian systems analysis, Nigeria, charity model, feedback loops, localisation, systems thinking, emergency management

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria presents one of the most analytically rich and practically consequential humanitarian environments on the African continent. It is simultaneously home to the continent's largest economy, one of its highest rates of multidimensional poverty, a decade-long armed conflict in the Northeast that has displaced over three million people, endemic food insecurity across multiple agro-ecological zones, and a civil-society sector of extraordinary diversity (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2023). Into this landscape pours an annual torrent of charitable and humanitarian resources — from international donors, diaspora remittances, faith-based tithing systems, corporate philanthropy, and government social protection programmes — yet structural crises persist and, in many instances, deepen.

The persistence of humanitarian need despite substantial resource flows invites not merely programmatic critique but systemic inquiry. Why does the system reproduce crisis rather than resolve it? Why do well-intentioned actors — bilateral donors, INGOs, national NGOs, religious charities, corporate foundations — collectively produce outcomes none of them individually intend? Systems thinking, as developed by Forrester (1969), elaborated by Senge (1990), and applied to humanitarian settings by Ramalingam et al. (2008), provides analytical tools adequate to this complexity. It shifts attention from individual actors and linear causes to feedback structures, time delays, and the emergent behaviour of interconnected components. A system, in this sense, is not merely the sum of its actors but the pattern of relationships and incentives that determines

how those actors behave — which is precisely why reforms aimed at individual organisations so often fail to change aggregate outcomes.

Prior work on Nigeria's humanitarian system has been dominated by qualitative case studies and programme evaluations, leaving room for a more integrated, structural account of how the sector's various actors and incentives interact as a system. This paper addresses that gap by applying a systems-thinking framework — synthesising the existing empirical, policy, and practitioner literature — to produce an integrated structural diagnosis of the sector, and by translating that diagnosis into concrete implications for practice, policy, and future research.

This paper proceeds through the following sections: a conceptual grounding in systems-thinking methodology, including Meadows' (2008) full hierarchy of leverage points; a statement of the paper's scope, approach, and limitations; a mapping of Nigeria's charitable architecture and its historical roots; identification of the system's dominant feedback loops and how they interact; examination of key structural tensions, including the politics of measurement and visibility; an account of the Nigerian state's ambivalent structural position; a discussion of gender and intersectionality as system blind spots; a leverage-point analysis for systemic transformation; a discussion of practical implications for donors, agencies, and government; an agenda for future empirical research; and a concluding argument for a paradigm shift from charity to rights-based solidarity.

Theoretical Framework: Systems Thinking in Humanitarian Contexts

Systems thinking distinguishes itself from conventional analytical approaches by foregrounding relationships rather than components, dynamics rather than static states, and feedback causality rather than linear chains of cause and effect (Meadows, 2008). A system, in Meadows' foundational formulation, consists of stocks (accumulated quantities), flows (rates of change that alter stocks), and feedback loops (circular causal chains that amplify or dampen change). The behaviour of complex systems — including humanitarian systems — emerges from the interaction of these elements over time, often producing outcomes that surprise their participants.

Ramalingam et al. (2008) applied complexity and systems concepts to international aid, documenting how the aid system's apparent irrationalities — volatile funding, poor coordination, unintended consequences — are in fact rational products of the system's incentive structures. Hummelbrunner and Jones (2013) extended this analysis to argue that conventional logframe-based approaches to programme design are epistemologically incompatible with complex adaptive systems, requiring instead approaches that embrace iteration, learning, and emergent strategy.

In the African humanitarian context, Duffield (2007) offered a foundational political-economy critique, arguing that international humanitarian governance constitutes a form of biopolitical management of surplus population, in which the perpetuation of humanitarian need serves the institutional interests of the humanitarian system itself.

Central to this paper's analytical apparatus is Meadows' (2008) hierarchy of twelve leverage points — places to intervene in a system, ranked in ascending order of transformative potential. In increasing order of effectiveness, these are: (12) constants, parameters, and numbers, such as subsidies, taxes, and standards; (11) the size of buffers and stabilising stocks relative to their flows; (10) the structure of material stocks and flows, such as transport networks or population age structures; (9) the length of delays relative to the rate of system change; (8) the strength of negative (balancing) feedback loops relative to the impacts they are trying to correct; (7) the gain around driving positive (reinforcing) feedback loops; (6) the structure of information flows — who does and does not have access to what information; (5) the rules of the system, including incentives, punishments, and constraints; (4) the power to add, change, or evolve system structure; (3) the goals of the system; (2) the mindset or paradigm out of which the system's goals, structure, and rules arise; and (1) the power to transcend paradigms altogether. Meadows observed that interventions clustered at the lower-numbered end of this hierarchy — goals, paradigms, and the power to transcend them — are consistently underused relative to their leverage, precisely because they are harder to implement and more threatening to

existing power arrangements than parameter-level tweaks such as budget reallocations or reporting-format changes.

