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EDITORIAL

Open Access



# The humanitarian challenge and the aims and scope of the *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*

Hans-Joachim Heintze<sup>1</sup>, Andrej Zwitter<sup>2</sup> and Ronan McDermott<sup>3\*</sup>

The current refugee crisis illustrates once more the limitations of the international community in coordinating matters of burden-sharing in the face of claims of sovereignty by states. It also highlights the international community's failure to fulfill its responsibility in dealing with the crisis before it led to refugee flows by addressing the regional conflict in the Middle East much earlier. This crisis also illustrates that the laws of normalcy are not laws for all seasons. However, the principle of humanity imposes the responsibility on States to protect human beings in emergency situations resulting from natural or man-made disasters. The worst man-made humanitarian crises stem from armed conflicts, which lead to large-scale suffering of human beings and destruction. According to the principle of humanity and to human rights law and international humanitarian law, the victims of crisis and conflict are entitled to humanitarian assistance. The organization of this assistance produces numerous moral, legal, logistical, and technical questions.

According to international laws and ethics, the burden of humanitarian actions falls to all states within the international community and they have the obligation to address humanitarian emergencies. The United Nations Charter obliges its 193 member states under Articles 55 and 56 to take joint and separate action to find solutions to international economic, social, health, and related problems (leg. cit. Art. 55(b)). Also, in accordance with the International Law Commission's Articles on State Responsibility, human rights are a responsibility of every state and the protection against large-scale human rights violations is not only a right against any state but also an obligation of every state—a so-called *obligatio erga omnes*. This has been reconfirmed by the International Commission on Sovereignty and State Responsibility in its 2001 report on the Responsibility to Protect.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon's proposed initiative, the World Humanitarian Summit, due to take place in Istanbul in May 2016, is timely given the protracted nature of armed conflict and the related displacement crisis as well as the range of other challenges that humanitarian action seeks to address. Ahead of the Summit, a wide-ranging consultation process has been initiated, addressing each global region and seeking to engage all those with a stake in humanitarian action. It has brought together key stakeholder groups, including not only representatives of donor agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, UN agencies, and NGOs but also representatives of conflict- and disaster-affected communities themselves, as well as the private sector and academia.

Five action areas were identified during the global consultations ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016: dignity, safety, resilience, partnerships, and finance. It was recognized that these issue areas are overlapping and interdependent. There was also a strong call for the Synthesis Report and wider consultation process to inform the Secretary General's report to be issued ahead of the Summit. The Summit marks an opportunity to invigorate the humanitarian system through building further the capacity of local actors in humanitarian action. Other key imperatives are the greater recognition of the private sector's responsibilities in providing greater efficiency within humanitarian action and reducing risk. We are also cognisant of the role that the research community, broadly conceived, plays in contributing to more effective humanitarian action. We hope that this new journal will provide at the very least a small contribution to this important endeavor. The journal is an initiative of the Network for Humanitarian Action (NOHA), a growing network of 12 European member universities and five global partner universities from different continents. The institutions share a commitment to humanitarian action and

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cooperate in joint educational and training programs, research, and other projects.

It is envisaged that the *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* will provide an open access peer-reviewed forum for the dissemination of research relating to all aspects of humanitarian action. The Journal welcomes submissions in all disciplines of relevance to humanitarian action, including disciplines as diverse as anthropology, international relations, law, public health, and management. In particular, submissions that are multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary in nature are welcomed. The Journal is aimed at and seeks the perspective of academics, government and organization officials, and practitioners in the field of humanitarian action. The Journal thus encourages submissions that not only address theoretical issues but also take into account the practical challenges encountered before, during, and after humanitarian crises as well as the measures needed to address them.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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