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ORGANISATIONAL LETHALITY IN THE DOING- GOOD SECTOR: UNEQUAL EXCHANGE, IMPERIAL REPERTOIRES AND THE POLITICS OF HARM

A NORTH BORNEO CASE STUDY

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Foreword

The Critical Perspectives in Social Innovation series of working papers is designed to provide challenging analyses. The purpose of the series is to critically examine prevailing assumptions, practices and narratives within social innovation. By bringing together academic research and practitioner insights, the series seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, encourage reflection, and support the development of a critically informed social innovation for a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world.

In this essay, Caitlyn examines the Doing-Good sector using a case study from North Borneo. Her research focuses on how power, governance, and inequality are produced through organisations, markets, and development regimes, combining materialist analysis with case-based inquiry.

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Organisational Lethality in the Doing-Good Sector: Unequal Exchange, Imperial Repertoires, and the Politics of Harm

A North Borneo Case Study

Borneo's rainforests are among the oldest on the planet, shaped by evolutionary processes that long predate modern states, markets, and conservation regimes. Today, these forests are rapidly declining and concurrently, increasingly governed through carbon markets, biodiversity offsets, and sustainability standards designed far from the island. Framed as solutions to environmental crisis, these interventions reconfigure land, value, and responsibility in ways that prioritise global legibility and market compatibility while obscuring longer-term cultural, human and ecological consequences. These attempts to secure environmental governance through the imperatives of global accumulation in a profoundly unequal world is internally contradictory and it is this contradiction that provides a starting point for understanding how "doing-good" organisations can become lethal.

Social innovation scholarship often assumes that organisations working under a "do-good" mandate such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), conservation funds, or ESG investors, are inherently benign. Yet, as Neil Stott has argued in this series, organisations of all kinds have the potential to become lethal.¹ Lethality here is not confined to militaries or police; it includes the patterned harms organisations create, even when pursuing progressive missions. Stott's intervention expands the concept beyond obvious perpetrators to encompass NGOs, universities, and service providers, situating lethality within a broader thanato-economy. While this argument powerfully reorients our understanding of organisational harm, it leaves underexplored the structural geographies of lethality: how lethality is differentially produced and experienced across the Global South and North, and between imperial metropolises and resource frontiers.

This intervention builds on a substantial body of work in critical development studies that has long documented how development, humanitarian, and non-governmental organisations reproduce structural violence through practices of de-politicisation, professionalisation, and the management of poverty rather than its causes.² This literature has shown how claims to benevolence often mask relations of domination, converting political struggles over land, labour, and resources into technical problems of governance and delivery. However, while critical development studies has powerfully exposed the harms produced by NGOs and development regimes, it has paid less sustained attention to how these harms are spatially organised across imperial cores and resource frontiers, or how they are reproduced through contemporary conservation and climate governance. By situating organisational lethality within frontier political economies and the dynamics of unequal exchange, this essay extends these critiques to show how "doing-good" organisations function as active sites through which imperial forms of extraction and governance are reproduced under contemporary conditions.

This essay develops the concept of organisational lethality by drawing on cases from North Borneo, a resource frontier where conservation, development, and climate finance converge. Despite being resource-rich in timber, oil, palm, carbon; Borneo, divided into three nations during colonial times, remains structurally poor. This is an outcome that world-systems theorists describe as the product of unequal exchange: a system where ecological and labour value flow outward while costs and harms accumulate locally.³ Even where sovereign debt is not the organising mechanism, NGOs, conservation, and development organisations frequently reproduce debt-like dynamics: donor resources flow into frontier projects only to be recycled back to metropolises through consultancy contracts, reporting systems, and reputational gain.⁴

Organisational lethality in the "doing-good" sector emerges from the structural dynamics of unequal exchange and from the refusal of organisations to confront them. When examined through

Global South case studies and a material analysis of extraction and imperial repertoires of rule, it becomes evident that organisations perpetuate, rather than neutralise or prevent, the very structures of harm on which their legitimacy rests. When organisations sidestep power relations, ignore Indigenous governance, or privilege donor metrics over community well-being, they enact choices that are themselves lethal.