This hierarchy is directly relevant to humanitarian reform debates. Much of the formal reform agenda in the international humanitarian sector — the Grand Bargain's efficiency commitments, harmonised reporting templates, joint needs assessments — operates at the level of parameters, buffers, and information structure: levels 6 through 12 in Meadows' hierarchy. These reforms are not unimportant, but they are, in Meadows' terms, comparatively low-leverage. This paper's later leverage-point analysis (see below) is deliberately weighted toward the higher-leverage end of the hierarchy: system rules (funding architecture), system goals (what 'success' is understood to mean), and — at the highest leverage point — the paradigm from which the system's goals are derived.

This paper operationalises systems thinking through three analytical lenses: actor mapping and flow analysis; feedback loop identification; and leverage point analysis using Meadows' (2008) twelve leverage points hierarchy. These qualitative frameworks are applied throughout the paper to synthesise findings from the existing empirical and policy literature on Nigeria's humanitarian sector.

Scope, Approach, and Limitations

This paper is a conceptual, literature-based systems analysis. It synthesises published academic scholarship, humanitarian-sector policy literature, and publicly available institutional reporting — including from OCHA, UN Women, the World Bank, and Humanitarian Outcomes — rather than presenting new primary survey or interview data. Illustrative figures drawn from these public sources are cited to their original source; general statements about sector-wide patterns and practitioner perceptions reflect the weight of the secondary literature and public reporting rather than a study-specific dataset.

This approach carries clear limitations, which are stated here rather than left implicit. First, a conceptual synthesis cannot establish causal direction or effect size with the precision that a properly powered primary study can; where this paper describes a relationship — for instance, between funding architecture and programming quality — it is describing a pattern that recurs across the secondary literature and sector reporting, not a statistically estimated effect. Second, the paper's actor categories (INGO, FBO, diaspora network, government agency) are necessarily stylised; in practice, organisations often straddle categories, and the boundaries between 'formal' and 'informal' humanitarian action are more porous than the typology suggests. Third, because the paper does not draw on a bounded, dated dataset, it is better read as a structural map of recurring dynamics than as a snapshot of the sector at a single point in time; the specific figures cited from OCHA, the World Bank, and UN Women retain their own publication dates and should be read accordingly.

These limitations point directly to the value of primary empirical research that could test, refine, or challenge the propositions advanced here — an agenda taken up later in this paper. The intention of the present analysis is not to substitute for that research but to provide the structural scaffolding — the actor map, the feedback loops, the leverage points — against which future primary data collection could be designed and interpreted.

The Architecture of Charity and Humanitarian Action in Nigeria

Colonial and Missionary Foundations

Organised charity in Nigeria is historically entangled with the colonial encounter. Mission societies, including the Church Missionary Society, the Sudan Interior Mission, and Roman Catholic missionary organisations, established the first institutionalised charitable infrastructure: schools, hospitals, and famine relief networks (Hastings, 1994). This bequeathed a charity model characterised by paternalism, an external-donor logic, and a tight linkage between material assistance and ideological reproduction. Mauss (1925/2002) identified the constitutive asymmetry of the gift — the way charitable exchange creates and enforces social hierarchies — and these dynamics, transplanted into colonial Nigeria, produced charitable institutions that simultaneously served populations and reproduced their dependency.

These cultural sediments persist in contemporary practice. The NGO-isation of Nigerian civil society from the 1980s onward reproduced the external-facing accountability logic of missionary charity, creating organisations whose primary relationship was to foreign donors rather than domestic constituencies. This structural feature — accountability upward to donors rather than downward to beneficiaries — is among the most consequential inheritances of the colonial charitable order, and is widely noted in practitioner and policy commentary on Nigerian civil society. It also shapes the professional incentives within the sector: career advancement, organisational prestige, and institutional survival are typically tied to donor satisfaction rather than to beneficiary satisfaction, a misalignment that later sections of this paper identify as a structural driver of several of the system's reinforcing feedback loops.

