

# Humanitarian Technologies as Sociotechnical Imaginaries

*How Multi-National Companies Impact on the  
Idea of Humanitarian Action Through  
Technologies*

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# LIST OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>DECLARATION.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>COPYRIGHT STATEMENT.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>PREFACE .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
STATE OF THE PROBLEM.....	11
KNOWLEDGE GAP AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	14
RESEARCH APPROACH .....	17
THESIS OUTLINE .....	20
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>26</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	26
A TRADITIONAL IMAGINARY OF AID: HUMANITARIAN ACTION AS HUMAN COMPASSION AND ALTRUISM .....	28
THE LEGITIMACY CRISIS OF ‘TRADITIONAL’ HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS .....	31
THE RISE OF A NEOLIBERAL IMAGINARY: MARKETISATION OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION.....	34
<i>Humanitarian Crisis as a Marketplace</i> .....	34
<i>Business Engagement in Humanitarian Action</i> .....	37
Private-Public Partnerships in Humanitarian Aid: Definitions and Applications .....	38
Business Motives for Engaging in Humanitarian Aid.....	42
A Divided Body of Literature on the Role of Businesses in Humanitarian Aid .....	43
RESEARCH GAP .....	46
<b>CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL CONCEPT .....</b>	<b>53</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	53
THE CREATIVE FORCE OF IMAGINATION WHICH CONSTITUTES SOCIAL LIFE .....	55
<i>Castoriadis’ Social Imaginary as Creator of Society</i> .....	55
<i>Humanitarian Community as Imagined Community</i> .....	57
SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES.....	59
<i>Visions as Drivers of Co-Production Between Society and Technology</i> .....	60
<i>Capturing Sociotechnical Imaginaries Through Significations</i> .....	63

SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES AND BUSINESSES .....	64
CONCLUSION .....	67
<b>CHAPTER 4: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>68</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	68
THE MECHANISMS OF CO-PRODUCTION.....	70
<i>Making Identities</i> .....	72
<i>Making Discourses</i> .....	76
<i>Making Representations</i> .....	79
GUIDING ASSUMPTIONS, ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS AND INDICATORS FOR ANALYSIS .....	84
<i>Identifying the Mechanism of Making Identities</i> .....	84
<i>Identifying the Mechanism of Making Discourses</i> .....	87
<i>Identifying the Mechanism of Making Representations</i> .....	89
CONCLUSION .....	92
<b>CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHOD.....</b>	<b>95</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	95
A CRITICAL REALIST ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY .....	97
RESEARCH DESIGN .....	101
<i>A Critical Realist Comparative Case Study Design</i> .....	101
<i>Case Selection Strategy: Method of Difference for Critical Realist Comparative Studies</i> .....	105
DATA COLLECTION .....	109
<i>Snowball Sampling</i> .....	110
Documents .....	111
Semi-Structured Interviews.....	118
DATA ANALYSIS.....	120
<i>The Importance of Demi-Regularities in Critical Realist Analysis</i> .....	120
<i>Thematic Narrative Analysis</i> .....	121
Looking for Demi-Regularities: Organisational and Substantial Coding.....	123
Looking for Causal Mechanisms: Theoretical Coding .....	125
LIMITATIONS OF STUDY AND REFLEXIVITY .....	127
<b>CHAPTER 6: IKEA FOUNDATION’S ‘BETTER SHELTER’ .....</b>	<b>131</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	131
CASE DESCRIPTION.....	133
<i>The Context: Shelter in Humanitarian Action</i> .....	133
<i>Humanitarian Technology: The ‘Better Shelter’ (The Refugee Housing Unit)</i> .....	136
IKEA FOUNDATION’S NARRATIVE .....	140
<i>From Philanthropic Giving to Developing a Humanitarian Product</i> .....	140

<i>Building Back Better as “The Power of Design for Social Renewal”</i> .....	144
<i>More Dignity Through Design Benefits</i> .....	146
THE HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVE .....	148
‘ <i>A Top-Down Engineered Shelter and Exclusive Partnership</i> ’ .....	148
<i>Building Back Better as ‘Shelter as Process’</i> .....	153
<i>More Dignity Through Self-Resilience</i> .....	154
THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE .....	155
“ <i>Innovative, Humanitarian, and Implemented</i> ” .....	155
<i>More Dignity Through a Prefabricated Mass-Product</i> .....	157
DISCUSSION .....	161
<i>Making Identities: Shaping the IKEA Market</i> .....	161
<i>Making Discourses: A Customer Gaze and the Co-Option of a Humanitarian Debate</i> .....	164
<i>Making Representations: The Success of a Myth, The Failure of a Product</i> .....	167
CONCLUSION: THE CREATION OF AN IMAGINARY OF TECH-HEDONISM .....	170
<b>CHAPTER 7: MASTERCARD AID NETWORK AND PREPAID CARDS .....</b>	<b>173</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	173
CASE DESCRIPTION.....	175
<i>The Context: The Rise of Cash and Voucher Assistance in Humanitarian Action</i> .....	175
<i>The Humanitarian Technology: MasterCard Aid Network and Prepaid Cards</i> .....	178
MasterCard Aid Network.....	178
MasterCard Prepaid Cards.....	180
MASTERCARD’S NARRATIVE .....	182
“ <i>We Are All Humanitarians</i> ”: <i>Merging Commercial, Development and Humanitarian Goals in the Name of Financial Inclusion</i> .....	182
A “ <i>World Beyond Cash</i> ”: <i>Pushing for Digital CVA to Seed a Global Market of Financial Inclusion</i> .....	187
<i>Dignity Through Digital Identity: “[Refugee] Cardholders are Like Anybody Else Having a Debit Card”</i> .....	190
THE HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVE .....	194
<i>Financial Inclusion as a Humanitarian Priority?</i> .....	194
A “ <i>Revelation</i> ”: <i>United in Enthusiasm for Digital CVA</i> .....	197
A <i>Humanitarian Dilemma: Dignity Through Digital CVA vs. The Risks of a Digital Identity</i> .....	200
DISCUSSION.....	204
<i>Making Identities: MasterCard’s Integrating Strategies in the Digital (Humanitarian) Payment Service Market</i> .....	204
<i>Making Discourses: Streamlining the Debate about CVA in Favour of Building Markets</i> .....	207
<i>Making Representations: Banking Aid Recipients - From Nobody to Consumer</i> .....	209
CONCLUSION: THE CREATION OF AN IMAGINARY OF DIGITAL FINANCIAL INCLUSION.....	211



<b>CHAPTER 8: CROSS-CASE SYNTHESIS .....</b>	<b>213</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	213
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF IMAGINARIES OF TECH-HEDONISM AND DIGITAL FINANCIAL INCLUSION.....	215
<i>The Narrative of Freedom: Aid Recipients and Commodified Humanitarian Technologies .....</i>	215
<i>“In the Ruins of Neoliberalism”: Shaping Relevant Markets in a Fragmented Society.....</i>	219
SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES AND PERCEPTION OF ‘GOOD’ AND ‘BAD’ HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES .....	223
<i>Social Cohesion with Corporate Visions Through Shared Identities and Discourses .....</i>	223
<i>Validation of Technologies in Light of Sociotechnical Imaginaries .....</i>	226
CONCLUSION: HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND CORPORATE TECHNOLOGIES – THE EROSION OF A TRADITIONAL IMAGINARY OF AID .....	228
<b>CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>232</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	232
RECAPITULATION OF PURPOSE AND FINDINGS .....	234
KEY CONTRIBUTIONS .....	238
<i>A Critical Realist Stance to Revise the Concept of Sociotechnical Imaginaries.....</i>	238
<i>From Private-Public Partnerships towards Hybrid Organisations.....</i>	240
‘Private-Public Partnerships’: A Limited and Inconsistent Concept .....	240
Hybrid Organisations: Liberating a Term from Positivist Studies .....	244
Investigating Hybrid Organisations in Humanitarian Action: Shifting Priorities and New Roles .....	246
IMPLICATIONS: POWER AND ACCOUNTABILITY(IES) BEHIND HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES .....	249
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>252</b>
SOURCES ‘BETTER SHELTER’ .....	271
<i>IKEA Foundation and IKEA.....</i>	271
<i>Museums and Exhibitions .....</i>	272
<i>Newspapers and Magazines .....</i>	272
UNHCR .....	274
Interviews.....	277
SOURCES ‘MASTERCARD AID NETWORK AND PREPAID CARDS’ .....	277
<i>Humanitarian Organisations.....</i>	277
<i>International Organisations.....</i>	278
<i>MasterCard .....</i>	278
<i>Newspapers and Magazines .....</i>	280
<i>Think Thanks, Consulting, Platforms and Networks.....</i>	281
<i>UN Agencies .....</i>	282
Interview .....	283

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# LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: CATEGORIES OF PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP USED IN LITERATURE.....	40
TABLE 2: CASE SELECTION INFORMED BY A CRITICAL REALIST METHOD OF DIFFERENCE.....	107
TABLE 3: DOCUMENTS USED FOR ANALYSIS, CASE 'BETTER SHELTER' .....	113
TABLE 4: DOCUMENTS USED FOR ANALYSIS, CASE 'MASTERCARD AID NETWORK AND PREPAID CARDS' .....	116
TABLE 5: ORGANISATIONAL CATEGORIES.....	124
TABLE 6: CRITERIA FOR POSITIVE VALIDATION OF HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES .....	227

# LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: MECHANISMS OF CO-PRODUCTION AS GUIDEPPOSTS FOR ANALYSIS .....	72
FIGURE 2: THE CRITICAL REALIST ONTOLOGY AND EPIDEMIOLOGY APPLIED TO SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES .....	100
FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTS PER YEAR, CASE 'BETTER SHELTER' .....	114
FIGURE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTS PER YEAR, CASE 'MASTERCARD AID NETWORK AND PREPAID CARDS' .....	117
FIGURE 5: IKEA FOUNDATION INFORMATION. SOURCE: IKEA (N.D.) .....	137
FIGURE 6: 'BETTER SHELTER' FLAT-PACKED AND ASSEMBLED. SOURCE: BETTER SHELTER RHU AB (N.D.) .....	138
FIGURE 7: UNHCR SELF-STANDING FAMILY TENT. SOURCE: UNHCR (2016, 7).....	139
FIGURE 8: 'BETTER SHELTER' AT DESIGN MIAMI/BASEL 2015. SOURCE: DESIGN MIAMI/BASEL (2015). .....	158
FIGURE 9: 'BETTER SHELTER' AT "DESIGN AT LARGE". SOURCE: DESIGN MIAMI/BASEL (2015). .....	158
FIGURE 10: 'BETTER SHELTER' INSTALLED IN LONDON. SOURCE: DEZEEN (NOVEMBER 14, 2016).....	159
FIGURE 11: SOUTH KENSINGTON UNDERGROUND STATION. LONDON. SOURCE: (DEZEEN, NOVEMBER 14, 2016).....	159
FIGURE 12: 'BETTER SHELTER' AT "INSECURITIES: TRACING DISPLACEMENT AND SHELTER". SOURCE: MOMA (2016A). .....	160
FIGURE 13: 'BETTER SHELTER' AT MOMA. SOURCE: MOMA (2016A).....	161
FIGURE 14: MASTERCARD AID NETWORK. SOURCE: MASTERCARD (SEPTEMBER 24, 2015) .....	179
FIGURE 15: A MASTERCARD PREPAID CARD. SOURCE: MASTERCARD (JUNE 20, 2016) .....	181

# ABSTRACT

This PhD study examines how multi-national companies impact on the idea of humanitarian aid through technologies designed to improve aid delivery in complex emergencies and disasters. In light of a humanitarian turn towards technologies, private-public partnerships between humanitarian organisations and corporate companies have become a key aspect of humanitarian aid. In fact, businesses have become vital partners for humanitarian aid through the development of technologies that fundamentally change the way humanitarian aid is delivered.

This study argues that in a sector which traditionally has been strongly rooted in the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, corporations should not be seen merely as new implementing partners. Rather, they are simultaneously actors with sociotechnical power and create, through the way they operate through technologies, new knowledge and expectations about future humanitarian orders. However, only little scientific knowledge exists about businesses' capacities in establishing sociotechnical imaginaries as vital elements in the making of the humanitarian sector. This thesis fills this knowledge gap by combining two separate areas of research, namely, private-public partnerships in humanitarian studies with the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries originating in Science and Technology Studies. In doing so, the objective of this thesis is threefold. Firstly, the aim is to better understand underlying mechanisms of how particular sociotechnical imaginaries emerge through corporate technologies; secondly, to investigate to what extent they appear to become dominant within the humanitarian community; and thirdly, to examine the impact of new imaginaries on humanitarian principles as a moral fundament for aid.

Founded in the research position of critical realism, this thesis uses a qualitative, comparative study design of two cases of corporate humanitarian technologies: IKEA Foundation's prefabricated, temporary shelter 'Better Shelter', and Mastercard's Aid Network and prepaid cards for the delivery of cash and voucher assistance. By applying a thematic narrative analysis, this study identifies and interprets the establishment and implications of hegemonic sociotechnical imaginaries in narratives.

The study has two main findings. Firstly, both corporations establish sociotechnical imaginaries in markets relevant to them through a narrative of freedom. This promotes a conception of humanitarian technologies as commodities, and an idea of dignity for aid recipients rooted in the logic of consumption. Secondly, humanitarian organisations validate what is seen as 'good' or 'bad' humanitarian technology in light of the dominant sociotechnical imaginary at play. An imaginary of principled aid is eroding in the aftermath of neoliberalism, and the case of MasterCard suggests that this process is accelerated when corporations are originators of shared visions.

This thesis concludes that corporations do not just provide new technologies. They can also generate novel interpretations of humanitarian aid which can lead to private-public partnerships forming hybrid organisations with their own operational priorities and moral guidelines overwriting a traditional imaginary of principled aid.

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# PREFACE

Isabelle P. Schläpfer is currently managing editor of the Journal of Humanitarian Affairs, a collaboration between the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute/University of Manchester, Save the Children and MSF.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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“The ‘Better Shelter’ tackles one of the defining issues of the moment: providing shelter in an exceptional situation whether caused by violence and disaster . . . . It shows the power of design to respond to the conditions we are in and transform them. Innovative, humanitarian and implemented, Better Shelter has everything that a Beazley Design of the Year should have.” (Jana Scholze, Jury Member Beazley Design of the Year, quoted as in IKEA Foundation, January 30, 2017)

“The ‘Better Shelter’ flew in the face of a lot of shelter thinking and philosophies and ideas. The reaction was very negative to it without even thinking about it, saying this is not the way we want to go . . . . It kind of was embarrassing for us to face our UNHCR colleagues and not to say: “what are you doing? This is crazy!”” (Shelter & Settlements Technical Advisor, Skype Interview, October 4, 2019)

## STATE OF THE PROBLEM

Since the 1990s, the humanitarian sector has undergone a far-reaching transition in favour of neoliberal ideas, with the aim of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid. This thesis uses the term humanitarian aid, as is common in humanitarian studies, to refer to “assistance, protection and advocacy in response to humanitarian needs resulting from natural hazards, armed conflict or other causes, or emergency response preparedness” (IASC 2015, 9).<sup>1</sup> Through processes of marketisation and professionalisation, the humanitarian community has been increasingly exposed to market forces and competition among humanitarian organisations.<sup>2</sup> For a long time associated with an act of compassionate solidarity, and

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use the terms ‘humanitarian aid’, ‘humanitarian action’ and ‘humanitarian assistance’ interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘humanitarian organisations’ and ‘aid agencies’ throughout this thesis as an umbrella term to refer to single- and multi-mandated non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in humanitarian action, United

justified by moral considerations and principles, various scholars have observed a shift from humanitarian ‘aid’ towards a humanitarian ‘industry’ and ‘enterprise’ of ‘services’ (Barnett 2005), a humanitarian ‘business’ (Weiss 2013), a ‘global aid market’ (Carbonnier 2015a), a humanitarian ‘market’ (Hopgood 2008) and humanitarian ‘marketplace’ (Krause 2014), with supply and demand chains financed by donors who subcontract aid agencies and other actors in the provision and delivery of aid. For humanitarian organisations, gaining and securing access to this humanitarian market has become crucial for organisational survival (Krause 2014). However, for other actors, such as for-profit companies, this market holds the promise of different rewards and can be highly lucrative for doing business (Andonova and Carbonnier 2014; Carbonnier 2015a; Johnson 2009; Kent and Burke 2012; Weiss 2013). As one consequence of this, multi-national companies have, over the last twenty years, gradually entered upon the humanitarian market (Carbonnier and Lightfoot 2016; Hopgood 2008; Sezgin and Dijkzeul 2016).

Today, partnerships between multi-national companies and humanitarian organisations play a vital role in humanitarian action. Businesses may offer cash, in-kind donations or staff to support the humanitarian sector. However, due to their skills, expertise and financial resources, they are particularly crucial to the development of technologies designed to improve aid delivery in complex emergencies and disasters (Sandvik et al. 2014; Scott-Smith 2016; Zyck and Kent 2014). Humanitarian technologies<sup>3</sup> have gained rising attention in humanitarian action and are often accompanied by great optimism in terms of their ability to solve complex humanitarian problems in a more efficient, accountable and effective way (Jacobsen 2015; Sandvik 2014; Scott-Smith 2016; Scriven 2016). Some of these technologies enjoy popularity and recognition beyond humanitarian circles, for example IKEA Foundation’s ‘Better Shelter’, a temporary shelter solution, which has been showcased

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Nation (UN) agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (RCRC).

<sup>3</sup> In scholarly and practitioner literature, the term ‘humanitarian technologies’ is often used to refer to digital and web-based information and communication technologies. However, I use the term in a broader sense, referring to humanitarian technologies not just as digital software, but also ‘things’ such as products, hardware and fabrics. While humanitarian technologies can be developed and innovated by various organisations or individuals, in this thesis I set the focus on technologies which are developed, designed, or adjusted for humanitarian purposes by multi-national, corporate companies.



in the media, displayed at multiple exhibitions, and won the Beazley Design of the Year 2016. Other companies act less visibly, but nevertheless change the way humanitarian action is carried out through their technologies. This includes MasterCard, which in 2013 started to offer digital payment systems for the delivery of cash and voucher assistance (CVA). However, as the two contrasting quotes at the beginning of this introduction illustrate, the reception of new corporate technologies, expectations about their goals, and the way corporate visions of technological progress shape or resonate with existing imaginaries of humanitarian action, may vary significantly. A good example of this is IKEA Foundation's shelter, which was publicly praised for its 'humanitarian and transformative character' by the widely quoted jury of the Beazley Design Award, but simultaneously met with resistance and negative comments from humanitarian organisations using the shelter in the field.

This contrast indicates an underlying tension between multi-national companies and humanitarian organisations who hold different or even conflicting ideas and visions about what humanitarian action stands for, and what technological progress should look like. However, while humanitarian technologies developed by businesses are a dominant feature of today's humanitarian action, the social process of meaning-making behind and through these technologies, within and beyond the humanitarian community, has received scant attention in the research literature. With this in mind, and due to differences in organisational size, expertise, economic power, organisational goals, ethical values, moral foundations and legal jurisdictions, I put forward for consideration that corporations cannot be merely seen as new implementing partners. Rather, they are simultaneously actors with sociotechnical power over technologies to contest the very meaning of humanitarian action, and have a potentially significant effect on the humanitarian landscape and the way humanitarian aid is delivered. While humanitarian action has been strongly rooted in a traditional imaginary of ethical stance and the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, I assume that corporations create, through the way they operate through technologies, new knowledge and expectations about future humanitarian orders which are yet to be fully understood.

The impact that multi-national companies have on what humanitarian action stands for is a timely and pressing topic for investigation. The question of who defines the meaning, purposes and aspirations of humanitarian action is crucial, as it significantly affects what type of humanitarian action is considered desirable and appropriate, what actors are seen as legitimate and obtain access to the humanitarian community to deliver aid, and how aid recipients are viewed and selected as eligible to receive aid (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010). With that, the struggle over what humanitarian action stands for is a contest over what imaginaries about the 'right' idea of the humanitarian endeavour prevail. In this sense, disentangling what and whose visions become dominant in defining humanitarian action and the humanitarian community seems to be an important step towards a more nuanced understanding about the dynamics and frictions in contemporary humanitarian action.

## KNOWLEDGE GAP AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There exist contradicting definitions of business engagement in humanitarian aid. Generally, the literature refers to partnerships between humanitarian organisations and for-profit companies as 'public-private partnerships' (e.g. Drummond and Crawford 2014) or 'business-humanitarian partnerships' as a variation of 'private-public partnerships' (e.g. Andonova and Carbonnier 2014).<sup>4</sup> While scholars use various criteria to differentiate partnerships, they deal mainly with three types: firstly, philanthropic partnerships, which involves the donation of money or products but not any further participation by businesses; secondly, non-commercial partnerships, rooted in a company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy, and which involves the implementation of humanitarian programmes or the development of products by a business through the provision of staff, expertise, technologies or other forms of support; and thirdly, commercial partnerships, where businesses are contracted or sub-contracted by humanitarian organisations to implement humanitarian services.

Despite the wide attention that private-public partnerships receive in humanitarian studies, scholarship on corporate engagement in humanitarian action remains limited.

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<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, I pre-dominantly, but not exclusively, use the term private-public partnership.

This becomes apparent mainly in two ways. On the one hand, the literature on private-public partnerships evaluates business-humanitarian partnerships in light of their performance, using them as a descriptive tool by which to assess outputs. Evaluative questions about their efficiency and effectiveness, along with recommendations regarding how to improve these aspects, dominate these studies (e.g. Bailey 2014; Drummond and Crawford 2014). On the other hand, the engagement of businesses in humanitarian aid is often examined in a heated debate from a normative and interpretative point of view about the moral and ethics of corporations in humanitarian action per se. Here, authors who welcome businesses as important reformers of the humanitarian sector and see them as inevitable partners of humanitarian organisations for the efficient delivery of effective aid (e.g. Bennet 2016b; Zyck and Kent 2014) oppose scholars who challenge or dismiss the idea of profit-oriented actors in light of a traditional imaginary of principled aid (e.g. Barnett 2005; Hopgood 2008).

This shows that a vast amount of studies on business-humanitarian partnerships is engaged with corporate actors in humanitarian action, however, I identified a neglect within the current literature to address one of the most significant ways of corporate engagement in humanitarian action, namely, the provision of technologies developed or adapted for aid. This is important for two main reasons. Firstly, technologies play a central role in contemporary humanitarian action, and a surprisingly euphoric optimism dominates the discussion about them (Sandvik 2014; Scott-Smith 2013). It is striking that despite recognising corporations as important actors with the skills, expertise and resources to develop and provide humanitarian technologies, the literature mostly ignores that the process of innovating and implementing these technologies is led by questions of who has and gets power over and from technologies in humanitarian action. Secondly, although corporations are seen as new actors within this field, the literature does not ask how they alter or reinforce what humanitarian action stands for, and as a result, is not asking what and whether new meanings and aspirations emerge from such partnerships. Although there exist an important body of anthropologist literature (Collier et al. 2017; Cross and Street 2009; de Laet and Mol 2000; Redfield 2012, 2016; Scott-Smith 2016, 2018) engaging with

humanitarian technologies, which is also concerned with the marketisation of these products, the major shortcomings of both strings of literature is the lack of causal explanation regarding the impact of corporations on the making of humanitarian action, and the neglect of focus on humanitarian technologies developed by corporations in their role as drivers for change on principled aid which would move the literature on business-humanitarian partnerships forward.

This thesis starts to fill this gap by combining two separate areas of research, namely, humanitarian studies addressing private-public partnerships in humanitarian action with research from Science and Technology Studies on the co-production of technology and society. Looking at the impact of business on humanitarian action through this lens is a promising way to gain new insights about a timely phenomenon which constitutes the main argument of this thesis: that multi-national corporations have the capacity to envision humanitarian action, and that these visions are not simple fantasises, but latched onto humanitarian technologies with real-life consequences for every actor involved in humanitarian action. Little scientific reflection exists about businesses' capacities in conjuring sociotechnical visions as vital elements in the making of the humanitarian sector, and the implications corporate technologies have for the idea of a traditional imaginary of principled humanitarian aid.

As such, the research objective of this thesis is threefold. Firstly, it explores how particular sociotechnical imaginaries emerge through corporate technologies, and to what extent they appear to become dominant within the humanitarian community, inevitable when explaining the influence of businesses in humanitarian action. Secondly, the study investigates how sociotechnical imaginaries are enabling visions which facilitate the development of new understandings of the humanitarian order, and how they shape perceptions about new humanitarian technologies developed by corporations. Thirdly, it explores what hegemonic sociotechnical imaginaries mean for principled humanitarian aid in terms of what interpretations of partnerships, roles between partners, views on crises and aid recipients, and moral foundations in the implementation of humanitarian technologies develop.

At the core of this PhD thesis lies the question of how multi-national companies impact on the idea of humanitarian action through technologies designed to improve aid delivery in complex emergencies and disasters, and what effect this has on a traditional imaginary of principled aid. This main question is divided into three sub-questions:

- I) How do visions and aspirations for humanitarian action emerge as sociotechnical imaginaries in narratives of corporate technologies, and what are they?
- II) To what extent and why do collectively held sociotechnical imaginaries of corporate technologies transform or reinforce particular conceptions of what humanitarian action stands for, and what are they?
- III) To what extent and why do some of these visions appear to become hegemonic sociotechnical imaginaries within the humanitarian community, and how do they shape perceptions of new humanitarian technologies?

## RESEARCH APPROACH

To answer these research questions, the thesis engages with sociotechnical imaginaries which emerge through humanitarian technologies developed in partnerships between corporate and humanitarian actors. The theoretical concept of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2015) thus provides the theoretical grounding for the analysis of this thesis. This concept originates from Science and Technology Studies and refers to “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 4). Put differently, when individual ideas and aspirations become collectively shared imaginaries, they provide a sense of legitimacy in terms of what is widely seen as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Sociotechnical imaginaries do not develop and stand alone, but result from processes of co-production between social orders and technologies (Jasanoff 2004). In fact, technologies are important carriers of visions and ideas of social progress, and therefore play a crucial part in the development of sociotechnical imaginaries (Hilgartner, Miller, and Hagendijk 2015).

