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Humanitarian history in a complex world

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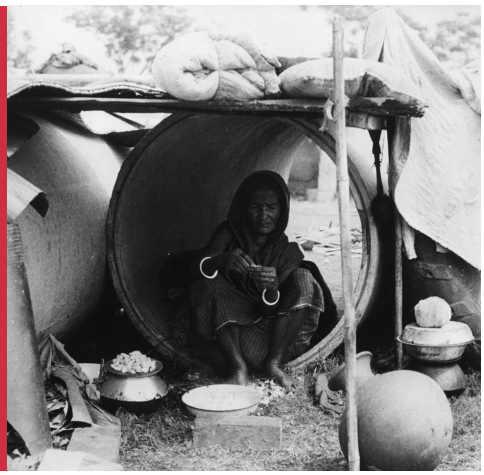

Key messages

- Engagement with history can bring valuable skills, resources and insights to humanitarian practice and policy.
- Historical perspectives can help analysis of the complex situations and processes that shape humanitarian action.
- Learning from the past requires the investment of time and resources, but working in crises does not prevent it.

Despite widespread agreement that knowledge of past experience is essential to present and future decision-making, the question of what this might mean for humanitarian action is rarely considered and thorough engagement with the challenges and potential benefits of a greater historical perspective is yet to come. The complexity and instability that characterise both conflict and natural disasters can mean that information rapidly appears obsolete, despite the fact that it is precisely in such environments that practice must be grounded in long-term analytical perspectives. This HPG Policy Brief explores how an understanding of humanitarian history can strengthen critical analysis by challenging assumptions and helping to think through complexity. It argues for the development of instincts and mind-sets informed by a critical engagement with history, not as the preserve of professional historians, but as a set of skills and resources that can be used in tangible ways to inform practice and policy.

Neglect and potential

A number of factors have contributed to the neglect of history within humanitarian policy and programming.

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Photo: A Bengali refugee woman in India seeking shelter in a concrete drainage pipe, 1971
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They largely derive from an image of humanitarian action as a field in which decision-making is urgent and resources are scarce. The very nature of the work being done, as Hugo Slim has highlighted, is at the heart of this tendency: 'The world of emergencies is fast-moving and tends to focus on the "here and now" of rapidly changing events. Under such circumstances, historical reflection is seldom the first concern of relief workers'.[1] Such lack of a historical perspective is accompanied by inadequate analysis of the contemporary political contexts in which humanitarian agencies work. This arguably reflects the privileging of international technical expertise over local mobilisation and priorities, with exogenous 'solutions' meeting endogenous 'challenges' and 'needs'. This tendency has faced criticism, but has not yet been dealt with. In the meantime, historical material should make up part of political economy and social analysis. This could mean taking account of the history of a given place and the people who live there, as well as the narrower history of relevant relief and protection operations.

The high turnover of humanitarian personnel is another key factor in the neglect of historical knowledge, as well as the weakness of institutional memory in the sector. New personnel are not necessarily provided with background on previous programmes, nor is the rationale for decision-making always explained. Research and report writing can understandably seem less important than work viewed as saving lives. Record-keeping is often partial and sometimes outright negligent, and what records that exist are not necessarily accessible, easily usable or built into retrospective reflection. Improved knowledge management, including consultation of previous experience – whether in archives or, as is often the case, in the experience accumulated by key individuals including national staff – may provide useful data and help to minimise repetition and duplication.

Just as there are reasons for the neglect of history, there is significant anecdotal support for the idea of using historical analysis to shape more effective responses. The role of history as part of context analysis has already been mentioned. Engagement with the past can also challenge the idea that there are no alternatives to particular practices or concepts by drawing out the conditions under which these practices and concepts emerged. This should not be taken to imply that most analyses of humanitarian action are complacent. Many critiques of the sector are, however, based on a short-term view. As Michael Barnett highlights, 'Although there is a growing line of commentaries of humanitarianism that are sensitive to its paradoxes and dilemmas, because they limit themselves to contemporary events they fail to appreciate fully how these tensions have been present from the beginning'.[2] Historical analysis can contribute not only by demonstrating that these tensions (and strategies to mitigate them) are long-standing, but also by bringing original insights to debates conducted in a 'perpetual present'.