By *imperial repertoires of rule*, this essay refers to the recurring techniques through which imperial power has historically organised extraction, governance, and legitimacy in frontier contexts. These repertoires include land alienation and enclosure; contractual domination; indirect rule through intermediaries; securitisation and surveillance; bureaucratic enumeration; and the de-politicisation of resistance through technocratic governance. While such practices were central to colonial administration, they did not disappear with formal decolonisation. Rather, they persist in reworked form within contemporary conservation, development, and climate governance, where coercion and dispossession are reframed as protection, sustainability, or technical necessity. These repertoires operate together as imperial governance: the institutional and organisational arrangements through which extraction is normalised, resistance managed, and legitimacy secured across frontier spaces.

It is important for social innovation scholarship to understand that good intent can obscure complicity, and that organisations commanding flows of resources and legitimacy have the responsibility rather than the option to examine their lethality and redesign their practices accordingly. By weaving in the lens of unequal exchange⁵ - understood here as the enduring pattern through which value flows outward from frontiers while harm accumulates locally - this essay argues that organisational lethality is not merely an abstract universal but a patterned outcome of global economic relations. Through materialist analysis, lethality is revealed not as an aberration, but as structurally produced.

The case study of North Borneo helps to make visible the contradiction between global claims to sustainability and the unequal distribution of structural harm in practice, reframing the duty of “do-good” organisations to treat lethality as central to their legitimacy.

This essay proceeds as follows. First, it situates North Borneo as a resource frontier shaped by imperial extraction and enduring patterns of abundance and dependency. It then develops unequal exchange as a structural driver that links environmental governance, organisational legitimacy, and the outward flow of value from frontier regions. Building on this foundation, the essay examines how contemporary “do-good” interventions become lethal through four recurring organisational pathways, before tracing how these pathways cohere into broader patterns of structural harm. The analysis then moves beyond these lethal governance logics to consider alternative arrangements grounded in community-led stewardship and conflict resolution, before situating organisational lethality within wider dynamics of violence, legitimacy, and imperial governance. Drawing these strands together, the essay presents a model of organisational lethality in frontier governance that maps how harm and legitimacy are produced and circulated. It concludes by proposing a diagnostic framework for organisational lethality and arguing that examining and mitigating lethality is not optional, but a core condition of responsibility and legitimacy for organisations operating in unequal global contexts.

Borneo as Frontier: Abundance and Dependency

These contemporary forms of organisational lethality through environmental governance are not novel; they rest on a historical foundation of extraction and repression that has long structured Borneo as a resource frontier. Borneo (today Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia, Brunei, and Kalimantan in Indonesia) is a paradigmatic frontier: for more than a century, successive imperial, postcolonial, and global regimes have extracted value through timber concessions, plantation agriculture, and

now conservation finance. These processes exemplify what David Harvey describes as *accumulation by dispossession*: the continual enclosure and commodification of land, forests, and labour to feed the demand of the imperial core.⁶

In this essay, *imperial extraction* refers to the patterned processes through which ecological, labour, and social value are appropriated from frontier regions and transferred outward to metropolitan centres, and through which governance arrangements are structured to enable and legitimise that transfer. Under colonial rule, these processes were organised through concessionary contracts, land enclosure, forced labour regimes, and fiscal extraction. Following formal decolonisation, these extractive logics did not disappear; they were reconfigured through postcolonial states, transnational corporations, and, increasingly, conservation and climate governance. This continuity constitutes the colonial legacy addressed here: not the persistence of empire as a political form, but the endurance of its extractive and governing logics under new institutional and moral vocabularies.

From the late nineteenth century, the British North Borneo Chartered Company imposed land alienation, head taxes, and monopolised cash-crop regimes, channelling wealth outward while Indigenous communities and indentured workers faced poverty and debt. These measures were not only administrative; they were also designed to fragment solidarities and entrench dependency, ensuring that colonial authority could extract resources while preventing unified resistance.⁷ After independence, state elites and transnational corporations continued similar logics through oil, logging, and palm oil concessions. As Samir Amin argues, postcolonial states remain embedded in a system of unequal exchange that binds them to dependency, even as extraction is reframed as modernisation.⁸

