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Innovation in Humanitarian Action: Editors' Introduction

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The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul in May 2016 brought the theme of innovation to the fore yet again. Innovation in a broad sense has arguably always been at the heart of any humanitarian action, at least in the basic sense of the word, as having to constantly adapt and adjust to complex and unexpected situations – to 'innovate', in other words. In the understanding of the WHS and within the UN system more broadly, innovation was to be strongly linked to cost effectiveness and efficiency, terms arguably more expected in a business environment than the field of humanitarianism. This has resulted, maybe not so unexpectedly, in a state of affairs where the main focus of innovation in relation to humanitarian action has remained on technical fixes or the development of new products, rather than a broader conception that interrogates innovation in a more holistic way, related to overarching humanitarian principles, strategies and partnerships.

This understanding of innovation as a fix was preceded by and is strongly related to the understanding of the humanitarian arena as a marketplace in which different actors compete. This approach has resulted, for example, in 'innovation laboratories' within the wider UN system modelled on management thinking in the business sector (Bloom and Faulkner, 2016). In contrast, other institutions, including the Elhra (Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance) Innovation Fund, call for a more holistic approach to innovation in humanitarian action, and other calls have been made specifically to devise principles for ethical humanitarian innovations. The need to make innovation ethical implies that unethical forms exist, which raises the questions of who is to judge and at what point in time (Elhra, n.d.; University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre, 2015).

Arguably, innovation in the humanitarian field has always been contested, with over-optimistic assumptions about technological fixes matched by pessimistic warnings about unintended consequences. Equally, there is a long history of how humanitarian endeavours have played a role in sustaining or exacerbating conflicts, where humanitarians intervened with the best moral and ethical intentions and principles but in the end were arguably pivotal in prolonging suffering, a pertinent example being the then 'innovative' humanitarian interventions in the secessionist war in Biafra that ended 50 years ago and has been a milestone in re-thinking humanitarian action more broadly (Heerten, 2017). In addition, seemingly altruistic technological interventions in humanitarian contexts often go alongside the expansion of state or military power and new mechanisms of surveillance and control (Jacobsen, 2015). More generally, as long as major technological innovations are largely driven or developed by the Global North, they are bound to perpetuate existing global inequalities, as evident, for example, in the field of digital humanitarianism (Roth and Luczak-Roesch, 2018).

In the wider context of innovation in humanitarianism, it has of late been argued that the 'humanitarian innovation' movement does in fact represent an ideological departure from long-held humanitarian principles, not necessarily openly discussed and intended as such, but in actual practice. Driven by the private sector and a strong commitment to the market as the main driver of innovation – whether understood narrowly or more holistically – and using the language of private for-profit enterprises, it reveals that the innovation agenda is mainly geared towards making humanitarian actors fitter for the humanitarian marketplace, rather than considering how beneficiaries might be better served (Scott-Smith, 2016).

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A pertinent recent example of how a humanitarian innovation agenda can expose a market-driven neoliberal logic that does little to protect the rights of beneficiaries of humanitarian action is the debate about the allegedly broken international 'refugee system' and how to fix it. Under the ideological banner of giving refugees back agency and dignity, proposals have been put forward to create 'special enterprise zones' where refugees can work and which will attract multinational companies, who can then sell ethical goods in a particularly galling example of Brand-Aid-type humanitarianism (Richey and Ponte, 2011; White, 2019). If nothing else, this demonstrates how important it is to question any form of humanitarian innovation not only in relation to its underlying ideology but in light of what it may mean to actual beneficiaries. After all, while 'pure' humanitarian principles and the autonomy of the humanitarian sector were always a myth, they served an important purpose: in the words of Scott-Smith (2016: 2241), they helped to 'distinguish the value-driven sphere of humanitarianism from the interest-driven spheres of politics and profit'.

In this special issue on Innovation in Humanitarian Action, we look at innovation from a range of angles and interrogate its potentials and pitfalls. The research article by Finnigan and Farkas moves the innovation debate forward by outlining the challenges involved in conceiving of innovation in a holistic sense and beyond technical fixes or laboratories. Among other things, the paper pays particular attention to the dynamics of climate change and rapid urbanisation in its call for the humanitarian sector to address four critical challenges in order to be able to provide meaningful assistance to communities in crisis in the future.

Scott-Smith's paper shifts attention to humanitarian architecture, arguing that the humanitarian sector often relies on an uncritical technophilia, which fetishises objects rather than focusing on politics and process. Using shelter as his site of analysis, he suggests that 'buildings without architecture' are bound to fall short of the socio-spatial challenges of producing appropriate, diverse and affordable shelter. Illustrated through the Viennese projects *Places for People*, Scott-Smith argues that humanitarian shelter should think *beyond* the provision of a complete house as a product and towards shelter production as a process. Designing on a smaller, more modest scale can enable shelters with social purposes, such as pleasure, enjoyment and conviviality, which he argues are too often lost. Such an approach to humanitarian architecture has important implications for producing inclusive cities.

The article by Hunt, O'Brien, Cadwell and O'Mathúna problematises language and translation in humanitarian crises. They start from the position that linguistic differences and a lack of access to adequate translation can undermine effective information sharing, coordination, collaboration and relationship building among humanitarian responders, government agencies and local communities. They show how translation innovations intersect with humanitarian values and humanitarians' ethical commitments. Drawing on contemporary crisis translation practices and products, they maintain that linguistic exchange should be conceptualised, not merely as transactional, but through an ethic of exchange that is equipped to acknowledge the inherent asymmetry between those who require and those who provide assistance during a crisis. Relatedly, they argue that language and barriers to understanding can reproduce the epistemic privileges inherent to humanitarian aid, and so they call for translation processes that practise epistemic humility.

Sandvik interrogates the private sector's increasing involvement in humanitarian aid, focusing in particular on humanitarian wearables. She demonstrates how such wearables and the data generated by them may turn the relationship between beneficiaries and humanitarian actors on its head, in that beneficiaries provide the goods, not least in the form of marketable data, to humanitarian actors. This raises important ethical concerns and, as Sandvik suggests, requires a considered debate about data colonialism.

Two further contributions engage with the specific field of medical humanitarianism. Jafar, in her op-ed, takes the example of medical documentation to reflect on the challenges that overseas medical teams face in acute emergencies. Issues around security, ownership and sharing are pivotal when having to make decisions about electronic records versus pen and paper – and much might be said for the former. In an interview with the editors, Tony Redmond reflects on his long career as professor and practitioner of International Emergency Medicine and founder of UK-Med, an NGO that provides international emergency humanitarian medical assistance and which hosts the UK International Emergency Trauma Register (UKIETR) and UK International Emergency Medical Register (UKIEMR). He questions the usefulness of seeking innovation in medical humanitarianism but advocates to aim for the same duty of care that one would offer in one's everyday practice at home. In this, Tony is also critical of the term 'humanitarian space', as it by definition proclaims an imagined geographical entity where normal rules should not apply.

Finally, Currion critically considers what a 'broken humanitarian system' means, and he goes on to discuss the limits of innovation in fixing that system. He warns that, at some point we will have enough labs, enough grants and enough partnerships, but still we will not see any sustained returns; and unless we innovate a new

financial model, then humanitarian innovation will be on life support from institutional donors indefinitely.

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