



A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action

Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute Integrated Programme Research Project 2011-2015

Project outline and rationale

History is absent from most discussions and debates on humanitarian policy and practice. Experiences of the past are frequently ignored despite the fact that many of the challenges faced by humanitarian organisations today are not novel. Even when the history of humanitarian action is invoked, there is a tendency to omit or deny its complexity, focusing on familiar actors or recent events.

Yet it is widely recognised that the Western-centric nature and outlook of the humanitarian system – its orientation towards familiar interlocutors, its difficulties in engaging across cultural or political divides, its aversion to risk-taking – constitute an obstacle to effective humanitarian action. Calls for reform have drawn attention to the system's association with Western power, but there is little understanding of the diverse humanitarian histories, cultures and perspectives across the globe.

For these reasons, in the 2011–13 Integrated Programme HPG began a research project entitled *A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action*, which continues in the 2013–15 Integrated Programme. The project examines the historical and cultural forces affecting humanitarian action since the mid-nineteenth century. It considers developments in practice, policy and institutional architecture and the contribution of culture, religion, politics and changes in ways of thinking. It is based on the belief that an improved historical consciousness relating to humanitarian action will help to generate a more informed critical perspective on operations, dialogue and reform.

The main goal of the project is therefore to promote the reference to history, understood as closely related to culture, in the service of humanitarian action. The project has three objectives designed to contribute to this goal:

1. To advocate for a more inclusive humanitarian history that includes diverse perspectives on the nature, meaning and practice of humanitarian action and how this has evolved over time.
2. To offer historical analysis to inform current discussions and debates on improving humanitarian policy and practice.
3. To help the sector more fully engage with the history of humanitarian action, including past contributions and experiences outside the Western narrative.

Humanitarian history: state of the art

Despite the neglect of historical experience in many approaches to policy and practice today, some humanitarian actors have encouraged historical research or indicated their belief in its importance. Much of this work is institutionally-driven history. These include numerous official and unofficial 'biographies' of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).¹ The United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) has also contributed to reflection on past successes and failures in areas related to humanitarian action and several international agencies have produced or supported research into their own histories.² The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has sponsored a number of studies of its own history and allowed external researchers partial access to its archives, and there is a significant body of work on other members of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement.³

A number of historical studies examining fields of practice have also emerged from the concerns of the humanitarian sector, although the operational history of humanitarian action – histories, for instance, of emergency shelter, nutrition, water and sanitation, protection work or livelihoods in crisis – largely remains to be written. Food aid has been the subject of strong historical work, although the emphasis has been on post-war experiences.⁴ The histories of public health, emergency medicine and nutrition also offer valuable insights into humanitarian action in the past.⁵ Legal frameworks for natural disaster and conflict response, including international humanitarian law (IHL) and refugee law, have been the subject of notable studies.⁶

The history of humanitarian action and its diverse forms has in recent years received growing attention from academic scholars, complementing accounts produced by the sector itself. In a remarkable contrast with the state of scholarship only 20 years ago, there is now a strong body of historical research dealing with various aspects of the history of humanitarian action. This includes key moments and actors in conflict response, natural disasters, displacement, colonial practice and military intervention.⁷ Recent collective volumes attest to the breadth of current scholarship in this field.⁸ Nonetheless, comprehensive histories remain small in number and the work of situating humanitarianism amongst other international movements has substantially yet to be undertaken.⁹

These streams of historical work have often been parallel rather than intersecting or collaborative: conforming to their own distinctive priorities and agendas and speaking to different audiences, academic historians have rarely shared the concerns and interests of humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers, nor have the latter sought insights from the former. One major contribution of HPG's *Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action* is therefore to foster dialogue across these communities of expertise. As the academic discipline of humanitarian history matures, for the first time able to constitute a significant resource to those seeking to understand past practice, the humanitarian sector is also reaching out for perspectives that can assist it in shaping its architecture and approach.