The Islamic Philanthropic Economy

In predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria, zakat (obligatory almsgiving) and waqf (endowed charitable trusts) constitute a parallel humanitarian infrastructure of considerable social reach, channelled through mosque networks, Emirate councils, and state-level zakat commissions. These flows remain largely invisible to international reporting frameworks and poorly integrated with formal humanitarian coordination mechanisms. State zakat commissions in some northern states have begun to digitalise their operations, creating new data trails that could potentially facilitate coordination with INGO-led clusters, though integration remains nascent.

The Lake Chad Basin crisis has prompted renewed attention to Islamic humanitarian actors, with organisations including Islamic Relief Worldwide and the International Islamic Charitable Organisation operating in Maiduguri. These organisations are frequently noted for their unique community access in areas where INGO neutrality has been compromised, alongside persistent exclusion from UN Cluster leadership structures. The zakat-waqf economy is worth dwelling on analytically because it represents a genuinely indigenous humanitarian financing infrastructure with its own theological legitimacy, administrative machinery, and — crucially — accountability relationships that run to the local religious community rather than to a foreign headquarters. In systems terms, it is an alternative stock-and-flow architecture operating largely outside, and in principle capable of correcting some of the structural weaknesses of, the internationally dominated humanitarian system described in the sections that follow.

Faith-Based Christianity and Social Welfare

Pentecostal megachurches and indigenous Aladura movements in southern Nigeria have developed sophisticated social-welfare arms — clinics, food banks, scholarship schemes, and disaster relief funds — financed through tithes, offerings, and diaspora giving. Faith-based humanitarian engagement expanded visibly in flood-affected communities in southern Nigeria during the 2022 flooding emergency, much of it uncaptured in OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS). These entities operate largely outside the NGO regulatory framework, commanding community legitimacy that formal NGOs frequently cannot replicate, and they typically respond faster than formal humanitarian actors precisely because they are not bound by the proposal, approval, and disbursement cycles that govern INGO funding.

The Corporate and Private Philanthropic Sector

A further actor category, distinct from both faith-based and diaspora giving, is the corporate and private philanthropic sector: corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes run by Nigerian banks, telecommunications firms, and oil and gas companies, alongside a growing number of private foundations established by high-net-worth individuals. This sector tends to concentrate on visible, reputationally advantageous interventions — scholarships, infrastructure donations, and disaster-response publicity moments — rather than the less visible, longer-term investments (institutional capacity-building, systems strengthening) that this paper's leverage-point analysis identifies as high priority. Corporate philanthropy in Nigeria is also structurally disconnected from the formal humanitarian coordination architecture in much the same way as diaspora and faith-based giving: it is rarely represented in OCHA-coordinated clusters, rarely captured in the Financial Tracking Service, and rarely subject to the same accountability and needs-assessment disciplines that donor governments and UN agencies formally endorse. The result is a further parallel financing stream whose

scale, allocation logic, and effectiveness are difficult to assess against the rest of the system — a data and coordination gap discussed further below.

The INGO Ecosystem and the Lake Chad Basin Crisis

The Boko Haram insurgency, erupting in 2009 and reaching catastrophic scale by 2014–2015, triggered a dramatic INGO surge in northeast Nigeria. OCHA (2023) reported that the Northeast Nigeria humanitarian response plan required $1.08 billion in 2023, of which less than 40% was funded by year's end. A critical structural feature of the INGO ecosystem is its accountability architecture: agencies are primarily accountable to their headquarters and bilateral donors (USAID, FCDO, ECHO) rather than to Nigerian communities, government structures, or civil society. This produces the accountability displacement dynamic that Cooley and Ron (2002) documented in their influential account of the political economy of transnational NGO action.

More recent commentary on the post–Grand Bargain era argues that while the formal rhetoric of localisation has changed, the structural incentive architecture largely has not: INGO budget lines for 'localisation' frequently fund the subcontracting of delivery rather than a genuine transfer of authority, and local organisations remain excluded from the highest-value, highest-visibility coordination forums. This produces a familiar pattern in which the language of reform circulates freely through strategy documents and donor reports while the underlying allocation of authority, funding, and decision-making power changes comparatively little — an illustration, in Meadows' terms, of reform activity concentrated at low-leverage points (reporting language, programme labels) rather than at the level of system rules or goals.

