



BEYOND AID AND NEUTRALITY: JUSTICE-ORIENTED LEADERSHIP IN A WORLD OF POVERTY, POWER, AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

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Abstract

Contemporary human rights challenges rooted in poverty, conflict, and systemic exclusion increasingly reveal the limitations of traditional humanitarian responses based on aid, neutrality, and technical reform. In this paper, I examine the ethical and practical demands placed on leaders working within systems that contribute to the harms they seek to address. Drawing on foundational human rights frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, alongside contemporary scholarship by Clapham (2015), Hickel (2017), Roth (2023), and Arden (2025), I advance a redefinition of leadership practice. I understand justice-oriented leadership as requiring engagement with structural harm, prioritization of accountability, and the development of humane and sustainable systems that support the realization of dignity and rights. Through analysis of global inequality, conflict, and leadership models, I propose a justice-oriented leadership framework grounded in truth-telling, solidarity, and ethical responsibility. Ultimately, I conceptualize leadership not as moral purity or heroic endurance, but as an ongoing ethical practice shaped by humility, courage, and collective action.

Keywords

Justice-Oriented Leadership; Human Rights Leadership; Structural Inequality; Poverty And Power; Social Exclusion; Structural Violence; Humanitarian Ethics; Neutrality And Accountability; Rights-Based Approach; Global Inequality; Systems Thinking; Sustainable Development Goals (Sdgs); Ethical Leadership; Nonprofit Leadership; Humanitarian Intervention; Power And Governance; Moral Responsibility; Leadership Sustainability; Solidarity; Development Ethics

Leadership at the Limits of the Current System

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, we are living in a moment where suffering is highly visible, yet accountability remains uneven and often absent. Images of war, displacement, famine, and climate disaster circulate daily, while global inequality deepens and political will fractures. From Gaza and Sudan to Haiti, Ukraine, and beyond, humanitarian crises increasingly feel protracted rather than temporary, systemic rather than accidental. In this context, the language of human rights remains powerful — but also under strain, as the gap between articulated ideals and lived reality becomes more difficult to ignore.

For leaders working in humanitarian, nonprofit, or justice-oriented spaces, this gap raises a difficult and pressing question: What does ethical leadership look like when the systems we work within are themselves implicated in harm? Traditional responses such as humanitarian aid, technical reform, and institutional neutrality save lives and mitigate suffering. Yet they often operate downstream from the forces that produce poverty, exclusion, and violence in the first place. As global crises become more interconnected and enduring, these approaches increasingly reveal their limits.

Human rights leadership today unfolds within a web of structural constraints. Poverty is not simply a lack of resources; it is shaped by global economic arrangements, historical extraction, and unequal power relations (Hickel, 2017). Social exclusion is reinforced by gender, race, nationality, and legal status. Conflict is often sustained by geopolitical interests rather than resolved by moral consensus. In such conditions, leaders are frequently asked to manage harm rather than transform its causes — to remain neutral in the face of injustice, to deliver aid without naming power, or to pursue incremental reform within systems that resist fundamental change.

This tension sits at the heart of contemporary human rights work. On one hand, foundational frameworks such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* articulate a universal moral vision grounded in dignity, equality, and freedom (United Nations, 1948). On the other hand, the lived experience of those rights is profoundly uneven. Andrew Clapham (2015) reminds us that human rights are not self-enforcing truths but negotiated commitments, continually shaped by political will and institutional power. The question, then, is not whether human rights ideals are valid, but how leadership can make them meaningful in contexts where structural harm persists.

The challenge becomes even sharper when neutrality is framed as an ethical stance. Humanitarian principles have long emphasized impartiality and access, particularly in conflict settings. Yet as Kenneth Roth (2023) demonstrates through decades of human rights advocacy, neutrality can also obscure responsibility and protect those who benefit from violence. Silence, “both-sides” framing, or careful avoidance of political discomfort often leave victims without recognition or redress. Leadership, in these moments, is not simply about effectiveness — it is about moral clarity.