A prominent place where sociotechnical imaginaries become identifiable and interpretable for researchers are within narratives (Gaonkar 2002; Jasanoff and Kim 2015). In order to study how corporate visions translate into collectively held sociotechnical imaginaries, this thesis develops an analytical framework focusing on key narratives that guides data collection and analysis. It helps identifying where in key narratives of humanitarian technologies corporate ideas are reproduced, stabilised, and promoted, and where alternative visions compete to establish which imaginary of humanitarian aid prevails. This analytical framework is built on three mechanisms of co-production: making identities, making discourses, and making representations. As such, using the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries as the point of theoretical departure helps to study how visions of technological progress transport with them underlying ideas about future humanitarian orders, leading to a more sophisticated understanding of the role of multi-national companies within the humanitarian realm.

An important body of knowledge provides vital insights into how a concept of sociotechnical imaginaries helps to understand how corporate narratives are originators of visions which find their way into collectively held imaginaries of technological progress (e.g. Sadowski and Bendor 2018; Smith 2009, 2015). However, the overwhelming majority of studies on sociotechnical imaginaries are based within critical constructivism. One major weakness of these studies is that they do not consider the materiality of sociotechnical imaginaries, in the sense that they omit to explain under what conditions and contexts visions turn into imaginaries and what this tells us about the social fabric of which perceptions and judgements are made. This is why my study is based on the ontological and epistemological fundament of critical realism (Bhaskar 1978). In general terms, critical realism claims an independence of the world from our thoughts, and presumes that “There exists both an external world independently of human consciousness, and at the same time a dimension which includes our socially determined knowledge about reality” (Danermark et al. 2002, 5–6). This reality and the way it behaves are not entirely accessible to immediate observation, but through the identification and study of causal mechanisms and the conditions within they work, the researcher can build an explanation of what “make[s] things happen in the world” (Danermark et al. 2002, 20).

This thesis applies a qualitative, comparative study design of two case studies, selected through a method of difference for critical realism (Bergene 2007): IKEA Foundations' temporary flat-packed 'Better Shelter'<sup>5</sup> and Mastercard's Aid Network and prepaid card service. These two cases were purposively chosen as they display contrasting, surprising outcomes in terms of how corporate visions gain traction as sociotechnical imaginaries within the humanitarian community. The first, the 'Better Shelter', is a prefabricated, rigid tent which arrives in two typical IKEA flat-packed boxes. This humanitarian technology results from a partnership between IKEA Foundation and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and was designed for the shelter sector with some specific requirements in mind, including weight, durability and assembly time. What is unexpected about this case is the ambiguous validation of the product. The 'Better Shelter' could be described as somewhat famous among the public; it became a highly praised and awarded product by both the media and the art and design community, seen as a helpful corporate technology for humanitarian action. However, there is a different side to what initially appears to be a success story. In fact, humanitarian organisations using the shelter in the field have been far more critical of the shelter than the public narrative would have led us to expect (Scott-Smith 2017). In contrast is the second case study, MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid card, a set of digital technologies used to deliver cash and voucher assistance (CVA) to aid recipients, a service offered by MasterCard to multiple humanitarian organisations across multiple sectors. Since 2016, CVA is increasingly chosen as the main mode of aid over in-kind distribution, with digital technologies playing a central role for the distribution of cash. MasterCard is an important player in this shift. It is, for example, represented at the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, and involved in various networks and platforms which promote CVA, including the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the Cash Learning Platform (CaLP). Yet, despite what seems to be an influencing corporate technology for humanitarian action which receives a widely shared level of approval by humanitarian organisations, any public narrative about

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<sup>5</sup> The shelter is known by two names: the 'official' product name is 'Refugee Housing Unit' (RHU), which is used, for example, by UNHCR; but the product is widely known by the name 'Better Shelter', used by IKEA Foundation and adopted in media etc. Throughout this study, I use the term 'Better Shelter'.

MasterCard's corporate engagement in humanitarian action and about its technologies appears scant.

As such, these two case studies have been selected to investigate sociotechnical imaginaries within key narratives, and to explain whether (and if so, why) some corporate visions become stable and collectively held within the humanitarian community, and the effects this has on a traditional imaginary of aid. In terms of research methods, I applied a thematic narrative analysis of written and oral documents and semi-structured interviews, for two main reasons. Firstly, this method of analysis considers social actors to have different experiences of reality, all of which are important for a critical realist analysis. Secondly, it helps identify similarities and differences across the cases in order to interpret sociotechnical imaginaries, and to explain the variation in how they manifest themselves and to what extent they may rival a traditional imaginary of aid. Hence, it is a useful strategy to find explanation in a comparative case study design.

## THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis is composed of nine chapters. After this introduction, to establish the foundation for the thesis, Chapter 2 critically reviews the literature in humanitarian studies which addresses the evolving ideas of humanitarian action. To give the reader an understanding of the changing meaning of humanitarian aid, the review starts by exploring a traditional imaginary of principled humanitarian action and its origins in 1863 and Henry Dunant's thoughts on compassionate acts of solidarity. Then, the chapter engages with the literature which discusses the reasons for the legitimacy crisis that traditional humanitarian organisations have been facing, and how a prevailing neoliberal imaginary in wider society has affected and shaped the interpretations of humanitarian action. I focus in particular on two aspects, namely, the emergence of a humanitarian marketplace, and the increasing role of corporations within that marketplace through their partnerships with humanitarian organisations. The last part of Chapter 2 will critically elaborate the research gap, and I emphasise the lack of understanding which exists about corporations in humanitarian action, due to the neglect by scholars of the role of businesses as sociotechnical powerholders over



humanitarian technologies, through which they possess the capacity to re-imagine humanitarian action.

Chapter 3 elaborates how visions and technologies work together more theoretically to introduce the concept underpinning this thesis, namely, that of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2015). This concept builds on the assumption that through technologies, new visions and aspirations overwrite 'old' ideas of how a society should be organised. Conceptualising the humanitarian community as 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's (1983) sense, it offers a suitable theoretical entry point for the rest of the thesis to explore how new visions and aspirations emerge through technologies, and may shape the perception of humanitarian action in light of the long-lasting principles of impartial, human and neutral aid.

In Chapter 4, I use the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries as the point of theoretical departure to develop the analytical framework which guides my research process. In doing so, I discuss the process of co-production between society and technology which lies behind sociotechnical imaginaries; specifically, I explore in more detail how, through mechanisms of co-production, individual visions become stabilised into the materiality of the social world (Jasanoff 2004). I elaborate that making identities, making discourses, and making representations are relevant mechanisms for my research subject, to understand how visions become manifested within the humanitarian community and beyond. I also formulate indicators which enable me to identify and interpret visions embedded in narratives, and which then help navigation throughout the research process of data collection and analysis of each case study, and provide direction for comparison to build an explanation about what sociotechnical imaginaries dominate. In the conclusion, I critically engage with existing studies on sociotechnical imaginaries and reflect on the analytical limitations in interpretivist studies on narratives based on critical constructivism.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the methodology and methods which inform my study, and offers the reader orientation regarding the research design and what steps were involved in data collection and analysis. I present my ontological and epistemological

grounding in critical realism and introduce the distinct characteristics of a critical realist approach, and retrodution as the main way of inference. Critical realists, in contrast to positivists, reject the notion that a study can produce generalisable results and objective truth but recognise that certain mechanisms work in specific contexts which generate trends, also called ‘demi-regularities’, which help to build a causal explanation for a certain social phenomenon under study. The chapter then discusses how critical realism informed the research design of a qualitative, comparative study of two cases, selected through a method of difference for critical realism (Bergene 2007). It also discusses how it directed the data collection and data analysis processes, and guided my analytical attention to the examination of conditions, mechanisms and tendencies in order to find answers to the research questions. I conclude this chapter with a critical reflection about the limits of my analysis.

The following two chapters describe the context in which the humanitarian technologies under investigation have been developed, introduce the humanitarian technologies itself, present the results of the analysis, and offer a discussion of the findings of the individual case studies in light of the analytical framework. Chapter 6 unpicks the ambiguous effect that IKEA Foundation’s narrative of the ‘Better Shelter’ had on the idea of what humanitarian shelter stands for. The corporate visions around the ‘Better Shelter’, namely, to become a revolutionary alternative to traditional tents designed to shelter people, became both a self-sustaining and a dominant imaginary – which I name an imaginary of tech-hedonism – among the wider public, but simultaneously resisted and resented from within the humanitarian community. In particular, IKEA Foundation did not account for a humanitarian shelter debate which has moved away from ‘shelter as product’ towards ‘shelter as process’ idea, which eventually decreased its credibility among humanitarian organisations using the shelter on the ground.

In Chapter 7, I move on to the second case study: the MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards. Here I unravel that, although widely unrecognised by the public, through strategic alliances and partnerships on a global (but also local) level, MasterCard’s visions have embedded themselves successfully as the dominant imaginary of ‘digital financial inclusion’, bridging humanitarian and development goals

and the company's commercial interests. Moreover, MasterCard offers a reformulation of what being 'humanitarian' looks like, that is, a sustainable business model by which to seed new markets. This idea is informed by its broader vision of financial inclusion as the main goal for humanitarian aid, which aims to stabilise local markets and alleviate poverty through digital infrastructures. MasterCard's narrative is received with a strong sense of optimism from within the humanitarian community in regard to CVA and the company's technologies are widely welcomed as a step towards digital humanitarian action.

Chapter 8 is a cross-case synthesis and aims to bring the findings of the two previous case studies together through the lens of the research questions. It identifies how two causal powers worked to establish sociotechnical imaginaries. Firstly, a narrative of freedom stimulated the idea of *égalité* between aid recipients and consumers in the West through the emotive, appealing interpretation of humanitarian technologies as commodities. This egalitarian spirit is visible in both imaginaries. In a tech-hedonist imaginary, it is assumed that at-need people gain dignity through a mass-produced, flat-packed, prefabricated 'Better Shelter', similar to any other flat-packed product in an ordinary IKEA store. In an imaginary of 'digital financial inclusion', it is assumed that when an aid recipient holds a branded MasterCard prepaid card, undistinguishable from any other customer in a shop, and free to consume whatever they like, this empowers them. Secondly, both corporations uphold the power to shape and construct the market relevant to them. In a society which has become fragmented and weakened in the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring processes, an imaginary of tech-hedonism succeeded among the public of potential IKEA consumers, as did an imaginary of digital financial inclusion within the humanitarian community where MasterCard works to expand the digital payment system market. Next, I elaborate how powerful the effect of a dominant sociotechnical imaginary is in providing a sense of legitimacy for building judgment. I claim that social cohesion emanating from humanitarians for corporate technologies is influenced precisely by the capacity of businesses to install new imaginaries through the mechanisms of making identities and discourses that shape the 'imagined humanitarian community', as the case of MasterCard shows. The conclusion of Chapter 8 reveals that humanitarian

organisations are aware that principles may be compromised through humanitarian technologies. However, the explicit acknowledgment of principles by private-public partnerships, and a systematic integration into the design, development, testing and implementation phases of technologies are not necessary conditions for whether a corporate technology is positively validated by humanitarian actors. My findings show that in the aftermath of neoliberalism, the traditional imaginary of principled aid has been eroding, with the case of MasterCard suggesting that this process is accelerated when corporations are the originators of shared visions.

In the final chapter, Chapter 9, I elaborate how this thesis has made some valuable contributions in two main ways. Firstly, this study has methodological relevance by introducing a more nuanced understanding of the role of humanitarian technologies and corporate companies in humanitarian action, based in causal explanation rather than pure interpretation or positivist generalisations. I show that through a research position in critical realism, power imbalances within the processes of co-production are important aspects which can be detected and used to explain what, when and how sociotechnical imaginaries develop and gain traction. This can refine our understanding of how technologies and societies are shaped by sociotechnical powerful actors. Secondly, this thesis provides a valuable contribution to the study of the idea of humanitarian aid and has conceptual relevance. I suggest a move away from the term of 'private-public partnership' and its descriptive and simplified applications as existent in the current literature to capture business engagement in humanitarian aid, and towards the use of 'hybrid organisations'. It takes seriously the notion of corporations as sociotechnical powerholders, and allows the examination of dominant aspirations, priorities and values in partnerships behind the design and development of new humanitarian technologies. This promises important insights into how humanitarian principles may further erode and new moral standards become manifested.

Both these contributions could lead to an exciting and timely research agenda that puts accountability of humanitarian technologies in focus. Where new imaginaries emerge as moral guidance for humanitarian action, questions arise as to whom and

how technologies are accountable. These need to be addressed if the humanitarian community is sincere in its apparent wish to put aid recipients at the centre of action.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

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## INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 reviews the large volume of literature which has investigated the changing idea of humanitarian action. As it indicates, the meaning of humanitarian action is not set in stone, but rather a social process evolving over time and under the influence of different visions of aid and progress upheld by various actors, one of changing and competing meanings which is reflected in this chapter.

The chapter begins, therefore, with the depiction of a traditional imaginary of aid. Dating back the late nineteenth century, this has been widely accepted within and outside the humanitarian community as guiding the understanding of what humanitarian action stands for, namely, an expression of human compassion and altruism led by humanitarian principles. Davey, Borton, and Foley (2013, 1) remind us that “While the humanitarian gesture – the will to alleviate the suffering of others – is centuries old and genuinely global, the development of the international humanitarian system as we know it today can be located both geographically and temporally.” The authors clarify that the Western (and especially European) experience of war and natural disaster have had a major influence on how the humanitarian system is today operating across the world.<sup>6</sup> It is hence important to state that while this review could have focused on critical post-colonial literature engaging with this Western dominance of meaning-making, my review is instead interested in literature occupied with how such a Western traditional imaginary and connotations of humanitarian aid have transformed and been challenged within themselves. In particular, I elaborate how the dominance of neoliberal visions and their focus on efficiency and effectiveness did not just restructure wider societies in the West, but also provided crucial arguments for critical voices within and outside the humanitarian community to rebuild the idea of

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘Western world’, or ‘the West’, has been shaped by different geographic, cultural, political and economic definitions. The definition used in this thesis refers to the West as a cultural imaginary, and includes Europe, as well as many countries of European colonial origin with substantial European ancestral populations in the Americas and Oceania (Daly 2014).

humanitarian action into a marketplace. At the centre of this review is the prevalence of this humanitarian market that opened the door for corporate companies. As such, this chapter examines in greater depth the literature that is occupied with the aspects and developments of a neoliberal imaginary and businesses in humanitarian action, in an attempt to build the ground to elaborate the research gap at the end of this chapter.

This chapter comprises six sections. After this introduction, the next section traces the origins of a traditional imaginary of principled humanitarian action in Henry Dunant's aspirations of human compassion and altruism. This is the point of departure for the next section, which is occupied with the legitimacy crisis of traditional humanitarian organisations in light of growing criticism about their appropriateness, efficiency, accountability and effectiveness in delivering aid. The erosion of trust within traditional humanitarian organisations will be situated within the context of the broader rise of neoliberal visions. The following section elaborates how a neoliberal imaginary has shaped various connotations of humanitarian action, emphasising in particular two aspects: firstly, the understanding of humanitarian action as a marketplace, and secondly, the growing importance of corporations as appropriate actors within such a marketplace. Then, I posit that amid these transitions there exists inconsistency within the literature that engages with such new actors and private-public partnerships in humanitarian action. Based on these elaborations, this chapter concludes by defining the research gap which the current literature leaves. Here, I argue that the literature on business-humanitarian partnerships so far has ignored the role of corporations in developing humanitarian technologies, and as such has neglected to go beyond the current debate to consider whether or not they should be part of the humanitarian community. There is a need for critical inquiry into the way businesses impact on the idea of humanitarian action as sociotechnical powerholders themselves.

## A TRADITIONAL IMAGINARY OF AID: HUMANITARIAN ACTION AS HUMAN COMPASSION AND ALTRUISM

There is no one, set-in-stone definition of humanitarian action, as it is motivated and oriented in multiple ways (Calhoun 2008). However, one of the most widely acknowledged and relevant interpretations of the term might date back to 1863 when Henry Dunant created the basis of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Warner 2013, 3–4). His idea of humanitarianism originates from a religiously influenced charity, focusing on the protection of innocent civilians. This understanding has become an accepted term and concept and, inspired by Dunant, a set of socially agreed connotations has evolved to comprise what humanitarian action traditionally stands for: a moral legitimacy; the desire to help others; and altruistic motives, growing out of human compassion and pity (Carbonnier 2015b). Slim (2015) describes the humanitarian ethos as the feeling of compassion and responsibility towards others who are living and suffering in extremis, and is the ground for humanitarianism and for ethics in humanitarian action. Humanitarian action as an imaginary of human compassion and pity is commonly known; however, it became increasingly criticised, as I show later in this chapter.

The interpretation of humanitarian action as the provision of the compassionate relief of suffering is closely related with humanitarian principles: Humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality are fundamental to humanitarian aid (ICRC 2015). OCHA (2010, 1) specifies the definition of each principle: ‘Humanity’ means that “Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings”. Humanitarian action therefore addresses human suffering, whether caused by natural disaster or by war and conflict. The principles of neutrality and impartiality guide how this assistance is given, with ‘neutrality’ indicating that “Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature” and ‘impartiality’ meaning that “Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender,



religious belief, class or political opinions.” Operationally, ‘independence’ means that “Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.”

Indeed, the commitment to humanitarian principles differentiates humanitarianism from other forms of assistance, such as development activities (Bennet 2016a, 47). Today, they build the ethical foundation for aid delivery, and their universal, not-evolving is widely accepted and acknowledged as the expression and aspiration of humanitarian action (Hilhorst and Schmiemann 2002, 490). Humanitarian principles are endorsed in the General Assembly Resolution 46/182 passed in 1991, and in Resolution 58/114 passed in 2004, as well as expressed in the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct, which is signed by 481 humanitarian organisations (Mackintosh 2003; OCHA 2010). Thus, referring to principles has been essential in legitimising all types of intervention in crises (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010, 1118). In fact, to become member of the humanitarian community has required a commitment to these principles, thus: “to be classified as humanitarian, aid should be consistent with the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence” (Carbonnier 2015a, 40).

Besides these core humanitarian principles, there are others which are internationally recognised and that complement principled humanitarian action. ‘Do No Harm’ (DNH) is one of the most important and widely acknowledged, developed in light of an increasing awareness of the potential negative impacts of aid activities: that humanitarian action carries the risk of doing harm, either directly, by damaging aid recipients, or indirectly by enabling or bringing about the wrongful acts of others (Slim 2015, 184). Its origin is rooted in medical practice and dates back to the Hippocratic oath, but was developed for humanitarian action by Mary Anderson in the 1990s (Bonis Charancle and Lucchi 2018, 5). Gradually, DNH was recognised not just as an approach, but also a principle guiding humanitarian action. It has no clear definition but is usually taken to mean “to avoid exposing people to additional risks through our action” and “taking a step back from an intervention to look at the broader context

and mitigate potential negative effects on the social fabric, the economy and the environment” (Bonis Charancle and Lucchi 2018, 9).

The literature has critically examined how traditional humanitarian organisations use principles not only as guidance for action, but as ‘gatekeepers’ to exclude ‘others’. For decades, the community of humanitarians has embraced a core group of – Western – institutions that refer themselves to these principles, including key institutional donors, UN agencies, the RCRC and national and international NGOs (Currion 2018, 3). Dubois (2018, 2), for example, reminds us that principles must be seen as expression of “hegemonic operations of a Western-oriented relief system.” Similarly, Sezgin and Deijkzeul (2016) show that formal humanitarian actors embrace the language of humanitarian principles and uphold an imagined exceptionalism in order to guard against the entry of ‘outside’ actors. In addition to a critical post-colonial perspective, Bennet (2016a, 50) discusses how in practice, the “principles often sit uneasily” with the reality of crisis situations and require trade-offs in their use. For example, multi-mandated organisations combine their humanitarian work with development activities and are thus also concerned with political and societal change. Moreover, Hilhorst and Schnieman (2002, 490) point out that the strict adherence to all principles is not feasible in every conflict setting, and that often humanitarian workers have to prioritise and interpret principles in their everyday use. In this sense, Bennet (2016) argues for a “more honest application” of humanitarian principles: she recognises their value as foundational guides but criticises their carrying of an inherent bias which disqualifies ‘non-humanitarian’ organisations as legitimate providers of relief. However, as we will see later in this chapter, various scholars from within and outside the humanitarian community welcome some types of ‘non-humanitarian’ organisation, namely, corporate companies, to join the community, albeit their ethical values and compliance with principles are in question. Before we turn to this point, however, the next section discusses how the image of traditional humanitarian organisations as legitimate actors has been eroded.

## THE LEGITIMACY CRISIS OF 'TRADITIONAL' HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS

For decades, humanitarian organisations enjoyed, “due to the immediacy of the need to which they respond” (Kent, Armstrong, and Obrecht 2013, 14), a high degree of acceptance as legitimate actors in humanitarian crises. However, this acceptance has dramatically decreased since the mid-1990s, when humanitarian organisations started to find themselves confronted with a crisis of legitimacy. As Bennet (2016a, 68) stated, “The norms and values of the system no longer represent the interests of today’s humanitarian stakeholders, and are no longer able to instil a sense of relevance and trust in aid recipients.” As an example, *The Economist* (2000, 129) provocatively questioned the legitimacy of NGOs in humanitarian aid by asking, “Who elected Oxfam?” This question refers to the fundamental difficulty of “Where do NGOs take the claim for legitimacy in representing views of the poor or marginalized, given the fact that most NGOs are neither membership organizations nor elected bodies” (Ebrahim 2003, 815). In other words, if there are no voters who democratically elect organisations, who then is the authorising environment that legitimises an organisation’s presence in humanitarian aid? As such, as Kent et al. (2013, 30) similarly state, “Humanitarian organisations depend on the trust of those with whom they interact, whether in form of loyalty, acceptance, or otherwise, they must be able to earn that trust through action.” Although trust plays a pivotal role in gaining legitimacy, Slim (2002, sec. 11) emphasises it can take on a life of its own: “[It] can rely on image rather than reality and may not require any empirical experience to influence people one way or the other.”

It is precisely the imaginary of the compassionate humanitarian, embodying pity and a moral sense of the importance of human life in Dunant’s tradition, which has eroded as reference point for trust in humanitarian organisations. In fact, this idea of humanitarian aid has been degraded as a utopian ideal, and instead replaced with an increasing demand for more ‘efficient’, ‘effective’ and ‘professional’ humanitarian interventions. Facing growing criticism about their effectiveness and efficiency, humanitarian organisations have come under pressure from within the community and

from donor governments to become more rational and professional (Barnett 2011; Carbonnier 2015a, 2015b). Partly, this is related to the nature and development of today's humanitarian crises. They are increasingly complex and protracted, and cause immense political, ethical and operational challenges. It has become the "new normal" that people are forced to remain displaced for years (UNHCR 2015c). Today, the average humanitarian crisis lasts more than nine years, an increase from an average length of 5.2 years in 2014 (OCHA 2019b). In combination with the high human cost of natural disasters, difficult political situations in crisis-affected areas, rising food insecurity and insufficient funding, this represents major challenges for the provision of the humanitarian aid that attempts to address all such crises (Hoxtell, Norz, and Teicke 2015; Kent and Burke 2012). All of these challenges amplify, as OCHA (2019b) reminds us, the call for more efficient and effective assistance. This means that humanitarian action requires not just providing a short-term response when a disaster or emergency strikes, but also protecting and caring for the long-term needs of displaced people in situations where aid recipients become settled into new environments.

Simultaneously, since the 1990s, a trend towards neomanagerialism has swept humanitarian organisations (Barnett 2005; Binder and Witte 2007; Carbonnier 2015a). This involves the adoption of business management approaches, such as a division of labour among staff within humanitarian organisations, and the specialisation, formalisation and standardisation of workflow (Binder and Witte 2007, 6). This means, Barnett (2005, 725) explains, that humanitarian action has become:

"increasingly rationalized, standardizing basic codes of conduct for intervention, developing accountability mechanisms, and calculating the consequences of actions. It became bureaucratized, developing precise rules that ideally could be applied across different situations. It became professionalized, developing doctrines, specialized areas of training, and career paths."

This development is closely related to New Public Management reforms embracing marketisation, professionalisation and liberalisation in the spirit of neoliberalism,

implemented in the wider environment of state bureaucracy and services since the 1990s. Specifically, the transition has been happening in light of a broad claim for neoliberal reforms in political steering and organisation of society as a response to the 1970s recession in much of the Western world. The normative argument reflects a fundamental problematisation of the role of the state, which is condemned as inefficient and ineffective in producing and delivering public goods (Duffield 2001). There was a deep discomfort with the state as the main locus for policy-making and implementation, and the state was “accused of being too closed, formalistic, narrow-minded, conservative, rigid, uncoordinated, and exclusive” (Torfing et al. 2012, 9). Instead, the role of various actors from the private sector and civil society was increased, in particular through ‘private-public partnerships’ and enhanced competition among actors. The emphasis on the capacity for ‘self-regulation and self-organisation’ of society has led to a division of responsibilities and labour between state and non-state actors in order to achieve more ‘efficient’ and ‘effective’ social services (Neil 2009, 239). In this sense, social services are provided by four sectors, including the government, voluntary, informal and commercial sectors. These are “embedded in the public and private domain of the social market of the welfare state, which is separate but overlaps with the economy of the market of capitalist society” (Neil 2009, 236). This development has been based on the idea that “privatization and decentralisation offers the most efficient approach to the production of and delivery of social services” (Neil 2009, 243).

Neomanagerialism within humanitarian aid has been followed by today’s institutional isomorphism, as Currion (2018, 5) observes. This means humanitarian organisations behave increasingly similar to their for-profit counterparts by copying “the[ir] structures, interests and procedures” (Cooley and Ron 2002, 13–14). As a result, the humanitarian community, particularly the largest organisations, has become increasingly corporate. Fiori et al. (2016, 13) add that “Neo-managerialism in the humanitarian sector has been shaped in part by the culture, objectives and practices of humanitarian organisations, which have assumed the symbols of [New Public Management] as their own.” It seems that the borders between humanitarian organisations and private companies have become blurred. Vincent (2011, 897) is

worried that, “By creating large-scale administration or by copying the multinationals, [the humanitarian sector] will come to identify itself through its structure rather than its humanitarian mission.” However, not only have humanitarian organisations been influenced by the private sector in terms of management philosophy and corporate culture, but the ideals of neoliberalism and an increasing trust in competitive forms of market can be observed in various aspects of humanitarian aid, as will be shown next.

