

HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND GLOCALISM

EDITORIAL

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Since the post-war, humanitarian action has been rooted on a set of universally agreed-upon values and international norms. Humanitarian action is also a good example of glocalism, as it is based on the encounter between the abovementioned universal values within diverse political-cultural contexts. From the reasons leading to humanitarian crises (armed conflicts, natural disasters, health emergencies, or mass migrations, among others) to the responses to those crises (peace and rescue operations, healthcare, and assistance to displaced persons, or the many forms of development aid), the links between local actors and international structures are a constant aspect of humanitarian action.

This dialectic between the closest possible contact with local populations and the worldwide scale has drawn growing attention – especially after the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit – with the commitment of international agencies and donors to transfer more responsibilities to local responders. Still, it remains to be seen whether the legal and political scopes of humanitarian action are effectively open to change, and how a true humanitarian glocalism may emerge in the future. For both theorists and aid workers, there is space for questioning the implications of recent developments in

humanitarian action: can the contributions of theories on humanitarianism, human rights, or even sustainable development, help to rethink humanitarian action in the light of glocalism? Up to what point can the new field practices in humanitarian action, such as culturally sensitive approaches, bottom-up strategies, and local empowerment policies, play a role in the emergence of new, more glocal forms of humanitarian action?

What can be observed from the recent trends is that humanitarian action has started a process of change. But it is not clear whether this process will promote more glocalism in its practice. Indeed, humanitarian action is now very different from the utopian ideals of the 19th century, but also quite distant from what it was forty years ago. This happens for at least three reasons. First, humanitarian action is now a professional activity, and as such it obeys to new constraints. Second, humanitarian action actors, albeit constantly referring to the founding values of humanitarianism, are creating new ones. As in other areas of social life, new values are emerging, together with a new ethics of humanitarianism. Third, and this is probably a problem for humanitarian action today, humanitarian crises have changed (due to climate change, for example), and the international reality is growingly complex, both at the global and the local levels. This puts pressure on humanitarian actors, at a moment when there is a need to deal with different crises, some of them totally new, as is the case of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

As a professional activity, humanitarian action is subject to a constant tension between two opposite sides. On the one side, it is gaining a more pragmatic focus, more formalism, as for instance in the area of quality certification or auditing. This increase in bureaucratic aspects may make humanitarianism more centralised, and at the same time more distant in relation to local matters. Humanitarian action may even transform into an industry or an industrial sector “as any other one” (Choumoff 2011). On the other hand, which is in reality the other side of the same coin, humanitarian action is criticized for being “zombie-like” (Rivoal, in Dreuil 2015). From this perspective, humanitarian action would be lacking courage and

strength, and would have lost its genuine spirit of fraternity, embodied in the famous words of Henry Dunant: “*siamo tutti fratelli*” (we are all brothers) (Garde 2021). Ironically, the ones who denounce this trend, this loss of the original spirit of humanitarian action, are also the ones who work for the most widely recognized, institutionalized and bureaucratic international NGOs.

Humanitarian action is changing as concerns another aspect: its ethics. The World Humanitarian Summit, in 2016, illustrated a demand for change. The “Grand Bargain” approved at the summit pinpoints that humanitarian action should now be planned and developed a lot more in the aid receiving countries, instead of being “imported” from outside. This implies not only different forms of financing humanitarian action, but also changes in the structures and a share in the responsibilities, which should, at least in part, be allocated to local structures. Humanitarian action is also asked to be more efficient, and at the same time more sensitive to social and political factors, such as the possibilities of long-term development. The ecological consciousness is another factor to be added, in this rather complicated and new equation. In this ongoing reconfiguration of humanitarian action, old and new ethical principles are potentially conflicting. The traditional principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement (impartiality, neutrality, and independence) are challenged by emerging principles, more adapted to the renewed approaches of humanitarianism. The principle of efficiency in aid, even when it means the sacrifice of the principle of neutrality, is now rather consensual. The same happens with the principle of independence, which is seen as an auxiliary principle and not anymore a core one, especially when it comes to receiving funds from states. Transparency is now a new principle, together with the principle of accountability, which are seen as a must in the humanitarian field. Accountability, which is in between ethics and legal requirements, is a key for action and for contacts with and between all the stakeholders of humanitarian action, from donors to the recipients of aid. Last but not the least, minimal intervention

is also a new principle, underlining the importance of a glocal ethical vision of humanitarianism.