Today, these dynamics persist under a greener guise. Palm oil remains dominant, while conservation finance and carbon markets are pitched as climate solutions. Yet, as Lisa Tilley and Jason Moore note, “green” interventions often reproduce extractive practices, turning frontiers into spaces for the commodification of “cheap nature.”⁹ In Sabah (North Borneo), where conservation contracts such as the 100-year Nature Conservation Agreement have raised concerns over secrecy and Indigenous rights, the framing of climate action masks the extension of frontier dispossession. Poverty rates in Sabah remain the highest in Malaysia: A Department of Statistics Malaysia report shows that Sabah recorded the highest incidence of absolute poverty in the country, at 19.7 per cent.¹⁰ However, in the same year, Sabah’s total exports derived from crude petroleum, palm oil, and gas, reached RM 77.2 billion - approximately 73 per cent of the national total, whilst analysts note that the majority of this surplus is captured by external actors rather than Sabah-based communities.¹¹ The combination of high poverty and large export revenues underlines the disjunction at the heart of unequal exchange: ecological wealth is converted into revenue benefiting metropolises (or non-local investors), while local populations absorb the costs. North Borneo illustrates the impact of the continuity from colonial to postcolonial to “green”, of unequal exchange in practice: ecological abundance converted into metropole revenue.¹² It also demonstrates why Global South perspectives are essential: “impact” cannot be understood apart from structures of dependency and domination.

Unequal Exchange as Structural Driver

Rather than being incidental, the dynamics described above are predictable outcomes of a global system where value is siphoned from frontiers to metropolises. Unequal exchange theory helps explain why. Arghiri Emmanuel and Samir Amin showed how labour and ecological value from the Global South is systematically undervalued, while the costs of extraction are borne—and indeed intensified—locally.¹³

In Borneo, unequal exchange has historically meant timber, oil, and rubber flowing outward, while debt, coercion, and ecological degradation deepened in situ. Today, carbon credits and biodiversity offsets function in strikingly similar ways: global markets capture ecological value in the form of tradable commodities, while Indigenous communities experience new restrictions on land use, heightened surveillance, and deepening dependencies. These “green” instruments thus reproduce the same structural pattern under a new guise—legitimacy and value accruing in metropolises, harms and risks accumulating in frontiers.

This continuity renders organisational responsibility unavoidable. The dynamics of unequal exchange are well documented, widely debated, and repeatedly raised by affected communities themselves.¹⁴ Organisations operating within this terrain cannot plausibly claim ignorance; rather, they act within structures that reward the externalisation of harm. It is within this context that the lethal pathways of contemporary “do-good” interventions must be understood.

How “Do-Good” Becomes Lethal: Four Pathways

These dynamics take concrete form through several pathways in which organisations that “do good” reproduce lethality in North Borneo today. Each pathway reflects a distinct organisational practice, but together they reproduce a common structural logic shaped by unequal exchange, frontier governance, and the pursuit of legitimacy.

1. Fortress Conservation and Security Logics

Conservation organisations increasingly deploy drones, AI, and armed patrols under the banner of protection. Evidence on biodiversity outcomes is mixed, but social harm is clearer: intimidation, surveillance, and strained relations between rangers and local communities.¹⁵ In Sabah, “fortress” models have led to criminalisation of foraging and subsistence practices, while community-led ranger schemes demonstrate more sustainable results.¹⁶

These security logics are lethal practices because securitised conservation reorganises the conditions under which life is sustained. By transforming subsistence activities into criminal acts and casting local communities as threats to biodiversity, fortress conservation legitimises coercion, surveillance, and the use of force. Such regimes expose communities to arrest, displacement and violence, while undermining access to land, food, and customary governance systems essential for survival.

Crucially, this framing erases the role of Indigenous peoples not only as custodians of culture, but as long-standing custodians of land and ecological knowledge vital to planetary sustainability. By positioning these communities as risks to biodiversity rather than as its stewards, securitised conservation reproduces imperial repertoires of governance in which violence is justified as the defence of “order” while extraction and dispossession continue. Similar dynamics have been documented in conservation zones across East Africa and South Asia, where militarised conservation has led to displacement, criminalisation of subsistence, and violent enforcement in the name of biodiversity protection. As with other pathways examined here, lethality emerges not from exceptional abuses but from routine organisational practices that prioritise organisational survival and legitimacy via donor funding, targets, and metrics, over human, ecological, and community well-being.