## THE RISE OF A NEOLIBERAL IMAGINARY: MARKETISATION OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The studies presented thus far suggest that in light of a wider neoliberalisation of the state, traditional humanitarian organisations have undergone a fundamental crisis of legitimacy. This section has a closer look at the literature which discusses the role of marketisation processes within humanitarian aid and their implications for what it means. In particular, from the studies reviewed for this section, two major transformations within humanitarian action can be observed. Firstly, a humanitarian crisis becomes increasingly imagined as a marketplace, which has its very specific connotations in terms of who ‘buys’, ‘sells’ and ‘competes’ for ‘humanitarian products’. This development is closely related with the implementation of various approaches and tools adopted by humanitarian organisations, of which the log frame and accountability assessments will be discussed, which reflect the push towards quantifiable and predictable ‘product’ outputs and outcomes in the spirit of neo-managerialism. Secondly, for-profit businesses enter the humanitarian marketplace and become important partners for traditional humanitarian organisations. With these, a new association of who is recognised as a legitimate ‘humanitarian actor’ develops, despite the existence of differences in moral fundamentals or organisational goals. In the following subsections, these two themes are elaborated in more detail.

### HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AS A MARKETPLACE

Curion (2018, 5) reminds us that a crucial characteristic of the prevailing neoliberalism imaginary is the extension of market mechanisms into realms that historically were not seen as a marketplace. Indeed, today’s humanitarian crises and humanitarian system

are increasingly associated with a 'marketplace' due to the incentive structures put in place by donors which have turned humanitarian aid into a quasi-market, as Krause (2014) plausibly argues.

Within this marketplace, who are perceived as the 'buyers' and 'sellers'? What is the 'product'? According to Krause's exploration, a humanitarian programme is the commodity that is exchanged in the humanitarian market: humanitarian organisations are the sellers, offering 'products' in the form of aid projects. The main buyer, and hence the main client for humanitarian assistance services, are the donors. As such, "What is being consumed by donors are not pots and pans or tents or food, but the act of giving" (Krause 2014, 47). As the unit of production is the aid project, humanitarian organisations seek to do effective programmes which are attractive to potential buyers, namely, donors. It also follows that those assisted – the aid recipients – become part of the commodity.<sup>7</sup> Krause's elaboration is plausible, and illustrates that commodities do not necessarily comprise merely material products, but are rather characterised by "processes of transforming literally anything into a privatized form of (fictitious) commodity that can be exchanged in the market [and] are thus of critical importance for both the rise and continuing reproduction of capitalism" (Prodnik 2012, 247).

Neomanagerialism, which I introduced above, and the humanitarian market promote the connotation of humanitarian assistance as "simple commodities or services that are delivered repeatedly [which] are amenable to standardisation and are easy to monitor" (Davies 2007, 13). Krause (2014) refines this, stating that the humanitarian project has indeed become a measurable unit of humanitarian work for a defined population over a particular timeframe. She demonstrates that this product is the outcome of a managerial tool: the logframe.<sup>8</sup> The logframe was first used as a planning approach by the US military, and then adopted by the US space agency NASA. In the

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<sup>7</sup> Similarly, but with a slightly different emphasis, Binder and Witte (2007) argue that aid organisations are the producers, donors the buyers and aid recipients the actual consumers, whereas this market is loaded with asymmetries as aid recipients have few options to complain or airing grievances.

<sup>8</sup> Logframe is another word for Logical Framework or Logical Framework Approach. It is a planning tool for projects and consists of a matrix of rows and columns that gives an overview about project's goals, activities, and anticipated results. It also includes indicators to monitor the progress and results. For more information about Logframe, and how it is applied, see, for example, ICRC (2008).

1960s, USAID started to use it for development projects. In the 1980s, it was increasingly adopted by European development organisations and by the end of the 1990s it had become a universal standard tool required by many donors for grant applications (Hailey and Sorgenfrei 2004, 7). With a focus on clearly delineating and achieving singular goals, “Management tools like the logframe do not determine what people do, but they shape it: they shape what people get to see and know about the world, and the people’s idea about what the task before them is” (Krause 2014, 76). With its specific outcomes, definite dates and established budgets, the project lends itself to a coherent narrative that tells the story of the work done by humanitarians to both external (for which, read donors) and internal audiences (Krause 2014, 25). Similarly, Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman (2007, 34–35) note that the prevalence of the logframe in the sector is in line with the dominance of neomanagerialism and the idea of “rational management” aiming controlled and predictable change. Krause’s and Wallace, Bornstein and Chapman’s observations are further supported by Lindenberg and Bryant (2001, 212, cited in Roberts et al. 2005, 1851) who observe that neomanagerialism techniques “entail the adoption of standard accounting practices and the production of “quantities of information””. Similarly, Shukla et al. (2016, 7) criticise that hard facts, standardised numbers and comparable results have become an imperative to satisfy results-based management and ‘payment by results’ as pushed by donors.

In a similar spirit, namely, to produce standardised and measurable results, but originating from the business world, the language of ‘accountability and transparency’ has become the lingua franca adopted by every non-profit organisation to prove to donors the worthiness of their products (Unerman and O’Dwyer 2006). Accountability performance exists in the form of various mechanisms, such as annual accountability reports and disclosure statements, performance assessments and evaluations, participation, self-regulation, social audits, and stakeholder analysis to measure the success of this commodity (Ebrahim 2003). Most humanitarian organisations, in common with for-profit companies, have established accountability departments, and are mainly kept accountable upwards to donors by demonstrating how they spend “designated money for designated purposes” (Ebrahim 2003, 417). Reporting usually



takes place in the organisation's headquarters, geographically often based in Europe, Australia, and the USA. This means "The process of financing, priority-setting, reporting, judging and enforcing occurs outside of the crisis zone, and often with little or no reference to the victims of that crisis" (Davies 2007, 13). NGO headquarters themselves rely on data generated by their country offices, but, due to the rigid accountability tools, Davies (2007, 13) pointedly asks: "How much room do [country offices] really have to respond to what they hear?" Similarly, Shukla et al. (2016, 7) observe that the experience of many NGO workers at the field level is that donor's targets have little to do to with the actual complexity of their work, and hence they feel as if they mostly produce rhetorical data in an attempt to demonstrate their achievements.

#### BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Within the humanitarian market, Krause (2014, 14) observes that humanitarian organisations are "Tacitly preoccupied with organisational survival, and in unstable or competitive markets, aid contractors cannot take their survival as a given." Securing new contracts or renewing existing ones therefore becomes an important aspect of organisational survival and is the best way to remain solvent. As a consequence, these organisations have been forced, by the pressure for efficient and efficient humanitarian action, and by facing an increasing number of humanitarian crises and a short-fall in funding, to access novel financial and other resources, such as expertise and technologies. In fact, the observation can be made that traditional humanitarian organisations are turning increasingly towards corporate companies to establish partnerships, which emerge either as an alternative source of funding or of other resources such as skills (Barnett 2011; Carbonnier 2015a; Kent and Burke 2012; Sezgin and Dijkzeul 2016). Then "how better to succeed in this marketplace than to partner with organisations that have already succeeded in another marketplace?", Currión (2018, 5) points this logic out. As such, Weiss (2013, 5–6) reflects how corporations are on both sides of the humanitarian market, as buyers (both financial or in-kind donor) and suppliers (when directly contracted):

"Among the 'buyers' of humanitarian services are governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), corporations, and individuals (i.e.,

compositely ‘donors’) . . . . Typical ‘suppliers’ would obviously include aid agencies, but also for-profit actors such as private military and security companies (PMSCs).”

Therefore, partnerships between humanitarian organisations and large corporations are, despite differences in size, technologies, expertise, economic power, organisational goals, ethical values, moral foundations and legal jurisdictions, increasingly important. By subcontracting or by partnering with them, operations are outsourced to ‘new’, market-oriented actors that are seen as more ‘efficient’, ‘effective’ and ‘competent’. However, the literature on these partnerships varies in terms of definition and application, as I show next.

#### PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIPS IN HUMANITARIAN AID: DEFINITIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The literature has an inconsistent use of definitions for such partnerships. Andonova and Carbonnier (2014, 351) use the term ‘business-humanitarian partnership’ as a particular category of multi-stakeholder arrangement or private-public-partnership, by specifying that “Business–humanitarian partnerships typically involve one or several firms as well as an intergovernmental or a non-governmental humanitarian organization.” Drummon and Crawford (2014), meanwhile, use the term ‘public-private partnerships’, while Zyck and Kent (2014, 7) refer to private sector engagement broadly as any role played by businesses in relief activities, whether as a supplier to aid agencies, financial donor, technical advisor, innovator, or a direct provider of aid. Hoxtell, Norz and Teicke (2015) apply two definitions to business engagement in humanitarian response, differentiating between commercial and non-commercial engagement. The first refers to a company contracted or subcontracted by a donor or a humanitarian organisation to directly implement humanitarian services. These engagements have a direct financial incentive for companies. Non-commercial engagements refer to the definition of ‘partnerships’ as developed and used by the United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/66/223 that emphasise the voluntary character of relationships between both public and non-public actors, in which they work together to achieve a mutual goal and share risks and responsibilities

as well as resources and benefits.<sup>9</sup> In non-commercial partnerships, businesses are partners in helping implement humanitarian activities or designing new products (Hoxtell et al. 2015, 13). The authors exclude corporate philanthropy, because in their view this means that businesses are not involved in the actual implementation of humanitarian services or disaster risk management.

Despite the growing body of research into businesses in humanitarian assistance – which cannot be described anymore as “in its infancy” (Binder and Witte 2007, 26) – no consistent criteria are used to differentiate forms of private-public partnership. With Zyck and Kent (2014) being an exception, the literature uses various criteria to categorise business engagement in humanitarian assistance. The most common boundary is made between commercial and non-commercial business engagement, while non-commercial engagement is often used as synonym for philanthropy, as for example applied by Nurmala, de Leeuw, and Dullaert (2017). However, and as mentioned above, Hoxtell, Norz and Teicke (2015) explicitly exclude corporate philanthropy from their interpretations of commercial and non-commercial engagement. Johnson (2009), in the meantime, emphasises the aspect of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as an important characteristic in his typology which separates non-commercial from for-profit/commercial partnerships. Another dominant criterion used to distinguish private-public partnerships in humanitarian assistance is the form of business contribution they make. Nurmala, de Leeuw, and Dullaert (2017) differentiate between cash, goods, services and a combination of all forms of contribution. Similarly, Kent and Burke (2012) draw a line between financial support and in-kind donations of goods. More detailed, Andonova and Carbonnier (2014) separate resource mobilisation, operational collaboration and joint advocacy. Hoxtell, Norz, and Teicke (2015) provide probably the most sophisticated typology, by offering two different models of commercial engagement which distinguish between subcontracting and contracting businesses. They also split non-commercial engagement into detailed partnerships, ranging from resource mobilisation partnerships, implementation partnerships, advocacy partnerships and system

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on the UN definition of partnerships, see: [https://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/about\\_the\\_gc/government\\_support/FINAL\\_A\\_RES\\_66\\_223.pdf](https://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/about_the_gc/government_support/FINAL_A_RES_66_223.pdf) (accessed November 1, 2019).

coordination initiatives, and innovation partnerships. Moreover, criteria can be built dependent on the number of actors involved, the form of business contribution, the duration of an engagement, or the stage of disaster/crisis at which a business gets involved (Andonova and Carbonnier 2014; Binder and Witte 2007; Kent and Burke 2012; Nurmala, de Leeuw, and Dullaert 2017). Table 1 summarises the different categorisations used in the literature:

**TABLE 1: CATEGORIES OF PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP USED IN LITERATURE**

Author(s)	Commercial vs. non-commercial	Number of actors	Form of contribution	Duration	Stage of disaster/crisis
Johnson (2009)	For-profit/commercial engagement vs. non-commercial/corporate social responsibility				
Binder and Witte (2007)		Single company engagement vs. partnerships vs. meta-initiatives			
Nurmala, de Leeuw, and Dullaert (2017)  Note: focus on humanitarian logistic only	Philanthropic vs. commercial relationship	With a single humanitarian organisation vs. jointly with a consortium vs. multi-stakeholder initiative	Cash vs. goods vs. Services vs a combination	Short-term ad hoc vs. long-term strategic	Phase of disaster
Zyck and Kent (2014)	No clear category				
Andonova and Carbonnier (2014)		Number of stakeholders	Resource mobilisation vs. operational collaboration vs. joint advocacy		
Kent and Burke (2012)	Partnership and collaboration with humanitarian organisation vs. direct commercial engagement within the sphere of humanitarian sphere OR outside of this sphere		Financial support or in-kind donations of goods vs. provision of technical support services		Humanitarian response vs. crisis prevention vs. reconstruction
	Commercial engagements:				

Hoxtell, Norz and Teicke (2015)	Model 1: Subcontracting: (relief agency-company)				
	Model 2: Contracting (donor-company)				
	Non-commercial as 'partnership' used by UN		Resource mobilisation vs. implementation partnerships vs. innovation partnerships vs. system coordination initiatives vs. advocacy partnerships		

This overview shows that while the criteria used to differentiate the involvement of businesses in humanitarian action vary greatly, it seems the literature circles mainly around three types of 'business-humanitarian partnerships', which I classify as follows:

- Philanthropic partnerships which involve the donation of money or products but not any further involvement by businesses.
- Non-commercial partnerships rooted in a company's CSR strategy, involving the implementation of humanitarian programmes or the development of products by a business, through the provision of staff, expertise, technologies, or other forms of support.
- Commercial partnerships where businesses are contracted or sub-contracted by humanitarian organisations to implement humanitarian services.

In applying either implicitly or explicitly these types of partnerships, the role of a business in these studies is usually assumed to be clear-cut, either as donor, voluntary implementing partner, or paid implementing partner. Moreover, the three types seem rooted in the understanding that partnerships are clearly divided into businesses and humanitarians while businesses 'drop in' and 'drop out' of the humanitarian realm, a point which I take up again when elaborating the research gap.

## BUSINESS MOTIVES FOR ENGAGING IN HUMANITARIAN AID

What are the motives for businesses to engage in a high-risk environment such as a crisis context or post-disaster setting? The literature observes a mix between CSR reasons and more direct commercial interests. Weiss (2013, 5) notes that “Contributing to saving lives can be a means to another end, a by-product in the pursuit of less lofty goals, including . . . “soft power”, a positive corporate image, and even raw financial profit.” Carbonnier (2015a, 189) reminds us that “The business of business is business: corporations pursue profit and shareholder-value maximation.” Yet businesses can be driven by direct or indirect commercial motives to engage in humanitarian assistance. More direct commercial motives involve using humanitarian engagement, as Kent and Burke (2012, 14) show, as a strategy to gain knowledge of and access to new markets, and valid experience of doing business in difficult environments. Andonova and Carbonnier (2014, 357) reflect that businesses might hope to get a competitive advantage by entering new markets soon after a humanitarian crisis. A study by OCHA (2017) confirms that more direct commercial motives become increasingly important for businesses, and observes that companies’ humanitarian involvement is no longer driven exclusively by CSR. While still an important motivation, “Companies are increasingly investing to enhance their business assets, their own resilience and the resilience of communities that may be affected by humanitarian crises” (OCHA 2017, 9). However, pressure from consumers, employees and a growing segment of the investment community to demonstrate good corporate citizenship remains an important aspect of increased business engagement (Thomas and Fritz 2006). Johnson (2009, 229) adds that although CSR-driven engagements do not have a direct profit motive, they contribute to a company’s long-term commercial benefits. In particular, humanitarian-related work contributes to a better working environment and enhances employee satisfaction, which generates loyalty for the company, as Kent and Burke (2012, 13) point out. Put differently, enhancing a positive brand image, motivating staff and improved visibility are key benefits of CSR activities in humanitarian aid (Binder and Witte 2007). Johnson (2009, 229) nevertheless reminds us that the reasons for for-profit engagement could be more complex. He thinks that while a business itself may be profit-motivated, the staff and founders might also be rooted in the desire to do good and are convinced that a for-profit

orientation is the preferred way to do so. Similarly, Kent and Burke (2012, 13) reflect that in some cases, the personal satisfaction of senior managers provides a valid motive for commercial engagement.

#### A DIVIDED BODY OF LITERATURE ON THE ROLE OF BUSINESSES IN HUMANITARIAN AID

To date, a number of studies have attempted to investigate the roles of humanitarian and corporate organisations in partnerships. However, there is a divide in what literature assesses the increasing role of corporate companies within humanitarianism as a positive development and what sources are more cautious. Many of the studies in support of the private sector come from policy papers, while most are published by the Overseas Development Institute, a global think tank. These studies highlight benefits and risks for both sides of business-humanitarian partnerships and provide recommendations of how to increase the quality of partnerships in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. For example, Bailey (2014) analysed the role of businesses in humanitarian assistance in Haiti, with a focus on the international response to the earthquake which struck Port-au-Prince in 2010. The author (2014, 1) investigated enabling factors and barriers, and concluded that, despite the existence of mistrust, humanitarian and business engagement offer “the potential for increasing financial resources, accessing technical capacity and supporting the local economy”. Similarly, Drummond and Crawford (2014) investigated business engagement in Kenya during the 2011 drought response, concluding that it was relevant to persuade businesses to engage with the humanitarian community, but that it would require effort to convince it about the resultant benefits. Zyck and Kent (2014, 5) see an “immense potential and wide-ranging benefits” and formulate recommendations that should help to eliminate misunderstanding by enhancing trust and facilitating collaborations. Among other positive aspects, they argue (2014, 5) that “businesses’ pursuit of new customers and profits has helped mitigate vulnerability in crisis-prone areas by fostering growth, broadening access to banking and telecommunications services, increasing access to goods and services and so on.” Bennet (2016c, 12) is similarly enthusiastic and welcomes the increasing role of private sector companies by insisting that the humanitarian community should let go of the idea that only humanitarians can provide effective relief and accept that different forms of relief . . . can co-exist and be equally

legitimate". She is convinced that effectively addressing people's needs, not ideology, should dictate operational approaches and tools. This view is supported by Kent and Burke (2012, 60) who write that business-humanitarian partnerships should be seen as "a potential for a new social compact to emerge that links commercial and humanitarian actors."

Taking into account that policy papers are likely to be more positive and reformist in their assessment, there is, however, amount of critical agreement in the academic and scholarly peer reviewed literature. In general, Wendy Brown claims that the salient features of private-public partnerships are 'inclusiveness', stakeholder 'consultation' and 'cooperation', but that in reality, "Contemporary neoliberal governance operates through isolating and entrepreneurship responsible units and individuals" (Brown 2015, 131). The commodification of humanitarianism "eliminates from discussion politically, ethically, or otherwise normatively infected dimensions of policy, aiming to supersede politics with practical, technical approaches to problems" (Brown 2015, 131). Such development, in her opinion, is masked as neutral discourse; in fact, it is the "lingua franca of both the political and business establishment with a displacement of questions of right with questions of efficiency, even questions of legality with those of efficacy" (Brown 2015, 131). Similarly, Hopgood (2008, 123) argues that "The logic of capital is to make us see one another as partners in a variety of instrumental exchange. The very logic of humanitarianism is to reject this idea precisely by helping those with whom no exchange is possible, whatever the Global Compact may say." By upholding humanitarian aid as symbol for human compassion in Dunant's sense, the author (2008, 113) expresses his discomfort, as "It seems that humanitarianism is about solidarity with suffering, rather than a simple meeting of needs."

With business motives for humanitarian engagement comes a critical assessment of their application of humanitarian principles. In case of point, Barnett (2005, 725) wonders "if commercial firms were really more efficient at saving lives, and if nonprofits were acting like corporate entities, then what exactly distinguishes the two?" Kent and Burke (2012, 17) point out that as a result of the pressure in engaging in business-humanitarian partnerships, "humanitarians feel the need to accept more business interests in collaborative initiatives than they may consider ethical from a



humanitarian point of view, or that they feel are inconsistent with humanitarian principles.” According to Binder and Witte (2007, 16), there is no systematic tension between non-commercial business engagement and principles; however, they conclude that “only a very few [corporate companies] were actually aware of humanitarian principles, or the debates around them in the humanitarian sector”. Hopgood (2005, 4) adds that “profit-oriented companies are less concerned about humanitarian principles than [humanitarian organisations]”. Although Bennet (2016a) pointed out that the compromising of humanitarian principles by humanitarian organisations is already reality, Hoxtell, Norz, and Teicke (2015, 14) identify the perception that this is usually “due to humanitarian concerns and difficult circumstances, while companies compromise the principles to make higher profits.”

Moreover, Andonova and Carbonnier (2014), and Carbonnier and Lightfoot (2016) ask if business-humanitarian partnerships might hurt the independence, impartiality and neutrality of the humanitarian agency involved, or might privilege large business companies in terms of the public provision of human security and democratic accountability. An example is Johnson (2009, 230) who elaborates how USAID requests its officers to use private firms rather than NGOs “in situations where the U.S. Government has a strong interest in maintaining regular oversight and control” and how this is at odds with the principles of impartial and neutral humanitarian aid. As a result of such tensions, there have been several attempts to strengthen principles and business-humanitarian partnership through guidelines. Among others, the WEF and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have devised a set of principles to guide business-humanitarian collaboration.

Together, these studies provide important insights into the evolving idea of humanitarian aid. All the studies reviewed here support the assumption that neoliberal processes of marketisation affect humanitarian aid in the sense of how crises become interpreted, how new types of intervention reimagine people in need, and how businesses become acknowledged as new members within the humanitarian community. However, there remain several aspects of this fundamental shift about which relatively little is known, namely, how businesses as powerful actors themselves transform the idea of humanitarian aid, and what important role technology (and the

control over it) plays in creating new associations of what humanitarian aid stands for. This research gap is discussed in more depth in the next section.

## RESEARCH GAP

So far, this chapter has discussed how the idea of (Western) humanitarian aid as principled human compassion, with its origin in Henry Dunant's formulation, has been challenged from both within and outside the humanitarian community. Embedded in a wider reconstruction of society in light of neoliberalist visions, the meaning of humanitarian aid and the perception of humanitarian organisations have been dramatically transformed. It has been shown that originally humanitarianism connotated "the moral man in immoral society" (Warner 2013, 12) who steps in to protect innocent civilians, driven by noble sentiments and inspired by a theological code of conduct. Today, these affirmations have become degraded in the literature into utopian phantasy which in reality never existed and are only upheld by some humanitarian traditionalists. Instead, new visions have risen and are replacing the idea of to what humanitarian aid should aspire and how it should be delivered.

The aforementioned literature demonstrates how visions of neoliberalism have diffused into the humanitarian community, becoming embodied by members and manifested in practices and perceptions of what is seen as an appropriate form of aid and who is recognised as legitimate humanitarian actor. However, while the very fundament of what humanitarian aid stands for is currently in transition, all of the aforementioned studies have some major drawbacks, in that they do not address the question of how businesses themselves wield the power in their envisioning of a future of humanitarian aid that might become hegemonic.

Instead, existing literature on businesses in humanitarian aid appears focused either on aspects of efficiency and effectiveness, and the provision of policy recommendations, or on their legitimacy as humanitarian actors. As mentioned above, there are many studies on business engagement in humanitarian aid which compare and evaluate the different forms of business-humanitarian partnerships in light of their performance or ethical fundament. However, this study argues that business engagements and their 'outputs' cannot be described and understood as something

that simply happen by and for themselves, nor is it plausible that they are merely new humanitarians who eventually become incorporated into the existing humanitarian realm. Certainly, critical literature provides important normative reflections about the morality of those new actors within the humanitarian community. As already shown, elaborations on the ethics of their motives and the risks of a 'culture clash' between humanitarian organisations and corporate partners are rich and detailed. However, within the existing literature, one aspect has so far been neglected: businesses themselves create new expectations about future humanitarian orders, yet little is known about their influence on the idea of humanitarian assistance. Although it is acknowledged that businesses are key actors as both 'buyers' and 'sellers' of humanitarian projects, surprisingly the literature on business-humanitarian partnerships has been downplayed that they also contribute significantly to the creation of the 'product' by developing humanitarian technologies.

As a matter of fact, technology plays a crucial role in processes of marketisation and hence in the marketisation of humanitarian aid. Çaliskan and Callon (2010, 3) elaborate how the market can be seen as a sociotechnical arrangement, highlighting the importance of technical devices and technical knowledge, as well as the skills and competences embodied by market actors. In the field of humanitarian action, Scott-Smith (2016) emphasises that the turn towards innovation and technologies is driven and self-sustained by processes of marketisation, precisely because capitalism is characterised by cycles of competitiveness and innovations that keep the market going. Indeed, the focus on new technologies within the humanitarian community was marked by the 2016 Humanitarian Summit, when 'transformation through innovation' was one of the four core themes thought to spur innovative partnerships. There are multiple examples of projects in which business-humanitarian collaborations have been used to develop technologies; for instance, Microsoft and OCHA partnered to develop an inter-agency website to improve humanitarian coordination. Another example is Ericsson, which works with Refugee United to help reconnect displaced Syrian families.