Feedback Loop Analysis: The Engine of System Behaviour

Systems analysis requires the identification of the reinforcing (amplifying) and balancing (stabilising) feedback loops that generate system behaviour over time. Nigeria's humanitarian system is characterised by four dominant reinforcing loops that collectively reproduce crisis and dependency, counteracted by two underinvested balancing loops.

Reinforcing Loop 1: The Dependency Trap

The dependency trap operates through the following causal chain: humanitarian relief provision reduces the perceived urgency of investing in local coping mechanisms; reduced local coping investment increases vulnerability to future shocks; increased vulnerability generates renewed humanitarian need; renewed need attracts continued relief provision. Ferguson (1994) documented this dynamic as the 'anti-politics machine.' In Nigeria's context, the dependency trap is most visible in the protracted IDP camp economy of Borno State, where many communities have remained in camps for close to a decade. Systematic integration of community resilience assessments into emergency response programming remains the exception rather than the rule across the sector, suggesting the dependency trap remains structurally embedded.

Reinforcing Loop 2: Accountability Displacement

Accountability displacement describes the dynamic whereby INGO service provision substitutes for state provision, simultaneously meeting immediate needs and eroding the political pressure that might otherwise generate improved state performance (Brass, 2016). The Nigerian state, relieved of immediate pressure, has reduced incentive to invest in its own delivery capacity. This dynamic is widely reflected in the gap practitioners describe between the operational capacity of international agencies and that of NEMA and the State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMAs), which remain chronically under-resourced relative to the scale of need.

Reinforcing Loop 3: The Donor Attention Cycle

The donor attention cycle operates through the interaction of media attention, donor response, and humanitarian funding volatility (Moeller, 1999). In Nigeria, this dynamic manifests in the systematic neglect of slow-onset disasters — the gradual desertification of the Lake Chad Basin, the erosion of food systems in

the Middle Belt — relative to episodic military offensives and mass displacement events (OCHA, 2023). Coverage gaps in international media have been widely associated with funding reductions in less visible crises, such as Nigeria's Northwest security crisis, despite continued civilian harm.

Reinforcing Loop 4: Corruption Feedback

Weak institutional oversight creates opportunities for diversion of relief goods and financial resources; diversion reduces aid effectiveness; reduced effectiveness generates donor risk aversion; risk aversion leads to bypassing government structures; and bypassed government structures develop reduced incentive and capacity for oversight. Perceptions of corruption and perceptions of aid effectiveness are consistently linked in practitioner accounts of the sector, reinforcing the case that this loop is an active feature of system behaviour rather than a background condition.

How the Loops Interact

Treating these four reinforcing loops separately, as the preceding subsections do for analytical clarity, understates the severity of the system's dynamics, because the loops are coupled rather than independent. Accountability displacement (Loop 2) weakens the state institutions that might otherwise provide oversight of resource flows, which increases the space in which corruption feedback (Loop 4) can operate; corruption feedback, in turn, increases donor risk aversion, which reinforces the preference for bypassing government structures that drives accountability displacement in the first place. Similarly, the donor attention cycle (Loop 3) interacts with the dependency trap (Loop 1): episodic surges of donor attention and funding around visible crisis events fund short-cycle relief rather than the resilience-building investments that would reduce future dependency, while the resulting under-investment in resilience increases the likelihood of future acute crises that then attract the next wave of donor attention. The system, in other words, is not simply afflicted by four separate problems but by a single, mutually reinforcing dynamic in which each loop supplies the conditions that sustain the others. This coupling is precisely why piecemeal reforms targeting a single loop in isolation — for example, anti-corruption compliance requirements aimed only at Loop 4 — tend to produce limited results: the reform may briefly weaken one loop while leaving the couplings that regenerate it fully intact.

Balancing Loops: Community Resilience and Localisation

Two balancing loops exist within the system but remain chronically underinvested. The community resilience loop operates where local coping mechanisms absorb shocks and reduce humanitarian demand. The localisation loop — the Grand Bargain commitment to direct a greater share of humanitarian funding to local and national actors — could theoretically strengthen local NGO and CBO capacity. Where localisation is implemented with genuine depth rather than as a funding label, it is consistently associated in the literature with stronger community resilience outcomes, though structural barriers to realising this potential remain substantial (Barbelet, 2021). Because these two balancing loops are the system's principal internal correctives to the four reinforcing loops described above, their chronic underinvestment is not a peripheral gap but a central explanation for why the reinforcing dynamics have gone comparatively unchecked over an extended period.