2. Carbon Finance as Dispossession by Contract

The controversial Sabah Nature Conservation Agreement (NCA) illustrates the risks of Carbon Finance. Signed in 2021, it granted a Singaporean company rights over nearly two million hectares of forest carbon for 100 years. Indigenous communities and civil society raised concerns about

secrecy, lack of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), and unclear benefit-sharing.¹⁷ UN Special Rapporteurs queried the deal, noting that century-long lock-ins could amount to dispossession by contract. Whatever its climate intent, the governance design enshrines a new form of enclosure.¹⁸

The lethal consequence of Carbon Finance is that it strips communities of the political and cultural foundations that sustain life. Long-term contracts extinguish the possibility of generational autonomy, binding Indigenous futures to external markets while criminalising customary land use. Comparable concerns have emerged in REDD+ projects in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, where long-term carbon contracts and opaque governance have restricted land use while delivering limited benefits to local communities. In effect, the Natural Capital Accounting (NCA) framework which is used to measure and value the stocks of natural assets and services, reproduces the imperial tactic of converting abundance into exportable value while displacing costs locally. It exemplifies the earlier argument that lethality in the “doing-good” sector is not an accident but a structural outcome of unequal exchange: organisations pursue legitimacy in global climate markets by externalising harm onto frontier communities.

3. ESG and “Sustainable” Palm Oil

Palm oil certification (e.g. RSPO) is often presented as proof of sustainability. Yet reports show that certified plantations have still been linked to deforestation and land-rights conflicts.¹⁹ ESG frameworks, designed for investor confidence, rarely align with the rights and needs of local communities.²⁰

Certification regimes institutionalise a new form of unequal exchange: they enable reputational sustainability to circulate in global markets while intensifying material harms in frontier communities. Investigations have shown that RSPO-certified plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia continue to be associated with deforestation and land conflicts, underscoring the limits of certification as a governance tool. Legitimacy is not simply detached from harm but actively tied to its reproduction. Organisations gain survival and authority through metrics and certifications that reward the appearance of sustainability, even as deforestation and dispossession continue. In this sense, reputational sustainability is itself a lethal practice, securing legitimacy in metropolises at the direct expense of well-being in the periphery.

4. Metrics That Erase Culture

Donor-driven Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) tend to privilege scale, speed, and legibility over depth, trust, and cultural integrity. In practice, this transforms communities into data points while erasing the relational forms of solidarity, memory, and governance that sustain resilience. As Stott, Tracey, and Suchman argue in their work on *peaceshaping*, impact must be understood not only in terms of outputs but also in terms of reducing enmity and fostering amity.²¹ Yet the dominance of technocratic metrics echoes longer imperial repertoires of rule, where enumeration, mapping, and categorisation served as instruments of governance that legitimised dispossession while obscuring violence.²² Contemporary measurement regimes thus reproduce deeper political genealogies of harm.

These measurement regimes do more than misrepresent outcomes: they corrode the cultural and political foundations that enable communities to resist exploitation. Similar critiques have been raised in development and humanitarian sectors, where audit cultures and KPI-driven governance have been shown to undermine trust, relational accountability, and local autonomy. By making harm appear rational, efficient, and benevolent, metrics lock organisations into logics of extraction and disable the solidarities required for community survival. In this way, the violence of enumeration functions as both a continuation of imperial governance and a mechanism of contemporary organisational lethality.

Pathways of Structural Harm

Taken together, these four pathways illustrate how organisational lethality is embedded in the pursuit of survival and legitimacy within frontier contexts. While grounded in Sabah (North Borneo) with examples from other territories in Borneo and Southeast Asia, these pathways echo patterns documented across conservation, development, and climate governance in other frontier contexts worldwide. Contracts that bind generations, conservation regimes that criminalise subsistence, certifications that legitimise dispossession, and metrics that erase culture all reproduce a familiar pattern: value and authority accrue outward, while costs and harms accumulate inward.

The structural logic underpinning these pathways has long been theorised through debt in unequal exchange scholarship. Debt functions as a mechanism that locks Global South states into dependency while transferring value to metropolises.²³ Although the cases examined here focus on conservation and development initiatives rather than sovereign debt, similar dynamics persist. NGOs and development organisations often act as intermediaries in this process, channelling donor resources into frontier contexts only to recycle value back to metropolises through consultancy contracts, reporting requirements, and the accumulation of reputational capital.²⁴ The debt-like dynamics exemplified in this essay highlight that even projects ostensibly disconnected from finance will reproduce the same structural logic: restrictions and harms are localised, while both material and symbolic value are siphoned outward. Taken together, these pathways raise a deeper question about whether organisational lethality is inevitable, or whether it is the outcome of specific governance logics that organise extraction, authority, and legitimacy in frontier contexts.