At the same time, leadership that seeks justice cannot rely solely on critique. Global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) attempt to address the interconnected nature of poverty, health, education, inequality, climate, and peace (United Nations, n.d.). Their ambition reflects an important insight: rights are not lived in isolation. Dignity depends on systems — economic, ecological, and institutional — that allow people to thrive. Yet the SDGs also expose the complexity of systems-based change, where progress in one area can undermine another and where universal goals meet deeply local realities.

Within this landscape, leadership itself comes under strain. The expectation that leaders must endure endlessly, absorb moral injury, and remain resilient in the face of structural injustice leads to widespread burnout across humanitarian and nonprofit sectors. Jacinda Ardern’s (2025) reflections on leadership, limits, and stepping aside challenge dominant narratives of power that equate strength with permanence and control. Her example invites a broader reconsideration of leadership as stewardship rather than dominance — as a practice that must be humane and sustainable if it is to remain ethical.

Taken together, these realities suggest that human rights leadership requires reimagining. It is no longer sufficient to respond to a crisis without examining cause, to claim neutrality without reckoning with power, or to pursue reform without attending to systems that reproduce harm. Leadership must be understood not as moral purity or heroic endurance, but as an ongoing ethical practice shaped by humility, courage, and responsibility.

Contemporary human rights challenges rooted in poverty and systemic exclusion require a redefinition of leadership practice. Approaches grounded solely in aid, neutrality, or technical reform are insufficient to address structural harm. A justice-oriented leadership approach prioritizes accountability and contributes to the development of humane, sustainable systems that support the realization of dignity and rights. Drawing on foundational human rights frameworks and contemporary scholarship, this analysis considers how leaders navigate the moral and practical tensions of working within imperfect systems while remaining committed to justice-centered change.

In the sections that follow, I examine human rights as an evolving moral project, analyze the structural roots of poverty and exclusion, interrogate the ethics of neutrality and advocacy, and explore leadership models capable of sustaining this work over time. Ultimately, I propose a justice-oriented leadership framework that integrates structural analysis, moral clarity, and humane practice — not as a final solution, but as a necessary response to a world still struggling to live up to its own commitments.

Human Rights as an Unfinished Moral and Political Project

Modern human rights frameworks are often described as settled truths — universal, timeless, and self-evident. Yet a closer look reveals something more fragile and more demanding. Human rights are not fixed guarantees; they are evolving moral commitments that exist only to the extent that people and institutions are willing to uphold them. Understanding this instability is essential for leaders working in contexts shaped by poverty, exclusion, and conflict.

Andrew Clapham's (2015) book provides a helpful starting point by tracing the historical and philosophical roots of human rights. Rather than presenting them as a single coherent doctrine, Clapham demonstrates that human rights emerge from multiple traditions — religious, moral, political, and legal — and remain shaped by struggle and contestation. This history matters for leadership because it disrupts the assumption that human rights function as neutral tools that can simply be applied. Instead, they operate as negotiated claims, continually reshaped by power.

This tension is especially visible in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Adopted in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II, the UDHR articulates a bold moral vision grounded in dignity, equality, and freedom for all people (United Nations, 1948). It marks a significant shift in global moral imagination by asserting that individuals — not only states — are subjects of rights. Yet from its inception, the Declaration exists alongside deep contradiction. Many of the governments that endorse it simultaneously maintain colonial rule, racial segregation, and gender exclusion.

Clapham (2015) emphasizes that this contradiction does not invalidate the UDHR; rather, it clarifies its function. The Declaration does not describe the world as it is. It names a vision of the world that humanity seeks to achieve. In this sense, human rights function less as enforceable guarantees and more as moral horizons — standards against which existing systems are judged and challenged. For leaders, this means inheriting frameworks that are aspirational by design and incomplete by necessity.

This incompleteness places a particular burden on leadership. Human rights do not enforce themselves, and legal instruments alone do not ensure dignity. As Clapham (2015) notes, the meaning and reach of rights depend on political will, institutional capacity, and public imagination. When these forces weaken — through authoritarianism, nationalism, or economic pressure — rights are narrowed, selectively applied, or abandoned. Leadership in such moments requires vigilance rather than complacency.