Structural Tensions and System Conflicts

Localisation vs. International Control

The humanitarian system's formal commitment to localisation — enshrined in the Grand Bargain, the Core Humanitarian Standard, and numerous agency policies — conflicts with the operational reality that coordination architecture, funding modalities, and accountability systems remain designed for and controlled by international actors. Nigerian civil society organisations frequently describe their experience of the cluster system as a space of nominal inclusion but substantive exclusion: consulted on programming decisions but rarely holding real authority over funding or agenda-setting. Stoddard et al. (2021) find that despite a decade of Grand Bargain commitments, only a small share of humanitarian funding globally reaches local and national organisations as principal recipients — a pattern widely reported to hold in Nigeria as well.

Humanitarian Neutrality vs. Political Economy

The tension between humanitarian neutrality and political economy is particularly acute in northeast Nigeria, where the Nigerian Armed Forces have at various points restricted INGO access, demanded intelligence-sharing, and instrumentalised humanitarian presence for counter-insurgency purposes (Omeni, 2017). Access constraints of this kind are repeatedly identified as a leading driver of unmet humanitarian need in northeast Nigeria, with military-imposed access barriers concentrated in Borno State's rural Local Government Areas.

Relief vs. Development

Nigeria's humanitarian crises are protracted — Borno State has been in active crisis for over a decade — yet the dominant funding architecture remains calibrated to short-term emergency response. The Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus framework, endorsed by multiple donors, has yet to translate into multi-year, flexible funding arrangements at the scale the sector describes as necessary (OCHA, 2022). Access to multi-year funding is widely reported by practitioners as the single most significant organisational precondition for rights-based, development-oriented programming, underscoring that the relief–development tension is not merely ideational but structurally enforced through funding architecture.

Diaspora Philanthropy and Formal Coordination

Nigeria's diaspora remits tens of billions of dollars annually — several times the value of official development assistance (World Bank, 2022). A growing proportion flows through organised diaspora philanthropic networks targeting education, healthcare, and community infrastructure. Yet these flows remain largely decoupled from formal humanitarian coordination, limiting the leverage of their localised knowledge and social capital. Hometown associations in diaspora communities from crisis-affected states have mobilised substantial resources for community reconstruction, largely outside formal coordination mechanisms and therefore uncounted in humanitarian funding tracking.

The Politics of Measurement and Visibility

A tension that cuts across each of the preceding four is the politics of measurement itself. The formal humanitarian coordination system — OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, the UN Cluster system, donor reporting frameworks — was built to track a particular kind of flow: bilateral and multilateral funding to registered international and national NGOs. Zakat and waqf giving, Pentecostal and Aladura church welfare spending, diaspora hometown-association remittances, and corporate CSR spending are all structurally outside this measurement apparatus, not because they are small but because the apparatus was never designed to capture them. This is not a neutral gap. What gets measured shapes what gets coordinated, what gets professionalised, and ultimately what gets treated as part of 'the humanitarian system' at all in strategic planning documents, donor conferences, and academic literature — including, it should be acknowledged, in systems-mapping exercises such as this one, which necessarily draw more heavily on the better-documented formal sector than on its less-visible counterparts. Addressing this measurement gap is therefore not merely a technical improvement but a precondition for any serious attempt at the kind of integrated, whole-of-system coordination that the localisation and zakat-formalisation leverage points discussed later in this paper would require.

The State as Ambivalent Actor

Nigeria's federal structure disperses humanitarian responsibility across federal, state, and local government levels, creating coordination gaps that non-state actors routinely exploit and occasionally fill. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and its state-level equivalents (SEMAs) nominally anchor government humanitarian response, yet their capacity is chronically under-resourced and their procurement is widely reported to be susceptible to elite capture.

A systems lens reveals the paradox of international humanitarian engagement with a weak state: the more that international humanitarian actors bypass the Nigerian state, the more they degrade the incentive structures and

institutional capacities that might eventually produce effective government. Practitioners across the sector are often candid that they bypass Nigerian government structures because they judge them too corrupt or capacity-limited to be reliable partners, while simultaneously recognising that parallel delivery systems erode government accountability and long-term capacity. This is less a failure of awareness than a collective-action problem: individual actors are frequently conscious of the accountability displacement dynamic while continuing to reproduce it, because no single actor bears the cost of the system-level effect.