However, the longer-term consequences of humanitarian technologies present profound unknowns, as Kent, Armstrong and Obrecht (2013) remark. According to

Sandvik et al. (2014), the majority of the literature in humanitarian studies deals with new technologies with tech-optimism. Likewise, Scott-Smith (2013) observes an “object fetishism” in humanitarian action, where new technologies are often seen to make humanitarian action more effective and inclusive, and are overall presented as a miracle solution to humanitarian problems. However, this PhD study prompts us to consider that by developing new humanitarian technologies and providing innovations, businesses are not just simply donors or implementing partners but simultaneously actors with the sociotechnical power to shape the meaning of humanitarian assistance in their holding of visions and aspirations which directly impinge upon the very idea of humanitarian aid. Sandvik et al. (2014, 7) remind us that “The turn to technology changes perceptions of what aid is, and what it means to provide it.” Humanitarian technology “is not “bad” – but neither is it neutral, or just passively adopted by society”, as the authors (2014, 7) point out, and so “Technology is not an empty vessel waiting to be imbued with “humanitarian meaning.” Rather, society and technology engage mutually. Similarly, Jacobsen (2015) urges that with new humanitarian technologies, new layers of political complexity are added which may challenge humanitarian principles. In addition, Sandvik (2014, 27) laments that technological progress does not equate to automatic improvement, and that questions of power distribution, justice and social transformation have been left out of the discussion about humanitarian technologies. If we want, therefore, to understand the current trends and future directions within the humanitarian realm, then, this study argues, we need to acknowledge the capacity of business to shape the meaning of humanitarian aid, namely, its capacities to conjure sociotechnical visions as vital elements in the making of the humanitarian sector. This perspective is particularly significant for an understanding of the ongoing transitions outlined above.

To acknowledge the role of visions and aspirations attached to technologies opens a space in which to reflect critically upon how they work as drivers for change in humanitarian aid; so far, however, little has been done. For example, Currión (2018) recognises that technology – especially new information and communication technologies – is a key driver for system change in humanitarian aid, prophesying that a new mode of networked humanitarian action would inevitably emerge in the twenty-

first century and arguing that networked technologies “drive a structural transformation of global society, away from the assumption of the industrial era and towards the patterns of the information age” (Currion 2018, 1). According to Currion, networks are how our societies connect, communicate, self-organise and self-help, while the humanitarian identity shifts from one defined by its principles to one based on self-organisation and the peer production of assets. For him (2018, 11), “Network humanitarianism offers the opportunity to use technology to fundamentally reshape relationships with aid recipients.” While Currion demonstrates the importance of technologies which shape how the idea of humanitarian aid might change, he omits to ask who actually introduces these technologies, leaving unaddressed the question of who holds power over them. In fact, it is businesses which enable Currion’s version of networked humanitarianism, and the new technologies and innovations which they bring into the humanitarian system require specific skills and knowledge. This study argues that the control of and sovereignty over specific technologies and skills structure and divide actors involved into those who hold the skills and those who do not. As such, humanitarian technologies mirror social visions of how society should be organised and are tied together.

Some scholars of business-humanitarian partnerships describe the growth in innovative partnerships and partly recognise the importance of who has control over which technologies. For example, Kent and Burke (2012) describe how humanitarian aid is increasingly led by technologies and innovations demanding degrees of specialisation, including satellite-transmitted remote sensing to be used to evaluate the condition and movements of displaced people, telemedicine as a new normal, and cash and goods distributed through mobile phone and internet systems. They foresee that when it comes to the question of who might be included in the humanitarian community, it will be those with specific technical skills or progressive innovative capacities, which might be corporate or humanitarian actors. However, it is more likely that business rather than traditional humanitarian actors possess the expertise and resources to develop new humanitarian technologies. For example, Carbonnier and Lightfoot (2014) describe the emerging role of business innovations at all stages of humanitarian interventions, reminding us that businesses increasingly affect the

humanitarian sector itself through innovations which influence how humanitarian aid is performed. As a result, humanitarian organisations, such as the United Nation's Children Fund (UNICEF), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the ICRC, have begun to establish field-based innovation units or platforms to spur innovation. The authors reflect that the introduction of business technologies is not risk-free; issues such as beneficiary data protection are controversial, but so too is the question of whether "digital humanitarians" are acting out of principle (Carbonnier and Lightfoot 2014, 180). Likewise, Duffield (2016) is concerned with "digital humanitarians", criticising the shift from face-to-face engagement with people at need to distant monitoring and remote management enabled by digital technologies. "Such remoteness", Duffield (2016, 146) points out, "is inseparable from the increasing sophistication of the global North's atmospheric ability to digitally rediscover, remap and, importantly, govern anew a now distant South." Nevertheless, neither Carbonnier and Lightfoot nor Duffield enquire into how technologies actually work as carriers for corporate visions, thereby failing to examine the transformative power of technologies on the idea of humanitarian aid.

Some important reflections on this topic come from anthropologist literature on technologies for development and humanitarian aid. A classic article has been written by de Laet and Mol (2000), where the authors are in search for the success of the Zimbabwean bush pump and find the reasons in what they describe as the fluidity of the technology, in terms of its ownership, form, results and ontology. The concept of fluidity was picked up by Redfield (2016), focusing, however, more on how technologies define themselves through a market logic by using the example of the LifeStraw®, a water filter developed by a corporate actor. He (2012, 158) re-emphasises a point the author already made in an article published four years earlier, namely, that technologies reflect "the doubts about state capacity to safeguard populations." It is a statement that resonates with my review above on how neoliberalism and marketisation within humanitarian aid prevailed: in a general climate of mistrust towards the state to provide 'public goods' in an efficient and effective manner, public-private partnerships and corporations have become increasingly welcomed to 'save lives' through their innovations, as Redfield (2012,

2016) argues. In a similar vein, Cross and Street (2009) described some years earlier how Unilever and the company's hygiene initiatives provide soap as 'social good' and combines the creation of new markets with the needs of the poor. Likewise, Scott-Smith (2016), critically observes the increasing role of large businesses in providing technologies. In fact, he uses the term "humanitarian neophilia" to describe an optimistic faith in the possibilities of technology and a commitment to the expansion of markets in humanitarian aid: humanitarian innovation, Scott-Smith (2016, 2242) suggests, "adopts, wholesale, the priorities, language and world-view of the private sector." The author calls for a braver engagement of humanitarians with such development and calls for a rethinking of how independence from neophilia could be achieved, suggesting it could be done through either a recommitment to humanitarian principles, or an evolution towards an assertive humanitarian politics. Scott-Smith (2018) brings then a new point to the conceptual debate by arguing the success of humanitarian technologies lies rather in their stickiness than fluidity. In his study of the Plumpy'nut<sup>®</sup>, a peanut paste for therapeutic feeding, he develops the thought that most humanitarian technologies are between fluid and immutable, they are sticky in form, in ownership, and in use, due to their more limited vision, offering a firm and effective intervention for humanitarians. In an attempt to address and understand the broader trend for these microtechnologies, small technologies and little devices – such as cash transfers, solar lanterns, water filtration systems, and sanitation devices – Collier et al.'s (2017) special issue and later Glasman (2019) argue they focus on the quantification of needs, individual survival and 'self-entrepreneurship' rather than longer-term social transformation, sustained by and sustaining a market logic of things.

All of these anthropologist studies provide crucial insights into how technologies work in their sites of humanitarian and development aid and acknowledge the role of marketisation and corporate companies as important drivers of technologies.

However, interpretative in their nature, they can only provide their own interpretation. Easton (2010, 118) points out that it is problematic "... when the interpretations are particularistic since this would appear to rule out not just regularity as a criterion but also any form of comparison." In different words, these studies provide limited empirical exploration based in causal language to explain the variations

in how and under what conditions businesses exert their sociotechnical power in the making of the humanitarian market, and especially what impact it has on an imaginary of principled aid. In this sense, studying business engagement within humanitarian action does not itself secure a common ground for research which can either be described or purely interpreted, but itself is 'in question'. The relevant aspects of business engagement in humanitarian action are not only whether it is 'efficient', 'effective' or 'legitimate', but rather which social visions of humans (and humanity) businesses hold and can be detected behind such engagement, as well as what the forms of materialisation of these visions look like. If traditional visions of humanitarian aid are exposed as utopic or even harmful, then we have critically to ask what new myths become constructed, as they generate significant real-world consequences for people within the humanitarian realm. Within such a perspective, the focus of this study lies on the performative act of businesses in humanitarian action, particularly how they envision humanitarian assistance through their technologies and establish interpretations of crises, practices and people in need, and themselves as part of the humanitarian community. Adjusting the focus on businesses as generator of visions and in control of technologies allows then a more nuanced analysis of what idea of humanitarian aid and why is going to conquer, and what that means for the humanitarian endeavour.

The next chapter suggests the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries as a theoretical point of departure by which to approach the research questions of this thesis. This concept is promising because it theorises the interplay between visionary technologies and society as a co-production process which establishes widely accepted imaginaries.



# CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL CONCEPT

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to elaborate the theoretical concept underpinning this study. Thus far, the thesis has posited that the meaning of humanitarian action has been in transition. I have identified that a traditional imaginary of compassion, solidarity and humanitarian principles has been modified by visions of neoliberalism and has led to the emergence of a humanitarian market and corporate actors. However, there is a gap in the knowledge about how corporations transform the realm of humanitarian assistance through technologies. Simultaneously, the current literature has neglected to take account of the role of corporate technologies in the making of the humanitarian idea. The relevant questions seem to be those which examine the underlying force and related mechanisms which accompany potentially emergent meanings coming out of these humanitarian technologies.

To approach these questions, there is a need to explore theoretically how meaning is created, the 'fabric' it is made of, and how it materialises and becomes widely shared. This requires a concept to help to explain the process of why and how humanitarian assistance stands for what it does, and how contesting meanings emerge and compete with existing ones. As this chapter shows, the theoretical concept of sociotechnical imaginaries offers a promising way to explore this relation in much more detail.

This chapter is organised in five sections. After this introduction, it traces back the theoretical origins of the 'social imaginary' and discusses Cornelius Castoriadis' (1978) thoughts on the creative force of imagination which constitutes social life. It introduces Benedict Anderson's (1983) highly influential work on 'imagined communities' along with arguments from Arjun Appadurai (1990) and Charles Taylor (2003), who both developed the concept of social imaginary further. Furthermore, I show how the concept of social imaginary has been applied within humanitarian studies to a humanitarian community as 'imagined community', as a way to approach

questions about identity and practices within humanitarian action. I also outline some theoretical drawbacks, which leads to the next section, in which I introduce Jasanoff and Kim's (2015) concept of sociotechnical imaginaries. The section specifies their focus on co-production processes between society and technology as drivers behind imaginaries, which offers a theoretical lens onto my research subject. Moreover, I elaborate how sociotechnical imaginaries can be identified and become materialised into the institutions of social life. In the next section, I examine the various applications of the concept to the study of businesses, which provide crucial insights into how corporations shape sociotechnical imaginaries. I conclude that this theoretical concept offers a promising starting point from which to build an analytical framework that engages with corporations and humanitarian technologies.

## THE CREATIVE FORCE OF IMAGINATION WHICH CONSTITUTES SOCIAL LIFE

How do new visions and aspirations overwrite 'old' ideas of what humanitarian assistance stands for, such that new practices, rules and values might become predominant within any humanitarian endeavour, against the long-lasting humanitarian principles of impartial, human, and neutral humanitarian aid? Put differently, how does such a new order emerge, and its values gain traction? Cornelius Castoriadis can be seen as originator of the idea that imagination constitutes social life, and I start this section firstly by introducing his thoughts, and secondly, elaborating how further refinements by Benedict Anderson (1983), Arjun Appadurai (1990) and Charles Taylor (2003) have influenced scholars to explore the humanitarian community.

### CASTORIADIS' SOCIAL IMAGINARY AS CREATOR OF SOCIETY

Cornelius Castoriadis found his answer in the constitutive, creative force of the imaginary. 'Imaginary' made its first appearance in the academic literature in the 1950s and 1960s thanks to Castoriadis, in particular his publication *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1978). In criticising a Soviet ideology, he asked, "How are a multiplicity of social-historical worlds, in all their novelty and alterity, possible?" (Gaonkar 2002, 6). Influenced by Kant's philosophy of the imagination and Emile Durkeim's thought on collective representations that are the bond of societies, Castoriadis focused on the dynamism behind creation, which is in sharp contrast to an ontology of determinacy (Garner n.d.). For Castoriadis, "Each society is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world, of its own world" (Cornelius Castoriadis 1997, 143). The creation of social forms and structures is a deliberate or unconscious emergence of newness, which is not determined by preceding historical or social conditions. He describes creation as a process "ex nihilo, or as stemming from nothing" (Garner n.d.), which takes place within a set of historical or natural conditions. Thus, society always pre-exists individuals and is a necessary condition for their activity. However, Castoriadis insists that society is a self-creating, self-instituting enterprise, which can generate many different, unforeseeable worlds. This point of an 'open

future' emphasises that there is no predictability of events due to a determinacy of what happens next.

But how does this creation occur? For Castoriadis, "The social-historical world is created ex nihilo in a burst of imaginative praxis . . . . This world-forming and meaning-bestowing creative force is the social imaginary of the instituting society" (Gaonkar 2002, 6), the singular or collective capacity to create society, its structures, practises, norms and beliefs. Castoriadis continues (1978, 143):

"This element, which endows the functionality of each institutional system with its specific orientation, which overdetermines the choice and connections of symbolic networks, which creates for each historical period its singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence, its world and its relations to it, this originary structuring, this central signifier-signified, source of what is each time given as indisputable and undisputed sense, support of the articulations and distinctions of what matters and of what does not, origin of the augmented being (*surcroit d'être*) of the individual or collective objects of practical, affective and intellectual investment—this element is nothing other than the imaginary of the society or period concerned."

It is important to clarify that for Castoriadis, social imaginary significations have real-world consequences: "The central imaginary significations of a society, far from being mere epiphenomena of 'real' forces and relations of productions, are the laces which tie a society together and the forms which define what, for a given society, is 'real'" (Thompson 1984, 24). It is precisely this 'realness' that is of specific interest, because it is the imaginary which accounts for the orientation of social institutions, and the constitution of motives, needs, and beliefs of individuals (Thompson 1984, 23). Castoriadis (Vibrating Athena 2014, own transcript) explains in an interview his point of view:

"Institutions are created by society itself. And . . . we see clearly that they are what I call, imaginary significations, that is, significations that orient the values and activity of the people who live in a society. Such significations cannot, by any means, be supported or justified or even refuted rationally."

He brings up a crucial point: widely acknowledged and respected values are, according to him, irrational and arbitrary; moreover, the rational refutation of institutions would not be of any interest. Rather, the social imaginary is for Castoriadis the mechanism that helps to understand why certain institutions and social practices come to be widely accepted, and from where the desire to follow certain rules, beliefs and values emerge. Although irrational, the social imaginary constitutes the world and pursuits people live in, although an imaginary does not remain fixed: new meanings are continually brought into existence, reproduced, displaced or transfigured as each society creates a world of its own.

#### HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY AS IMAGINED COMMUNITY

Castoriadis' work has influenced more current and significant research on the social imaginary. Firstly, in his classic work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1983), to understand nationalism and identity creation, offers the thought that nations are the product of collective imaginations. This work has been widely influential in the study of the nation, nationalism and beyond. He (1983, 6) reveals such identity creation by using imaginaries as a powerful explanation for nationalism and the nation state as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." For Anderson, a community is imagined "because the members will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1983, 6). An imagined community is tied together through shared, socially agreed associations that constitute who and what is perceived as right, appropriate, good and legitimate. Moreover, a community is limited because it encompasses a specific number of members and has finite, if elastic boundaries, as Anderson explains. Anderson's conception of the imagined community is a widely influential approach to understanding identity creation; it has also been applied to the study of the humanitarian community, as I show later. Secondly, another crucial contribution to the concept of the social imaginary has been made by Arjun Appadurai. He (1990) studies modern society and locates social imaginaries as organised sets of social practices. By studying processes of globalisation and cultural homogenisation, for him globalisation consists of five dimensions of global cultural flow—ethnoscapes, mediascapes,

technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—which are constituted by the people engaging in them. According to Appadurai (1990, 49), “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.” This is an important refinement for working with imaginaries, as their notion of ‘organised field of social practices’ allows analytically a closer look at where and how imaginaries become embedded and expanded, as is discussed later. Thirdly, Charles Taylor (2002, 2003) draw partly on Anderson’s understanding of the imaginary to examine in his influential work how ‘modern social imaginaries’ created the institutions of the western ‘modernity’—the economy, the public sphere, and the sovereignty of the people—and how these imaginaries became sustained through stories and ideas. He argues that individuals entertain certain beliefs and norms and imagine their collective social lives within the fold of a social imaginary: “The social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor 2002, 106). In other words, the social imaginary becomes incorporated by individuals and builds a framework for beliefs that come to be taken for granted. As such, by taking up a certain social imaginary, individuals constitute themselves as part of a collective; imaginaries thus create identity (Taylor 2002, 107).

The concept of the social imaginary has been a popular theoretical entry point to study the humanitarian community on many different levels. Specifically, the discussion about what and how constitutes the humanitarian community are so complex that various scholars suggest its conceptualisation as an ‘imagined community’ in Anderson’s sense. For example, Warner (2013) uses the concept to ask what the imagined community of humanitarian space is and where it comes from. The author traces back Henry Dunant’s religious and historical environment to understand the visions behind a humanitarianism that separates humanitarian from political action. Dechaine (2002) offers another application of the social imaginary, using this theoretical lens to examine Médecins Sans Frontières’ discourse of a global community. In particular, the author unveils a rhetoric which creates a public image of neutrality, a use of media channels to advertise events, and the construction of a

humanitarian space for social action in order to manifest a global community uniting individuals, governments, nongovernmental organizations and international institutions. O'Sullivan, Hilton, and Fiori (2016) offer a description of the history of non-state humanitarianism, and use the idea of an imagined community to rethink the its geography. They argue that the emergence of a global community after the Cold War, where NGOs worked alongside UN agencies, shaped the fields of development, human rights and disaster relief, offering people involved "an imagined community of solidarity activists committed to building a better world." (O'Sullivan, Hilton, and Fiori 2016, 8). Yet another application can be found in Horstmann (2011), who studies the ethical dilemmas and identifications of faith-based humanitarian organisations in the Karen Refugee Crisis. He argues that Karen people have been important agents of proselytisation, using their cultural capital to reach out to the imagined community of would-be Christians in order to expand opportunities and to link their own self and livelihood to the mission of the Christian movement.

## SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES

So far, this chapter has taken on Castoriadis' ideas of social imaginary as an important point of departure for building analysis. It offers a theoretical entry point to approach the research questions by accounting for the creative causal powers of the imaginary to construct social reality. Anderson's and Taylor's invocation of the imaginary offers further an explanation of why people adopt beliefs, gain identity, and achieve a sense of belonging in a collective. In other words, social imaginaries provide the fundamentals for explaining what a collective stand for and the values that are perceived as 'right'. While both Taylor and Anderson use the imaginary to explain how big shifts of collective identity creation happen, Appadurai's understanding moved the focus of imagination as fantasy to an organised field of social practice.

However, as Jasanoff (2015a, 7) points out, all of these traditional concepts of social imaginaries have a significant drawback, in that they omit the material aspect of their establishment. Jasanoff (2015a, 8) specifies in her critique that none of these classic accounts of social imaginaries pay attention to what she calls modernity's two most salient forces: science and technology. She argues that the three aforementioned

authors downplay the role technology plays in changing society, even though technologies are crucial to explaining how social imaginaries gain traction. Anderson, for example, explains how imagined communities were tied together through the medium of newsprint, but omits accrediting the explicit role of technologies as carriers of imaginaries. Similarly, Taylor subsumes science and technology into aggregated institutional changes but does not look further at the causal power they have over change. Likewise, Appadurai acknowledges the flow of technology, “but he too fails to engage with the seminal role of knowledge and its materializations in generating and anchoring imaginaries of social order” (Jasanoff 2015a, 8). Hence, Jasanoff laments the systematic lack of attention to the material inventiveness of social imaginaries and proposes a concept of sociotechnical imaginaries.

#### VISIONS AS DRIVERS OF CO-PRODUCTION BETWEEN SOCIETY AND TECHNOLOGY

The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries is first introduced in Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim’s (2009) work on nuclear power in the United States and South Korea. The same authors further elaborated the concept in an edited collection, *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power* (2015), which established the idea of sociotechnical imaginaries among Science and Technology Studies scholars and draws heavily on theoretical foundations led by Jasanoff’s earlier work (2004). Sociotechnical imaginaries are defined as

“collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 4).

Sociotechnical imaginaries, states Jasanoff (2015a, 4) in the introduction to *Dreamscapes*, indicate “the myriad ways in which scientific and technological visions enter into the assemblage of materiality, meaning, and morality that constitute robust forums of social life.” The concept is an attempt to situate the relationship between technologies and the social world. In fact, technology and social order are not believed to exist in a unidirectional relationship, but rather are co-produced through a single process (Jasanoff 2004). Co-production therefore refers to “the notion that modes of



making knowledge about the world are also simultaneously and reciprocally modes of making social order” (Hilgartner, Miller, and Hagendijk 2015, 5). This co-production then, the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries suggests, is driven by the creative force of imagined futures. Imaginaries are key, not only to explaining variations in science and technology policies around the globe, but also to understand how collective identity gets constructed, as “Such visions, and the policies built upon them, have the power to influence technological design, channel public expenditures, and justify the inclusion or exclusion of citizens with respect to the benefits of technological progress” (Jasanoff and Kim 2009, 120). In other words, imaginaries are latched onto technologies and have the power to steer and organise people. The emphasis here is that sociotechnical imaginaries are more than discursive constructs – they constitute powerful conceptions about the future which are materialised in the social organisation and practises of science and technology (Jasanoff and Kim 2009, 122). Thus, despite the assertion that sociotechnical imaginaries are rooted in scientific or technological practices, the concept does not ignore the impact that sociotechnical imaginaries have on understandings of what is good or desirable in the social world. It should be remembered that sociotechnical imaginaries are indeed simultaneously social imaginaries: encoded collective visions which create, according to Taylor’s formulation, a widely shared sense of legitimacy. Hence the adjective ‘sociotechnical’ emphasises that these imaginaries are “at once products of and instruments of their coproduction of science, technology, and society in modernity” (Jasanoff 2015a, 19). In this sense, the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries is concerned with what Jasanoff (2015b, 321) formulates to be the interpenetration of knowledge, materiality and power with a theoretical interest in the nature of collective self-understandings, and an analytical interest in why “societies follow the paths they do and why some formations endure while others weaken and wither.” However, how does such co-production of technology and society occur according to the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries?

Jasanoff (2015b) suggests analysing the process of how an imaginary turns into social practice throughout its life-cycle. It consists of four phases: origins, embedding, resistance and expansion. The first phase marks the beginnings of an imaginary and

refers to the different sources new imaginaries rise up from. Jasanoff proposes that individuals, activists, professionals, corporations and other organised groups hold dreams or embody loosely circulating aspirations, and are at the very beginning of starting new visions. A good example is found in the account of Smith's (2015) who describes how imaginaries of biotechnology, designed in the corporate boardroom of Syngenta, led the future to a global governance of golden rice. As such, individuals and groups have the capacity to imagine new scientific ideas and technologies as an important source for change. At this point, the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries stresses that technology plays an explicit, not just implicit role: dreaming up new worlds, embracing new aspirations for social orders, formulating new expectations of potential futures – as much as these fantasies matter in the origin stories of imaginaries, what is important is that such visions gain assent through embedment in order to become fully developed sociotechnical imaginaries.

The second phase describes the embedment of imaginaries, when they translate into material, cultures and institutional realities. The concept emphasises two ways of embedding: firstly, it is argued that imaginaries are often latched onto tangible things that circulate and generate economic or social value, such as commodities, artefacts, material infrastructure, new technologies and legal instruments. These all facilitate the coproduction of ideas, materiality, values and sociality. A second, more subtle way of embedding occurs through group reflection by various actors “on remembered pasts and desired futures” (Jasanoff 2015b, 327) and the consequent creation of myths. These myths serve as ‘collective remembering’ about events which possibly never took place, as Felt (2015) demonstrates in her account of Austria’s technopolitical identity. They construct convincing pictures that work as a means to envision a desirable future. Through embedding, Jasanoff argues, imaginaries convert into identities and become manifest in routines and things.

The third stage describes how imaginaries move through the realm of resistance, challenged, for example, by social movements, revolutions or the heterogenous reality of the various actors involved. Put differently, new imaginaries challenge old ones, and are competed against by parallel emerging imaginaries, in the establishment of the same social terrain. For example, Delina (2018) demonstrates how the dominance and

marginalisation of imaginaries of various actors take place in the contested coproduction of Thailand's energy policy, in light of political and economic pressures and disputes caused by a process hinged towards achieving the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement. Similarly, Molden and Meehan (2018) examine the multiple and contested trajectories of urban modernisation and how contested spatial visions shape the urban future.

Finally, expansion refers to how imaginaries become universal and travel over time and territory, describing how imaginaries persist through time or by overcoming geopolitical boundaries. Kim (2018) analyses the globalisation of converging technology policy by looking at technological developmentalism in South Korea. She demonstrates how a Western model of technological convergence interacts with existing Korean culture, unveiling how sociotechnical imaginaries can spread from local to national and to global contexts.

#### CAPTURING SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES THROUGH SIGNIFICATIONS

How can the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries be applied to encode "how imagination, objects, and social norms . . . become fused in practice" (Jasanoff 2015, 321)? Sociotechnical imaginaries are always also social imaginaries, and as such, I suggest that an answer can be found by revisiting the 'classic' account of social imaginaries by Castoriadis.

As the section on social imaginaries has shown, dreams, aspirations, wishes and visions are the forms of imaginative force that for Castoriadis lie at the core of social processes (Elliott 2002, 143). For him, the constitution and reproduction of a society depend on active and creative imaginary representations. Each society is instituted by creating its own world of imaginary significations and exists through them. In other words, the meanings given by society to their world are what Castoridas calls social imaginary significations (Moutsios 2013, 144). In these terms, understanding a society and the meaning it creates is possible by accessing its world of collectively shared significations, which are embodied and materialised in the social institutions of a society. For Castoridias (1978, 123), an institution is "a socially sanctioned symbolic network, in which a functional component and an imaginary component are combined

in variable proportions and relations.” Symbols play an important role in institutions, but explaining symbols requires identifying the imaginary significations they carry, and as such, institutions themselves. Moutsios (2013, 147) refers to Castoriadis’ idea on how significations are interlinked with institutions:

“Social imaginary significations are incarnated in institutions, and first and foremost in the two major social institutions, manifestations of the functional/instrumental (or identitary/ensemblistic) dimension of society: that of *teukhein* (i.e. techniques, technologies, tools, etc. – the instrumental/functional aspect of ‘social doing’); and that of *legein* (i.e. language – the instrumental/functional aspect of ‘social representing/saying’).”

