

Who are the Humanitarians Now?

Humanitarian & Conflict Response Institute
University of Manchester
ESRC Seminar, November 24-25th, 2009

Who are the humanitarians and what constitutes humanitarian action? The inaugural ESRC seminar organized by the Humanitarian & Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) brought together scholars and practitioners from the fields of Medicine, Humanities and the Social Sciences to consider these questions with the aim of informing a humanitarian research agenda which can in turn facilitate improvements in the delivery of aid in areas affected by both 'natural' and political crisis. Through a series of key note addresses, panel debates and in-depth master classes the participants in this seminar highlighted several key themes which provide us with a foundation for a comprehensive and better informed debate on the conceptualization and delivery of humanitarian aid.

Geopolitical turning points

The delivery and defining of humanitarian action are influenced by past and present geopolitical realities. While the forms of colonialism seen in the 19th and 20th centuries have ceased, the ghosts of colonialism continue to shape humanitarian space. Links between former colonial powers and their former colonial 'possessions' influence the direction of aid flows, the nature of these flows as well as the attitudes of the recipients of aid. In relation to this, questions arise as to whether current aid patterns provide evidence of a continued paternalistic relationship between north and south. Here, aid is seen as a technology of neo-colonialism, with humanitarian action possibly replacing direct rule. This has led some to ask if aid is a less obvious but no less powerful form of social engineering. Changes in the international sphere following the end of the Cold War have also transformed humanitarian practice. With the international sphere no longer characterized by super power struggle, some have suggested that the way in which institutions approach and describe practices of aid has shifted away from stability and statebuilding and towards a singular cosmopolitan ethic. Finally, the impact of September 11th and the resultant War on Terror continues to shape and alter understandings of humanitarianism. Concerns over links between Islamic charities and extremist groups have threatened the role and legitimacy of a set of humanitarian actors. In states such as Lebanon and Sri Lanka the humanitarian nature of some groups has been called into question because of supposed overlaps with terrorist organizations. At the same time, the provision of humanitarian and development aid is now seen as a potential counter-terrorism strategy, with a belief that the provision of basic needs and development will prevent individuals from joining terrorist groups.

The power of discourse and rhetoric

The geopolitical shifts described above have contributed to changes in political discourses and rhetoric, further shaping our conception of the humanitarian sphere. An increased use of victimhood discourses, which portray entire populations as anonymous victims in need of concerted external assistance, has resulted in the provision of aid being seen as both a political duty of 'developed' states, and the 'moral duty' of all actors including international organizations, states and individuals. The prevalence of such a 'moral duty' offers a partial explanation of the rise of the 'celebrity humanitarian'. Linked to notions of morality is a notable increase in focus and programming on the concept of justice, which has since the end of the Cold war been readily accepted by a multitude of actors. The creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to deal with the injustices committed during by the Yugoslav and Rwandan wars, national courts such as the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the more recent creation of the International Criminal Court illustrate the rapid growth of the concept of transitional justice in the humanitarian and post conflict realms.

Defining the 'human' in humanitarian

Ultimately, the questions of who is a humanitarian, what can be classified as humanitarian action, and who is deserving of the attention of humanitarians depends on one's definition of the 'human'. What is deemed legitimate in the humanitarian sphere is intrinsically linked to what actors are (or are not) constructed as acceptable human beings. The language of humanitarian action is underpinned by binaries such as civil/barbaric—with those classified as the latter being excluded from the humanitarian realm. Take for example, the notion of 'acceptable partners for peace' in Palestine through which only some actors are deemed worthy actors in the delivery of aid, assistance and political progress. The blacklisting of some NGOs (specifically Islamic NGOs) further illustrates this point, as does the disregard and even contempt for the humanitarian functions fulfilled by rebel groups such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. The contributions of these 'shadow humanitarians' (Jonathan Goodhand) are often excluded as they do not fit the rather rigid criteria of 'human'.