NEMA's institutional trajectory over the past decade or more shows a pattern of capacity erosion concurrent with INGO scale-up — not coincidentally, but through mechanisms consistent with Brass's (2016) account of NGO–state relations in Africa: salary competition, reduced citizen demand for state services, and political incentives to tolerate rather than regulate international humanitarian presence. The state's position is genuinely ambivalent rather than simply weak: Nigerian federal and state authorities retain formal sovereign authority over humanitarian access, registration, and coordination, and exercise that authority selectively — restricting INGO access in security-sensitive areas while tolerating, and in some respects depending upon, the substitution of state welfare functions elsewhere. This selective assertion of authority is itself a rational response to the incentive structure the system creates: the political costs of visible service failure are lower when international actors are quietly absorbing them.

Gender, Intersectionality, and System Blind Spots

Any systems analysis of Nigerian humanitarian action is incomplete without confronting its gendered dimensions. Women and girls in displacement contexts face intersecting vulnerabilities: sexual violence, exclusion from food distribution, early marriage as a negative coping strategy, and restricted access to sexual and reproductive health services (UN Women, 2022). Systematic collection and use of gender-disaggregated needs data at community level remains inconsistent across the sector, and gender-responsive programming is frequently under-resourced relative to its stated priority.

Vulnerability in Nigeria's crisis contexts is produced by the intersection of gender, age, disability, displacement status, ethnicity, and religious identity. Humanitarian programming that addresses these dimensions separately — a women's empowerment project here, a disability inclusion protocol there — fails to address the mutually constituting character of these vulnerabilities. The specific vulnerabilities of Boko Haram abductees and their children, who bear social stigma from association with the insurgency, constitute a particularly acute blind spot in reintegration programming in Borno State.

These blind spots are not incidental to the system dynamics described above; they are downstream of them. A humanitarian architecture organised around short funding cycles, donor-facing accountability, and episodic media attention (Loops 2 and 3) structurally disadvantages precisely the kind of patient, locally embedded, cross-sectoral programming that effective gender and intersectional response requires. Addressing gendered and intersectional blind spots is therefore unlikely to succeed as an isolated technical fix — a gender marker added to project proposals, for instance — without the underlying funding architecture and accountability structure also changing, reinforcing this paper's broader argument that the system's problems are structural rather than programmatic.

Leverage Points for Systemic Transformation

Meadows (2008) identified twelve leverage points at which interventions into a system produce change. This section applies this hierarchy to Nigeria's humanitarian system, identifying five high-leverage pathways for transformation, sequenced from structurally embedded to paradigmatically transformative, and positioned explicitly against Meadows' twelve-point hierarchy introduced above.

Leverage Point 1: Mandatory Multi-Year Humanitarian Funding

Shifting from annual to three-to-five-year funding cycles would fundamentally alter planning horizons for both INGOs and local actors. The UN's multi-year humanitarian funding instrument and various donor humanitarian reform commitments represent partial steps in this direction. Organisations with access to multi-

year funding are consistently reported to be more able to adopt rights-based, accountability-oriented programming frameworks, suggesting that funding architecture is a primary structural determinant of programming quality (Stoddard et al., 2021). In Meadows' hierarchy, this intervention operates primarily at the level of system rules — the length of the funding-commitment period is itself a rule that structures every downstream planning decision — placing it well above the parameter-level tweaks that dominate current reform discourse.

Leverage Point 2: Genuine Localisation of Coordination Power

Authentic localisation requires restructuring coordination authority and agenda-setting power. This means reforming cluster leadership to include community-based organisations in decision-making rather than merely consultative roles, and creating accountability mechanisms that connect international actors directly to affected communities (Barbelet, 2021). Deeper, more genuine localisation is consistently associated in the literature with stronger community resilience outcomes, providing a strong rationale for investing in this structural change. This leverage point operates at the level of system rules and, where it extends to genuine transfer of decision-making authority rather than subcontracted delivery, begins to approach the level of system goals — redefining what 'success' means for an international actor's engagement in Nigeria.