It is not only Castoriadis who emphasised the importance of symbols to identify imaginary significations. Taylor (2001, 189) highlights that the “social imaginary is embodied, but becomes apparent on the symbolic level.” Gaonkar (2002, 10) suggests that “The social imaginary is expressed and carried in images, stories, legends, and modes of address that constitute a symbolic matrix that cannot be reduced to theoretical terms.” This is why looking at narratives, state Jasanoff and Kim (2009), is a useful place for the identification of imaginaries, because language plays an important role in their construction. Put differently, sociotechnical imaginary significations can be analysed through the signitive dimension of society.

## SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES AND BUSINESSES

Originally, the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries was developed to ask to what extent national science and technology projects affect particular conceptions of what a nation stands for. The concept therefore focused on science and technology projects in relation to political institutions and national policy. In their refinement from 2015, Jasanoff and Kim state that there is no limit to national states, but that sociotechnical imaginaries can be created and propagated by various organised non-state actors. However, with a few exceptions, the concept is still overwhelmingly used to study the role of the state and transnational actors (Sadowski and Bendor 2018, 4). Although one must acknowledge that the concept has only just entered the adolescent stage, very few researchers present an elaboration of Jasanoff and Kim’s notion of the

sociotechnical imaginary of actors that goes beyond the national or state-bounded political sphere. As a consequence, only a few studies explore the possibilities the concept offers to understand the role of corporations in the coproduction of society and technology.

One of the first attempts has been delivered by Smith (2009) who investigates the Rockefeller Foundation's funding history of rice research and the evolution of imaginaries of development. The author (2009, 462) notes that there are "always multiple imaginaries at play in a society and within institutions" and that her research interest lies in explaining "how particular imaginaries become the best, most appropriate, or even inevitable—and how they become hegemonic while seeming apolitical or value-neutral." She demonstrates how the Rockefeller Foundation as a non-state actor controls the agenda for developing and implementing new technologies, and emphasises that its involvement in rice research is much more than an agricultural modernisation project, but rather must be understood as socio-political project "that extends particular modes of governance through homogenization and paternalism" (Smith 2009, 461). Moreover, the same author explores Syngenta's role as originator of corporate imaginaries, and how they travel and expand in space and time as an imaginary of biotechnology through the global governance of golden rice (2015). She investigates Syngenta's decisions and negotiations over ownership and control of golden rice, demonstrating the multi-national corporate's dilemma, when "with regard to sharing information and technologies, 'doing right' conflicted with the potential harm of negative publicity" (2015, 272). She concludes that the relevant question seems not only what companies are responsible for, but who has the power to decide about those responsibilities.

Another, more recent study has been published by Sadowski and Bendor (2018). They use the example of the smart city to demonstrate how corporations, not just state actors, actively construct sociotechnical imaginaries to advance their own ends. To do this, they examine IBM's and Cisco's dominance over the smart city imaginary. The authors (2018, 5) argue that "The success of new sociotechnical imaginaries relies on their fit with existing cultural norms and moral values, social structures and material infrastructure, political institutions and economic systems, and hopes and aspirations."

In this sense, they show that IBM and Cisco use a narrative of the smart city that is both conservative and progressive, depicting a near future that replicates and conserves existing sociopolitical structures. Their aim, namely, to establish their version of smartness as the urban future, becomes hegemonic through a particular narrative about urbanity and technological salvation. Finally, Williamson (2018) uses the sociotechnical imaginary lens to understand how companies not only shape educational technology by investing billions of dollars in it, but also by creating their own, alternative schools. The author argues that these new schools disrupt public schooling, creating a stabilised, institutionalised imaginary of the future of education that shows what young people should aspire.

Together, these studies provide important enhancement of the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries, suggesting a pertinent role for corporations in the meaning-making of technologies and the establishment hegemonic sociotechnical imaginaries. Indeed, it emerges from these studies that businesses are vital throughout all phases of a socio-technical imaginary. Corporations can be the origin of new visions about desirable futures (Sadowski and Bendor 2018; Williamson 2018); they use particular strategies to embed visions into products and make sociotechnical imaginaries tangible (Smith 2015; Williamson 2018); they make tactical use of competing existing imaginaries (Williamson 2018) while facing resistance themselves (Sadowski and Bendor 2018), and corporate established sociotechnical imaginaries travel in time (Smith 2009) and expand geographically (Smith 2015). As such, the application of the concept to corporations promises significant insights in how they operate within the realms of society and technology.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries provides a promising point of theoretical departure to investigate the impact of businesses on the idea of humanitarian action: the humanitarian community can indeed be understood as a socially sanctioned symbolic network consisting of ‘social doing’ and ‘social representing/saying’, as Castoriadis formulated it. It is, as elaborated earlier in this chapter, an imagined community with a symbolic matrix of techniques, technologies and representation/language.

The imaginary significations of a traditional imaginary of aid (which includes being impartial, human, neutral and independent) can be found in the ‘social doing’ and ‘social representing/saying’ that has been widely recognised as good and appropriate humanitarian action. However, as Chapter 2 shows, such an imaginary has become increasingly challenged by the rise of a neoliberal imaginary, leaving the humanitarian community in search of a new identity and a means to reinstall legitimacy while at the same time facing criticism. Indeed, the humanitarian identity, writes Currion (2018, 3), “is a tribal one – self-identification as an individual and acceptance by the collective make you a member of that community . . . .” The author adds, however, that “The community is ill-equipped to identify, let alone respond to, potential disruption emerging from outside its (admittedly contested) boundaries.” The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries specifically enables the study of the ‘disruptive’ role of businesses and their effect on the humanitarian community through the use of corporate technologies. This enables a better understanding of the extent to which corporate visions (and as such, new meanings) might reproduce, displace or transfigure the symbolic matrix which ties the humanitarian collective together.

As the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries convincingly specifies, visions become manifest through the co-production process of society and technology. Hence, understanding the impact of corporate visions means identifying the significations of sociotechnical imaginaries in co-production processes, to which I turn next.

# CHAPTER 4: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter brings the previous chapters together in an effort to operationalise the theoretical work on sociotechnical imaginaries, to give direction to and support for the data collection and analysis. Its aim is to put forward an analytical framework that outlines how I will study sociotechnical imaginaries and analytically situate them, while critically accounting for the assumptions upheld by the current literature. What is needed in order to understand how businesses impact on the idea of humanitarian aid is a framework which translates co-production processes of social order and technologies into guiding assumptions, analytical questions and indicators that I can apply to my data. In doing so, this chapter investigates three salient mechanisms of co-production: making identities, making discourses, and making representations. Carving out how these mechanisms work and under what conditions helps to understand why and how visions become embedded as collectively held sociotechnical imaginaries in the materiality of the social reality, and thus provide the analytical guide for this research. Although elaborated and presented in separate subsections, these mechanisms intertwine and overlap with one another.

This chapter has four sections. Following this introduction, the second section begins by unpacking the contribution of co-production to the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries. The assumption behind the notion of co-production is that social order and technology are in a dynamic interplay, where conceptions about life, values, visions and ideas are enabled, but also restricted by the material factors and material practices carried out. In the next section, I discuss how visions intervene and become manifested through three different mechanisms of co-production. Firstly, I elaborate how the making of identities is an important way to nourish social cohesion that holds an imagined community together through shared technological visions. Moreover, I show how discourses and discursive choices are an important way to embed visions into collective aspirations. Furthermore, I elaborate that representations can create



certain connotations and conceptions about an imagined community which become materialised as naturalised facts. The following section translates these conceptual thoughts into analytical indicators which guide the data collection and analysis process of my study. In particular, I outline how the three mechanisms play a vital role in the meaning-making of humanitarian action. The purpose of the indicators is to make sociotechnical imaginaries identifiable and interpretable for me as a researcher. The final section previews the methodology chapter which shows how the framework can be operationalised.

## THE MECHANISMS OF CO-PRODUCTION

Chapter 3 elaborated how the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries offers a useful approach by which to understand processes of whether and how new visions become embedded into the materiality of social world and, once manifested, provide that “sense of legitimacy” which holds a society together, as Taylor (2002, 106) formulates it. It also became apparent that the concept emphasises society’s active role in constructing imagined futures – enabled by and enabling technologies. In that sense, active imagination through sociotechnical imaginaries is seen as crucial driver behind the fundamental assumption that social order and technologies are constantly co-produced (Jasanoff 2004). I return here to the notion of co-production in more detail, as it is fundamental to building analysis.

Co-production stands for “the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in”, Jasanoff (2004, 2–3) explains in her work *States of Knowledge*. The relationship between technology and society is so important because we cannot discuss self-conceptions, values, visions and ideas without their materiality. The two are indivisible because, Taylor (2003, 31–32) explains, “Self-understandings are essential conditions of the practice making the sense that it does to the participants”. According to this perspective, our relationship to technology is not seen as unidimensional in the sense that it neither merely mirrors reality nor unidirectionally shape our values and norms. Rather, symmetrically, “our sense of how we ought to organize and govern ourselves profoundly influences what we make of nature, society, and the “real” world”, as Jasanoff (2015a, 3) states, elaborating further the notion of co-production. What this means can easily be understood in the case of emerging technologies. Hilgartner, Miller and Hagendijk (2015, 5) point out:

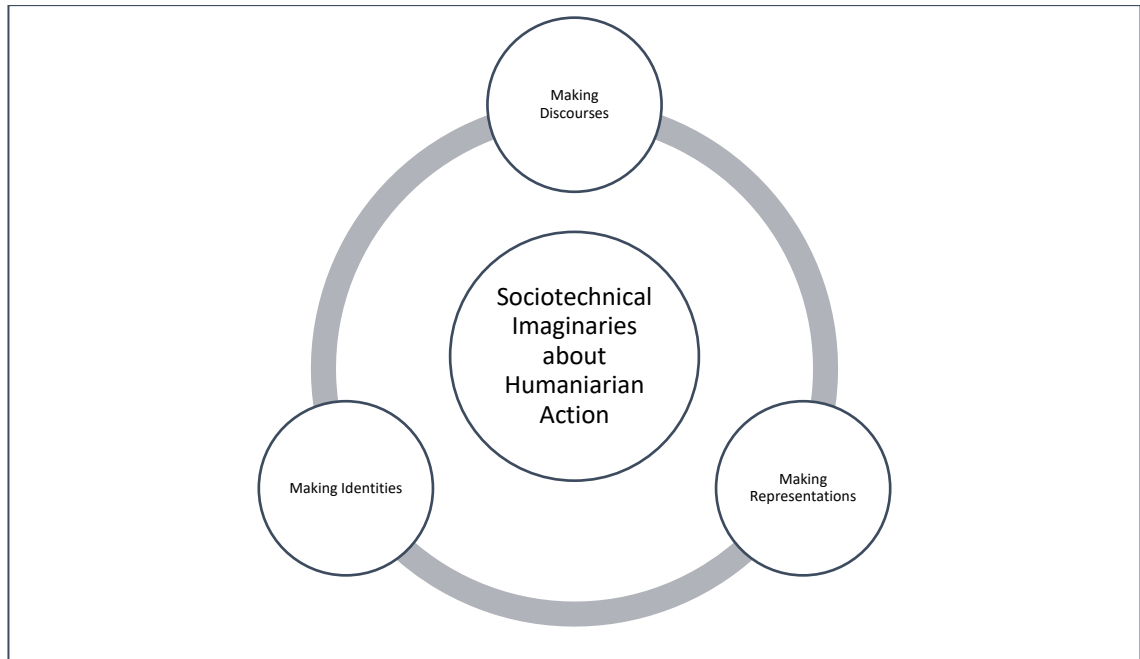
“The process through which technologies are developed and fitted into the wider world is from the outset a social one, and the practices that shape technological change also shape who is able to use emerging technologies to do what, how risks are distributed, and what kinds of lives and identities they support.”

Co-production processes in general therefore, and emerging technologies specifically, do not mark a neutral terrain, but are clearly entangled with questions of power and politics, a point which reminds us of Sandvik et al.'s (2014, 7) verdict that humanitarian technology is not "an empty vessel". How much power and technologies hang together becomes even clearer when old orders are shaken up and questioned, which happens sometimes in subtle and sometimes in more dramatic ways (Hilgartner, Miller and Hagendijk 2015, 5). Hence, if we want to understand how visions emerge and gain traction, we need to acknowledge that technologies embed and are embedded in the building blocks of the social, and consequently examine the sociotechnical powerholders in sites of co-production.

Generally, the mechanisms of co-production uphold two capacities. Firstly, they form and maintain certain social orders and thus have an ordering, stabilising function by accommodating technological capacities and society. Secondly, they help to put things together and give meaning to emerging phenomena in times of disorder and disruption. By acknowledging that sociotechnical imaginaries are the result of such a co-production process, the why-questions can be tackled, and the instruments provide an explanation of why certain visions and understandings of the (social and natural) world succeed over others, become collectively shared and maintained, or the opposite – are resisted and remain simple ideas. This includes asking why certain attempts to reinvent the idea of humanitarian action might succeed or fail, and why some visions and aspirations of humanitarian aid prevail over others. The instruments of co-production therefore serve as useful sensitising concepts to guide inquiry for this study (Hilgartner, Miller, and Hagendijk 2015).

Figure 1 shows how the three mechanisms of co-production – making identities, making discourses, and making representations – build the analytical guideposts for this research, in an attempt to utilise the theoretical foundations provided by sociotechnical imaginaries to disentangle how humanitarian technologies and the idea of humanitarian aid are co-produced, and particularly how this co-production is shaped by corporate visions.

FIGURE 1: MECHANISMS OF CO-PRODUCTION AS GUIDEPOSTS FOR ANALYSIS



Studying the idea of humanitarian action as a site of co-production enables an understanding of how sociotechnical imaginaries do their constitutive work and how they become manifested into the materiality of the social world and embodied by the actors within it. This study takes this materiality seriously and develops an analytical framework that looks at why and how imaginaries embed, by analysing the mechanisms of how visions about humanitarian technologies are intertwined within identities, discourses and representations of humanitarian action. What follows is a more detailed discussion of the three mechanisms and their role in processes of co-production.

### MAKING IDENTITIES

Making identities is a crucial instrument of co-production, and in particular, an important resource to restore sense out of disorder, Jasanoff (2004, 39) argues. Such disorder could involve emergent or controversial phenomena which destabilise social and technological orders. As an instrument, making identities refers to efforts to maintain and guard an existing identity, or to push and establish a new one while others erode. In both cases, imaginaries are crucial in making identities. We recall here Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities* to elaborate what makes people believe that they belong to something so abstract as a nation.

For Anderson, identity is based on people's capacity to imagine, and their willingness to uphold a shared sense of community built on visions and aspirations, which constitute self-identification with a certain community, but also the acknowledgement of others as members. Shared visions guide who is perceived as right, appropriate, good, and legitimate within a certain community, and why. A reason why community matters can be found in Taylor's work, Calhoun (1999, 7) argues, pointing out that "Membership in a community provides the basis for strong moral evaluations, for the pursuit of human goods that are irreducibly social in nature, and for the development of an identity and a sense of location in the dramatically enlarged world of modernity". However, identity and the sense of belonging are much more relevant than just for and by themselves. A community and shared collective identity are as much about creating and upholding certain understandings of one's place in society as they are about feeling part of a wider community. Formulated in Anderson's (1983, 50) terms in regard to identity and nations, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship." This point is crucial: despite imbalances between various actors and unfair distribution of resources that disadvantage certain groups, the perception of comradeship rising out of a community enables the high degree of cohesion (and hence solidarity) required to maintain power relations. This is particularly important in self-governing societies such as democracies, as Taylor (2003) points out, as a functioning democracy depends on a minority accepting the majority's will. Morina (2012, sec. 1) summarises that "Power of authority organizes and propels itself through notions of identity and is therefore, to an extent, defined by the cohesion of a people's collective identification. Simultaneously, identity is constructed according to the interests of power."

If identity is so important for solidarity, how can collective identity be constructed in the presence of governance, that is to say, when certain democratic mechanisms are absent? In governance structures, cohesion and solidarity with political actors and their decisions is equally important for decision-making processes; however, one of the main characteristics of any governance arrangement is the inclusion of non-elected and thus non-democratic actors. In other words, governance denotes the social

structure and process of social interactions required to achieve policy decision-making and implementation through the inclusion of different state and non-state actors, such as interest groups, private companies or non-profit organisations (Torfing et al. 2012). One of the biggest obstacles to governance, however, is the source from which involved actors derive their power to act, that is to say, whether any acknowledged leadership is possible at all without democracy. In a sense, governance arrangements always generate a vacuum of legitimacy and thus, given the numerous actors involved, establishing a collective identity seems more difficult to achieve. The lack of democratic legitimacy opens up opportunities for various organisations to impose their own interpretation of what the community stands for and to claim legitimacy (Van Kersbergen and Van Waarden 2004). Where democratic values and institutions do not, therefore, approve an organisation's legitimacy in a community, which values and through which mechanisms then is a shared identity created, and hence, cohesion achieved?

The mechanisms involved can be understood by engaging with the simultaneous emergence of new knowledge and technologies, institutions and identities. Elite theorists like Domhoff (1990) investigate, for example, the influencing role of corporations in governance arrangements, emphasising the institutional mechanisms through which a powerful elite finds stability. Domhoff (1990) claims that three main institutionalised networks are at play: firstly, an upper class network, consolidating institutions and ownership of wealth; next, a network of a corporate directors, managers and business professionals with their own institutions; and finally a policy network of non-profit organisations such as foundations and think tanks that develop policies and distribute political strategy (Domhoff 1990). However, in his writings on corporate organisations, strategies and hegemonic power structures, Gramsci (1971, 1995) disagrees with elite theory insofar as that "Hegemony is not dependent on coercive control by a small elite, but rather rests on coalitions and compromises that provide a measure of political and material accommodation with other groups, and on ideologies that convey a mutuality of interests" (Levy and Newell 2005, 49–50). Gramsci emphasised the role of ideas in maintaining control, and insists that "Moral and intellectual leadership is the basic form of authority and tool for domination in any

hegemonic social structure” (Okereke 2015, 128). Built on Gramsci, Levy and Egan (2002) and Levy and Newell (2002, 2005) showed how businesses adopt various strategies in order to influence modes of governance, on material, discursive and organisational levels. They did this by asking which products and technologies get produced to secure an existing or future market position, which discursive forms get used, and which coalitions and cooperation get built to improve their market and economic domination, and gain legitimacy through apparent intellectual and moral leadership. This leadership builds the ground that allows businesses to impose their own visions and aspirations, bringing a legitimacy which creates social cohesion and enables the shaping of a community’s collective identity.

Gramsci’s thoughts on moral and intellectual leadership as fundament for social cohesion and identity creation have been further developed by Suchman (1995), who strongly influenced scholars, especially in the field of sociology and organisation studies.<sup>10</sup> He fully acknowledges that legitimacy is the product of a social meaning-making process, defining it as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate with some socially constructed system of norms, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574). He (1995, 578–83) suggests that there is not just one organisational legitimacy, but three types with different underlying dynamics. Firstly, pragmatic legitimacy relies on a person or social group who calculate that an entity will pursue their interests directly or indirectly. Secondly, moral legitimacy rests on a person or social group who perceives the goals and procedures of an entity to be morally and normatively appropriate. Moral legitimacy follows the question if an organisation ‘does the right thing’. Thirdly, cognitive legitimacy is based on the perception that an organisation is accepted as necessary or inevitable. Black (2008, 144) adds that the meaning of legitimacy is moreover not static, but can change over time, space and context, and more particularly, in terms of the reasons for this acceptance. Together, Suchman (1995,

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to acknowledge that various definitions of legitimacy exist, of which some have been equally influencing. For example, Weber (1922) developed a typology of legitimate authority by distinguishing charismatic, legal-rational and traditional authority which has significantly shaped the way legitimacy has been approached in political science, development studies and sociology. Another major scholar of legitimacy is Beetham (2013), who acknowledged that legitimacy is achieved not just through capacities and resources, but depends also on the willingness of other to accept legitimacy. I prioritise Suchman’s (1995) definition in my thesis over others because neither Weber nor Beetham refer, or only indirectly, to the social process of legitimacy.

585) states, “as one moves from the pragmatic to the moral to the cognitive, legitimacy becomes more elusive to obtain and more difficult to manipulate, but it also becomes more subtle, more profound, and more self-sustaining, once established.” As a consequence, an organisation faces multiple legitimacy claims from within and outside the arena of its activism. Some of these may conflict or can even be incompatible, as Black (2008, 152) points out. For example, “Crass pragmatic appeals may debase lofty moral claims, and hollow moral platitudes may signal shirking in pragmatic exchanges” (Suchman 1995, 585). Such tensions between different types of legitimacy are more likely in times of social transformation.

### MAKING DISCOURSES

Discourses play a crucial role in processes of co-production and I understand them as suggested by Laffey and Weldes (2004, 28), namely, as “structures and practices” used to construct meaning about the world. Similarly, Crawford (2004, 22) understands discourse as “the content and construction of meaning and the organization of knowledge in a particular realm.” In fact, Foucault (1978, 1980) has paved the way for studying discourses as a close interweaving of knowledge and power. The effect of discourse is that it appears as structure that imposes itself on reality. As a consequence, a given discourse can become dominant and operate as a set of rules about what can and cannot be said and done.

For Foucault, the question of ‘who speaks?’ is at the heart of discourses, highlighting that some actors and voices are privileged and marginalise others. Discourse is therefore fundamentally concerned with the ways “in which power relations structure, constrain, and produce systems of meaning” (Herrera and Braumoeller 2004, 17). For Foucault, discourses are not neutral, and as such, they “constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (Weedon 1987, 108). If we recall therefore that discourse is in itself not meaningful but gains its meaning through relations and context, it is equally important to consider whose discursive practice stays in focus, and how more or less powerful actors use it. As such, it can be used as strategies of domination, as well as those of resistance (Quinby and Diamond 1988, 185). As a strategy of domination, Gramsci’s use of the term hegemony is again relevant, when we recall that “hegemony is about



constructing alliances, and in integrating rather than simply dominating other groups through concessions or through ideological means” (Fairclough 2013, 61). Hegemony is temporarily, partially, and as such, characterised by a constant hegemonic struggle. According to Fairclough (2013, 62), discursive practice “is a facet of struggle which contributes in varying degree to the reproduction or transformation of the existing order of discourse, and through that of existing social and power relations”. Levy and Egan (2003) applied Gramsci’s thoughts on hegemony by studying the influence of corporations in climate change negotiations. They demonstrate how domination works through discourse by showing how the “discursive structure of culture, ideology, and symbolism guide behaviour and lends legitimacy to particular organisations, practices, and distributions of resources” (Levy and Egan 2003, 810). Similarly, Levy and Scully (2007, 8) show how hegemony rises out of the manifestation of discourse into a clear vision and set of institutions. ‘Discourse’ can thus be perceived as social practice, or “text in context” (T. a. van Dijk 1990, 164).

Fairclough (2001) notes that social life is an interconnected network of social practices, including diverse social elements of which discourse is always a part. He argues that if we want to understand how discourse as social practice works, we need to take its broader context into account. In fact, Fairclough (2013, 3) suggests an understanding of discourse as relations with a dialectic character, explaining that it is not an entity, but a set of relations between individuals. Relations also exist between discourse and other complex objects, including ‘things’ in the physical world, persons, power relations and institutions, which are interconnected elements in social activity or praxis. A discourse therefore does not stand alone but must be understood according to its position in a web of relations.

Similarly, discourse can be described as what van Dijk (1990, 164) suggests as “text in context”, referring to written texts but also including pictures, symbols and artefacts (Grant, Keenoy, and Oswick 1998) or more generally to “places in which the complexes of social meanings are produced in a certain historical situation of their production . . .” (Dremel and Matic 2014, 156). Text therefore represents discursive units and material manifestations of discourse (Chalaby 2007, 2). I follow Fairclough (2004, 3) who includes as text the written and spoken word, and any instance of language in

use. Put differently, discourse has no inherent meaning, or as Dremel and Matic (2014, 156) summarise it, “Discourse does not possess meanings immanently, it is shared and social, and emanates from interaction between groups and institutions.” Similarly, van Dijk (2006, 11) states that discourse “is being produced, understood and analysed relative to context features.”

Dominant discourses manifest themselves in institutions. Institutions are, according to Hodgson (2006, 2), “systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions.” By stabilising social rules, institutions store and preserve knowledge and power, and are thus key in the co-productionist accounts of the world and sense-making. Actually, co-production can hardly happen without institutions; Jasanoff (2004, 40) explains that through institutions, “the safety of new technological systems [are] acknowledged, and accepted rules of behaviour written into domains.” Institutions are highly important because they stabilise and enforce the norms and rules that people acknowledge as appropriate and right to follow. Visions and aspirations underpin institutions, and thus sociotechnical imaginaries are embedded within them – such as normative fundamentals, in art, legal systems, social norms, accepted routines, standardised practices and economic activities. Institutionalised ways of meaning-making are constantly reproduced as they are either socialised into actors and thus become unquestioningly reapplied, or because it would be too disruptive to re-examine them openly. However, institutions have a dynamic nature as a part of co-production processes of technology and society; they can change, specifically at times of disruption and uncertainty. Where new visions and phenomena shake up established orders, they simultaneously underpin new institutions which help put things in their places and offer orientation. As such, technological change is not just constrained by institutions, but “it is in part through institutional practices that that scientific and technological agendas change” (Hilgartner, Miller, and Hagendijk 2015, 6).

According to a co-productionist notion, discursive choices, such as creating new languages or adjusting old ones, are important aspects of problem-solving and naming new phenomena (Jasanoff 2004, 40–41). Jasanoff (2004, 41) points out that constructing discourses as mechanisms of co-production often involves discursive

strategies that involve “the appropriation of existing discourses . . . and their selective retailoring to suit new needs.” Speaking the right language is a crucial part of being acknowledged and heard. Moreover, the selective use of language and visuality are not only used to establish new language, but also to devalue existing meanings by simultaneously persuading others to believe in new ones (Jasanoff 2004, 41). Gaonkar (2002) emphasised the importance of language too, and reminds us that imaginaries appear through meaningful language, such as metaphors. Language, for him (2002, 7), is the main medium through which social imaginaries become manifest and do their constitutive, stabilising work: “Each society derives its unity and identity by representing itself in symbols, myths, legends, and other collectively shared significations” (Gaonkar 2002, 7). Again, however, language is not a neutral communication device, but a powerful tool which constitutes and defines social life; it is therefore of significant importance to look at the use powerful people make of it.