Beyond Lethal Governance Logics

These dynamics are not inevitable. Empirical research across frontier contexts demonstrates that governance arrangements grounded in community-led stewardship and conflict resolution operate through fundamentally different organisational logics. Such arrangements prioritise collective land tenure, locally embedded decision-making, and dispute-resolution mechanisms accountable to customary authority rather than external enforcement or market metrics. In Borneo, Indigenous-managed forests such as community forestry initiatives recognised under customary (*adat*) governance in Sabah and Sarawak, have repeatedly demonstrated greater ecological resilience and social legitimacy than externally imposed conservation regimes.²⁵ These arrangements treat local communities not as threats to be managed but as custodians of land, knowledge, and intergenerational responsibility. Similar patterns are documented in comparative studies of community-based conservation in Southeast Asia and Latin America, where collective tenure and local authority have been associated with lower deforestation rates and reduced conflict.²⁶

These forms do not eliminate conflict or trade-offs; rather, they reorganise how conflict is negotiated, reducing reliance on securitisation, long-horizon contractual enclosure, and technocratic control. Crucially, they embed accountability within social relations rather than external metrics, allowing harm to be contested and addressed before it escalates into repression or violence.

The marginalisation of these alternative arrangements underscores that organisational lethality is sustained not by necessity but by institutional preference. This shifts the analytical focus from outcomes to mechanisms, and to the ways in which “doing-good” organisations reorganise, distribute, and legitimise violence under the guise of care, protection, and sustainability.

Organisational Lethality and Violence

Stott frames “organisational lethality” as a spectrum: from direct forms of harm (killing, bankruptcies, displacement) to more concealed harms (exclusion, dependency, erosion of trust).²⁷

When organisations pursue survival and legitimacy above all else, lethality can arise regardless of their stated mission. This dynamic arises because the pursuit of survival and legitimacy is conditioned by political–economic systems that reward extraction, donor legibility, and efficiency at scale, while penalising practices rooted in trust, relational depth, and accountability to communities.²⁸ In such contexts, harm is a structural consequence: organisations externalise costs, sidestep inconvenient power relations, and privilege metrics that sustain their own authority, even when these practices undermine the communities they claim to serve. The attritional harms produced by these organisations echo Nixon’s concept of *slow violence*: violence that is incremental, dispersed, and often rendered invisible.²⁹

In Borneo, conservation and development initiatives do more than displace communities from land or foreclose livelihoods. They also erode Indigenous governance systems and fracture solidarities across ethnic, community, and national lines. These fractures are pursued despite the peoples of Borneo being bound by shared land, deep histories predating colonial partition, and cultural ties that transcend nation-state borders.³⁰ In addition, conservation and development initiatives suppress political dissent and facilitate the erasure of practices that sustain resilience. These processes are not only attritional but can generate acute forms of violence: forced evictions and displacement, clashes with enforcement units, criminalisation of resistance, and the destabilisation of local politics in ways that expose communities to cycles of repression and insecurity.³¹ As Nixon argues, *slow violence* encompasses not only environmental degradation but also the gradual erosion of culture, voice, and solidarity.³²

These dynamics are continuous with historical imperial repertoires of rule, in which overt acts of violence such as punitive expeditions or executions, were sustained and normalised through administrative, legal, and economic mechanisms that obscured responsibility.³³ In this sense, contemporary conservation and development in Borneo reproduce a longer historical trajectory: attritional harms that corrode cultural and political foundations while simultaneously generating conditions for more immediate violence and accruing more and more harm.

The social innovation literature has tended to underplay these dimensions, often treating lethality as an unintended aberration rather than a structural outcome of organisational practice. Yet, when viewed from the Global South, lethality appears as continuous with longer imperial repertoires of extraction and governance. In frontier contexts such as Borneo, the harms associated with “do-good” organisations are not exceptional failures but patterned effects of an extractive political economy in which organisations secure legitimacy by reproducing both slow and spectacular forms of violence. If lethality is patterned and structurally produced, it can be mapped as a recurring organisational mechanism rather than treated as a series of isolated failures.