The UDHR's opening declaration — that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (United Nations, 1948, art. 1) — remains profoundly disruptive. Taken seriously, it challenges hierarchies based on nationality, race, gender, wealth, and legal status. Yet the persistence of global poverty and social exclusion raises a difficult question: if rights are universal, why is their realization so uneven? This question cannot be answered through legal analysis alone. It requires attention to systems of power that shape whose rights are protected and whose are treated as optional.

From a leadership perspective, recognizing human rights as an unfinished project shifts the role of the leader. Leadership becomes less about enforcement and more about stewardship — holding moral commitments steady while pressing institutions to align with them. It also requires humility. No leader operates outside history or power. Human rights leaders must navigate the tension between defending existing norms and reinterpreting them in response to new forms of harm, including economic inequality, climate displacement, and digital surveillance.

This understanding also reframes failure. When human rights are violated, the issue is not limited to individual wrongdoing or weak implementation. It often reflects deeper structural arrangements that constrain choice and concentrate power. Leaders who treat rights as static rules risk misidentifying symptoms as causes. Leaders who understand rights as evolving commitments are better positioned to ask harder questions: Who is excluded? Whose dignity is negotiable? What systems make that exclusion appear normal?

Ultimately, viewing human rights as an unfinished moral and political project does not weaken their force — it strengthens their claim. It clarifies that rights are not inherited achievements but ongoing responsibilities. For justice-oriented leaders, this means recognizing that leadership does not resolve the gap between ideals and reality once and for all. It requires sustained accountability to that gap — and a refusal to allow it to disappear into abstraction or apathy.

Poverty, Power, and Structural Harm

Poverty is often described as a condition — a lack of income, education, or access to basic services. Yet framing poverty primarily as absence obscures a more troubling reality: poverty frequently results from systems that actively produce and maintain inequality. Understanding poverty as structurally generated rather than accidental is essential for leaders committed to justice-centered and rights-based practice.

Jason Hickel's (2017) book, *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and Its Solutions*, challenges dominant narratives of global development. Hickel argues that contemporary poverty is not a residual problem awaiting technical solutions, but a predictable outcome of historical and ongoing processes of extraction, colonization, debt dependency, and unequal trade. Within this framework, global inequality is not a failure of development; it is a feature of how the global economy is structured.

One of Hickel's (2017) most important contributions is his critique of what he calls the "development delusion." This concept frames poverty as a technical problem located in the Global South — something to be addressed through aid, capacity-building, or institutional reform — while overlooking the massive flows of wealth moving in the opposite direction. Debt servicing, illicit financial flows, tax avoidance, and unequal trade rules drain resources from poorer nations at rates that far exceed incoming aid. When leaders fail to acknowledge these dynamics, humanitarian interventions function as palliative rather than transformative responses.

This analysis aligns closely with Farmer's (2003) concept of structural violence. Farmer defines structural violence as harm produced not by direct physical force, but by social, political, and economic systems that constrain people's ability to meet basic needs and live with dignity. Poverty, in this sense, is not simply unfortunate; it is violent. It shortens lives, limits opportunity, and renders suffering predictable. Importantly, structural violence often appears normal, invisible, or inevitable — which makes it especially difficult to confront.

For leaders, this normalization presents a profound ethical challenge. When poverty and exclusion are treated as background conditions rather than outcomes of power, leadership responses tend to focus on managing symptoms. Food aid is delivered without questioning land dispossession. Education initiatives proceed without addressing gendered labor expectations. Health interventions treat disease without examining the economic policies that make illness endemic. These efforts may be necessary, but they are insufficient if underlying structures remain unchanged.

Hickel (2017) argues that aid can unintentionally reinforce inequality by masking extraction. The narrative of benevolent donors assisting impoverished recipients obscures the reality that wealth accumulation in high-income countries has been historically tied — and remains structurally linked — to the deprivation of others. This framing distorts moral responsibility and shapes leadership identity. Leaders may come to view themselves as helpers rather than participants in systems that require dismantling.