Competing narratives

Understanding reasons for the neglect of history in humanitarian action, and identifying potential uses along the lines of those proposed, is an important first step. However, history is not a single story. To understand the potential connections between humanitarian history, policy and practice, we must learn to interpret the competing narratives that make up 'the past': we tell different stories for various reasons, and these stories also change for various reasons. A historical perspective can highlight these competing narratives and why they arise, so that we can learn not only from these narratives, but also from the way they have changed.

With this in mind, the idea of historical neglect on the part of the humanitarian system must be qualified. On the one hand, poor memory is not always an accident. Work by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) on negotiations with armed groups, for example, has identified a 'functional amnesia' discouraging recognition of the dilemmas and compromises inherent in such negotiations.[3] Stepping away from history can marginalise certain issues (in this case, past experiences of working in an 'unprincipled' manner), thereby easing the way for other explanations or agendas, even if this means sacrificing analysis that may be useful. On the other hand, history is present – though not always explicitly so – in humanitarian debates in a number of ways, but often simplified, used for the purpose of fostering identity rather than analysis or focused on the recent past.

1 Hugo Slim, 'Editorial', *Disasters*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1994, p. 189.

2 Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 8.

3 Ashley Jackson and Eleanor Davey, *From the Spanish Civil War to Afghanistan: Historical and Contemporary Reflections on Humanitarian Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups* (London: ODI, 2014).

The role of historical narratives in identity-building or for other political purposes is from a certain point of view legitimate, and in any case unavoidable. The brief histories provided on websites and captured in grey literature play this role. Numerous biographies of non-governmental organisations and UN agencies, despite their more comprehensive approach, often contribute to a similar cause. Inevitably, foundational narratives emphasise a particular vision. This text from the World Food Programme (WFP) website is typical: 'Scheduled to go into operation in 1963 as a three-year experimental programme, WFP was up and running before it could walk. An earthquake hit Iran in September 1962, followed by a hurricane in Thailand in October; meanwhile, newly independent Algeria was resettling 5 million refugees: food was urgently needed, WFP supplied it, and it has never stopped since then'.

The narrative of emergency response and logistical 'solutions' reflects and serves WFP's position as a leading humanitarian agency. But it elides a significant part of the organisation's experience and the factors that have shaped its growth. In reality, emergency work in WFP's first three years encountered significant difficulties, and as a result the majority of its work for the next three decades was in development projects.[4] It was only in the 1990s that this model decisively changed. Short-term frameworks can thus distort understandings of evolutionary processes and the situations and patterns that result from them. They might serve the purposes of communications, but not analysis or planning. The historical foreshortening represented by statements such as 'since 9/11' or 'since the end of the Cold War' limits perceptions of the influences on humanitarian action and helps to entrench received truths.

The effect of this can be seen in the widespread view of 'humanitarian space', often conflated with agency space, as under threat due to post-9/11 geopolitical pressures. In contrast, a historical perspective suggests that 'most of the problems that are commonly attributed to "shrinking" humanitarian space are, in fact, the types of problems that inevitably result from humanitarian actors' attempts to involve themselves directly in large-scale assistance or protection efforts in the midst of conflicts'.[5] That is, they are not unprecedented expressions of hostility or manipulation, but instead correspond to changes in scale and ways of working. Associated claims that aid worker insecurity has increased in the last two decades have also come under scrutiny, with researchers emphasising that 'there is an urgent need to avoid a-historicity, presuming that deliberate targeting of relief workers began in the post-Cold War period, and to engage the problem in proactive and analytical rather than catastrophic terms'.[6] Such analysis can challenge received truths and provide a resource for those seeking to understand trends and shape responses.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that interpretations of history are themselves evolving and contested. Accounts of the war of 1967–70, when Biafra sought to break away from Nigeria, demonstrate this point. Interpretations of humanitarian action in Biafra range from an emphasis on the impressive operational capacity of NGOs in the face of mass suffering to accusations that the humanitarian campaign exacerbated suffering by prolonging the conflict. Biafra is also part of the creation story of both Concern Worldwide and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), but this association has at times sidelined the experience of other aid organisations, not to mention Nigerian (including Biafran) perspectives on the relief effort. Despite the widely recognised significance of the conflict in the history of humanitarian action, detailed research on aid in Biafra remains in short supply. For other episodes the process of historical examination has been even slower.