A Model of Organisational Lethality in Frontier Governance

The following model synthesises the dynamics of unequal exchange, frontier governance, and legitimacy-seeking traced in this essay and shows how “doing-good” interventions become organised as predictable pathways of harm. The model clarifies that lethality is produced through ordinary organisational routines: how projects are financed, how authority is claimed, how nature is governed, and how accountability is rendered legible to funders rather than communities.

In frontier contexts, organisations enter landscapes structured by unequal exchange, where value is extracted outward and costs accumulate locally. In order to secure survival and legitimacy within this environment, organisations adopt practices that translate land, people, and ecosystems into donor-legible forms such as contracts, targets, certifications, security infrastructures, and metrics. These practices simultaneously enable intervention and obscure harm: they externalise social, political, and ecological costs while producing legitimacy in metropolises through investor confidence, donor approval, and reputation gain.

Legitimacy thus becomes both the outcome and the driver of harm. As legitimacy stabilises access to funding and authority, organisations expand their operations, deepen governance control, and further entrench extractive arrangements. The harms produced including dispossession, securitisation, cultural erosion, and political repression, are then managed through additional technical fixes rather than structural change. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle in which legitimacy enables expansion, expansion intensifies extraction and control, and harm is rendered administratively manageable rather than politically contestable.

Figure 1 presents this cycle as a sequence of reinforcing steps, alongside the four pathways through which it materialises in frontier territories such as Borneo.

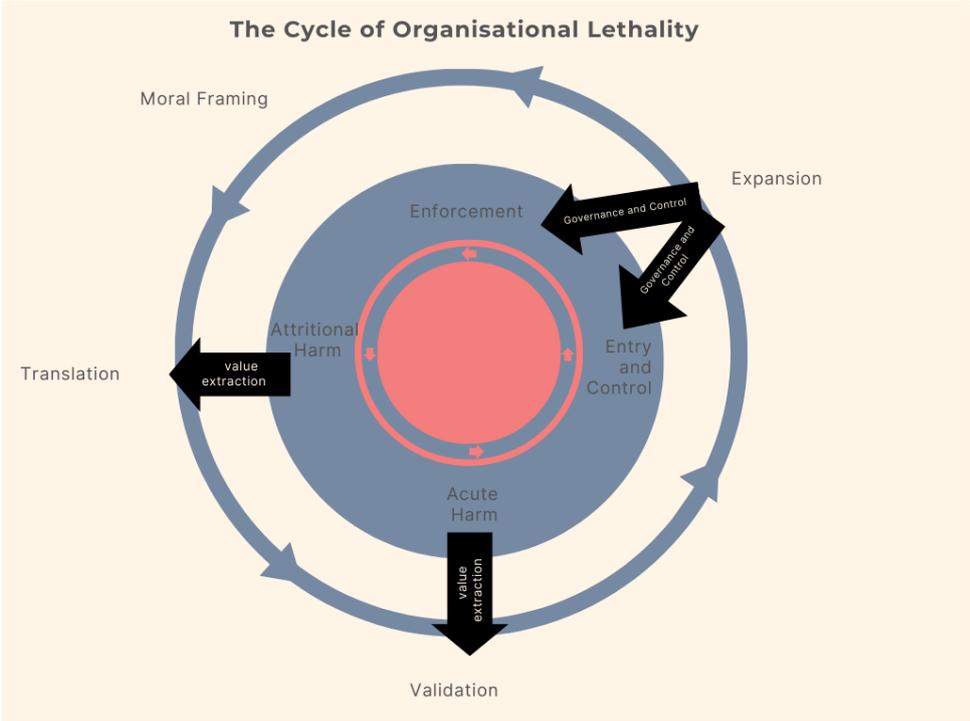


Figure 1. A model of organisational lethality in frontier governance.

The model illustrates how “do-good” organisations operating in frontier contexts shaped by unequal exchange come under survival and legitimacy pressures that incentivise specific organisational practices. These practices generate predictable pathways of harm, producing both slow and acute forms of violence. Legitimacy and value accrue outward, while costs and harms are localised, reinforcing the cycle of organisational lethality.

