



A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action

Frequently asked questions

What are the project's aims?

The main goal of the project is **to promote the use of history in the practice and policy-making of humanitarian action**. It is based on the belief that investing time and resources in historical analysis will in the long term contribute to improving the experience of affected communities. The project has three objectives designed to contribute to the main goal:

1. To advocate 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.

How long does the project run for?

The project will continue for four years, from April 2011 until March 2015.

Why should we look at history now?

History is rarely included in debates on humanitarian policy and practice. Past experiences are frequently ignored, even though many of the challenges of humanitarian action are not new. This means we are missing opportunities to gain perspectives and insights from historical analysis.

Taking this opportunity to learn from the past is particularly important now that the formal humanitarian system is facing a **critical juncture**. In recent years, there has been strong criticism of the system's association with Western powers, but there is little understanding of the huge range of humanitarian histories, cultures and perspectives across the globe. History can help shape future responses, rethink aid architecture and provide a platform for engaging with a wide range of actors.

Why is the project a 'global history' and what is 'modern' about it?

A 'global history' approach means we are looking at humanitarianism as a system of interconnected processes **across the globe**. This approach means making comparisons (looking for similarities and differences) and connections (things that cross traditional boundaries) in time and space. The humanitarian action we look at is 'modern' because research focuses on the **twentieth century**.

Who is the project aimed at and why?

The project has a wide range of audiences, who may be interested in the work for a variety of reasons. These include humanitarian practitioners, policy-makers, donors, academic researchers – notably but not exclusively historians, students, and activists in other fields such as human rights and development. Their engagement with history may take a number of forms. For instance:

- History can and should be a part of context analysis; this could mean including historical material in needs assessments, operational planning and in training for **aid workers**.
- History can assist thinking about current challenges and should be part of **institutional memory**. It could be considered similar to 'lessons learned', but on a far more systemic level.
- Historical analysis can help us to understand factors and processes of change as well as continuities across time. It can sharpen analysis of cause and response factors. Using history in this way could potentially make a significant contribution at the level of **policy** formation.

- History can challenge (or reinforce) myths about humanitarian action. It can provide a resource for those seeking to **understand** the nature of the humanitarian landscape and provide depth to contemporary analyses on issues like the role of humanitarian principles, the contributions of diaspora networks, or the responsibilities of states.
- History can help the humanitarian system more accurately perceive its origins and identity as a global framework. 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, too inflexible, and too associated with Western priorities.

How much history is out there?

On the level of actual events, a lot; on the level of previous research, there's more than most people know about, and **the list is growing**. Some histories have been produced or encouraged by humanitarian actors like the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the United Nations and its agencies. There is also a large amount of research being done, particularly in the last five to ten years, to address the history of humanitarianism from an academic point of view. However, there are many gaps left in the scholarship. This project aims to bring different interested groups into discussion and highlight potential areas for future research.

What topics are you working on?

The work exploring these questions largely falls into three categories: **Western histories, regional histories, and cross-cutting studies**. In 2011–13, we worked on a preliminary historical narrative to be used as a starting point for the engagement with various alternative perspectives. Regional studies are a major part of the project over the four years and 2013–15 will feature more 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.

What geographical areas does the project look at?

The project looks at international issues, but it also includes regional studies for in-depth consideration. Two regional studies were undertaken in 2011–13: one on **East/Southeast Asia** and the other on the **Middle East/North Africa**. In 2013–15 additional regional studies will be added, exploring the regional dimensions of the history of humanitarian action in **Africa** and **Latin America**.

How are decisions made?

A project **steering group** provides guidance to the project; its members were chosen to help the project target key stakeholders and link with others working on humanitarian history. For the regional studies, smaller advisory groups assist in selecting research areas or papers, provide feedback on literature reviews and commissioned papers and help identify key collaborators. Like the main steering group, they bring together historians and those involved in current responses.

How is the project funded?

Work on *A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action* is part of HPG's **Integrated Programme**, an independent research programme made possible by unearmarked funding from multiple donors.

Where can we access the research materials?

All of our publications and event reports are available **online** at www.odi.org.uk/hpg

How can we contribute to the debate?

Events are open to the public in London and streamed live online. If you have **feedback or comments**, want to join the project's mailing list, or would like to draw our attention to your own work on humanitarian history, you can send an email to Eleanor Davey at e.davey@odi.org.uk or share your thoughts on Twitter using the #aidhistory hashtag.

For more detail see the *Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action* research framework online.