From a human rights perspective, this structural understanding of poverty complicates the implementation of universal frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If rights are universal but resources and power are systematically unequal, then the realization of rights cannot depend solely on national commitment or individual effort. As Clapham (2015) notes, human rights are mediated by political and economic contexts that determine whose claims are recognized and whose are deferred. Structural inequality effectively stratifies access to dignity.

Leadership in this context requires more than compassion. It requires the willingness to examine how organizations, policies, and global systems participate — directly or indirectly — in sustaining harm. This examination is uncomfortable. It challenges leaders to look beyond programmatic success metrics and consider deeper questions about power, accountability, and complicity. As Farmer (2003) argues, addressing structural violence requires moral clarity paired with political analysis.

At the same time, structural analysis does not remove the responsibility for immediate action. Lives are at stake in real time. The ethical tension lies in holding both realities at once: responding to urgent needs while rejecting narratives that portray poverty as inevitable or apolitical. Justice-oriented leadership must resist the tendency to choose between relief and transformation. Instead, it requires engagement with both — acting within flawed systems while working to change them.

Ultimately, recognizing poverty as structurally produced reshapes the purpose of leadership. Leadership becomes less focused on fixing individuals or communities and more concerned with identifying and challenging the arrangements that make harm routine. This shift moves the focus from charity to solidarity and from intervention to accountability. In doing so, it prepares the ground for the next

question addressed in this paper: if harm is structurally produced, can neutrality be considered ethical — and what does leadership require in moments of injustice?

Justice-Oriented Leadership in Systems of Structural Harm

If poverty, exclusion, and human rights violations are produced through systems rather than isolated failures, then leadership aimed at justice must also operate at the level of systems. This insight sits at the heart of Jason Hickel's (2017) argument in *The Divide* and is reinforced by Kenneth Roth's (2023) account of decades of human rights advocacy in *Righting Wrongs*. Both authors challenge the idea that ethical leadership is primarily about individual virtue or good intentions. Instead, their work points toward leadership as an act of sustained resistance to structural harm.

Traditional leadership models—especially those rooted in charity, aid delivery, or technocratic problem-solving—often assume that suffering can be reduced without confronting the power arrangements that produce it. Hickel (2017) explicitly critiques this approach, arguing that aid can coexist with extraction, allowing wealthy nations and institutions to appear benevolent while continuing to benefit from unequal trade, debt regimes, and ecological exploitation. From a leadership perspective, this raises an uncomfortable but necessary question: Are leaders acting in ways that reduce harm, or in ways that make injustice more manageable?

Justice-oriented leadership requires a shift in orientation—from addressing symptoms to identifying underlying causes. This does not mean abandoning immediate humanitarian response; rather, it requires holding relief and transformation together. Roth (2023) illustrates this tension in reflections on Human Rights Watch's work in places such as Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. Documentation, advocacy, and international pressure play important roles, but they remain slow, politically constrained, and often resisted by powerful states. Leadership in these contexts becomes less about intervention and more about endurance, credibility, and moral clarity over time.

A critical leadership dilemma emerges here: neutrality versus accountability. Roth (2023) argues that claims of neutrality often function as protection for perpetrators, particularly in contexts of unequal power. Similarly, Clapham (2015) notes that international human rights law is frequently applied selectively, shaped by geopolitical interests rather than universal standards. Justice-oriented leadership therefore requires a willingness to disrupt institutional comfort—among donors, organizations, and allies—by clearly identifying responsibility.

This approach aligns with a human rights-based framework, which emphasizes accountability, participation, non-discrimination, and transparency (UN OHCHR, n.d.). Rather than positioning communities as passive recipients of aid, rights-based leadership recognizes them as rights holders whose dignity and agency shape interventions. This reframing has significant implications for organizational leadership: success is measured not only by outputs or efficiency, but by whether power shifts, voices are amplified, and structural barriers are challenged.

Importantly, justice-oriented leadership is not synonymous with idealism. Both Hickel (2017) and Roth (2023) acknowledge the constraints of political reality—entrenched interests, donor pressures, and institutional inertia. However, these constraints are not treated as justification for inaction. Instead, leadership is framed as a moral practice carried out within imperfect conditions: acting strategically while maintaining ethical clarity.