Diagnostic Framework for Organisational Lethality

Patterned organisational lethality can be identified through recurring features rather than isolated features. The model above demonstrates that lethality emerges where organisational survival and legitimacy depend on the externalisation of harm, the abstraction of value, and the displacement of accountability. In such contexts, contracts, security logics, metrics, and certifications are not neutral tools but indicators of how power and harm are organised.

The diagnostic framework summarised in Table 1 below, translates this model into a practical tool. Rather than treating contracts, security arrangements, metrics, or certifications as neutral instruments, it reads them as *organisational signals*: indicators of how power is exercised, how harm

is organised, and how imperial logics are reproduced through everyday governance practices. The table therefore does not catalogue outcomes but instead maps the mechanisms of organisational routines through which unequal exchange is stabilised and legitimised.

This table should be read horizontally: each row identifies a lethal organisational feature, explains why it reproduces harm through imperial continuities, and specifies corresponding mitigation practices that interrupt, rather than merely manage, those dynamics.

Lethal feature (imperial continuity)	Why lethal	Lethality mitigation
Consent and tenure – FPIC reduced to signatures; disregard for Indigenous governance.	Reproduces imperial logics of “treaties” and land alienation; erases community authority.	Community veto power – embed revocable FPIC and veto rights into contracts and governance structures.
Contract horizon – century-long deals with no exit clauses.	Binds generations to unequal terms; dispossession by contract.	Reparative budgeting & time-bounded agreements – shorter terms, periodic review, funds for land titling and cultural survival.
Security creep – drones, armed patrols, surveillance without grievance mechanisms.	Criminalises dissent; echoes imperial policing of frontiers.	Demilitarisation – community-led rangers, livelihood compacts, accountability mechanisms.
Supply-chain opacity – inability to trace impacts to concession level.	Allows harm to circulate invisibly while legitimacy circulates globally.	Transparency and remedy pathways – enforce traceability, community monitoring, reparative claims systems.
Metric myopia – KPIs privileging scale, speed, legibility.	Continues imperial repertoires of enumeration and categorisation; erases culture, solidarity, dissent.	Relational accountability – evaluate on “harm-minus” and “amity-plus” outcomes: trust, solidarity, governance vitality.

Table 1 translates the preceding model (Model 1) into a diagnostic framework which identifies the recurring organisational features through which “doing-good” organisations reproduce lethality in frontier contexts, and the corresponding points at which these dynamics can be interrupted.

Organisations must examine their lethality if they claim legitimacy. To ignore these red flags is not a failure of knowledge but a failure of will. As the table indicates, organisational lethality is patterned and each feature corresponds to an imperial repertoire of rule: contracts that bind, policing that represses, metrics that erase, opacity that obscures. Together, these features reproduce unequal exchange by ensuring that value and legitimacy flow outward while costs and harms intensify locally.

If organisational lethality is structurally produced, it cannot be addressed through isolated reforms or ethical commitments alone. Mitigation must instead focus on interrupting the organisational routines through which harm is externalised and legitimacy accumulated across project design, governance, and exit. The measures outlined below are therefore not aspirational “best practices” but baseline conditions for operating in frontier contexts where unequal exchange structures relations of power and value. Lethality mitigation can help reduce the exacerbation of structural harm:

1. Reversibility and veto power.

Projects must be designed with meaningful community veto power, including the ability to pause, renegotiate, or terminate agreements at multiple stages of the project lifecycle, not only at inception. Long-term contracts that bind land and futures across generations without exit mechanisms reproduce dispossession by design and should be treated as indicators of lethal risk rather than stability.

2. Demilitarisation of governance.

Security-based conservation and development models should be replaced with governance arrangements that prioritise community-led stewardship and conflict resolution through locally recognised authority structures rather than external enforcement. Where surveillance, armed patrols, or coercive enforcement are treated as routine tools, lethality is not an unintended consequence but a foreseeable outcome.

3. Reparative and redistributive budgeting.

Budgets must account for harm already produced, not only future outputs. This includes resourcing land restitution, cultural continuity, and independent grievance mechanisms controlled by affected communities, rather than channelling disproportionate funds toward consultancy, monitoring, and donor-facing reporting infrastructures that primarily serve organisational legitimacy.

