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Livelihoods

In the humanitarian world, livelihoods are activities that allow people to secure the basic necessities of life, such as food, water, shelter and clothing (UNHCR 2014: 1). The term has historically drawn special attention as it is widely employed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies dealing with development and relief in rural and urban environments. The frequently protracted nature of crises produced by human-made conflict or natural disasters has ended up placing greater emphasis on refugee capacity to develop coping mechanisms and self-reliance, which have now gained great momentum in international debates. In fact, during the 1960s and 1970s the strategy of targeting refugees around the world by humanitarian livelihoods-programming changed from the care and maintenance of refugees to a self-reliance formula. In the same vein, the language of “resilient” (Reid 2012) or “sustainable” livelihoods (Chambers and Conway 1992) has placed further responsibility to survive and thrive on the beneficiaries themselves, based on

the capacity of crisis-affected people to circumvent exclusion with urban- or rural-based methods.

NGOs have primarily used livelihoods to refer to biological life and the way in which individuals or social groups develop means to sustain life in contexts of displacement through access to both employment and services. Nonetheless, NGOs' approaches have nuanced this understanding of livelihoods, which has become a self-standing professional sector, although cutting across humanitarian protection, shelter, labor, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (these three latter often referred to as WASH). The increased importance of livelihoods in the humanitarian sector has paved the way to a common, transnational—but mostly technical—understanding of the term. Against this backdrop, the challenge of translating the word from English into other languages is noteworthy, with several languages borrowing it from English *tout court*. Some languages, Arabic being an example, resort to paraphrases, such as “ways to improve life.” Tentative translations of the term livelihoods play a major role in unfolding the standardized and dehistoricized way in which livelihood strategies have often been exported through humanitarian programming, which is aimed at guaranteeing survival on the basis of local specificities.

Employed in contexts of crisis, where the source of instability, poor infrastructure, hazards, risks, and violence is both political and economic, the term has gradually been redefined in the light of political vulnerabilities and governance deficiencies (Jaspars and Shoham 2002). Since the early 2000s, the culture-specific concept of livelihoods and the process of livelihood-hunting have increasingly concerned practitioners and researchers. For instance, while the term has largely been employed as an individual strategy of developing tactics of survival in crisis-affected contexts, livelihoods can now also entail a collective aspiration (Kaiser 2009) to economic sustainability and self-sufficiency in cultures where family, religious belonging, or household-oriented ways of coping write the real grammar of everyday life.

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Media

Media plays a central role in shaping the humanitarian field, from mediating and drawing attention to humanitarian crises, to serving as a platform for alerts about unfolding crises, to reporting on the hidden and underlying causes of crises. Media is here broadly understood as both the medium, whether press, radio, or television, as well as online news media and the media actors—the editorial teams and journalists of respective media outlets—who make decisions about events to cover and how to cover them. Social media outlets are increasingly also studied in the framework of media studies, where news is both produced (by social media users) and relayed from other news sources. Different types of media exercise significant power in framing perceptions about the key issues at stake in an emergency setting.

The war in Biafra between 1967 and 1970 led to the emergence of a new visual culture in modern humanitarianism, and the establishment of Médecins Sans Frontières was essentially motivated by the need to “bear witness” (*témoigner*). This mobilized media coverage of the war and the ensuing suffering. Following this, photographic images came to be seen as central to mobilizing Western political attention towards ongoing crises and to ensuring humanitarian access.

Scholarly literature has extensively focused on the role of the media in prioritizing certain humanitarian crises. This literature has debated whether there is a “CNN effect,” or other types of effects, that media coverage of a given situation would have on the political responses and “calls for intervention” (Robinson 2002). In order to assess which political contexts in Western capitals are more or less likely to give the media a decisive role in shaping responses, the focus has been primarily Westerncentric, mainly looking at North American and European media channels and how they portray crises occurring elsewhere.