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Humanitarianism: An Overview

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This overview briefly discusses four crucial domains of contemporary humanitarianism, namely humanitarian diplomacy, education in emergencies, the concept of civil society in humanitarianism, and humanitarian borders.

Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, humanitarian relief has spread worldwide to become a global salvific narrative. Today, this is captured in the notion of “humanitarianism” – in which the suffix “ism” embodies a whole set of beliefs, practices, categories, discourses, and procedures that, although flexible and apt to change quickly, are recognizable as “humanitarian.” Humanitarianism is manifested in a plurality of actions, movements, and ethics that are different in their implementation and expression and yet are coherent in their idealistic intentions. While these intentions build on core humanitarian principles such as “neutrality,” “independence,” “humanity,” and “impartiality,” they go beyond these to define a modern redemptory attitude that is expressed in forms of compassion and government. Indeed, humanitarianism is not simply a reaction to crisis but a vast, articulated, evolving, and multiscale mesh of different actors, politics, and structures. It is a modality of intervention (with the aim of improving the world), a global ethos that is driven by a call to address human needs in extraordinary, unbalanced, or unequal circumstances. As such, it constitutes a consistent and important feature of modernity, and its history is intertwined with ideas and practices of salvation and liberation.¹

Humanitarian Diplomacy

Providing ongoing access to humanitarian aid during conflict and complex emergencies has always been a major concern for policymakers and humanitarian actors. Thus, humanitarian negotiations have historically been conducted in situations of extreme insecurity and unstable political conditions in order to secure access, assistance, and protection for civilians.² The implicit, sometimes even concealed, practices of humanitarian negotiations³ led to the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, which started to circulate more consistently in the early 2000s (although there are uses of this expression long before). Humanitarian diplomacy is generally defined as persuading decision-makers and opinion leaders to act at all times and in all circumstances in the interest of vulnerable people and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles. It encompasses activities carried out by humanitarian actors to obtain a space from political and military authorities within which they can function with integrity. These activities include arranging for the presence of humanitarian organizations in a given country, negotiating access to civilian populations in need of assistance and protection, monitoring assistance programs, promoting respect for international law and norms, and engaging in advocacy at

a variety of levels in support of humanitarian objectives.⁴ In this scenario, humanitarian diplomacy is understood as a means to reach the most vulnerable people. Indeed, the commitment to “leave no one behind” has been a key feature of discussions about Sustainable Development Goals, and there is a growing political consensus that operationalizing this aim is a crucial element of the 2030 Agenda⁵ issued by the United Nations (UN). However, a significant tension is embedded in humanitarian diplomacy. Diplomacy is essentially about the representation of one polity vis-à-vis another polity, while humanitarianism is about advocating for and helping people in need. Therefore, diplomacy is characterized by compromise and pragmatic dealings, whereas the public image of humanitarian action (which often contradicts what happens in practice) is the opposite: it is about working for ideals and universal principles regardless of the interests of specific political actors.

While some practitioners defend the apolitical stance of humanitarianism, scholars have largely contested this claim, pointing out that humanitarianism cannot be considered outside its operational contexts, which are always political and imbricated in a variety of diplomatic practices. Analytically, understanding humanitarian diplomacy through its practices facilitates its conceptualization in the framework of the broader pluralization of diplomacy.⁶ Indeed, the use and conceptualization of diplomatic practices has extended far beyond the Westphalian state system. Understanding diplomacy only in its traditional sense, as monopolized by states and international institutions such as the UN and the European Union, does not adequately reflect the reality of today’s diplomatic practices and infrastructures. Clearly, the idea that diplomacy is exclusive to sovereignty and statecraft is incorrect and misleading. The complexity of global challenges, such as conflicts, environmental catastrophes and refugee flows, cannot be simply reduced to the concern of state actors to which traditional diplomacy could cater.⁷ Diplomacy is a plural business within networks of different actors with diverse interests, identities, and understandings of what the world is (or how it should be) and how it works.⁸

The variety of humanitarian actors involved in complex emergencies and their competing priorities and goals produce different understandings and practices of humanitarian diplomacy. Its definitions and perceived content vary as widely as the number of organizations (or states) using the term and the humanitarian operations that they carry out. There is a significant difference between conceiving the idea of humanitarian diplomacy, using the term itself, and