The uses of history in humanitarian action

There is significant anecdotal support for the notion of using historical analysis to contribute to more effective and innovative humanitarian action. Few humanitarians would deny the importance of understanding at least some aspects of past experience – though there are perhaps even fewer who have time to do the study required to become familiar with it. However, HPG's project *A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action* is based on the conviction that investing time and resources in historical analysis will in the long term contribute to improving the experience of affected communities. Engagement with history may take a number of forms and serve a variety of purposes.

History can and should be a part of context analysis. This involves being aware of the history of a given place or the people who live there and the history of relief and/or protection operations in that place. Such a need was highlighted by a recent study, which emphasised that perceptions were influenced by what it termed environmental factors such as colonial history, previous military or humanitarian interventions, and the presence of foreign actors (Abu-Sada, 2012: 4). The use of historical analysis in this way is perhaps best represented in the inclusion of historical material in needs assessments and operational planning and in training for aid workers, though in many cases this does not occur.

A similar use of history, although less directly linked to a specific context, is the consultation of experiences as a way of aiding reflection on contemporary challenges. This was summed up by a researcher who had spent 20 years working in the Horn of Africa before turning to historical research: 'To my surprise, which in retrospect was absolutely unwarranted – one underestimates how little human nature changes – I discovered that many issues of humanitarian aid in the Italo-Ethiopian war [of 1935] were similar to those I had encountered fifty years later' (Baudendistel, 2006: xvi). Although not necessarily bound to a single organisation, such work is part of the practice of institutional memory; it may be considered as a more abstract form of a 'lessons learned' analysis or after-action review, though at a greater remove and on a more systemic level.

The reflection that comes with historical analysis can help in understanding factors and processes of change as well as continuities across time. It can help to place a given situation of needs in perspective and sharpen analysis of cause and response factors. In the words of one displacement expert, for instance, 'we need to know how today's movements are related to those of the past: how institutional actors responded to people displaced in earlier migration crises, how discourses of the refugee have emerged and how they have shaped policies for refuge and asylum' (Marfleet, 2007: 137). Using history in this way could potentially make a significant contribution at the level of policy formation.

The reference to past experience can also challenge (or indeed reinforce) myths about humanitarian action. It can provide a resource for those seeking to understand the nature of the system and provide depth to contemporary analyses. 'Although there is a growing line of commentaries of humanitarianism that are sensitive to its paradoxes and dilemmas,' one author notes, 'because they limit themselves to contemporary events they fail to appreciate fully how these tensions have been present from the beginning' (Barnett, 2011: 8). It is precisely because such self-reflexive, critical debates are regularly undertaken within the humanitarian sector that historical analysis has the opportunity to make a contribution. By providing an additional perspective on key issues such as the role of humanitarian principles, or the place of sovereignty and non-state actors, history provides a tool for reflection. As another study puts it, 'understanding the history of humanitarian action helps understand why it is the way it is today, and helps identify how it can, and maybe should, change in the future' (Walker and Maxwell, 2008: 13).

Finally, and as an extension of this, a fuller engagement with history can help the humanitarian system more accurately perceive its origins and identity as a global framework. A recent study of humanitarianism in Asia underlined that 'in spite of conventional perspectives of humanitarianism as constituting a "universal" value that transcends both time and context, there are, in fact, diverse interpretations of this complex concept, with its meanings being far from uncontested and uncontroversial' (Hirono and O'Hagan, 2012: 1). In developing a fuller understanding of its own past, and in recognising it as part of a worldwide story of concern for the suffering of others, the formal humanitarian system will be better placed to assess its position in the future. History can help build a stronger platform for dialogue and a clearer programme for the fundamental changes that many see as necessary to correct a system that remains top-down, with limited flexibility and impartiality and which 'marginalizes non-western forms of humanitarianism' (Donini et al., 2008: 27).