Finally, in a situation where diverse cultures are both shaping and contesting practices and norms, recognising that humanitarianism has a history beyond the Western narrative is fundamental. In moving away from a Western-centric focus, we are not merely showing interest in or learning about the contexts in which humanitarians work, but also gaining a fuller understanding of how the current situation evolved, how it may be viewed by different parties and where it may be heading. As Pichamon Yeophantong argues in relation to concepts of humanitarianism in East and Southeast Asia, 'traditions of charitable giving and social obligation, grounded in human empathy for the suffering of others, have deep roots in most Asian

4 D. John Shaw, *The World's Largest Humanitarian Agency: The Transformation of the UN World Food Programme and of Food Aid* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

5 Sarah Collinson and Samir Elhawary, *Humanitarian Space: A Review of Trends and Issues* (London: ODI, 2012), p. 9.

6 Arnaud Dandoy and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 'Humanitarian Workers in Peril? Deconstructing the Myth of the New and Growing Threat to Humanitarian Workers', *Global Crime*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2013, p. 353.

societies, being the products of complex social and religious systems'.[7] However, these – like all traditions and practices – are not monolithic or unchanging. Their distinctiveness does not mean they exist in isolation, or that interpretations of them are any less contested than other areas.

Complexity and history

The speed of emergencies and the weakness of institutional memory appear frequently in discussions of the neglect of history and its impact on humanitarian action. In this view, the push for urgent action and a limited knowledge of previous efforts contribute to flaws in the formulation, planning and implementation of programmes. There are truths in both parts of this claim, but both are also tested by a closer examination of how responses to crisis unfold. Firstly, research has suggested that organisational culture is one of the most powerful determinants of programming decisions. There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between organisational ethos and favoured responses, and assumptions based on this relationship often drive response choices even where analysis and consultation suggest that less familiar options may be more effective.[8] This raises the question whether stronger institutional memory would in fact make a difference to decision-making, and whether history really can add to decision-making assets.

If the answer is in the affirmative, it is not (or not primarily) because a historical perspective can contribute new information. Rather, in its methods, skills and ethics – in the accumulation and examination of sources, in the interpretation of cause, effect and context and in recognising that process and outcome are not linear or one-dimensional – history can guard against complacency.[9] By intervening against distortion and omission, independent historical analysis can help to sharpen debates and shape choices.

Secondly, while rapid action is required, and agencies often work to short-term timeframes for internal (bureaucratic and financial) reasons as well as practical necessity, not all responses to emergency are reactive. The majority of humanitarian work is in protracted or recurrent crises; even sudden-onset crises are very rarely over before there is time to think. Moreover, not all those who work for humanitarian organisations are fighting fires; those whose focus is on contingency planning, preparedness and risk reduction, research and analysis, monitoring and evaluation or policy and strategy should be encouraged to think outside the short-term as much as possible. Developing the habit of thinking historically, of engaging critically with the competing narratives of history, may help navigate the power relationships within which humanitarian action takes place and which it must contend with.

None of the difficulties inherent in supporting people affected by crisis are simple, and none have solutions that the 'lessons of history' can neatly provide. Improvement in terms of technical standards does not necessarily mean a more successful response. Technical guidance, as found by a study of the response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, generally offers aid workers 'little to prepare them for living with chaos, for a model where emergency aid does not engineer solutions or end-states, but rather offers another set of resources (financial, material, technical) which people will use or not, but never in the ways foreseen'.[10]

The historical perspective, conversely, is comfortable amongst this complexity. More – it is built upon it. Instead of trying to foresee impacts, it offers the opportunity to consider processes. History can expose assumptions and draw attention to how language channels ideas. It can foster empathy and encourage sensitivity to diverse experiences and an aptitude for interpretation and argumentation. For all of these reasons, the cultivation of a historical sensibility within humanitarian action may even come to be considered a modest but meaningful instance of progress.

7 Pichamon Yeophantong, *Understanding Humanitarian Action in East and Southeast Asia: A Historical Perspective* (London: ODI, 2014), p. 1.

8 Daniel G. Maxwell et al., *Response Analysis and Response Choice in Food Security Crises: A Road Map*, Network Paper 73 (London: ODI, 2014).

9 Michael Woolcock, Simon Szreter and Vijayendra Rao, 'How and Why History Matters for Development Policy,' in C. A. Bayley et al. (eds), *Historians and Development Policy: A Necessary Dialogue* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 11–14.

10 Simon Levine et al., *Avoiding Reality: Land, Institutions and Humanitarian Action in Post-earthquake Haiti*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2012), p. 33.