In this sense, justice-oriented leadership functions as an ongoing posture rather than a fixed role. It requires leaders to ask not only what works, but who benefits, who bears the cost, and which systems remain intact as a result of leadership decisions. This form of leadership aligns closely with the course's emphasis on ethical decision-making in complex systems, particularly in contexts of poverty, conflict, and exclusion. It recognizes that leadership for human rights does not occur outside of power, but through sustained, critical, and reflective engagement with it.

Systems Thinking and the Sustainable Development Goals

If poverty and exclusion are structurally produced and leadership must move beyond neutrality and charity, then the question becomes how leaders engage systems without oversimplifying them. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent one of the most ambitious global efforts to respond to this challenge. Adopted by the United Nations in 2015, the SDGs articulate a vision of shared responsibility across seventeen interconnected goals, ranging from poverty and health to climate action, peace, and inclusive

institutions (United Nations, n.d.). Beyond functioning as a policy framework, the SDGs reflect a systems-based understanding of justice.

What distinguishes the SDGs from earlier development agendas is their explicit recognition of interdependence. Poverty reduction (Goal 1) is inseparable from food security (Goal 2), health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), climate action (Goal 13), and peace and justice (Goal 16). This interconnected design reflects a crucial insight for leadership: rights are not experienced in isolation. Dignity depends on ecological stability, institutional trust, economic opportunity, and social inclusion operating together rather than in silos.

Systems-thinking scholarship reinforces this insight. Research on SDG interactions indicates that progress toward one goal can either reinforce or undermine progress toward others, depending on context and implementation (Fuso Nerini et al., 2019). For example, economic growth strategies that ignore environmental limits undermine long-term health and livelihoods, while climate policies that exclude marginalized communities deepen inequality. Leadership, therefore, is not simply about selecting the “right” goal, but about navigating trade-offs, feedback loops, and unintended consequences.

This complexity has direct implications for justice-oriented leadership. Traditional leadership approaches often reward narrow success metrics — programs delivered, funds distributed, outputs achieved. The SDGs challenge this logic by requiring consideration of system-wide effects and long-term outcomes. From a human rights perspective, this aligns with the understanding that rights are conditions to be sustained, not boxes to be checked. Leaders must ask not only whether interventions are effective, but whether they strengthen or weaken the systems that enable rights to be realized.

At the same time, the SDGs reveal a persistent tension between universality and locality. While the goals apply to all countries, implementation varies significantly based on income, governance capacity, and historical context. High-income countries often frame the SDGs as external development concerns, while low-income or conflict-affected states carry disproportionate responsibility for achieving them under more constrained conditions. This imbalance reflects broader critiques of global governance, where responsibility is shared rhetorically but distributed unevenly in practice (Hickel, 2017).

For leaders committed to justice, this tension requires reflexivity. Systems thinking cannot function as an excuse for abstraction or inaction, nor can it obscure power dynamics. As Clapham (2015) notes, rights frameworks are shaped by political and economic forces that determine whose priorities are advanced. Justice-oriented leadership therefore requires combining systems awareness with accountability — identifying how global economic arrangements, climate impacts, and political decisions constrain local possibilities.

The SDGs also expand what counts as “human rights work.” By integrating goals related to climate action, reduced inequalities, and strong institutions, the SDGs challenge narrow definitions of rights that focus only on legal protections or civil liberties. They underscore that rights cannot be protected in contexts of ecological instability, economic precarity, or institutional weakness. From this perspective, leadership for human rights becomes inseparable from leadership for sustainability. Importantly, the SDGs do not promise simplicity. Their breadth acknowledges that transformation is collective, iterative, and ongoing. This recognition aligns with the course’s emphasis on leadership in complexity rather than control. Leaders are not positioned as sole decision-makers delivering solutions, but as participants in systems that require coordination, humility, and long-term commitment. Ultimately, the SDGs function less as a checklist and more as a framework for leadership practice. They require leaders to apply systems thinking, engage tension without withdrawal, and pursue justice across interconnected domains. In doing so, they reinforce the central claim advanced here: justice-oriented leadership must move beyond isolated interventions toward sustained engagement with the systems that shape whose rights are realized and whose remain aspirational.