This is a crucial point that I took earlier up in this section, highlighting the importance of symbolic narratives to transport specific meaning. Barthes’ (1972) thoughts on myths play a crucial role here, and I elaborate how myths work in the next section on making representations. For now, myths can be understood as stories appearing to be ‘naturalised’ and which are actively created either to establish new meanings, or to devaluate existing meanings.

## MAKING REPRESENTATIONS

Making representation is the third mechanisms of co-production in my analytical framework. Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It involves the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things (Hall 2003). A slightly different but more common usage of the term representation is that of “a set of processes by which signifying practices appear to stand for or depict another object or practice in the ‘real’ world” (Barker 2004, 77). It is important, however, to recognise that representations do not just mirror reality, but rather are “constitutive of the meaning of that which they purport to stand in for” (Barker 2004, 77). The process of representation is therefore not simple, and representations are not “innocent

reflections of the world” (Barker 2004, 77). This means that making representations is about power: representations are selective and exclusive, and shape dramatically what we think to know about the world, independent of the real world that exists. Gramsci reminds us that hegemony is tightly connected with representation processes: representations are a powerful tool to enable some kinds of knowledge to exist while excluding other ways of seeing. As a consequence, making representations is a use of power to maintain or achieve certain hegemonic social orders.

For Hall (2003, 17) , there are two processes – which he calls ‘systems’ – involved in representations: firstly, “There is the ‘system’ by which all sorts of objects, people, and events are correlated with a set of concepts or *mental representations* which we carry around in our head”. Hall explains that these mental representations are necessary for us to be able to interpret the world meaningfully. Moreover, he goes on to explain that members of the same community need broadly to share the same conceptual maps to make sense of or interpret the world in a similar way – we must share the same imaginary to understand representations. This is where the second system of representation comes into action, the ‘system of language’<sup>11</sup>, in which words, sounds or images carrying meaning, called signs.

From a co-productionist account, we can see how signs and symbols are used as instruments of representation in Anderson’s account of imagined communities, nation-making and national identity. Anderson argues that community making depends on the deployment of persuasive representations of symbols which signify nationhood. Crucially, “the instrumentalities, or technologies, that figure most prominently for him are those that have the power to discipline people’s imaginations by making them receptive to shared conceptions of nationalism” (Anderson 1983, in; Jasanoff 2004, 26). In fact, as Castello (2016) explains, the imagined nation is rooted in technology, which helps to spread the meanings contributing to a shared sense of belonging. For Anderson, this technology was mainly the popular press which made

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<sup>11</sup> Hall (2003, 19) uses the term ‘language’ in a broader sense than Fairclough; including the written and spoken words of a particular language, but also visual images, facial expressions, and other non-linguistic languages such as the language of fashion, of traffic lights etc..

the same representation available to millions of people at the same time (Castello 2016).

Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) offer an interesting approach to investigating representation, suggesting that it always happens through recontextualisation. Meaning then is created by precisely the lack of a clear account of events, logical arguments, or a reasonable assessment of information (Machin 2013, 352) and so, resume van Leeuwen and Woday (1999, 96), “recontextualization always involves transformation, and what exactly gets transformed depends on the interests, goals and values of the context into which the practice is recontextualised”.

Recontextualisation, according to the authors, can, firstly, include deletion, as a representation cannot provide every aspect of a social practice. The question is, therefore, what will be included and what excluded in a certain representation in order to create meaning. In imagined communities, forgetting plays an important role in the construction of identity, as Calhoun argues: forgetting certain events and meanings are key in the self-understandings of communities (Calhoun 2016, 14). Forgetting could be understood as van Leeuwen and Wodak’s ‘deletion’ in the sense of recontextualising representations. Secondly, recontextualization may also involve rearrangement, where the elements of a social practice are not necessarily represented in the order in which they would actually occur. Thirdly, representation can happen through substitution, where details and complexities can be substituted by generalisations or abstractions. Finally, recontextualization also means adding an element to a representation that alter meaning.

Similar to discourses, representations often manifest often in institutions, as the latter build a stable foundation for people’s sense of what is good and what is wrong, and provide common sense for why things get done the way they are. Gramsci’s work on hegemonic power is again helpful in understanding how and why representations prevail in institutions. According to him, hegemonic power – in the sense of establishing a collective identity through constructing alliances and securing consent as moral and intellectual leaders – is not exclusively economic or coercive but also derives from institutional forces (Gramsci 1971, paraphrased in Okereke 2015, 128). Influencing institutions is therefore central aspects of hegemony. In fact, a hegemonic

stability is rooted in the institutions of society, which play a crucial role in ideological reproduction, providing legitimacy through the assertion of moral and intellectual leadership and the projection of individual interests as general interests (Levy and Newell 2005, 50). Put differently, the dominant vision of a hegemonic structure constitutes “a conception of the world that is manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life” (Gramsci 1971, 328). Similarly, such institutional underpinning of imagination can be found in Anderson’s discussion of census, map and museum, Calhoun (2016, 14) explains, whereas “each of these three instances, involved institutionalizing a bundle of artifacts and practices that shaped how identities, solidarities, boundaries, and relationships were imagined.”

Similarly interested in how signs gain meaning through recontextualization, Roland Barthes (1972) offers in the essay *Mythologies* another approach to examining how meaning is created through representation. Focusing on non-verbal signs in everyday life, he argues that signs have a literal meaning (which he calls ‘denotation’) and a second-order, coded and culturally specific meaning, or ‘connotation’. In more detail, a denotative response to a sign means ‘describing’ a sign, while connotative signs carry a range of higher-level meanings, or more sophisticated mental associations conjured up when we come across a particular sign. Connotative responses include those which are indexical and those which are symbolic. Taking a drawing of a red rose as an example, it is not only iconic at the level of denotation but also indexical to a garden and symbolic of love at the level of connotation. At the same time, as mentioned previously, interpretation of signs is cultural and contextual. We only decode and understand signs in a similar way when we share the same conceptual maps and apply similar codes to interpret the signs.

Barthes (1977) applies denotation and connotation to advertising images to study how meaning gets into the image, text and beyond. He uses an advert for pasta by the company Panzani as example, arguing that signs can transfer visual and textual meaning on to objects. At the level of denotation, the adverts transmit a non-coded iconic message: one can see “some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag, in yellows and greens on a red background” (Barthes 1977, 33). However, there is another, coded

iconic message at the level of connotation: 'returning from the market' (freshness of products and domestic preparation), 'Italianicity' and a total 'culinary service'. Barthes argues that these mental associations are 'socially agreed': because the relationship between a sign and the concept it stands for is arbitrary and based on convention, "we need codes to tell us how to know what words mean and what signifiers and symbols mean. The meaning is arbitrary, based on convention, not natural" (Berger 1995, 83). Indexical, symbolic and connotative signs therefore can be understood through their codes, or "set of conventionalised ways of making meaning that are specific to particular groups of people" (Rose 2016, 126). Through codes, the wider ideologies at work can be accessed. It is often the text in an image that provides what Barthes calls anchorage, which allows to choose between a potentially confusing number of possible meanings. In addition to Barthes, Williamson (1978) showed that meaning transfers in adverts are often made so persuasively that certain products or brands become the objective correlates of certain qualities.

Some connotative responses are so broadly conventionalised that they appear to be 'natural'. Barthes argues that some connotations are so widely accepted that they reach the level of 'myth', which is, he states, where a 'socially agreed' symbolic association becomes so common that it is seen as iconic. His point is that a myth allows a connotative meaning to appear denotative, and semiology helps to demystify this meaning. In Barthes' formulation (1972, 123):

"I am at the barber's, and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture

of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier.”

For Barthes, the notion of mythology is a second-order semiological system. In the first-order semiological system, a denotive sign (or ‘meaning’) consists of a signifier and a signified, which are fairly easy to understand (Rose 2016, 129). However, the denotive sign becomes a signifier at the second, mythological level of meaning (called ‘form’) of a signified (called ‘concept’). This second level sign is called ‘signification’. According to Barthes, the meaning of the first sign becomes remote, and instead a myth inserts itself as a non-historical truth. Then a myth “makes us forget that things were and are made; instead, it naturalises the way things are” (Rose 2016, 131).

## GUIDING ASSUMPTIONS, ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS AND INDICATORS FOR ANALYSIS

This section translates the mechanisms of co-production into analytical indicators which will inform my study. I do this by outlining the relevance of each mechanism for humanitarian action and, based on this, formulate a guiding assumption along with guiding questions and a set of indicators. The purpose of the indicators is to make sociotechnical imaginaries identifiable and interpretable for researchers.

### IDENTIFYING THE MECHANISM OF MAKING IDENTITIES

The mechanism of identity is particularly interesting in the field of humanitarian action. Here, according to Slim (2002), legitimacy can be passively derived or actively generated through different sources. It can be built through moral and legal stances, such as ethical foundations in principles or international humanitarian law. Moreover, legitimacy is not only derived legally and morally from a set of principles, but also actively generated, tangibly and intangibly, in practice. Tangible sources include direct support from those it seeks to help, its members and supporters, but also, the knowledge and relationship it maintains, as well as the performance it demonstrates. Intangible sources such as trust, reputation and integrity of those an organisation intends to help, its members and partners, are hugely important as they are the basis “on which most people perceive and value an organisation” (Slim 2002, sec. 11).



Specifically, Kent, Armstrong and Obrecht (2013, sec. 30) add, “humanitarian organisations depend on the trust of those with whom they interact, whether in the form of loyalty, acceptance, or otherwise, they must be able to earn that trust through action.” And yet, while trust plays a pivotal role in constructing legitimacy, it can take on a life, as Slim (2002, sec. 11) points out: “[It] can rely on image rather than reality and may not require any empirical experience to influence people one way or the other.”

An important aspect of legitimacy is transparency; being transparent about ones actions and the very reason for an organisation’s existence, and thus being ‘accountable’ is an important aspect of the humanitarian identity. Accountability is described as a process in which a humanitarian organization “holds itself openly responsible for what it believes, what it does and what it does not do in a way which shows it involving all concerned parties and actively responding to what it learns” (Slim 2002, sec. 13). Put differently, understanding to whom organisations feel accountable helps to analyse their legitimacy claims and identity. There are three dimensions of accountability in humanitarian aid, Hilhorst (2015) suggests considering. Firstly, upwards accountability refers to relationships with donors (such as multi-national companies, foundations, governments) and is focused on the spending of designated moneys for specific purposes. Secondly, downwards accountability refers to communities and beneficiaries of aid. Specifically, it is determined “by the claims NGOs make for themselves as to whether they speak as, with, for or about oppressed people”, as Slim (2002, sec. 12) clarifies. Thirdly, internal accountability refers to the endogenously established accountability that arises from organisations’ staff. It entails the responsibility of staff to an organisation’s mission, and to one another. Specifically, Hilhorst (2015, 110) emphasises the importance of accountability relationships with implementing staff, because these field level workers “work with communities on a daily basis, and they often know better than anyone what the problems are with the provision of aid.” Finally, sideways accountability refers to the relation between different implementing organisations, such as NGOs and for-profit companies. In fact, there is an effectiveness and legitimacy incentive for this type of accountability: “affected communities often don’t distinguish between different aid providers, and

problems with one agency can easily tarnish the credibility of the entire sector, jeopardising the effectiveness and legitimacy of the whole response”, states Hillhorst (2015, 109).

Considering these thoughts helps then to translate the importance of the mechanism of identities for this research. While the literature convincingly describes the emergence of a neoliberal imaginary which infuses and interferes with a traditional understanding of the humanitarian identity, it does not capture the “humanitarian turn to technology” (Sandvik et al. 2014), and the specific role of business in it. When we believe Kent and Burke (2012), whom I introduced in the Research Gap section, then those with specific technical expertise or innovative capacities will be included in the humanitarian community and seen as legitimate actors. A consequence is reflected by Jacobsen and Fast (2019), who critically point out that new humanitarian technologies, and especially digital technologies, bring a new dimension to humanitarian governance in terms of access to the humanitarian community: there is not only a governance of the uses of new technology, but also a governance which is produced by it. This, the authors argue, puts forward questions about who has access to digitalised data collected from beneficiaries, and asks to whom actors feel accountable when new forms of access are created. However, Hopgood (2008) wonders what happens if some businesses see themselves as part of the humanitarian community but others do not, calling for a humanitarian essence, which sets explicit boundaries between humanitarians and businesses. What these accounts show is that the relationship between businesses and their involvement through technologies is crucial to understand social cohesion and boundaries within the imagined humanitarian community, and how they are maintained or shaped. The following questions underpin this thematic guidepost and help me approach the data:

- Guiding assumption: corporate actors create understandings about the humanitarian community and being ‘humanitarian’ that translates through technologies into a new sense of humanitarian identity.
- Guiding questions for analysis:
  - How do corporate and humanitarian actors perceive their own position, and the meaning of private-public partnerships in regard to

the humanitarian community? Do these self-perceptions match with the view of others?

- What does their narrative tell us about what it means to them to be a 'humanitarian'?
- How and to what extent do businesses establish pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy that leads to intellectual leadership – and a leadership that makes them accountable to whom?
- Indicators:
  - Perceived and self-perceived position within humanitarian community
  - Perceived and self-perceived motivation for engagement in humanitarian aid
  - Perceived characteristics of being a member of the humanitarian community
  - Meaning of private-public-partnerships
  - Perceived and self-perceived accountability

#### IDENTIFYING THE MECHANISM OF MAKING DISCOURSES

The relevance of discourses in creating meaning about humanitarian action is significant. Indeed, being familiar with the right language is crucial for guarding access to the humanitarian community and creates the particularity of what humanitarian action stands for. For example, Dechaine (2002) shows the importance of rhetoric in the discourse of Médecins sans Frontières to create a sense of global community. The author shows how the language of the humanitarian space is used for generating access to people in need, but also to enable members of the organisation to justify themselves as legitimate actors for providing aid. Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) offer another study of the importance of discourse, where they reinterpret the humanitarian space as an arena where actors negotiate the outcomes of aid. Discourse plays a crucial role in such negotiating processes; equally important strategies, the authors state, are coercive violence, written statements, formal interactions, schemes deployed in the shadow of the official process, and the banalities of everyday gossiping. By emphasising the role language plays, Hilhorst and Jansen (2010, 1120)

remind us that the effect discourses have is on the certain way society is understood, including its organisation and the distribution of power, with some becoming excluded while others attain a position of authority. Sezgin and Dijkzeul, (2016) indicate what this means for the humanitarian community itself, stating that “the kinds of actions or actors considered to be humanitarian are not predetermined, nor are the principles that qualify as humanitarian established in advance”. Discourse is, throughout their work, an important aspect in the making of what humanitarian action stands for. This is also illustrated in Krause’s (2014) account of the marketisation of humanitarian action, as addressed in the literature review of Chapter 2. Discourses are crucial to acquiring organisational survival in a humanitarian marketplace, in which organisations are challenged by the discourse of marketability. Obligated to prove their appropriateness to potential investors by competing in this market space and by assuming the role of rivals alongside other organisations bidding for funding and contracts from various international donors (Krause 2014), this kind of competition can only be won with the right terminology use. Transformed into market players, humanitarian actors are now competitors rather than allies on a mission, and this becomes mirrored in the language used. Gill and Wells (2014) explore an example of this, investigating the use of the rhetorical construction of symbolic capital by a non-profit organisation to assess the potential for dissonance between image and behaviour in humanitarian aid. They (2014, 46) reveal that despite non-profit organisations having their established values and goals, a donor’s gaze is a central component in the construction of legitimacy: “[Non-profit organisations] may privilege the values, symbols, and practices of the donors/volunteers who are local to the NPO’s base in the developed world.”

Within this context, the mechanism of making discourses is crucial to understanding the dynamic between the creation of meaning and how meaning is translated into the materiality of humanitarian action. The unabated interest in humanitarian partnerships with corporations and the simultaneous rising demand in corporate technologies lead me to assume that language and discursive choices accompany the introduction, development and implementation of humanitarian technologies. As

such, the following guiding questions and indicators are part of the analysis of this mechanism:

- Guiding assumption: corporations are the gatekeeper of technologies and have power over a vocabulary that holds the capacity to frame the way the humanitarian community thinks and talks about humanitarian action.
- Guiding questions for analysis:
  - What meanings of humanitarian technologies exist, and does one seem to be dominating over the others?
  - How are these meanings embedded in existing or emerging visions?
  - What jargon is attached to the discourses of humanitarian technologies, and to whom is this language accessible?
  - What are the different expectations about a technology held by corporate and humanitarian actors, and are they similar?
- Indicators:
  - Main goals/vision of a humanitarian technology
  - Justification for the need of technology
  - Perceived accessibility and usability of technology in the field
    - Cause-effect assumptions behind humanitarian technology
    - Jargon, slogans and catchwords

#### IDENTIFYING THE MECHANISM OF MAKING REPRESENTATIONS

Representations play a key role in producing meaning and are used as important way of persuading others to think about humanitarian action and its members in a specific way. As an example, Kennedy's (2009) work offers an interesting account of the ethical dilemmas of humanitarian action. He investigates the relationship between humanitarian relief and imagery, focusing on the ways in which aid agencies produce and disseminate images of human suffering. He follows the argument that physical distance is inversely related to charitable inclinations and shows how humanitarian organisations use imagery to bridge distance, to bring the distant victim to donor publics. At the same time, he illustrates the dilemma this brings; presenting human suffering without context, autonomy or dignity, where victims have no abilities but

rather their representations are simply used in order to facilitate humanitarian action. Chouliaraki (2010) investigates humanitarian communication and the development of representations in great detail. She elaborates how representations of suffering have undergone a 'crisis of pity' and left criticised for dehumanising people in need, to obtain a 'shock effect' that would release financial support from state and private donors. As a response, a communication style involving the 'positive image' has become appealing. The difference is that the latter type of representations rejects the imagery of the suffering and instead focus on a victim's agency and dignity. The intended effect is to personalise sufferers, emphasising that each individual has agency. However, there is the pretention of sameness that leads to a double moral: while a positive imagery should emphasise the dignity of sufferer, it simultaneously disempowers them by neglecting their individuality through Western ideas of identity and agency. A third type of representation, which she calls a post-humanitarian communication style, serves the practice of playful consumerism. These forms of representations are characterised by textual games, low intensity emotional regimes, and a technological imagination of instant gratification with no justification. She argues that this form of representation follows a market logic of persuasion and can be seen as response to the mediatised global market in which humanitarian organisations operate today.

Within this context, investigating the making of representations is an important aspect to disentangle in order to decide how meaning is put into place through corporate technologies. I ask the following questions during data analysis:

- Guiding assumption: corporations' representations build on persuasive representations of war and disaster and aid recipients to create particular versions of humanitarian action that serve the commercial purpose of their technologies.
- Guiding analytical questions:
  - What representations of humanitarian technologies exist?
  - What modes of recontextualization can be observed; in particular, what elements have been included or excluded; through what re-arrangement does recontextualization happen;

what elements have been substituted; and what elements have been added?

- Do representations of humanitarian technologies create naturalised understandings about humanitarian action?

- Indicators:

- View on 'aid recipients'
- View on humanitarian crises
- Mechanisms of recontextualisation: deletion, addition, substitution and rearrangement
- Role of suffering in representations
- emotional and affective appeal of representations

## CONCLUSION

So far, I have elaborated an analytical framework which accounts for the important role the co-production of society and technology plays in the establishment of collectively held imaginaries. The question is, then, where and how this framework can be applied to identify and analyse sociotechnical imaginaries.

Narratives, to restate a point by Jasanoff and Kim (2009) brought up in Chapter 3, are the location where sociotechnical imaginaries become particularly identifiable, because language is important for their construction. In order to study how corporate visions translate into collectively held sociotechnical imaginaries, it is crucial to identify those key narratives where corporate ideas are reproduced, stabilised and propagated; and where alternative visions compete to establish which idea of humanitarian aid prevails.

The majority of the research on sociotechnical imaginaries relies heavily on interpretative textual analysis of various sorts based on critical constructivism (McNeil et al. 2016, 451). Interpretation of written material is the dominant means of analysis, either of semi-structured interviews (e.g. Delina 2018; Kim 2018), various secondary documents (e.g. Jasanoff and Kim 2009; Sadowski and Bendor 2018), website content (e.g. Williamson 2018), archival materials (e.g. Smith 2009), or other historical (e.g. Jasanoff and Kim 2015) and ethnographic material (e.g. Smith and Tidwell 2016). This method of interpretation, it seems, is preferred over others because narratives are expected in written and oral discourses. Sadowski and Bendor (2018, 9) remind us that “we rely on discourse analysis because documents are the medium most often used to construct and transmit sociotechnical imaginaries.” Indeed, Jasanoff and Kim (2009, 123) state that “Sociotechnical imaginaries reside in the reservoir of norms and discourses.” Nevertheless, sociotechnical imaginaries are not mere discursive constructs. Jasanoff and Kim (2009, 2015) themselves distinguish their concept of sociotechnical imaginary from a number of other discursive theories. As such, they explicitly point out that imaginaries are different from discourses: the former focus on language but less on action and performance, while imaginaries focus on materialisation through technology. Moreover, imaginaries are not the same as policy



agendas; they “are less specific, less issue-specific, less goal-directed, less politically accountable, and less instrumental” (Jasanoff and Kim 2009, 123). Similarly, imaginaries are not equal to master narratives, which are usually used for explanatory or justificatory purpose of past events. Rather, imaginaries create visions of what is good and desirable (or the opposite); they articulate futures and help create the political or public will. Finally, imaginaries differ from ideologies as the latter lack the imagination’s properties of reaching and striving toward futures.

Nevertheless, none of these applications of the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries can escape some criticism from a methodological point of view that implies some major analytical drawbacks. Even though Jasanoff and Kim (2009, 2015) emphasise that the performative aspects of imaginaries become apparent in narratives, it seems that the interpretation applied in the literature is limited in its explanative power. The main weakness of the aforementioned studies is their failure to address the materiality of sociotechnical imaginaries, in the sense that they appear not to understand the variation of why some visions become stable and collectively hold sociotechnical imaginaries. It remains unclear how their analysis manages to identify imaginaries without collapsing material into meaning, or in other words, avoids an ontological and epistemological fallacy. Sadowski and Bendor (2018, 4) state that the presence of sociotechnical imaginaries expands the conceptual vocabulary of critical constructivism; I would argue, however, that the strength of the concept lies precisely in the emphasis on taking seriously the materialisation of imaginaries in technologies.

This motivates me to argue that there are performative powers at work which must have been activated to make the materialisation of imaginaries happen. Thus, accepting that imaginaries exist outside of our thoughts seems a crucial aspect of working with them, and should be reflected in the ontological fundament that then informs methodology and methods. Otherwise, a study tends to confirm Sovacol and Hess’s (2017, 719) critique that “The study of imaginary become limited to descriptive cultural analysis rather than including the full interplay of actors, social structures, and institutions in the explanation of sociotechnical change.” Hence, while an interpretative analysis of narratives certainly enables a researcher to identify sociotechnical imaginaries, it seems limited to description. As such, I argue that the

concept of sociotechnical imaginaries can be expected to acquire far greater strength through application to new areas and problems with the ontological and methodological lens of critical realism, as I suggest in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to lay out how I position myself in relation to the discussion within which my research methodology is located, and to present the research strategy and activities I found appropriate for answering the research questions. There is a difference between methodology and methods. 'Methodology' refers to views about the nature of the social and natural world (ontology), and the theory of knowledge (epistemology). The methodology informs the selection of methods, the actual data collection and analysis techniques (Sayer 2000). As such, this chapter translates the research questions and analytical framework into a research design which resonates with my positions about the world and knowledge production.

This chapter consists of six sections. In the section after this introduction, I discuss the fundamental tenets of critical realism, its understanding of the world as a stratified reality, and retrodiction as the main strategy of inference. Then, in the next section, I turn towards critical realism's impact on my research design. I elaborate why a qualitative comparative case study design is suitable for my research and justify why I applied a purposeful sampling strategy of two corporate humanitarian technologies inspired by Bergene's (2007) enhancement of the method of difference for critical realist comparative studies. Moreover, I justify why I chose IKEA Foundation's 'Better Shelter' and Mastercard's Aid Network and prepaid cards as cases for my study, and why they can be seen as suitable cases in terms of the contrasting outcomes that come with them. In the next section, I turn towards the data collection process. I explain why and how I chose documents and supplemental semi-structured interviews as my data sources through snowball sampling to approach key narratives. Then, I discuss how I arrived at my choice of a thematic narrative analysis as the most appropriate data analysis procedure and explain the practical stages that were involved. The final

section is a reflection on the limitations of my analysis, and how, from a critical realist perspective, I must acknowledge that my explanation is fallible.

## A CRITICAL REALIST ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

I adopt a critical realist approach which I see as appropriate for this research. Critical realism develops a philosophical ontology, where the world is structured, differentiated, stratified and changing. In general terms, critical realism claims that there is an independence of the world from our thoughts, and presumes that “There exists both an external world independently of human consciousness, and at the same time a dimension which includes our socially determined knowledge about reality” (Danermark et al. 2002, 5–6). This reality and the way it behaves are not entirely accessible to immediate observation. Rather, “One property of reality is that it is not transparent. It has powers and mechanisms which we cannot observe but which we can experience indirectly by their ability to cause - to make things happen in the world” (Danermark et al. 2002, 20). This is why critical realism switches its attention from the things that are happening towards what produces such things, namely, the underlying generative mechanisms and causal powers. In doing so, Bhaskar (1978, 56) suggests an ‘ontological map’ of the reality that is differentiated into the real, the actual, and the empirical.