Global history as a methodology

The methodological approach known as 'global history' offers some theoretical underpinnings for this project. Global history returned to prominence in the late stages of the twentieth century as an attempt to put the forces, processes and effects of globalisation into a deeper historical perspective. Here, globalisation refers to the increased interconnectedness of different parts of the world due to changes in technologies of transport and communications, systems of finance and trade, internationalist political or social ideologies and phenomena such as the spread of disease or the incidence of natural hazards. Because of its ambition to account for the existence of these global networks – which have deep historical antecedents, but whose intensity and significance have increased drastically in modern times – one important piece argued, 'narrating world history in our global age means taking seriously (rather than fleeing from) the present' (Geyer and Bright, 1995: 1,052). The practice and ideology of humanitarianism can be seen as part of these phenomena, many of which began to emerge (like modern humanitarian action) in the mid-nineteenth century.

In seeking to understand such large-scale global phenomena in their diverse cultural expressions, scholars in the field of global history have developed two main approaches (O'Brien, 2006: 4–5). The first, referred to as 'connection', examines long-range encounters or contacts that cross political, spatial or cultural boundaries. Typical fields for this kind of study include trade, migration, religion, warfare and communication. The second approach is based on 'comparison', which extends the scope of a given area of study – which may in its origins be highly localised – by comparing it with other relevant examples in different countries, regions

or cultures. Such comparisons help to illuminate each individual case, avoiding exceptionalism or various 'centrisms', and highlighting differences as well as similarities across the globe. Both of these methodologies are pertinent to the study of humanitarian action.

Scholars of global history have also addressed the importance of these approaches given that, to quote a veteran of humanitarian action, 'the current trend is towards greater assertiveness by the Western powers and less consensus about their legitimacy' (Vaux, 2006: 241). This trend, which has dominated analyses of the humanitarian system since 2001, has a crucial bearing upon the methodologies of global history. Its practitioners acknowledge that 'the [twentieth] century ends with the world being drawn together as never before but with peoples asserting difference and rejecting sameness on an unprecedented global scale' (Geyer and Bright, 1995: 1,044).

Despite the interconnectedness of global systems, the push towards integration has not been universally or even widely accepted. Instead, reactions to the processes of globalisation have often stressed difference and particularity. The fragmentation and conflict associated with this process, according to global historians, is fundamental to the way that its history should be constructed: 'once we acknowledge [...] that the processes of global integration have not homogenized the whole world but produced continuing and ever-renewing contestations over the terms of global integration itself, then the histories of all regions (and their changing spatial, political, and cultural composition) become immediately relevant to world history – and not simply for reasons of equity or to establish the "essential" qualities of their civilizations but as actors and participants in the very processes being narrated' (ibid.: 1,044–45).

This point is of fundamental importance to the history of humanitarian action as conceived in HPG's work. It is crucial to recognise that, while the humanitarian system has its foundations in the West and remains dominated by Western models and actors, the history of humanitarian action cannot be written as a division between 'the West' and 'the rest', setting Western universalism against Southern essentialism. Work to develop *A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action* must be conceived as narrating a process of exchange between communities, rather than one of competition between differing claims to authenticity. Attempts to understand contributions and attitudes beyond those of Western Europe, North America and other developed countries should avoid the language of intellectual export and import and the hardening of oppositions between the domestic and the international.

Such an approach also aids in bringing individual voices into the wide-frame narrative. Global history connects individual or local experiences to the national, international and global forces that shaped them. For humanitarian history, as for humanitarian work in general, this means being able to set the lives and choices of individuals within the big picture of forces beyond their control. By drawing connections and comparisons across time and space, and in studying cultures of aid, solidarity and charity, not for their 'essential' value, but because they are part of global processes, HPG's project on the history of humanitarian action hopes to offer a new resource to those committed to improving the experience of people affected by conflict and natural disaster.

Research, outreach and dissemination activities

HPG's project *A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action* combines research, interviews, outreach and dissemination on a number of different tracks. It seeks to engage with a range of audiences with a stake in the history of humanitarian action. Running over four years, it will provide a resource for these audiences and a platform for dialogue, with publications, audio-visual material and public and private events.