What is striking is that the new ethical principles stated above are not mentioned in the norms or in the recommendations of the United Nations agencies specialized in humanitarian action (or, if they are mentioned, it is discreetly). Despite the fact that most of the major humanitarian NGOs are affirming these new ethical principles in their charters, they are not contained in the International Committee of the Red Cross updated doctrine. The Red Cross movement, in 2015, adopted an important Resolution at the 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (Resolution 2 – “Strengthening compliance with international humanitarian law”), where it refers to the (new?) guiding principle of “non-selectivity”, together with the traditional humanitarian principles (Red Cross and Red Crescent 2015). But this principle was referred as regards the conduct of the consultation process within the movement, and not as a new ethical principle as such.

In sum, humanitarianism is living a contradiction between the old and the new ethics; and instability in its ethics is probably the worst that could happen in an equally unstable world, as it hinders trust. It also shows the intrinsic contradictions of humanitarianism. Isn't the World Humanitarian Summit, held in May 2016, the perfect illustration of this contradiction? Less than two months after the summit, where an “Agenda for Humanity” was discussed, a military coup took place at the place of the summit, Istanbul. This event was followed by more than 10,000 detentions and by abuses of all sorts on detainees (Amnesty International 2016).

Together with humanitarianism, humanitarian crises themselves are under growing tensions and may change, in return, humanitarianism. Crises are more widespread, some are forgotten (often depending on media coverage). Armed conflicts may have protracted characters, and may be local and low-intensity, or acute. As we write, events are in course in Ukraine that will certainly impact a reconfiguration of humanitarian action in the future. The contrast with the past is enormous, despite the idea that an international

conflict as the one in Ukraine may have a bitter taste of *déjà vu*. After World War II, the actors of humanitarian action, including the United Nations agencies (such as the WHO, the UNICEF, the UNHCR, to mention only a few), and the major NGOs acting in the humanitarian field, had put the emphasis on humanitarian aid to respond to the consequences of humanitarian crises (hunger, lack of healthcare, forced displacements). After the 1960s, new bodies (such as the UNDP) have emerged and developed an approach based on the consequences and also the causes of humanitarian crises. Yet, such a holistic approach has not reached its full maturity, for several reasons: the multiplication of civil conflicts, destroying the capacity of the communities to build on solid social and political foundations; the somehow inadequacy of aid, in some cases counterproductive (e.g., in Bangladesh, in the 1970s, hand-pumped wells were financed by the UNICEF, but water was not tested for arsenic, which caused major health problems). At a global level, the pandemic of SARS-CoV-2 also demonstrated that current methodologies are unable to prevent the spread of epidemics. Global collaboration, such as the International Health Regulations, is far from being glocal, as it is not known by local or national actors. Last, humanitarian action remains distant from development needs. Following the World Humanitarian Summit, the many potential or actual bridges between humanitarian action and cooperation for development are still to be consolidated.

What is more problematic is the lack of perspective of humanitarian action, today. We knew, empirically, that refugee law was outdated, and its many *ad hoc* adaptations (e.g. temporary protection regimes) look like some cosmetic treatment: everyone would understand that an international norm of 1951, completed in 1967, is no longer adapted to our time. Still, what is it possible to do, without the agreement of states? The same question can be put, as concerns the rules of international humanitarian law. Oddly, humanitarian law has always put the focus and all its attention on the paradigmatic case of the international armed conflicts. But now, what we witness, in Ukraine, is a pure classical form of international

armed conflict, with the almost complete, and for sure repeated violations of basic humanitarian rules. So, recent events are questioning humanitarian law and humanitarian action in their foundations. What is therefore the role of humanitarian action, if nothing can be done? Is it really efficient and effective, in preventing or dissuading violations of its core rules, such as the principle of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, or the protection to be guaranteed to the latter?

