A global history of modern humanitarian action:
The history of humanitarianism in Africa

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

The symposium on the history of humanitarianism in Africa is part of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)’s research project A global history of modern humanitarian action. The objective of the project is to identify and understand the principal changes in policy, practice and institutional architecture that the humanitarian sector has undergone since the beginning of the Twentieth Century, with the aim of helping the sector better understand its history, and making greater use of historical analysis and lessons in current discussions aimed at improving humanitarian action. A crucial part of this is to encourage appreciation of the diverse histories and perspectives of humanitarian action across different regions of the globe.

The symposium aims to bring together different perspectives on the evolution of and influences on the concept and practice of humanitarianism on the African continent. The symposium, to be held in March 2015 in Africa (location to be determined), will bring together academics, experts and practitioners in a discussion on how humanitarian action has been experienced and understood in various parts of Africa during the past century. The symposium will aim to focus on what have been neglected African perspectives to allow for a greater understanding of how cultures of care and responsibility have been conceived and practiced in Africa.

This call for abstracts invites authors, preferably those based in Africa, to submit abstracts of no more than 300 words by 15 August 2014 to hpgresearch@odi.org.uk. Authors of abstracts selected to proceed to full papers will be notified in September 2014.

Abstracts should be submitted in English, French or Portuguese and should include an overview of the proposed topic and argument/angle presented, and basic author biography of no more than 100 words, including the author’s current affiliation/post.

Authors of selected papers will be asked to submit paper drafts (of no longer than 8,000 words) by 15 February, 2015, and then present those drafts for discussion at the symposium in March 2015. Travel costs will be reimbursed for those authors presenting their papers. In the months following the symposium, HPG will work with authors to finalise papers for possible ODI/HPG publication as part of its A global history of modern humanitarian action project.

Abstracts and papers should investigate the history of humanitarianism in Africa from a variety of perspectives, including developmental, religious, human rights and social/political movements. This could be accomplished thematically or through a case study analysis of key events. Emphasis should be given to literature and events prior to 1990, and an historical perspective is essential.

Possible thematic issues include, but are not limited to:

- Aetiology of the term ‘humanitarianism’ in Africa, including its historical evolution and interpretations of the term and its use in an indigenous language.
- Human rights perspectives and influences on humanitarianism, for instance the historical importance of human rights discourse, links to various religions and indigenous peoples.
• **Legacies of the colonial system and changes in humanitarian action in the context of wars of de-colonisation**, for instance the impact of anti-slavery movements on humanitarian practice, the influence of European medics and faith-based organisations on African relief efforts, the impact of urbanisation after the Second World War.

• **Wars of liberation, social, religious and political movements and their diverse interpretations and applications of humanitarianism**, for instance humanitarian action in non-war contexts and how these approaches differ, left-wing social movements in the 1970s and 1980s, social movements and urban violence.

• **Different typologies of humanitarianism in pre- vs. post- Cold War Africa**, including the evolution of disaster response, for instance among different African regions; but also across different types of disasters, including both sudden onset and chronic disasters.

• **Responses to conflict and displacement**, for instance different experiences in long-lasting conflicts in areas such as the Great Lakes region, the interplay between disaster and conflict.

• **History of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement**, for instance historical links and parallels with the Red Cross organisations of former colonial powers, the evolution of local societies.

• **Indigenous humanitarianism**, including the role of diaspora groups, tribal identities, regional/transnational and local networks, for instance characteristics of the culture of care in the pastoralist and clan-based societies; key influences, differences, similarities to other ethnic groups in the same region, the emergence of African NGOs;

• **National relief efforts to famine**, including the evolution of early warning systems

• **Indigenous responses to disease**, and the role of ‘popular’ medicine and healing practices in different cultural contexts.

• **The 'limits of humanitarianism'**, where humanitarianism has clashed with development or political agendas, and the historical tensions in some countries between provision of humanitarian assistance and state building processes.

**Some key events that might serve as case studies, include:**

• Refugees in West Africa, during the 1970s
• Rwandan Genocide
• Biafra war
• Ethiopia from 1970 onwards, with an emphasis beyond famine
• Refugees in Great Lakes – also as broad set of issues
• Wars of liberation, various
• Belgian Rubber Scandal / Congo Free State, pre-WWI
• The pan-African movement
• Post-colonial period and particularly from 1945-1970

**About the Humanitarian Policy Group**

The [Humanitarian Policy Group](https://www.odi.org.uk) of the Overseas Development Institute based in London, is one of the world’s leading teams of independent researchers and information professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high quality analysis, dialogue and debate.