1 De Lauri 2020

2 Mancini-Griffoli and Picot 2004; Pease 2016

3 Magone, Neuman, and Weissman 2011

4 Minear and Smith 2007

5 Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

6 Turunen 2020

7 Turunen 2020: 465

8 Constantinou 2013; Turunen 2020

arriving at international recognition for its definition and agreement on how it should be conducted.⁹

As massive humanitarian crises, such as those in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, have shown, the protected areas that humanitarian action is meant to provide are increasingly the targets of parties engaged in conflict. This leaves many people either trapped within a conflict or forced to flee along routes that put them at high risk of exploitation from trafficking, and where humanitarians have little or no access. The dangers that humanitarianism faces are the result of war zones and prolonged crises where civilian populations are the intended victims, where access is difficult, where aid workers are in danger of being perceived as a threat or a kidnapping target, and where their physical safety is in doubt.¹⁰ Access to humanitarian aid is increasingly challenged in ways that redefine the role of humanitarian actors and their diplomatic capacity. The character of violent conflicts is changing and the politicization of access to aid has become an integral element of conflict itself.¹¹

Humanitarianism and Education

In postwar and post-disaster contexts, national authorities, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations must provide access to schooling for children who have been displaced or are otherwise affected by restricted mobility, growing insecurity, lack of infrastructure and/or qualified personnel, loss of livelihood, and loss of families. Schools are not safe from direct attacks during times of armed conflict. For example, in rural areas, they may be the only permanent structures, which makes them highly susceptible to shelling, closure, or looting. Local teachers may also become primary targets because they are considered important community members, they may hold strong political views, and they may embody the only form of governmental representation in an isolated village. The destruction of education networks is one of the most severe democratic setbacks for countries affected by conflict. Deterioration in and the loss of basic education and professional skills normally takes years to replace, making the overall task of postwar recovery extremely difficult.¹² As a basic principle, the 1989 Convention on Rights of the Child obliges “State parties [to] take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict,” and to make primary education available and compulsory without limitation.

Education in emergencies has expanded as a subfield of expertise and humanitarian assistance because of the high number of children affected by disasters and wars. Education in emergency projects is often part of a larger program that encourages social change and resilience at community level.

According to international law, displaced refugee children can attend regular schools in host countries but very few are able to in practice. Some host governments refuse to make educational activities for refugee children available or even to allow humanitarian agencies to provide it.¹³ Providing ongoing access to education in emergencies may range from transitional home-based education¹⁴ to assistance in camps and schools in host communities to double schooling. Protecting children’s right to education in emergencies requires attention to the full cycle of education from supporting families to rebuilding schools. Among other concerns, education providers must take into account how to (re)integrate schools into larger societal institutional settings and how to restore trust through access to the “ladder” of education. It is also important to convey life skills and values for health, gender equality, responsible citizenship, and environmental awareness, and to provide protection for marginalized groups such as minorities, children with disabilities, and out-of-school adolescents.¹⁵

Although agreements and procedures to guarantee access to education exist in some contexts, they often fail to ensure the quality of the teaching and learning process, and also the effectiveness of the education response.¹⁶ Bottom-up participatory evaluations of education projects aim to identify the challenges of a complex emergency timescale, the production of knowledge, and the capacity to hold a child-centered perspective.¹⁷ The latter implies attention on and consideration of not only formal schooling but also the informal educative processes that can play a significant role in society, especially in times of conflict.¹⁸

Humanitarianism and Civil Society

The concept of civil society originates in Cicero’s notion of *societas civilis*, itself a development of Aristotle’s idea of *koinonia politike* (political community). The contemporary use of the term can be directly linked to modern European thought and refers to a dense network of groups, communities, networks, and ties that stand between the individual and the modern state.¹⁹ It is commonly understood as the “third sector” of society, distinct from the state and market.