Firstly, the *real* is unobservable but objective, as critical realist ontology assumes reality to be independent of our knowledge of it (Morais 2015, 196). The real refers to “whatever exists, be it natural or social, regardless of whether it is an empirical object for us, and whether we happen to have an adequate understanding of its nature” (Sayer 2000, 11). At this level of reality lie generative – also called causal – mechanisms, which are defined as the structures, causal powers, and liabilities of things, either physical or social. ‘Things’ may be better described as entities or objects, which provide “the basic theoretical building blocks for critical realist explanation and can be such things as organisations, people, relationships, attitudes and so on” (Easton 2010, 121). These entities with causal powers act, under certain conditions, as causal forces to produce events in the actual, the second level of reality. The *actual* level of reality refers to equally objective but partially observable events (Morais 2015, 196). These events are “what happens if and when [entities’] powers and structures get activated” (Sayer 2000, 11). It is important to note that within the actual domain, events happen whether we experience them or not, or may be understood quite

differently by observers (Easton 2010, 123). Put differently, the level of the actual “consists of all mechanisms that have been activated, even if they have not been observed” (Gorski 2013, 665). Thirdly, the *empirical* refers to the level of experience where observations are made and experienced by its observers. It consists of “all mechanisms that have been activated and observed” (Gorski 2013, 665). In other words, what we can observe is the result of a complex interplay of (mostly) not directly observable mechanisms and structures (Puehretmayer 2010, 17).

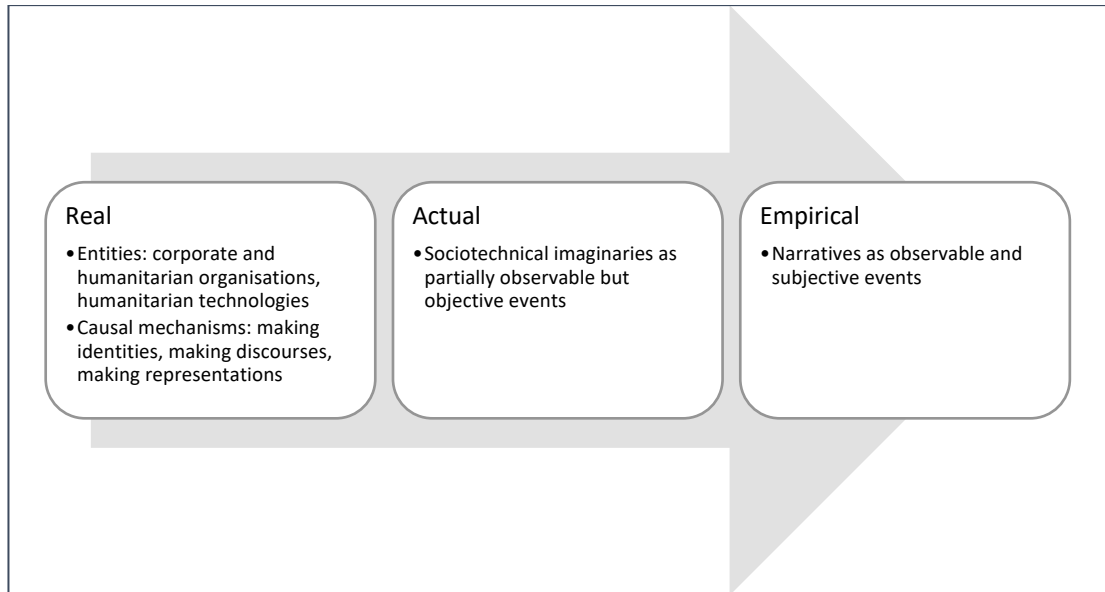
Bhaskar (1978, 36) points out that most scientific work reduces these three domains to a single one, which he calls epistemic fallacy. However, the purpose of scientific work should be to “investigate and identify relationships and non-relationships, respectively, between what we experience, what actually happens, and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events in the world” (Danermark et al. 2002, 21). As such, critical realism is an ontology which focuses on the explanation of an event and its underlying generative mechanisms and causal powers, rather than the event itself: “Explaining why a certain mechanism exists involves discovering the nature of the structure or object which possesses that mechanism of power” (Sayer 2000, 14). It is important to see the clear difference between critical realism and interpretative theory and post-structuralism: “While realism shares with interpretive social science the view that social phenomena are concept-dependent and have to be understood, unlike interpretivism it argues that this does not rule out causal explanation” (Sayer 2000, 18). Explanation therefore depends on identifying causal powers, examining how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions. According to Elger (2010, 254; as quoted in Morais 2015, 199), a critical realist explanation “requires a theoretically guided analysis of relationships among mechanisms (processes by which entities with particular causal powers cause events), contexts (other entities which may trigger, mediate, or contradict those powers), and outcomes (caused effects or events).” What this means in terms of what strategy of inference is used in critical realist studies is explained next.

Retroduction is the dominant mode of reasoning or strategy of inference used by critical realists, and involves “The process of identifying what causal powers are active in a given situation” (Fleetwood and Ackroyd 2004, 11). While induction means

reasoning from data to generality and deduction means reasoning from generality to data via hypothesis testing – both strategies of inference common in social science – retrodution refers to “reasoning about why things happen including why the data appear the way they do” (Olsen 2007, 1). As such, the goal of retrodution is “to identify the necessary contextual conditions for a particular causal mechanism to take effect and to result in the empirical trends observed” (Fletcher 2017, 189). In other words, “Retrodution is a mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them” (Sayer 1992, 107). By keeping assumptions weak, the purpose is to improve knowledge about the object of research. Critical realists such as Bhaskar (1978, 6) suggest that we “avoid any commitment to the content of specific theories and recognize the conditional nature of all its results”. For this reason, “Initial theories must be treated as just that: initial theories. The initial theory facilitates a deeper analysis that can support, elaborate, or deny that theory to help build a new and more accurate explanation of reality” (Fletcher 2017, 184). Critical realists do not, by acknowledging the complexity of the world, look for laws or generalities, but rather for tendencies (Danermark et al. 2002, 70).

From a critical realist point of view, the question is then, what is the event I can observe at the empirical level to detect such an imaginary, and what causal mechanisms can I investigate that help me to find answers to the question to explain “what must be true in order to make this event possible?” (Easton 2010, 123). Figure 2 shows how I translate a critical realist ontology and epistemology to the study of sociotechnical imaginaries.

FIGURE 2: THE CRITICAL REALIST ONTOLOGY AND EPISDEMOLOGY APPLIED TO SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES



From a critical realist point of view, narratives are the experiences at the empirical level which I, as researcher, can observe. By identifying and comparing narratives, sociotechnical imaginaries, which are partially observable but are also objective events, become for me interpretable. However, as mentioned above, I am not just interested in the mere description of imaginaries but focus also on what mechanisms work that make certain ideas about humanitarian assistance become collectively shared imaginaries. Following the logic of retroduction, I ask in more detail what mechanisms are able to produce such events, namely, the establishment of sociotechnical imaginaries, and under what conditions. The analytical framework I elaborated in Chapter 4 offers the conceptual guidance followed throughout this enquiry. The entities in my study are the organisations (including corporations, humanitarian organisations) partnering in humanitarian aid and the humanitarian technologies that result from such engagements. My analytical framework suggests three mechanisms of co-production – making identities, making discourses, making representations – that are important for the establishment of sociotechnical imaginaries. These are the postulated ‘causal mechanisms’ in a critical realist sense which I hope to investigate and better understand in terms of how, and under which conditions, they are working and contributing to the establishment of sociotechnical imaginaries, and why they affect the meaning of humanitarian assistance.



## RESEARCH DESIGN

### A CRITICAL REALIST COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY DESIGN

As became apparent in the sections above, critical realism has a strong interest in causation, and more particularly in underlying generative mechanisms which explain a process or outcome. As Sayer (2000, 4) notes, “Explanation depends on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions”. This is mirrored in the case study approach’s interest in searching out explanations (Easton 2010). For example, Gerring (2007, 45) stresses: “Case studies, if well-constructed, may allow one to peer into the box of causality to locate the intermediate factors lying between some structural case and its purported effect”. According to Yin (2014), the primary aim of a case study approach is to gain, by means of empirical enquiry, an in-depth understanding of a single or a small number of cases set in their real-world contexts. A case study aims to identify relationships and processes by illuminating a phenomenon in its completeness and from different perspectives, thereby producing an “insightful appreciation of the ‘cases’ [which] will hopefully result in new learning about real-world behaviour and its meaning” (Yin 2012, 4). Easton (2010, 119) therefore defines the case research as “a research method that involves investigating one or a small number of social entities or situations about which data are collected using multiple sources of data and developing a holistic description through an iterative research process.” The generic features of a case study approach support critical realist analysis, Easton (2010, 119) points out, because critical realism justifies the study of any situation, regardless of the numbers of research units involved, but only if the process involves in-depth research with the objective of understanding why things are as they are.

Within the case study approach, comparative case study design is particularly suitable for a critical realist-backed research inquiry which looks into discovering the ways mechanisms work. Danermark et al. (2002) state that studies aimed at describing or theorising fundamental conditions may to great advantage be organised as comparative case studies. Kessler and Bach (2014, 170) add that “the value of the comparative case approach lies in its capacity to identify these broader tendencies or

demi-regularities and underlying causal mechanisms . . . .” Ackroyd and Karlsson (2014, 31), similarly, claim that “There will be variations in the way a generative mechanism works itself out in given situations. Comparative research helps to clarify both the nature of a mechanism and the range of variation in both process and outcome that can occur.” Hence, an advantage of a comparative case study is that a significant variation of key outcomes can be investigated, which should lead to the development of better-founded knowledge of the nature of mechanisms and their properties.

When it comes to the question of how to design a comparative case study (or case study more generally), it is important to stress that there are varying, sometimes opposing, approaches, dependent on the scholars’ ontological and epidemiological foundation. Stake, who can be described as an influencing case study scholar, follows constructivist claims. He (1995, 2) avoids a clear definition of a case, seeing it as a “a specific, a complex, functioning thing”, arguing instead for a flexible design, building on the assumption that “the course of the study cannot be charted in advance” (Stake 1995, 22). Interpretation and being flexible enough to adjust throughout the research process lie at the heart of a case study. On the other hand, Yin (2012, 2014), who is without doubt one of the most prominent case study methodologists and whose contributions can clearly be described as landmark, demonstrates positivist leanings in his perspective on case study. This becomes specifically apparent when looking at his orientation towards objectivity, validity and generalisability. As aforementioned, the aim of a case study is to gain an in-depth understanding of a single or a small number of cases set in their real-world contexts. As such, qualitative case study designs use non-probability samples, where cases are non-randomly selected to reflect particular features that allow for such small-scale, in-depth studies. Case studies therefore have the advantage of generating high internal validity due to detailed knowledge, but are often criticised for findings that are weakly generalisable beyond the immediate study (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994).<sup>12</sup> This criticism is usually made by quantitative researchers, who see probability sampling as the most rigorous approach to generating a statistically representative study which allows the estimation of

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion on reliability and validity in qualitative research and common concerns that qualitative studies face, see, for example, Bryman (2012).

prevalence or distribution of characteristics that apply to the wider population (Ritchie et al. 2014, 78). Framing his response to these concerns in positivistic terms, Yin (2014) suggests increasing the overall robustness of qualitative case studies by choosing a multiple-case design over a single-case study, as the evidence of a multiple-case study is often considered more compelling than that of a single-case study (Yin 2014, 54). According to Yin (2014, 54), the logic behind a multiple-case study is to follow a replication design, which either predicts similar results (literal replication) or contrasting results for anticipatable reasons (a theoretical replication). He also (2012, 7–8) recommends choosing multiple case studies, “the way that you would define a set of multiple experiments—each case (or experiment) aiming to examine a complementary facet of the main research question.”

However, from the critical realist point of view that this study adopts, there is some disagreement with both – constructivist and positivist – positions. Easton (2010) criticises an interpretivist approach for lacking clarity about the standards by which one interpretation is judged to be better than another. In addition, he (2010, 118) argues that “It is even more problematic when the interpretations are particularistic since this would appear to rule out not just regularity as a criterion but also any form of comparison.” From a critical realist point of view, Yin’s positivist language is also rejected. For example, Kessler and Bach (2014, 173) find particularly the suggestion problematic that a multiple design equates to an ‘experiment’ generating predictions. In fact, it is very unlikely that comparative case studies meet the requirements of experimental design, and usually the cases used in comparative work differ from each other in multiple ways and are not be thought of as approximations to experimental design (Siggelkow 2007).

Although critical realist authors distance themselves from Yin’s positivistic terms, some of them find his use of purposeful selection supportive of a critical realist analysis which focuses on revealing patterns and their underlying causation. Purposeful sampling is helpful when looking for a rationale, such as the one Kessler and Bach (2014) label ‘light theorization’. In particular, they argue that Yin’s forms of replication – selecting for most-similar systems or for most-different systems – are useful in highlighting the close relationship between case-selection techniques and light

theorization.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Ackroyd and Karlsson (2014) argue that such strict strategies of selection, following a deductive logic in the tradition of Mill's (1843) method of difference (similar cases, different outcomes) and method of agreement (different cases, similar outcomes), does not apply in the same sense for a critical realist comparative study. Instead, the author (2014, 32) states, "it is accepted that much is different between the cases", bearing in mind that "there is instead the argument that there is a generative mechanism at work that has distinctive properties working itself out in particular circumstances."

Bergene (2007) agrees with such a concern by stating that a comparison strictly based on a most-similar systems or most-difference systems design is too rigorous and does not allow for contingent mechanisms and synergy between the variables to be studied. She suggests building on Lawson's (1997) idea of surprising occurrences, where the researcher seeks to explain why a certain event has (or has not) happened where it was (not) expected. While the case selection strategy does indeed build heavily on Mill's (1843) method of difference, the focus is not primarily on the outcome, but on contrasting or comparing cases to explain why 'y' has occurred – or not. While the common goal of Mill's method of difference is standardising for, or factoring out, factors common to all cases, she states that "in addition to letting surprised expectations of external differences among cases initiate an explanatory process, researchers need to conduct an internal analysis of each case" (2015, 18). In doing so, this reveals how factors and mechanisms manifest themselves differently in different contexts to build a nuanced explanation. She states (2015, 18) that a "surprised expectation or contrast might be a good point of departure" for case selection, at the same time reminding us (2007, 15) that "cases are not selected primarily on the basis of difference in outcome, but rather because the cases manifest a common structure that the researcher wants to describe." For a comparison to be relevant, however, the cases should be very different in most other aspects.

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<sup>13</sup> Della Porta (2008) and Bergschlosser and De Meur (2009) provide useful overviews of and introductions to the use and definition of most-similar and most-different systems design. In short, in most-similar systems design, similar cases with different outcomes are compared, assuming that factors common to the cases are irrelevant in explaining the difference in outcome. In most-different systems design, dissimilar cases with similar outcomes are compared. Through contrasting cases, all factors which are not linked to the same outcome are eliminated in order to isolate the one that offers a universal explanation.

The case selection strategy for this study draws heavily on Bergene's thoughts and Mill's method of difference, with a special focus on surprising outcomes, as I elaborate next.

#### CASE SELECTION STRATEGY: METHOD OF DIFFERENCE FOR CRITICAL REALIST

##### COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Due to its comparative element, a comparative case study design is particularly useful in studying sociotechnical imaginaries. In fact, this is "perhaps the most indispensable method for studying sociotechnical imaginaries. Comparing . . . not only helps to identify the content and contours of sociotechnical imaginaries but also avoids the intellectual trap of taking as universal epistemic and ethical assumptions that turn out, on investigation, to be situated and particular" (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 24). However, comparison in this study does not fix analytical attention to a few predetermined variables to formulate generalisations, as Yin (2014) would suggest. Rather, it helps to understand the common mechanisms through which sociotechnical imaginaries manifest, and why visions become "collectively held reference points and anchors for future" (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 28) through narratives of progress and in favour of technologies.

Guided by this research interest, and underpinned by the theoretical concept and analytical framework, I followed a purposeful sampling strategy of two cases inspired by Bergene's (2007) enhancement of the method of difference for critical realist comparative studies, in an attempt to amplify what we can learn from them. Based on the three types of private-public partnerships I detected from the literature, presented in Chapter 2, I focused on the second type of partnership, which I described as non-commercial implementing partnerships. This is because within these partnerships we can find businesses who provide and develop technologies for humanitarian purposes. Hence, their engagement is more than mere financial giving, but at the same time they are not directly contracted.

To identify relevant cases, I conducted a preliminary desk-based study of business technologies developed for humanitarian assistance, starting with an online search using the keywords 'corporate technologies AND humanitarian assistance'. I made a

list of technologies which could be classified as part of non-commercial implementing partnerships. Furthermore, I had three main criteria I used to pre-select and classify cases. These criteria emerged out of my elaborations in the research gap: type of company, type of technology developed, and type of humanitarian sector addressed by the humanitarian technology. Firstly, the type of company is directly linked to my research interest in multi-national companies having their origin in the West. In this sense, I was not looking for local businesses operating in a single country, but for multi-national corporate companies doing businesses on a global scale. Secondly, the next criterion was the type of technology developed. The introduction to this thesis defines humanitarian technology as involving both products and digital technologies. In the research gap, I further elaborated the growing importance of digital technologies; for the case selection, therefore, it was important to include technologies from both types, physical and digital technologies. Finally, the third criterion refers to the humanitarian sector for which a humanitarian technology has been developed. The thought behind this criterion lies again in the research gap. Some technologies are specifically developed for one humanitarian sector, while digital technologies do not necessarily address just one humanitarian area<sup>14</sup> but tend to be relevant for all of them. Overall, I compiled a list of fourteen potential cases.

Next, I used this list to make the final case selection. Following Bergene's (2007) suggestion, I looked for any surprising contrast in outcomes, and at the same time for a common structure informed by my analytical framework in how visions manifest themselves. The key criterion for a surprising outcome was the validation of a corporate humanitarian technology as a success within the humanitarian community. I used the term 'success' not in a strict sense, but rather in how key narratives would suggest the humanitarian community responded to a certain humanitarian technology. This criterion emerges directly out of Chapters 3 and 4, where the literature indicates that sociotechnical imaginaries are "animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science

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<sup>14</sup> The governance of humanitarian aid is commonly differentiated into thematic areas, referred to as clusters. Such clusters include, among others, Shelter; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene; Protection. For more information, see, for example, OCHA's useful overview: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/about-clusters/what-is-the-cluster-approach> (accessed September 16, 2020).

and technology” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 4). Hence, I was expecting that a positive validation of a humanitarian technology would allow me to investigate hegemonic sociotechnical imaginaries. To detect surprising, contrasting outcomes, I went through the list, looking for general information about the validation of a specific humanitarian technology within the humanitarian community. I did this by scanning various field reports and having informal conversations with colleagues working in the humanitarian sector. In doing so, two corporate humanitarian technologies offered surprising outcomes, which are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: CASE SELECTION INFORMED BY A CRITICAL REALIST METHOD OF DIFFERENCE

Case	Type of company	Type of technology	Year of release	Humanitarian sector	Outcome
The ‘Better Shelter’	Multi-national	Product	Formally launched: 2013  Wider distribution: 2015	Shelter sector	Widely known and popular in public, but critical voices from within humanitarian community
Mastercard Aid Network and prepaid cards	Multi-national	Digital service	2013 (prepaid cards)  2015 (Aid Network)	Multiple sectors	Somewhat unknown, but appears to be widely accepted within humanitarian community

The first was the ‘Better Shelter’, a flat-pack temporary emergency refugee shelter which was the result of a collaboration between IKEA Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the IKEA company, UNHCR and a Swedish social enterprise called Better Shelter RHU AB. This product was first introduced to the sector in 2013 and specifically developed for humanitarian shelter. By 2015, the ‘Better Shelter’ went into mass production and was distributed to a range of global locations. The ‘Better Shelter’ came under the spotlight of the media, won the Beazley Design of the Year award in 2017, and was widely and greatly admired for its innovative character and praised for its success in sheltering refugees. However, informal discussions with humanitarian practitioners and academic colleagues conducted as part of the selection process indicated that there also exists a different, critical view about the shelter which is at odds with its successful public image. That the positive validation the shelter received

from the media did not appear to be shared by humanitarian community could be considered a surprising outcome.

Secondly, the MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards also caught my attention in terms of outcome. MasterCard prepaid cards were, like the 'Better Shelter', formally launched in 2013. In 2015 – in the same year when the 'Better Shelter' went into production and was globally distributed – MasterCard introduced Aid Network. These are digital service technologies used across multiple humanitarian sectors to distribute cash assistance. Mastercard's engagement in humanitarian action appeared to attract little or no public attention, despite the company's apparent intense involvement in the promotion of cash and voucher assistance (CVA). For example, in 2015, it participated in an UN High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing; in 2018 and 2019, MasterCard was represented in talks at the WEF about humanitarian innovation and CVA; and it is represented in the board of the Cash and Learning Platform, one of the biggest networks for cash and voucher programming in humanitarian assistance. MasterCard has also been enabling or co-authoring various field reports about digital delivery of cash and voucher programmes in humanitarian settings. In contrast to IKEA Foundation's 'Better Shelter', there is not much mainstream media coverage to be found. Its activities, however, suggest that MasterCard and its technologies seem greatly engaged within the humanitarian community across multiple sectors and levels.

This prompted the question: why are things as they are? Why are these corporate technologies accompanied by a common structure in a sense that both appear positively validated but by different audiences? Or more significantly, that one is so unpopular among the humanitarian community while being commensurately popular with 'the general public'? How does the apparently so successful product of 'Better Shelter' and MasterCard's rather unknown digital technologies connect or differentiate in terms of what sociotechnical imaginaries dominate the idea of humanitarian action? Both, the 'Better Shelter' and MasterCard's technologies, became more known to the humanitarian community in the same years, namely, 2013 and 2015, which means some general context in which the products have been implemented are similar. For example, 2015 was a year when media reported intensively about what was commonly



called the “refugee crisis” (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017), a term usually used to refer to refugees attempting to reach Europe. In addition, at the end of 2014, the amount of funds requested through UN-coordinated appeals was the highest ever recorded (Global Humanitarian Assistance 2015). Similarly, the UN estimated 60 million people to be forcibly displaced (UNHCR 2015c), again, the highest number ever recorded up to then.

I found these two corporate humanitarian technologies ideal to examine what mechanisms of co-production between technology and society were at work that would explain why these outcomes present themselves the way they do, and where I can trace back collectively shared imaginaries to corporations’ visions which explains their impact on the idea of humanitarian assistance. In this sense, IKEA Foundation’s ‘Better Shelter’, and MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards are considered suitable cases of corporate humanitarian technologies.

## DATA COLLECTION

There is little practical guidance on how to integrate a critical realist approach into specific methods. This is also observed by Fletcher (2017) who laments the lack of applied literature on critical realism. Rather in general terms, Sayer (2000, 19) suggests that “critical realism endorses or is compatible with a relatively wide range of research methods, but it implies that the particular choices should depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it.” The same author (2002) proposes a differentiation between extensive and intensive research methods which could all be applied in a critical realist study. Extensive methods employ large scale surveys, formal questionnaires and statistical analyses, whereas intensive forms of method entail interviews, ethnography and qualitative analysis.

For the present study, I employed intensive forms of method in a critical realist sense to collect two types of data: written and oral documents and semi-structured interviews, although documents built the main sources of data. ‘Documents’ refer to written official documents deriving from private sources such as organisations (e.g. annual reports, mission statements, press releases, and public relations material); virtual documents from Internet sources (e.g. blog entries), newspaper articles, and

oral documents (e.g. YouTube videos). The reason why I use these forms of data for analysis is that language is crucial for narratives, as I have discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. Language appears as “spoken and written words and in formal (e.g. speeches, policy documents, media, instruction manuals) as well as informal (prompted or informal conversations, blogs) contexts” (White n.d.). In either case, this thesis puts particular emphasis on the interpretation of metaphors, myths, discursive choices and on vision creation which are relevant for the study of sociotechnical imaginaries.

What follows next is firstly, a general elaboration on how I adopted ‘snowballing’ as sampling strategy to collect documents and interview partners. Then, I talk through the process of how I collected written documents and oral documents; and present the material. After that, I discuss how I found my interview partners.

#### SNOWBALL SAMPLING

Within both case studies, a snowball sampling technique guided the data collection process. Snowball sampling is a form of purposeful sampling, described as a “sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have the experience or characteristics relevant to the research” (Bryman 2012, 424). I applied snowball sampling to all types of data relevant for my study: written and other oral documents, as well as interview partners. I found snowball sampling appropriate as it allowed me to identify and follow the main ‘storytellers’ within and across narratives who create, shape, challenge or maintain corporate visions and ideas of humanitarian progress. Comparing these key narratives allows hegemonic collectively held imaginaries to be identified.

Snowball sampling continues until the researcher has reached ‘data saturation’, that is, “a reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability within [their] data set” (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 1995, 65). This, however, is not without risk, and can in particular lead to a homogenous sample (Saunders 2012). While I was interested in following the dominant storytellers, this may have excluded other narrators whose story would have illuminated another important aspect of my cases. I reflect on this risk, and how critical

realism deals with the implications this may have on the conclusions I draw from my analysis, in more detail in the final section of this chapter. From a critical realist point of view, however, data saturation is governed by the question of what data is required to establish a plausible causal mechanism. Hence, “since retroduction is the key epistemological process that critical realists recognise, seeking an explanation requires that the researcher goes back to the research site collecting more data until epistemological closure, however flawed and temporary, is obtained” (Easton 2010, 124). I explain how I applied snowball sampling to collect my data, next.

#### DOCUMENTS

As a general note for my document search, it is important to state that before feeding a document that I considered relevant into my database, I applied Scott’s (1991, 6) four criteria to evaluate its quality:

1. Authenticity. Is the evidence genuine and of unquestionable origin?
2. Credibility. Is the evidence free from error and distortion?
3. Representativeness. Is the evidence typical of its kind, and, if not, is the extent of its untypicality known?
4. Meaning. Is the evidence clear and comprehensible?

For the document collection regarding ‘Better Shelter’, I began by searching the IKEA Foundation website using the keyword “Better Shelter” and “Refugee Housing Unit” (its official name). 17 results came up, and after checking I considered all to be relevant for analysis. The types of document included three annual reviews, two videos (which I transcribed), six press releases, and six web content.