Humane Leadership and the Ethics of Sustainability

If justice-oriented leadership requires confronting structural harm and resisting the false comfort of neutrality, it also requires attention to the human cost of that work. Leadership in contexts of poverty, conflict, and social exclusion is not only ethically demanding — it is emotionally taxing and often unsustainable when framed as endless endurance. The question, then, is not only how leaders challenge unjust systems, but how they do so without reproducing harm through burnout, domination, or self-sacrifice.

Jacinda Ardern's (2025) *A Different Kind of Power: A Memoir* provides an important counterpoint to dominant models of leadership rooted in control, toughness, and permanence. Drawing on her experience as Prime Minister of New Zealand, Ardern presents leadership grounded in empathy, relational power, and care as both a strategic and ethical approach. This perspective challenges the assumption that effective leadership requires detachment, hardness, or continuous endurance. This challenge is particularly relevant in humanitarian and human rights contexts, where leaders are often praised for self-sacrifice and moral stamina. The expectation that leaders absorb crisis indefinitely, without pause, transition, or renewal, reflects the same logic that normalizes structural harm. Just as systems treat certain populations as expendable, leadership cultures can treat leaders themselves as expendable once they are depleted. Ardern's (2025) decision to step down when she no longer has "enough in the tank" reframes leadership as an ethical practice rather than a test of endurance. This decision disrupts the idea that leadership legitimacy depends solely on longevity. Leadership is instead understood as stewardship — a responsibility to the role, the community, and the broader system. Decisions about when to lead and when to step aside become expressions of accountability rather than indicators of failure. This reframing carries significant implications for justice-oriented leadership because systems change remains slow, contested, and nonlinear. Leaders working to address poverty, exclusion, and rights violations often operate within institutions resistant to transformation. In the absence of humane leadership models, this work risks reproducing the same hierarchies it seeks to dismantle — privileging control over care, output over people, and urgency over sustainability.

Scholars of humanitarianism identify this paradox. Barnett (2011) notes that humanitarian institutions often oscillate between compassion and control, with leaders operating within systems that demand moral action while constraining moral imagination. Humane leadership, in this context, requires resisting pressures to project certainty or dominance and instead fostering trust, shared responsibility, and ethical transparency. From a leadership ethics perspective, this approach aligns with a rights-based understanding of dignity. If human rights leadership affirms the inherent worth of all people, that commitment must extend to colleagues, communities, and leaders themselves. Leadership cultures that reward burnout, silence vulnerability, or equate exhaustion with virtue undermine the ethical foundations of justice work.

Humane leadership does not involve abandoning accountability or structural critique. Ardern's (2025) leadership includes decisive action, moral clarity, and political risk. What distinguishes this model is integration — the refusal to separate values from practice or effectiveness from humanity. This integration is essential for leaders navigating complex systems characterized by uncertainty and sustained resistance. In this sense, humane leadership complements the systems thinking emphasized by the SDGs. Systems endure through relationships, norms, and cultures, not solely through policies. Leaders who focus exclusively on strategy without attention to people create short-term gains at long-term cost. Justice-oriented leadership therefore requires the integration of three commitments: confronting structural harm, maintaining moral clarity, and sustaining the human capacity necessary to continue the work. Ultimately, humane leadership reframes power itself. Power is not measured solely by authority or control, but by the ability to create conditions in which dignity, participation, and shared responsibility are sustained. In a context of ongoing global crisis, this reframing is not optional. It is a necessary condition for leadership that seeks justice without reproducing harm.

Toward a Justice-Oriented Leadership Framework

Leadership in human rights and humanitarian contexts cannot be reduced to good intentions, technical expertise, or personal resilience alone. Poverty, exclusion, and rights violations persist not because of isolated failures, but because they are produced and sustained by systems of power. Leadership that seeks justice must therefore be oriented not only toward response, but toward transformation — even when such transformation is slow, contested, and incomplete. A justice-oriented leadership framework can be understood through five interrelated commitments. These commitments do not function as a checklist or formula; rather, they provide ethical orientations for navigating complex systems shaped by inequality, conflict, and moral ambiguity.