4. Relational accountability over metric compliance.

Organisations must move beyond donor-legible indicators - such as quantified outputs, audit-friendly KPIs, ESG scores, certification benchmarks, and reporting formats designed primarily to satisfy donors, investors, and regulators - toward forms of accountability grounded in trust, consent, and harm reduction.

Metrics that privilege scale, speed, and visibility should be treated as risk factors where they displace relational depth and local governance. By contrast, accountability grounded in trust and consent is relational rather than extractive: it operates through ongoing, revocable processes of Free, Prior and Informed Consent; locally recognised decision-making authority; accessible grievance mechanisms; and the capacity for communities to contest, reshape, or halt projects when harm emerges before it escalates into repression, criminalisation, or displacement.

Seen in relation to the model above, lethality mitigation targets the organisational circuits through which legitimacy is accumulated and harm externalised, rather than attempting to manage outcomes after violence has already been set in motion.

5. Planned exits and refusal of dependency.

Projects should include harm-minimising exit strategies designed from the outset, with clear responsibilities, timelines, and resource transfers that avoid leaving communities more dependent, fragmented, or exposed than before intervention. Organisational growth and permanence cannot be assumed as ethical goods where they deepen asymmetries of power.

Seen in relation to the model above, lethality mitigation targets the organisational circuits through which legitimacy is accumulated and harm externalised, rather than attempting to manage outcomes after violence has already been set in motion. These measures do not resolve unequal exchange, but they make its reproduction contestable within organisational practice. These forms of lethality mitigation do not guarantee the absence of harm. Rather, they acknowledge that operating within unequal global systems requires continuous confrontation with the ways organisational practices produce violence. Mitigation, in this sense, is not a technical fix but the start of an ongoing refusal to normalise harm in the pursuit of legitimacy.

The Responsibility to Examine Lethality

Organisations that refuse to examine how harm is produced through their own practices cannot plausibly claim neutrality or benevolence. Because “do-good” organisations command significant flows of capital, legitimacy, and narrative authority, they do not have the option of avoiding self-scrutiny. Examining lethality is not a discretionary act of ethical leadership; it is an obligation that follows directly from these organisations’ roles in reproducing structural violence. As scholars of development and humanitarianism have shown³⁴, claims to benevolence frequently function as shields that obscure harmful practices rather than prevent them. To continue operating without examining lethality is therefore not neutrality, but an enactment of bad intent under the cover of virtue.

Organisations in the impact and conservation sectors must accordingly be held to standards of anti-lethality: practices designed not merely to “do no harm” but to actively interrupt the extractive and repressive logics through which harm becomes routine and profitable. Anything less entrenches the very inequalities these missions purport to challenge. A responsible organisation therefore begins from the assumption that it is already reproducing harm and subjects itself to rigorous scrutiny of power, consent, and accountability. For organisations operating in Global South frontier contexts, the diagnostic framework outlined above offers an initial means of identifying and mitigating lethal organisational features.

Conclusion

Organisations in the “doing-good” sector are not immune to lethality; indeed, their social and environmental missions can create a smokescreen under which colonial, postcolonial or neocolonial, and imperial dynamics continue to thrive. In frontier contexts such as Borneo, harms take the form not only of dispossession by contract, securitised conservation, and erasure through metrics, but also of fractured solidarities and suppressed dissent. These outcomes are patterned consequences of organisational legitimacy-seeking within an unequal global political economy.

By extending Stott’s argument that all organisations carry lethal capacity,³⁵ this essay has situated lethality within the structural geographies of extraction and the political economy of unequal exchange. It has shown that organisational lethality is a lived reality in the Global South, where omissions around FPIC, contract design, and security logics actively reproduce imperial repertoires of rule in contemporary form. To disregard these dynamics is not innocent oversight but a form of mal intent concealed beneath the language of benevolence.

Recognising lethality is therefore not an optional reflection but a duty intrinsic to the claim of any social or environmental mission. Organisations that mobilise resources and legitimacy in the name of social good cannot claim innocence when their practices perpetuate structural violence. The responsibility of social innovation is thus not merely to “minimise harm” but to embed anti-lethality at the core of its legitimacy: practices that interrupt unequal exchange, dismantle securitisation, and redistribute authority to those most affected. Anything less entrenches the very inequalities these organisations purport to address.

Footnotes

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