9 Régnier 2011

10 Barnett and Weiss 2008

11 De Lauri 2018

12 Aguilar and Retamal 2009

13 Aguilar and Retamal 2009

14 Kirk and Winthrop 2007

15 Sinclair 2007

16 Gallano 2018

17 Maclure 2006

18 Anderson and Mendenhall 2006

19 Kenny 2007

According to the World Health Organization, civil society refers to the arena of collective action around common interests, purposes, and values. Although its institutional forms are normally described as distinct from those of the state, family, and market, the boundaries between these and civil society are always blurred and negotiated. Civil society includes different spaces, actors, and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy, and power. Civil society includes organizations such as registered charities, nongovernmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions, and advocacy groups.²⁰ The UN considers partnerships with civil society crucial for advancing the organization's ideals and supporting its work.²¹ However, this view reflects a general attitude in the humanitarian sector to use the notion of civil society in a vague sense. While considered strategic when implementing grounded interventions via local partners, the notion of civil society is often mobilized by international humanitarian actors as a way to gain legitimacy rather than to enhance local ownership.

The "third sector" has grown rapidly since the 1990s. What many defined as the global associational revolution of the aid industry was linked to at least three main elements: a widespread crisis of the state in providing welfare and protection; the growth in number and scale of organized private and voluntary actors (stimulated by new information and communication possibilities); and the impact of neoliberalism.²² Notwithstanding this rapid growth and the consolidation of the idea of a global civil society, the very notion of civil society continues to bear a certain degree of ambiguity and remains open to questions regarding its proper definition and the different ways in which it has been applied at various times and numerous places.²³ Civil society has been used, for example, to promote political and economic transition in former communist countries as well as to promote democracy and human rights in fragile states.²⁴ Critiques also emphasize the ways in which global civil society increasingly represents a retreat from universal rights and reinforces official donor government policies that discipline populations.²⁵

Another key question is whether it makes sense to distinguish civil from political society. Different groups in civil society, from interest groups to religious

organizations, are constantly mobilized for political goals. A rigid distinction between political and civil groups can be misleading. Therefore, the notion of civil society is intrinsically ambivalent as it does not make it clear when civil becomes political.²⁶

Beyond semantics, some see civil society, or global civil society, as a humanitarian actor itself, which is essential in order to claim a right to humanitarian assistance;²⁷ while others remain skeptical about the universalistic nature of the term, especially because of its propensity to make the roles and intentions of different social groups, organizations, and other collectives involved in humanitarian settings less evident.

Humanitarianism and Borders

A world without borders represents the mantra of globalization proponents, whether they be large corporations or humanitarian organizations. And yet the proliferation of walls and fences is not in conflict with borderless discourses and globalized flows. Rather, they demarcate the "fault lines of globalization",²⁸ being built both against and along these discourses and flows. Walls and fences exacerbate inequality and symbolize the affirmation of a privileged few who actually live the promise of globalization and defend its privileges through teichopolitics, the politics of building barriers.²⁹ At the same time, as objects that reveal contested instances of power and sovereignty, border walls are shaped by domopolitics, meaning that the state is governed as if it were a home:³⁰ walls are physical limits through which notions of home and protection materialize. In the framework of crisis, not only engineered but also natural physical borders (such as a desert or sea) become instruments of dissuasion and patrol that allow for instances of separation and privilege (between those who can and those who cannot cross a border).

The crisis of borders in the so-called Western democracies has exploded into the public domain because of their inability to control flows of migrants and refugees or to stop terrorists. In addition to exacerbating security policies, the crisis has ideologically and politically justified the affirmation of humanitarian borders as zones where practices of aid and rescue have merged with policing and rejection. The 2015 migration reception crisis, for example, did not simply make explicit the dysfunctionality of Europe's asylum system and its broader architecture, but it also made evident how,

20 WHO 2007

21 www.un.org

22 Salamon et al. 1999

23 Foley and Edwards 1996

24 Roy 2005

25 Pupavac 2005

26 Foley and Edwards 1996

27 Miglinaité 2015

28 Ritaine 2009

29 Rosiere and Jones 2012

30 Walters 2004

through the narrative of “rescue,” interdiction was laundered into an ethically sustainable strategy of border governance.³¹ On the ground, migrant safety continues to be undermined by policies that further securitize and militarize borders.³²