Humanitarian action is now quite distant from what it was in the past, especially before World War II. In a sense, the end of the antagonism between the blocks, East and West, and the post-Berlin Wall era, in the 1990s, created a favourable floor for humanitarian activities. For decades, after World War II, for ideological reasons, humanitarian action was targeted as being a “real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means”, to use the famous words of Clausewitz about war (Von Clausewitz 1976). At the beginning of the 20th century, when the modern forms of humanitarian action started to develop, there were already debates over humanitarianism. But the main debate concentrated on whether it was legitimate, as the International Committee of the Red Cross did, to intervene in the battlefields with the assent of the belligerents, and this way accepting, even if indirectly, the legitimacy of war (Von Suttner 1914). With the end of the ideological clashes, and with the universal recognition of the role of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, humanitarian action began a new moment, and a promising one. However, humanitarian action has been, in a sense, the victim of its own success. This new period of opportunities was lost, and it was followed by a time of unrest for humanitarianism. Now, nothing seems solid anymore, and the dangerous fluidity of the international context puts almost unbearable pressures on the shoulders of humanitarian actors. Albeit more developed than ever, humanitarian action is now more instable than ever. It is also, still, or again, subject to criticism. Not due to its ideological or political limits, but rather because of its lack of solutions for the new problems of our time.

The articles gathered for this issue of “Glocalism” reflect on the changes and on the debates mentioned above. In *Towards an Ecumenial or a Catastrophic City? A Design, Ecumene and Humanitarian discussion*, Paulo C. Seixas and Nadine Lobner adopt a theoretical perspective and propose “Ecumene studies” as a field “aiming at the reconciliation of human differences in/for a cosmopolitan perspective”. They elaborate on the concept of “the ecumenial city” as the locus of “‘the right to have rights’: a city of human rights in a cosmopolitan world”. Uma Segal and Felia Davenport analyse *Humanitarian Reactions to Conflict and the Resettlement of Refugees* departing from the statement that “refugee movements are [...] the embodiment of ‘glocalization’”. They draw a general perspective on the refugee experience and affirm that “resettlement is only a beginning, and acceptance and integration in the host country is a lifelong process”, for which they provide a model.

Isabel C. Leite addresses restrictive measures in the context of the European Union (EU) foreign policy. The author analyses EU sanctions with reference to their use for humanitarian purposes and human rights’ protection, but also highlights possible humanitarian hindrances resulting from sanction regimes. Ana G. González debates Israeli humanitarian aid in Latin American, in a comparative study between its missions in Mexico, in 2017, and in Brazil, in 2019. The author concludes that Israel is a global leader in humanitarian missions, and further discusses the development of protocols for field action. Lukasz Urbaniak and João Casqueira Cardoso explore the links between humanitarian action and aid to development, focusing on the model *Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development*. They evidence the contradictions between both perspectives, but also propose ways beyond that contradiction, namely under the principle of humanitarian subsidiarity. Nora Pelamo and Cláudia Ramos debate the role of multilateral development banks (MDB), with reference to the connections between the humanitarian and the development dimensions, and assess MDB’s efforts to tackle poverty and to abide by sustainability concerns.

In the section “Other essays”, Ana M. Eyng, Jéssica A.P. Da Silva and Eduardo F.H. Pacheco debate democratic participation in educational contexts as an emancipatory tool and a counter-hegemonic practice. Mona Gupta and Akshay Tyagi address the communication strategies of some Indian corporate websites, in order to assess how this tool was a booster of gender equality promotion, under Covid-19 restrictions. Vathsala Wickramasinghe and Madura Eleperuma present findings of a study that investigated causes for migration, the expectations of migration and post-migration experience of IT professionals from Sri Lanka. In the final article, Subhayu Bhattacharjee discusses the work of Swami Vivekananda.

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