1. Structural Analysis Over Charity

A justice-oriented leadership framework begins with rejecting the treatment of poverty and exclusion as accidental or inevitable. As Hickel (2017) and Farmer (2003) demonstrate, structural harm is produced

through economic arrangements, historical extraction, and political decisions that constrain choice and concentrate power. Leadership that relies solely on charity or aid risks managing symptoms while leaving underlying causes unaddressed. This perspective does not negate the value of immediate relief. Rather, relief is situated within a broader analysis that examines why harm occurs and who benefits from existing arrangements. Leaders committed to justice must develop the capacity to identify systemic patterns and to name them clearly, even when doing so is uncomfortable or politically risky.

2. Truth-Telling Over Neutrality

The second commitment centers on moral clarity. Neutrality is often framed as a humanitarian virtue, particularly in conflict settings. However, as Roth (2023) argues, neutrality frequently functions as silence in the presence of unequal power. When harm is asymmetric, “both-sides” framing obscures responsibility and delays accountability. Justice-oriented leadership requires truth-telling — the clear identification of violations, rigorous documentation of harm, and resistance to narratives that normalize injustice. This does not eliminate the need for strategic discernment or access, but it does require rejecting false equivalence. Leadership, in this framework, is defined by ethical clarity exercised with care.

3. Solidarity Over Saviorism

A third commitment involves rethinking relationships between leaders, institutions, and affected communities. Rights-based approaches emphasize participation, agency, and accountability rather than benevolence (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2006). Leadership grounded in solidarity recognizes communities as rights holders rather than recipients, and as partners in shaping solutions rather than objects of intervention. This orientation challenges narratives that position leaders or organizations as primary problem-solvers. Justice-oriented leadership prioritizes voice, power-sharing, and mutual accountability. It considers whether interventions expand agency or reinforce dependency, and whether leadership presence amplifies or overshadows local knowledge.

4. Systems Thinking Over Siloed Action

The Sustainable Development Goals reinforce the necessity of systems-aware leadership. Rights are experienced through interconnected conditions — economic stability, environmental sustainability, institutional trust, and social inclusion (United Nations, n.d.). Siloed interventions, regardless of intent, often fail to account for trade-offs and feedback loops that undermine long-term impact (Fuso Nerini et al., 2019). Justice-oriented leadership requires systems thinking: the capacity to navigate complexity, anticipate unintended consequences, and coordinate across sectors. This approach resists simplistic solutions while maintaining a commitment to progress grounded in realism rather than resignation.

5. Humane Sustainability Over Endurance at All Costs

Finally, justice-oriented leadership must be sustainable — not only for systems, but for the individuals operating within them. Arden’s (2025) reflections on power, empathy, and limits challenge leadership cultures that equate effectiveness with exhaustion. When leaders are expected to endure indefinitely without rest, transition, or care, the work of justice becomes fragile and exclusionary. Humane leadership recognizes that ethical practice requires renewal, shared responsibility, and the willingness to step back when necessary. This is not a retreat from accountability, but a commitment to stewardship — ensuring that leadership structures remain viable, inclusive, and aligned with the values they claim to advance. What unifies these commitments is responsibility rather than certainty. Justice-oriented leadership does not produce clean outcomes or moral purity. It operates within imperfect systems while refusing to normalize harm. It balances urgency with patience, critique with care, and vision with humility. Viewed in this way, leadership functions as an ethical practice rather than a fixed role — a way of engaging power that remains accountable to those most affected by its exercise. In a context where injustice is often systemic and endurance is frequently mistaken for virtue, this approach provides a path forward grounded in the ongoing work of making dignity attainable.

Implications for Nonprofit and Humanitarian Leadership Practice

A justice-oriented leadership framework carries significant implications for nonprofit, humanitarian, and advocacy organizations operating within contexts of poverty, conflict, and systemic exclusion. While no

single organization can dismantle structural harm alone, leadership choices shape whether institutions reproduce injustice or resist it.

