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Needs

One of the key specificities of organizations active in the humanitarian space is the emphasis they place on the role that needs play in shaping their decisions. The needs-based approach can be seen as a way of operationalizing humanitarian principles—especially impartiality—as it aims to give priority to humanitarian concerns over any other type of political consideration. Funding is said to be provided on a needs-only basis, while the quality of the needs-assessment strategy followed by humanitarian practitioners is often taken as a key standard of professionalism. Although humanitarian practice has always involved documenting and analyzing the needs of crisis-affected people, the emphasis has been more on the defense of human rights than on the alleviation of humanitarian needs in the language used (Cabanes 2014). Needs-based rhetoric entered humanitarian language in the 1980s, building on the development field of the 1970s in which the use of the term “needs” meant to signal the rejection of a development agenda was based on the promotion of growth (Singh 1979).

The historical emergence of the term has strongly influenced its contemporary multifaceted use in the humanitarian field. A first use refers to basic human needs that must be met during and after a crisis. From the early ages of humanitarianism, when aid mostly consisted of protection and intervention for health-related needs, the notion of needs has seen a considerable expansion, and it now covers elements that were traditionally regarded as belonging to the development realm, such as education or infrastructure building. This mission creep has been criticized for diluting the humanitarian agenda and increasing the risk of aid manipulation. By covering an expanding range of needs, humanitarian actors provide the same services that governmental authorities would provide under normal circumstances, hence relieving the pressure on these authorities to provide public goods (Narang and Stanton 2017).

Moreover, the narrative of a humanitarian agenda driven by universal needs is often used to hide the very political nature of the humanitarian endeavor. Research on humanitarian funding shows that, despite rhetorical commitments, humanitarian donors prioritize needs according to a political agenda (Fink and Redaelli 2011). An illustrative example of this lies in the recent development of humanitarian strategies in which donors target specific geographical areas (e.g. former colonies for Belgium, France, or the United Kingdom) or specific vulnerable groups (as the Netherlands does for children in crisis settings). Besides, humanitarian organizations often create needs to ensure their organizational survival.

A second use of the term refers to the state of deprivation of a crisis-affected population. This deficit conception has also attracted criticism. First, in the absence of commonly agreed standards on humanitarian needs, humanitarian organizations often assume that they have the authority to decide on the norm and minimum requirements in terms of access to basic needs and services. Under this assumption, humanitarianism can be conceived as a paternalist endeavor combining expression of care with a form of domination (Barnett 2016). To signal their opposition to this agenda, some organizations prefer to speak of a humanitarian duty to uphold the rights of crisis-affected populations, even if this right-based approach has been questioned for paving the way for military interventionism in crisis contexts. Secondly, the language of needs is closely linked to a commodification of humanitarian action, where the emphasis is put on needs that are easy to quantify. Core concepts of humanitarian practice such as “protection,” “security,” and “dignity” are too subjective and multifaceted to be quantified (Darcy and Hofmann 2003). Thirdly, focusing on a needs-only approach contributes to the continuation of current pathologies of aid. Although practices considerably differ, needs assessment exercises are often formal processes—mostly carried out by international organizations at inter-agency level (the so-called clusters)—which rely on a series of quantifiable and often partial indicators. Contextualizing these exercises is often challenging, as vulnerability is relative, depending on the capacity of a population to adapt to a crisis. Getting to the contextual level implies being able to devote time and resources in needs assessments that organizations often lack in crisis contexts.

Humanitarian organizations do not always involve local communities and institutions properly. As a consequence, they reinforce the aid dependency cycle. The needs-based approach is of a reactive nature, whereas concepts such as vulnerability and risk allow humanitarian needs to be put in a broader political and historical perspective, emphasizing the role of root causes and the importance of local knowledge and crisis prevention.

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Neutrality

Together with humanity, impartiality, and independence, neutrality is a prime humanitarian principle that lies at the center of humanitarian orthodoxy. It is so bound up with traditional definitions of what distinguishes humanitarianism that neutrality is seen as a metric that can be used to determine the humanitarian status of a person, project, action, or organization. Yet this belies the slippery nature of neutrality because it exists primarily as a claim that rests on the recognition of others for its achievement. This constitutes a major, and possibly permanent, instability for humanitarian actors and organizations. It means that whatever form, relation, or action humanitarianism takes will be shaped and limited by the need to manage the perceptions of others in order to fulfill the relevant requirements for recognition. To inquire into neutrality is to open up the contested and contingent basis of humanitarian-ness itself, and its relationship to politics.

The role played by neutrality in common definitions of humanitarianism indexes the outsized influence played by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the field of modern humanitarian action (Barnett 2011; Redfield 2010). The ICRC emerged in the latter half of the 19th century as a moral response to war-related suffering. It proclaimed a neutral or apolitical position—the refusal to “take side in hostilities or engage at any time in