Leverage Point 3: Formalising the Zakat-Humanitarian Interface

Integrating northern Nigeria's substantial zakat infrastructure into humanitarian coordination through respectful, non-co-optive partnership would unlock significant domestic resources. The Islamic Relief Worldwide model of coordinating with state zakat commissions in other contexts provides a possible template. The ongoing digitalisation of zakat commission operations in parts of northern Nigeria creates new operational opportunities for coordination that did not exist a decade ago. This leverage point operates primarily at the level of information-flow structure — bringing a previously invisible stock-and-flow system into shared visibility with the formal coordination architecture — and, if done well, at the level of system structure itself, by adding a durable new node to the humanitarian coordination network rather than treating zakat as a one-off funding source.

Leverage Point 4: Investing in State Accountability Mechanisms

Rather than simply bypassing the Nigerian state, humanitarian actors should condition engagement on measurable improvements in humanitarian governance, support civil society watchdog capacity, and strengthen legislative oversight of NEMA and SEMA. Perceptions of corruption are consistently linked to perceptions of aid effectiveness across the sector, suggesting that accountability investments targeting the corruption feedback loop could produce measurable improvements in both perceived and actual programme quality. This leverage point targets the strength of a negative (balancing) feedback loop directly — strengthening oversight mechanisms so that diversion of resources is detected and corrected more quickly — which in Meadows' hierarchy ranks above most parameter-level anti-corruption compliance measures, because it builds a self-correcting capacity into the system rather than relying on external, one-off interventions.

Leverage Point 5: Paradigm Shift from Charity to Rights-Based Solidarity

The most powerful leverage point challenges the fundamental framing of Nigeria's humanitarian system. The charity model constructs humanitarian action as benevolence extended by capable actors to passive recipients, reproducing the asymmetric gift relation that Mauss (1925/2002) identified as inherently constitutive of social hierarchy. A rights-based paradigm frames humanitarian action as the enforcement of obligations that the Nigerian state owes to its citizens, and that international actors owe to fellow human beings by virtue of shared humanity (Slim, 2015). The association between multi-year funding access and rights-based programming adoption discussed above suggests that paradigm shift and structural funding reform are mutually enabling rather than independent pathways. In Meadows' terms, this is the paradigm-level leverage point — the highest-ranked and least frequently exercised — and the paper's central argument is that the other four leverage points, however valuable individually, will continue to be partially reabsorbed by the system's existing reinforcing loops unless this paradigm-level shift also occurs.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The preceding systems analysis translates into a distinct set of practical implications for the different actors who make up Nigeria's humanitarian architecture. These are offered as directions for practice and policy rather than as prescriptive templates, given the conceptual and literature-based nature of this paper's evidence base.

For Bilateral and Multilateral Donors

- Treat multi-year funding commitments as a default rather than an exception for protracted crises such as northeast Nigeria, where the underlying drivers of need are not expected to resolve within a single annual cycle.
- Fund monitoring, evaluation, and accountability capacity within Nigerian government agencies (NEMA, SEMAs) directly, rather than exclusively through international intermediaries, to address the accountability displacement dynamic at its source.
- Commission a dedicated financial-tracking mechanism, or extend the existing Financial Tracking Service, to capture zakat, faith-based, diaspora, and corporate philanthropic flows, even where such flows cannot be brought under direct donor control, in order to close the measurement gap identified above.

For International and National NGOs

- Distinguish explicitly, in internal reporting and external communication, between 'localisation' that transfers subcontracted delivery and localisation that transfers genuine design and decision-making authority, since conflating the two obscures the difference in leverage between them.
- Build direct, non-transactional coordination relationships with zakat commissions, Pentecostal and Aladura welfare networks, and diaspora hometown associations in areas of shared operational presence, rather than treating these as parallel or competing systems.
- Where security conditions require negotiating access with Nigerian security forces, document and, where possible, publicly report on the terms of that negotiation, to protect the sector's neutrality from erosion by increments that individually seem minor.

For the Nigerian State

- Resource NEMA and the SEMAs commensurate with their formal coordination mandate, recognising that under-resourcing this function has the effect of ceding humanitarian governance to external actors by default rather than by deliberate policy choice.
- Strengthen legislative and civil-society oversight of humanitarian and emergency-management procurement, given the documented linkage between corruption perception and aid-effectiveness perception across the sector.
- Extend and standardise the digitalisation of state zakat commissions already underway in parts of northern Nigeria, both to improve internal administration and to create the shared data infrastructure that formal-informal coordination would require.