Politicization of aid

The use of humanitarian aid to further the political aims of actors has led to an increasing concern over the politicization of aid. Throughout history, humanitarian actors in the form of NGOs have had an uneasy relationship with states, at times being unwitting partners in the statebuilding programs led by the victors of war. This problematic relationship continues as NGOs are tasked with protecting human security in the midst of violence and reconstructing relationships between actors as part of post conflict peacebuilding initiatives. In these cases there is concern that aid is not being provided based on need and guided by principles of neutrality, but rather the aims and ambitions of political elites. 'Traditional' humanitarian actors, such as the ICRC and MSF, have attempted to shield themselves from such politicization, invoking the norm of neutrality—though some would characterize 'claiming neutrality' as an equally political action. Concerns over the politicization of humanitarian space are related to debates over militarization, where humanitarian aid is now delivered by *armed* forces or where humanitarian actors are seen as closely cooperating with military actors. Alternatively, there are concerns over (or in some cases celebration of) humanitarian actors who intentionally engage in politics, choosing to act as advocates with the aim of altering political environments as opposed to delivering goods and services to communities in need. Thus, while in some cases such politicization is used pejoratively, others see it as inevitable (as in the case of militaries and NGOs having to cooperate to effectively deliver aid) or as necessary (as in the cases where it is felt that delivering aid is simply enough, serving to sustain rather than transform the politics that led to the crisis).

Communication, media and technology

The field of humanitarianism is further influenced by the growth of communications technology. The internet, for example, has given voice to recipients of aid and diasporic groups, allowing some to communicate the needs of their communities to a global audience. The internet has also empowered recipients of aid, equipping them with knowledge of aid practices outside of their own communities which allow them to question and challenge external actors, who previously held a virtual monopoly over the wider picture of humanitarian aid. These global mediums are also used and manipulated by celebrity humanitarians, who for reasons of either altruism or personal gain, use the power of fame and technology to shape the global humanitarian agenda (in ways often considered undemocratic or misguided). Regardless, the changes in communications technology have greatly altered the nature of 'voice' in humanitarian action, with both internal and external actors utilizing modern media to their own ends.

The rise and fall of relevant actors: shifts in the balance of power

The above changes and debates can be seen as contributing to ebbs and flows of power within the humanitarian sphere. While states in the north and the NGOs associated with them are often believed to have had the greatest degree of power, it has been suggested that states in the global south are increasingly asserting their sovereignty. States may deny that humanitarian problems exist, shutting down specific programs (as seen in the case of the Niger feeding program where the government insisted there was not a malnutrition problem and therefore that the MSF intervention was not needed). Southern states are also now arresting and expelling humanitarian actors believed to be 'meddling' in internal affairs, as seen in Chad and the Sudan. Likewise, in Sri Lanka access to IDP camps was denied to NGOs whose mandates included conflict resolution or peacebuilding, access being granted primarily to NGOs focused on aid delivery. The growth and increased cooperation with Islamic NGOs and the 'problems' associated with integrating them into an otherwise 'western' dominated humanitarian industry must likewise be considered as having disrupted the relative balance of power within the system. Further, the growth of the private sector, including private security/military companies reveals that the spaces previously occupied and claimed by NGOs is now being contested by a new set of actors who often claim to be more efficient. Such contestations raise questions over the importance of motivation, namely the stereotypical view that humanitarianism is (and should be) guided by altruism as opposed to efficiency and profit. With an increasingly privatized and competitive aid industry, the division of labour between actors (what it is and what it *should be*) emerges as a central research question.

Towards a research agenda for humanitarianism and conflict response

Through the process of defining of 'humanitarian', participants in the seminar highlighted a range of debates which serve as useful starting points for a comprehensive and interdisciplinary research agenda. In order to conduct the modes of critical research that not only effectively explain the intricacies of humanitarianism but also have the potential to inform aid practices, the above themes need to be considered and compiled. The geopolitics of aid, and the concomitant impact of this on the rhetoric and discourses that guide aid practices serves as an important foundation for this research agenda. Evidence of and the impacts of the politicization of humanitarian space need also to be addressed in order to manage both practical and ethical issues related to aid delivery. This includes the ways in which different political actors define the human based on their own moral codes and political interests. Finally, the role of modern technology and its impact on the relative power of actors in the aid industry must accompany further investigation in the division of labour within the current aid industry and the multiple motivations and pressures associated therein. Through continued dialogue between scholars and practitioners, forthcoming HCRI/ESRC seminars will explore these issues further, while also adding new lines to this research agenda.