The study will be guided by the following questions:

- How has humanitarian action evolved and changed since the mid-nineteenth century? How has this development differed in different geographical regions? What trends and issues can be identified?
- Is there a common understanding of the meaning, origins and action of humanitarianism across different geographical regions? How do these relate to each other, if at all?

- How can an analysis of historical trends and issues inform current debates and discussions on humanitarian policy and practice?

The work exploring these questions largely falls into three categories: Western histories, regional histories and cross-cutting studies. Research in the project's early phases, including a scoping paper and literature reviews, established a preliminary historical narrative to be used as a starting point for engagement with various alternative perspectives.

The regional studies are undertaken through collaborations with researchers and partners in the regions involved. For each study, advising groups have been and will be established to provide guidance. Academics and experts who have engaged in humanitarian research are invited to prepare papers with a focus on geographical and thematic aspects of the regional history of humanitarian action. These are presented and disseminated at conferences, with the papers to be published as a collection and additional unifying work done by HPG researchers. The subjects of these papers will be selected by the project research team on the basis of their research and the findings of literature reviews, commissioned by HPG, which will draw attention to published research on humanitarian action in the regions and the key events or actors that emerge from this literature.

Integrated Programme 2011–13

Work in the 2011–13 cycle explored the diverse influences upon the evolution of the international system, as well as the historical experiences of humanitarian action in two significant geographical areas. Outputs include a Working Paper on the changing meanings of the term 'humanitarian', another on the French experience of humanitarian action, and an analysis of the history of the formal international humanitarian system, as well as reviews of the Nordic literature on humanitarian action and a detailed study of colonial relief. A Policy Brief argued for the importance of an awareness of the past when seeking dialogue with today's actors.

Two regional studies were undertaken in the 2011–13 IP cycle: one on East and Southeast Asia and the other on the Middle East and North Africa. Partnerships with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore and the Arab Thought Forum (ATF) in Amman were established for these studies. All outputs to date are available online at www.odi.org.uk/hpg.

Integrated Programme 2013–15

The 2013–15 cycle will include additional regional studies, exploring experiences and perspectives in the history of humanitarian action in Africa and Latin America. The decision about which areas to study will be made in consultation with the project's Steering Group, recognising the need to select topics that make sense for the target audiences and areas of perceived relevance, while also drawing upon available historiographies and reflecting changing dynamics over time.

The cycle will also include other publications or events that focus on key themes or issues emerging from the project's findings, or provide a historical analysis of issues of concern to current practice. These pieces will offer cross-cutting analysis, seeking to make global connections and comparisons, and may be events or publications as appropriate to the subject matter and aims. Wherever possible, they will be undertaken as partnerships in order to build support for and experience of the use of history in policy-making and practice

Integrated Programme 2011–13

Publications

New Players Through Old Lenses: Why History Matters in Engaging with Southern Actors. HPG Policy Brief, July 2012.

Continuity, Change and Contest: Meanings of 'Humanitarian' from the 'Religion of Humanity' to the Kosovo War. HPG Working Paper, August 2012.

Beyond the 'French Doctors': The Evolution and Interpretation of Humanitarian Action in France. HPG Working Paper, October 2012.

A History of the Humanitarian System: Western Origins and Foundations. HPG Working Paper, May 2013.

Conferences

The history of humanitarian action in East/Southeast Asia. Singapore, 29-30 January 2013

The history of humanitarian action in the Middle East/North Africa. Amman, 15-16 April 2013

discussions. The project will seek to provide a resource or complement to other areas of HPG's Integrated Programme, offering a historical perspective on key research areas. Work will draw on a wide range of sources, including archival material, published literature on the history of humanitarianism and oral interviews with a range of practitioners, policy-makers, students and researchers.