For Local and Community-Based Organisations

- Where multi-year or flexible funding is available, prioritise investment in the kind of trust-based, longitudinal community relationships that this paper's analysis identifies as the precondition for effective localisation and rights-based programming, rather than treating flexible funding solely as a buffer against short-term volatility.

- Engage collectively, through national NGO networks and coalitions, in cluster leadership and coordination forums, since individual organisations typically lack the leverage to shift coordination architecture unilaterally.

Directions for Future Empirical Research

This paper's conceptual and literature-based approach is a deliberate choice given the limitations of the available evidence base (see Scope, Approach, and Limitations, above), but it leaves open an extensive agenda for primary empirical research that could test, refine, or challenge the propositions advanced here. Four directions are particularly promising.

First, a properly designed, stratified survey of humanitarian sector professionals across organisation type (INGO, national NGO, government agency, UN agency, FBO, diaspora network) and geography, with a transparent sampling frame, a publicly documented instrument, institutional ethics approval, and an accompanying open dataset, could test this paper's central propositions for instance, whether donor control mechanisms are associated with lower perceived aid effectiveness, and whether localisation depth is associated with stronger community resilience outcomes with the statistical rigour this conceptual paper deliberately does not claim.

Second, financial-flow research that attempts to systematically estimate the scale of zakat, waqf, faith-based, diaspora, and corporate philanthropic giving directed toward humanitarian need in Nigeria and to compare it, on a comparable basis, with internationally tracked humanitarian financing would directly address the measurement gap identified in this paper's discussion of the politics of visibility, and would materially improve the evidence base for the zakat-formalisation leverage point proposed here.

Third, longitudinal case-study research tracking specific communities or displacement sites over multiple years could test the dependency-trap mechanism more directly than either a cross-sectional survey or a conceptual synthesis can, by observing whether and how local coping capacity changes as a function of the type, duration, and design of humanitarian assistance received.

Fourth, comparative research examining whether Nigeria's four reinforcing feedback loops and two balancing loops are specific to the Nigerian context or recur, in modified form, across other protracted crises in the region would help clarify how much of this paper's diagnosis reflects general features of internationally financed humanitarian systems as opposed to features specific to Nigeria's particular institutional and religious landscape. Any such research programme should, in light of the concerns that motivated the present revision of this paper, be conducted with full methodological transparency: a publicly documented instrument, a stated and verifiable sampling frame, registered ethics approval, and open, independently checkable data and analysis code.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's humanitarian system is not broken in any simple sense. It functions precisely as its structural incentives design it to function: generating short-cycle relief, protecting institutional interests, reproducing donor–recipient hierarchies, and leaving the structural determinants of crisis largely untouched. This is not a failure of individual actors' goodwill or competence but of system architecture.

The systems analysis presented in this paper indicates that four reinforcing feedback loops — the dependency trap, accountability displacement, the donor attention cycle, and corruption feedback — collectively dominate the system's dynamics, and that these loops are mutually reinforcing rather than independent, which helps explain their persistence despite decades of programmatic reform effort. Two potentially transformative balancing loops — community resilience and localisation — remain chronically underinvested, in part because the system's dominant measurement architecture renders large segments of Nigeria's actual humanitarian financing (zakat, faith-based, diaspora, and corporate flows) structurally invisible to formal coordination and strategic planning. Structural tensions between localisation and international control, neutrality and political

economy, relief and development, and formal and informal charitable systems further constrain transformative potential.

The deepest conclusion is that the dominant charity model rooted in colonial missionary practice, institutionalised through decades of INGO-building, and reproduced by the incentive architecture of international donor systems is inadequate to the scale and character of Nigeria's humanitarian challenge. It generates a moral economy of reassurance: reassurance for donors that action is being taken, for agencies that their models are working, for states that their obligations are being met by others. Durable progress requires not merely better implementation of the existing model but its fundamental rethinking, reframing humanitarian action in Nigeria as a matter of justice, rights, and political accountability rather than benevolence, charity, and technical delivery. Realising that shift will require action at every level identified in this paper: from donors willing to commit to multi-year funding as a rule rather than an exception, from international agencies willing to distinguish genuine localisation from subcontracted delivery, from a Nigerian state resourced and held accountable to exercise its coordination mandate, and from a research community willing to invest in the rigorous, transparent, primary evidence base that a conceptual synthesis such as this one can motivate but cannot itself provide.

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