We owe the convincing definition of the humanitarian border to William Walters³³, who explains that this idea might at first sound oxymoronic. Contemporary humanitarianism is often described as a force that, in the name of an endangered humanity, transcends the walled space of both national and international systems. However, it would be misleading, Walters suggests, to draw any simple equation between humanitarian projects and the logic of deterritorialization. While humanitarian interventions might stress certain norms of statehood, the exercise of humanitarian power is intrinsically connected to the production of new spaces. By redefining certain territories as “humanitarian zones,” humanitarianism actualizes a new geography of spaces that materializes in various situations—in conflict areas, in regions affected by famine, in the context of failed or fragile states, or in situations where the actual borders of states and gateways to national territories become zones of humanitarian government.³⁴ This is the case for many borders today in Europe, the United States, the Middle East, Australia, and Africa. In Europe, for instance, the multiplication of border barriers, detention centers, and shelters, on the one hand, and the intensification of border patrols, maritime control, and deportations, on the other, signal a new step in European border history: the humanitarianization of European borders as zones affected by severe crisis.

Traditionally, border control has been implemented with the mandate of maintaining state sovereignty over exclusive territorial spaces through the regulation of who and what can move across state borders; that is, into and out of exclusive state territory. To this end, border control has authorized practices that range from violence embodied in the restriction and denial of movement to physical force embodied in the work of the border police.³⁵ With the rise of humanitarian borders, the politics of bordering has increasingly overlapped with practices of confinement (helping refugees and migrants in their “home countries”). As a consequence, the externalization of European borders and policies of rejection have been framed as actions of compassionate control and as a response to crisis and insecurity. Patrolling coasts, expanding the reach of immigrant reception centers, or fencing territories have thus become humanitarian reactions to migrant and refugee emergencies, and, by extension, to border crises. Today, the reciprocal relationship between humanitarian search-and-

rescue operations and state performances on European borders reproduces, on European territory, a dynamic that humanitarian militarism around the world has best embodied for decades: the overlapping of rescue and global policing.³⁶ Despite the diversity of geographical, historical, and cultural contexts characterizing today’s humanitarian borders globally, it is possible to discern the emergence of a transnational discourse of compassionate border security that fuses the humanitarian impetus with policing and militarization, reshaping traditional territorially based understandings of borders.³⁷

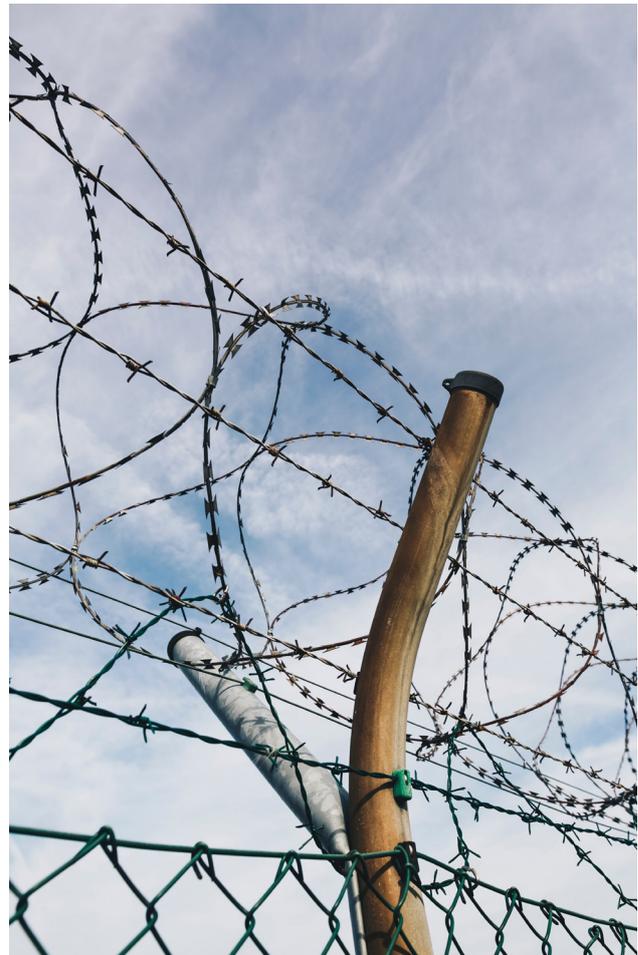


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31 Moreno-Lax 2018

32 Williams 2016

33 2010

34 Walters 2010: 139

35 De Lauri 2019a

36 De Lauri 2019b

37 Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017

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