First, this framework challenges organizations to redefine success. Traditional metrics — numbers served, dollars distributed, programs completed — remain important, but they are insufficient on their own. Justice-oriented leadership requires attention to whether interventions shift power, expand agency, and reduce long-term vulnerability. This requires integrating structural analysis into program design and evaluation, moving beyond output-focused accountability toward impact that is ethical as well as effective (Hickel, 2017; OHCHR, 2006).

Second, this framework carries implications for advocacy and institutional courage. Leaders often face pressure to remain neutral to preserve funding, partnerships, or access. However, as Roth (2023) demonstrates, silence and ambiguity function as complicity when harm is unevenly distributed. Justice-oriented leadership requires discernment about when neutrality preserves humanitarian space — and when it obscures responsibility. Organizations committed to human rights must be willing to name injustice clearly, even at reputational or political cost.

Third, this framework emphasizes participatory and relational leadership. Rights-based practice requires recognition of communities affected by poverty and exclusion as rights holders with knowledge and agency, rather than as beneficiaries (OHCHR, 2006). For nonprofit leaders, this involves designing governance structures, feedback mechanisms, and partnerships that genuinely share power rather than symbolically consult. Solidarity, in practice, requires humility and sustained listening.

Fourth, systems thinking reshapes strategic planning and collaboration. The SDGs highlight that progress in one domain is inseparable from conditions in others. Justice-oriented leadership, therefore, requires cross-sector partnerships, long-term horizons, and the capacity to navigate complexity. Leaders must be prepared to engage trade-offs rather than pursue perfect solutions, and to resist pressures for simplicity that undermine sustainability (Fuso Nerini et al., 2019).

Finally, this framework calls for a reexamination of leadership culture itself. Burnout, moral injury, and leadership turnover are widespread in humanitarian and nonprofit sectors. Arden's (2025) emphasis on limits and ethical transition highlights the need for leadership models that are humane and sustainable. This includes shared leadership, succession planning, attention to well-being, and recognition that stepping back can be an act of responsibility rather than failure.

Taken together, these implications indicate that justice-oriented leadership is not a matter of adopting new language, but of reshaping organizational norms, incentives, and values. While such change is difficult and often incremental, it remains essential for institutions seeking to maintain moral credibility in an increasingly unequal world.

Leadership as Ethical Practice in an Unfinished World

Contemporary human rights challenges rooted in poverty and systemic exclusion require a rethinking of leadership practice. Approaches grounded solely in aid, neutrality, or technical reform are insufficient to address crises that are structurally produced and politically sustained. Justice-oriented leadership requires engagement with power, prioritization of accountability, and the cultivation of humane, sustainable systems that support the realization of dignity and rights. Analysis of human rights frameworks, systems thinking, and leadership scholarship demonstrates that injustice is rarely accidental. Poverty, conflict, and exclusion persist because they are embedded within global arrangements that distribute resources and responsibility unevenly. Leadership does not exist outside these systems; it operates within them and contributes either to the continuation of harm or to efforts to resist and transform it.

At the same time, leadership in this context cannot be understood as heroic or pure. Justice-oriented leadership operates within constraint, ambiguity, and moral tension. It requires action without full certainty, the ability to hold immediate response and long-term transformation together, and sustained accountability even when progress remains partial. As Clapham (2015) emphasizes, human rights are unfinished by design — aspirational commitments that require ongoing interpretation and defense. The framework developed here does not provide a final resolution to the problem of injustice. Instead, it identifies a set of commitments that orient leadership practice: structural analysis rather than charity, truth-telling rather than neutrality, solidarity rather than saviorism, systems thinking rather than siloed action, and humane sustainability rather than endurance at all costs. These commitments shift leadership away from control and toward responsibility, and toward an understanding of dignity as a lived condition rather than a rhetorical ideal. In a world marked by overlapping crises, the work of justice will remain

incomplete. Yet incompleteness is not a reason for resignation. It is an invitation to leadership understood as ethical practice — patient, courageous, and collective. The task is not to perfect the world, but to refuse to normalize harm, and to continue widening the circle of those for whom dignity is real.

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