In a longer time-frame, the project aims to culminate in the preparation of one or more books unifying the reflection of the four years of research. Materials may also be incorporated into a planned website for the history of humanitarian action, to be jointly managed by HPG and the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) of the University of Manchester, should it receive sufficient funding to proceed.

People and networks

A project steering group has been created to provide guidance to the project and facilitate access to sources of information, such as humanitarian agency and government archives. The members of the steering group have been chosen so as to ensure the project targets key stakeholders and is linked with existing efforts to better understand the history of humanitarian action, noting the global ambition of the project.

In addition, smaller advisory groups have been established to guide the selection of research areas or papers for the regional studies, provide feedback on literature reviews and commissioned papers and help identify key partners or individuals. As in the case of the main steering group, they bring together historians and those involved in current response.

The regional studies and the project in general are enriched by partnerships and collaborations, both those already established through other elements of HPG outreach and new partnerships created during the course of the project. The steering group involves a number of academic institutions, including HCRI, the Centre for Education and Research on Humanitarian Action (CERAH) in Geneva, and the Humanitarian Futures Programme (HFP) at King's College London.

The regional studies also involve extensive partnerships and collaboration, helping HPG to develop its networks beyond European and North American research centres.

Current steering group members

Michael Barnett, *George Washington University*

Vincent Bernard, *ICRC*

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Notes

Note: many of these references reflect the dominant narrative of Western humanitarianism rather than the more diverse histories of humanitarian action across the globe, yet to make their mark upon historiography. The examples given are intentionally restricted to monographs.

¹ See, for example, Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam, the First 50 Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Axelle Brodiez, *Le Secours Populaire Français, 1945-2000: du communisme à l'humanitaire* (Paris: Presse de la Fondation Nationale des sciences politiques, 2006); Wallace Campbell, *The History of CARE: A Personal Account* (New York: Praeger, 1990); Kathleen Freeman, *If Any Man Build: The History of the Save the Children Fund* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965); Anne Vallaëys, *Médecins sans Frontières: la biographie* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

² See, for example, Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and Thomas G. Weiss, *The Power of UN Ideas: Lessons from the First 60 Years* (New York; Washington: UNIHP, 2005); UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees, 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Geneva; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); UNICEF, *1946-2006: Sixty Years for Children* (New York: UNICEF, 2006).

³ See, for example, Pierre Boissier, *From Solferino to Tsushima: History of the International Committee of the Red Cross* (Geneva: Henry Dunant Institute, 1985); André Durand, *From Sarajevo to Hiroshima: History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*

(Geneva: Henry Dunant Institute, 1984); Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (London: HarperCollins, 1998).

⁴ See, for example, D. John Shaw, *World Food Security: A History since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); D. John Shaw, *The UN World Food Programme and the Development of Food Aid* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Frank Trentmann and Flemming Just (eds), *Food and Conflict in Europe in the Age of the Two World Wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

⁵ See, for example, Sunil Amrith, *Decolonizing International Health: India and Southeast Asia, 1930-65* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); David Arnold (ed.), *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Paul Weindling, (ed.) *International Health Organisations and Movements, 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶ See, for example, Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare: The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts* (London: Methuen, 1983); Peter Macalister-Smith, *International Humanitarian Assistance: Disaster Relief Actions in International Law and Organization* (Dordrecht; Lancaster: Nijhoff, 1985); Claudena Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁷ See, for example, Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* (London: Allen Lane, 2011); David D. Caron, and Charles Leben (eds), *Les aspects internationaux des catastrophes naturelles et industrielles* (The Hague; London: Martinus Nijhoff, 2001); Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War 1* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Brendan Simms, and D.J.B. Trim, *Humanitarian Intervention: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁸ See, for example, special issues relating to the history of humanitarian action in the following journals: *Ethnologie française* (2011); *French Historical Studies* (2011); *Humanity* (2012); *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (2012); *Past & Present* (2013); *Disasters* (forthcoming 2014).

⁹ See, for example, Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (London; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Philippe Ryfman, *Une histoire de l'humanitaire* (Paris; La Découverte, 2008).

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