These materials were the starting point for the snowballing. Firstly, I went on the websites and sources hyperlinked or referred to (such as newspaper articles). Secondly, I scanned the documents by looking for (a) key people from other organisations (such as partner organisations and humanitarian organisations using the shelter in the field), and mentioning of (b) networks, platforms and important events related to the ‘Better Shelter’. I then looked them up, and searched these websites for all relevant documents by again using the keywords ‘Better Shelter’ and, where applicable, the names of key people. In doing so, I found two videos by IKEA

Foundation released on the official IKEA Foundation website and documents from UNHCR.

I continued my search with UNHCR, the IKEA Foundation developing partner in the 'Better Shelter' project, searching on the UNHCR website in two ways. Firstly, I used the hyperlinks from IKEA Foundation documents as described above. In addition, I searched on the UNHCR website for all documents relating to 'Better Shelter' and 'Refugee Housing Unit'; 62 results came up, of which not all were relevant: some were duplicates which I already had. Others did not pass the assessment of quality which I run for each document; often criteria three (Representativeness) and four (Meaning) were not met. In total, I considered 25 UNHCR documents as relevant, including two appeals, one shelter design catalogue, two factsheets, three introductory remarks, eleven reports and six web content.

Although I was consulting the Better Shelter RHU AB website (a social enterprise and the third partner organisation involved in the development of 'Better Shelter'), I decided to use statements only when made through other documents, such as a press release by IKEA Foundation or when quoted in a newspaper article. The reason is that my focus lied on IKEA Foundation as corporate originator of visions and in the exploration of how these visions manifests in the wider narrative, while the staff of Better Shelter RHU AB first came together as a group of independent designers in 2008 without any involvement from IKEA Foundation (I discuss the evolution of the 'Better Shelter' in more detail in Chapter 6).<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, I used different online news archives to extend my search to include media coverage. By using "IKEA Foundation" AND "Better Shelter", the result on NewsBank/Access World News was 35 articles; Factiva led to 62 results; International Newsstand 19 results; and Europresse 27 results. I included 23 articles by newspapers and magazines in my database, in light of many duplicates and of what could be called 'data saturation'. However, through hyperlinks in some of these articles I then collected an additional three exhibitions texts from museums and art exhibitions.

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<sup>15</sup> This decision was made in light of the limited resources available for this study.

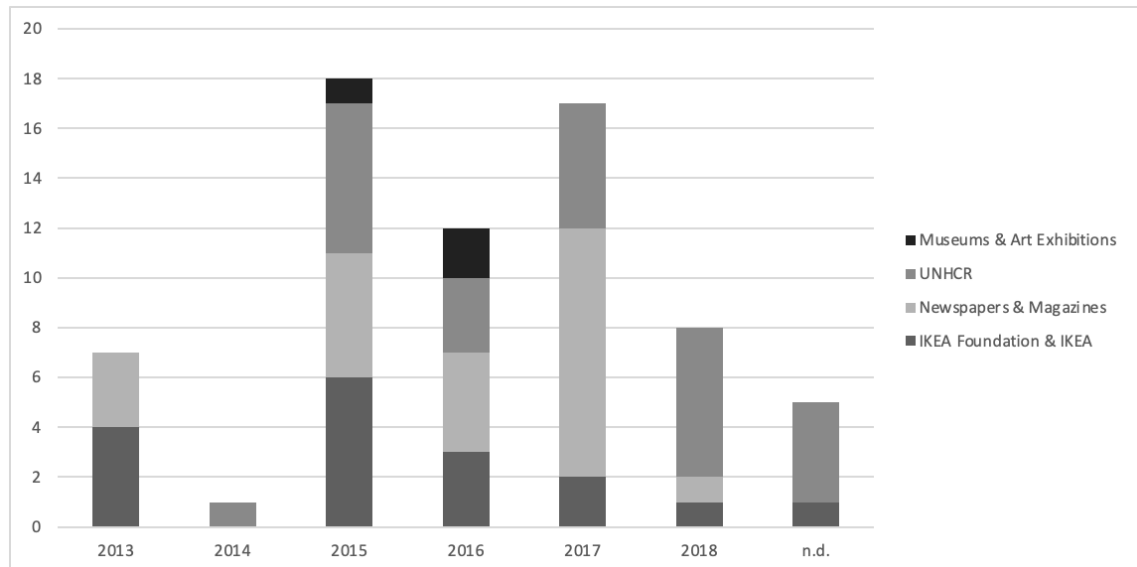
In total, I analysed 68 documents. Table 3 shows a refined overview of the different type of documents and sources that built the database:

TABLE 3: DOCUMENTS USED FOR ANALYSIS, CASE 'BETTER SHELTER'

Source	Type of Document	Total
IKEA Foundation & IKEA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual reviews: 3</li> <li>• Press releases: 6</li> <li>• Videos: 2</li> <li>• Web content: 6</li> </ul>	17
Museums & art exhibitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhibition texts: 3</li> </ul>	3
Newspapers & magazines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articles: 23</li> </ul>	23
UNHCR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appeal: 2</li> <li>• Catalogue: 1</li> <li>• Factsheet: 2</li> <li>• Introductory remarks: 3</li> <li>• Report: 11</li> <li>• Web content: 6</li> </ul>	25
Total		68

Figure 3 shows the distribution of documents in relation to publication year. As becomes clear, there is a time lag regarding when documents were published. Most of my data in 2015, for example, is published by IKEA Foundation and UNHCR, when the 'Better Shelter' was officially introduced. In 2016 and 2017, the proportion starts to change, and while IKEA Foundation's coverage seems to fade out, the 'Better Shelter' attracts more media attention. Moreover, UNHCR has a regular 'Better Shelter' coverage.

FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTS PER YEAR, CASE 'BETTER SHELTER'



For document collection pertaining to the second case study, I began by searching the MasterCard.com website for all documents relating to 'MasterCard Aid Network'; only seven results showed up. I then went on MasterCard Content Exchange website, where MasterCard's news, press releases, briefs, etc. are archived, but no results came up with the key word 'MasterCard Aid Network'. Instead, a Google search using the keywords "MasterCard" AND "Aid Network" led me to the section of the MasterCard website called "MasterCard Aid Network – A Digital Platform to Humanitarian Solutions" (Public Sector > Find Solutions > Humanitarian Solutions). Here, I proceeded in a similar manner to the materials in the first 'Better Shelter' case study, as it had served as a starting point for the snowballing. I followed inserted hyperlinks leading to other content or sources, such as a white paper, a field report, one instance of general information on the website, two promotional videos, a vision paper, 13 press releases, and a blog entry. In total, I collected 20 documents from MasterCard.

Secondly, I scanned the website and documents/video by looking for (a) key people whom I could later approach for interviews, (b) relevant organisations (partner organisations, namely, Save the Children, World Vision, Mercy Corps, and World Food Programme), and mention of (c) networks, platforms and important events related to MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards (for example, the WEF). I then went onto these websites, searching by again using the keywords 'MasterCard Aid Network' and 'MasterCard prepaid cards'. In total, I collected 13 documents from humanitarian

organisations; six from UN agencies, 2 from International Organisations, and 9 from Think Tanks, consulting firms, platforms, and networks.

In addition, I used different online news archives to extend my search and different combinations of key words to specify the area of interest. Many results were duplicates; nevertheless, this facilitated the finding of further relevant documents which again led to other sources. In total, I included 12 articles from newspapers and magazines into my analysis.

- Factiva:
  - "MasterCard" AND "Aid Network" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 0
  - "MasterCard" AND "prepaid cards" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 0
  - "Mastercard" AND "cards" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 0
- NewsBank / Access World News:
  - "MasterCard" AND "Aid Network" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 14 results
  - "MasterCard" AND "prepaid cards" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 3 results
  - "Mastercard" AND "cards" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 32 results
- International Newsstream:
  - "MasterCard" AND "Aid Network" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 7
  - "MasterCard" AND "prepaid cards" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 3
  - "Mastercard" AND "cards" AND "Humanitarian Aid": 33

Overall, in contrast to the first case study, the search of documents turned out to be more complicated, an issue which I reflect on in the last section of this chapter. Here, an iterative research process proved to be crucial, and after several cycles of data analysis, I returned several times to the sources, looking for additional data. In total, for this case study, I included 62 documents for analysis. Table 4 presents a summary of sources and type of documents:

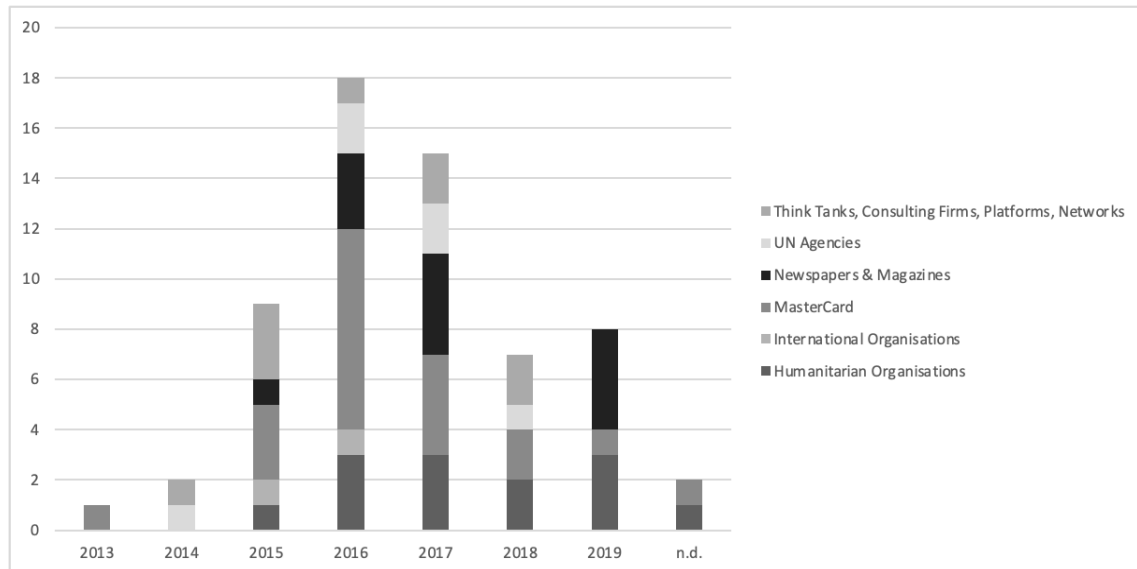
**TABLE 4: DOCUMENTS USED FOR ANALYSIS, CASE 'MASTERCARD AID NETWORK AND PREPAID CARDS'**

Source	Type of Document	Total
Humanitarian Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field report: 1</li> <li>• Handbook: 1</li> <li>• Press article: 1</li> <li>• Press releases: 2</li> <li>• Reports: 4</li> <li>• Web content: 4</li> </ul>	13
International Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Press release: 1</li> <li>• Strategic note: 1</li> </ul>	2
MasterCard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blog: 1</li> <li>• Field report: 1</li> <li>• Press releases: 13</li> <li>• Videos: 2</li> <li>• Vision paper: 1</li> <li>• Web content: 1</li> <li>• White paper: 1</li> </ul>	20
Newspapers & Magazines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articles: 12</li> </ul>	12
Think Tanks, Consulting Firms, Platforms, Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background note: 1</li> <li>• Blog: 1</li> <li>• Press releases: 1</li> <li>• Reports: 5</li> <li>• Web content: 1</li> </ul>	9
UN Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blog: 1</li> <li>• Field report: 1</li> <li>• Guide: 1</li> <li>• Report: 1</li> <li>• Strategic note: 1</li> <li>• Working paper: 1</li> </ul>	6
Total		62

Figure 4 shows the documents I used in relation to publication year. There is clear peak when MasterCard released information about the technologies in 2016 and then a steady decline over the following years.



**FIGURE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTS PER YEAR, CASE 'MASTERCARD AID NETWORK AND PREPAID CARDS**



For a broader understanding of their humanitarian engagement and partnerships, and information about the technologies themselves, I searched IKEA Foundation and MasterCard websites for contextual information, reading corporate and foundational documents, key policy documents, along with other documents from various sources. These materials provided important background information.

The result of snowball sampling as a method of document selection was that documents intended for a variety of different audiences could be read together for established narratives by key actors across all data. For example, press releases are aimed at informing the public, while an UN High-Level Panel report, for example, is intended for a more specialist audience; although focus and tone may vary between these different types of documents, the overarching narratives could be identified. Hence, this strategy of data collection allowed me to trace collectively shared imaginaries, noting their visionary origins as well as how and why they were mobilised, embedded or resisted. Snowball sampling also enabled me to collect documents from various data sources which strengthened the robustness of my analysis. In addition to the documents and in a further attempt to enhance the validity of my results, I conducted interviews with representatives from IKEA Foundation and MasterCard, humanitarian practitioners and experts in the field. I will turn to the interview process next.

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

It was always my understanding that the research is predominantly document-based. However, by following an iterative retroductive research process, I hoped that through expert interviews with representatives from IKEA Foundation and MasterCard, as well as with further experts and humanitarian practitioners whose names came up during the document analysis, I would be able to gain a more nuanced picture of the visions and imaginaries at play, and, particularly, cross-reference and deepen the results.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of identifying narratives around 'Better Shelter', I conducted a total of four interviews. I was able to set up an interview with a representative of IKEA Foundation. I also reached out to an author of an article about development in shelters, who submitted to a journal where I hold the position of managing editor. A humanitarian practitioner, he agreed to be interviewed and provided a list of potential interview partners. I gained two more interview participants from this list, one a humanitarian practitioner and one a representative of a think tank specialised in shelter in humanitarian assistance.

In the case of tracing narratives around 'MasterCard Aid Network' and 'MasterCard prepaid cards', I contacted ten people in total from MasterCard and from humanitarian organisations working with MasterCard's technologies, but only arranged one interview with a humanitarian practitioner based in Lebanon. I reflect on the issue of access in the last section of this chapter, where I also elaborate the limitations of the study and analysis.

When I contacted potential interview partners – usually via Email – I attached an information sheet with details of my research topic and my expectations about the interview, as well as pointing out that my PhD study has been approved by the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee. Ahead of all interviews, I gained consent by sending an agreement form which participants had to sign and return. In agreement with participants, I recorded all interviews. I partly transcribed and partly paraphrased the interviews before using them for analysis.

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<sup>16</sup> I discuss the iterative process of analysis I applied to my data later in this chapter.

I used the form of semi-structured interview (Bryman 2012; Kvale 1996). The main reason for this type of interview was the flexibility it gives me as researcher to gain deep insights into my research topic, while simultaneously allowing me to cover topics which were relevant in light of my analytical framework. Interviews were conducted after a first phase of document analysis, when I needed to go back to the research site and collect more data. Semi-structuring the interviews was very useful as it allowed me to cover specific topics that I understood to be important, but at the same time enough flexibility to pick up on statements the interviewees would make and to give them enough freedom in their response. This allowed me to apply an iterative process of refinement, where I adjusted the analytical framework throughout the process of data collection and analysis in order to build up causal explanation (Bryman 2012, 471).

Humanitarian practitioners were asked to talk about experiences encountered when working with the corporate technology ('Better Shelter', or in the one interview with MasterCard, with 'MasterCard Aid Network' and 'MasterCard prepaid cards), why they felt positive or negative about the corporate technology in the way it was introduced to the humanitarian community and implemented, what were the specific strengths and offerings of the technology, how they perceived the role of IKEA Foundation/MasterCard, but also more generally that of businesses, in humanitarian assistance, and, when applicable, what they experienced as opportunities and barriers when collaborating with them. They were also asked some specific questions which emerged from the first phase of analysis, about how they think the technologies affect aid recipients, but also how the humanitarian community works more generally. This set of questions was slightly adopted for the IKEA Foundation representative, adding questions about own positioning within the humanitarian community, accountability, and what aspirations the Foundation upholds in regard to the future of humanitarian assistance.

These questions were asked using a similar wording, but not necessarily in the same order. In addition, I took up themes the interviewees mentioned and tried to let them elaborate on things which appeared important to them. I always concluded by asking

interviewees if they wanted to mention anything which they had not felt able to earlier.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMI-REGULARITIES IN CRITICAL REALIST ANALYSIS

In this section, I discuss the analysis of my data. As a reminder, an important aspect of data analysis in a critical realist sense is that the researcher is not looking for laws or generalities. In its place, a critical realist scholar acknowledges that “social reality is open and that social events will rarely be clear-cut” (Bergene 2007, 18). Critical realists are looking for tendencies or demi-regularities, which are “non-spurious, rough and ready, partial regularities that come to dominate restricted regions of time-space” (Lawson 1997, 204). Demi-regularities can be found at the empirical level of reality, and an important part of data analysis is hence “looking out for rough trends or broken patterns in empirical data” (Fletcher 2017, 185). Demi-regularities are so important because they form our expectations about the events under study, as they “are seen to provide an indication of the working of a causal mechanism” (Bergene 2007, 18). As researchers can trace demi-regularities on the empirical level, “this indicates the possible reproduction of an underlying real causal mechanism (or mechanisms) that is being more or less actualised in specific sets of circumstances” (Jessop 2005, 43). In my study, this means tracing sociotechnical imaginaries at the empirical level of narratives, finding the origins of visions about humanitarian assistance, and explaining why they led, or failed, to turn into collectively held imaginaries.

Miller and Maxwell (2012) describe two main strategies in realist data analysis: categorising and connecting. The former refers to comparing and contrasting data, the latter to looking for antecedents and consequences. From a retroductive perspective and in search of causal explanation, I see categorisation as a valuable strategy for my analysis, as it is useful for comparison, “identifying differences and similarities and relating these to other differences and similarities” (Maxwell 2004, 256). This was demonstrated, for example, by Fletcher (2017), who used the strategy of

categorisation to trace demi-regularities in data and explain causal mechanisms.<sup>17</sup> Within this type of strategy, as I elaborate next, I chose the method of ‘thematic narrative analysis’ as appropriate for this study. Firstly, it acknowledges that social actors have different experiences of reality, crucial to critical realist analysis; it is also a valuable strategy for finding explanation in a comparative case study design. Before presenting how I applied this method of analysis to my data, I next provide some generic information about thematic narrative analysis, and a more detailed justification for this choice.

### THEMATIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

As elaborated in detail earlier in this chapter, key narratives lie at the heart of my analysis, used to identify and understand the establishment of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2015). These are not plain descriptions of reality. Narrators construct social reality and establish connections among events, feelings, thoughts and actions (Gergen 1999). However, Maitlis (2012) points out that social actors cannot merely create any wished reality through narratives; they are constrained by social structures, resources and skills. In this sense, narratives, albeit socially interpreted, are not mere constructs for critical realist analysis, but indeed real. Put differently, critical realism treats “the ideas and meanings held by individuals – their concepts, beliefs, feelings, intentions, and so on – as equally real to physical objects and processes” (Maxwell and Miller 2012, viii). This is why, in a critical realist study, narratives are important sources of analysis to understand what occurs in society and why. Some challenges do however come with analysing narratives: Sayer (1992, 259–62) reminds us to consider that they tend to underspecify causality in the processes they describe, and often miss the distinction between chronology and causality. Moreover, narratives appear often linear and chronological, and tend to simplify the complexity of the interaction of causal influences. In addition, ‘storytelling’ has often persuasive goals, which can make criticism difficult. Amid these obstacles,

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<sup>17</sup> There is little practical guidance when it comes to applying a critical realist qualitative study, but I found the work by Fletcher (2017) and Easton (2010) helpful. The two main stages of analysis applied in my study are inspired by these studies.

thematic narrative analysis proved to be a useful method to address these issues, as I discuss next.

A thematic narrative analysis seemed the ideal choice of method for two main reasons. Firstly, its aim is identifying central themes within a narrative or a set of key narratives that are common or different to all stories, as Maitlis (2012, 495) points out. I find this a useful way to deal with the dangers of researching narratives outlined above, as it equips me with the tools to distinguish between chronology and causality, and to unravel the complexity underneath a seemingly linear, 'smooth' storyline. As such, it helps to unmask masked rhetoric by finding differences and similarities across narratives. Secondly, thematic narrative analysis seems helpful to investigate a composite of narrative, that is, "a narrative composed by the researcher from multiple data sources" (Maitlis 2012, 495). In my cases, I indeed dealt with a composite of narratives drawn from different key narrators and sources, and this method of analysis allowed me to create categories across the data, distinguishing one narrative from another on the basis of common themes. This is an important aspect towards a thorough comparison across stories to find origins and causes for complex events as sociotechnical imaginaries. To sum up, thematic analysis "is an especially valuable approach when a researcher wants to understand the content conveyed in a narrative, and particularly when they wish to highlight the key content elements that give the narrative its power" (Maitlis 2012, 496).

Thematic narrative analysis can be either theory-led or more inductively derived. This is compatible with the research cycle of critical realism. Easton (2010, 124) states that the analysis may include elements of both deductive and inductive research cycles:

"Deduction helps to identify the phenomenon of interest, suggests what mechanism may be at play and provide links with previous research and literature. Induction provides event data to be explained and tests the explanations. [Retroduction] differs from other research process cycles only in that its goals are different. The cutting edge of this method is to continue to ask the question why?"

The thematic narrative analysis in my study involved two phases. Firstly, I was looking for demi-regularities in my data by applying organisational and substantial coding guided by induction and by the literature review; secondly, I examined what conditions caused these trends to appear as they do by applying theoretical coding guided by my analytical framework. For the analysis, I used 'pencil-and-paper' tools, to use Bazeley's (2013, 132) wording, although I tried NVivo as computer software. I am aware that printing out such a high volume of material was not the most environmentally friendly method, but reading through documents armed with colour pencils, able to quickly add notes and comments without the software crashing once a day, proved to be more efficient, intuitive and helpful in organising my thoughts and making progress in building up claims for analysis.

For an easier presentation, I will elaborate the two phases of analysis in separate sections; however, it is important to remember that I did not move from one to the next in a linear way but repeated them in an iterative cycle of analysis.

#### LOOKING FOR DEMI-REGULARITIES: ORGANISATIONAL AND SUBSTANTIAL CODING

In line with critical realist ontology, I first looked for demi-regularities at the empirical level of my data, and I did that through coding. Coding is what Miller describes as "the most widely used categorizing strategy in qualitative data analysis" (Maxwell and Miller 2012, 111). I used two types of coding. The first is what Maxwell (2009, 237) calls coding for 'organisational' categories, which "function primarily as "bins" for sorting the data for further analysis". I used this type of coding to find the broad topics which came up across the documents, and hence to identify similar and different visions across the narratives. For example, through coding for organizational categories I found that 'dignity and empowerment' in corporate narratives is a dominant theme when talking about 'Better Shelter' and also about 'MasterCard Aid Network' and 'MasterCard prepaid cards'. The idea that humanitarian technologies enhance, even enable aid recipient's dignity and agency is something that was also dominant in narratives of humanitarians. Another example might be the theme of 'financial inclusion', which is an important element of MasterCard's vision of progress for humanitarian assistance; it was also a dominant issue within the humanitarian narratives. As Table 5 shows, I had roughly twelve organizational categories:

TABLE 5: ORGANISATIONAL CATEGORIES

Case	Organisational Categories (reduced to key themes and visions for further analysis)
The 'Better Shelter'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Position of IKEA Foundation and perception</li> <li>• 'Dignity and empowerment' through the 'Better Shelter'</li> <li>• 'Shelter as process' vs 'shelter as product'</li> <li>• 'Building Back Better' – the different use of a humanitarian credo</li> <li>• Promoting 'Better Shelter' to an IKEA market</li> </ul>
MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'A world beyond cash' and financial inclusion</li> <li>• Financial inclusion: a humanitarian priority?</li> <li>• 'Dignity and Empowerment' through digital technologies</li> <li>• Bridging humanitarian and development goals with commercial interest</li> <li>• Meaning and role of private-public partnerships</li> </ul>

Next, I coded for substantial categories. These are descriptive categories in the sense that they identify, for example, social actors' beliefs and perceptions (Maxwell 2005, 97–98). I treated most as subcategories to the organizational categories. Taking the example of the “bin” ‘dignity and empowerment’, I coded for what actors understood by these terms and their feelings about how the technologies contribute to them. Similar to Maxwell’s point, substantial coding happened in somewhat of an inductively way, although not entirely: I was guided by the literature review, looking not only for what would emerge as themes in my data, but also for what related back to what I identified in my literature review as traditional and neoliberal imaginaries.

At this point of analysis, all codes within each case study were considered important, but I was especially looking for the distinct ways shared visions across the themes would crystallise themselves as sociotechnical imaginaries. These imaginaries were identified through mapping, a tool for clarifying and developing these connections (Maxwell 2009, 228). This I achieved by listing each theme and code on a separate piece of paper and pushing them around the table until I had them in groups that made sense to me, a technique which I found surprisingly helpful, and was proposed by Bazeley (2013, 181). In doing so, I identified two demi-regularities in the form of two sociotechnical imaginaries: in the case of 'Better Shelter', I identified a sociotechnical imaginary of what I will call 'tech-hedonism' which became dominant in the wider public, and in the case of MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards, an



imaginary which I name ‘digital financial inclusion’ which became manifested among strategic partners and allies within the humanitarian community.

After detecting collectively held sociotechnical imaginaries as demi-regularities, the second phase of my analysis sought explanations for this variation, examining why and where they appear as they do.

#### LOOKING FOR CAUSAL MECHANISMS: THEORETICAL CODING

The second stage of a critical realist analysis focuses on causal mechanisms. Here, retroduction aims to explain why a particular causal mechanism takes effect and results in the empirical trends observed (Fletcher 2017, 189). In my study, this involved examining why the sociotechnical imaginaries I identified in the first stage of analysis appear as they do. This stage involved another type of coding that thematic analysis allows, namely, for theoretical categories. As Maxwell (2009, 238) states, “Theoretical categories place the coded data into a more general or abstract framework . . . . They usually represent the researcher’s concepts (what are called “etic” categories).” Indeed, this step of the coding was strongly guided by my analytical framework and the indicators I developed to assess the three mechanisms of co-production: making identities, making discourses and making representations. The list of indicators I used can be found in Chapter 4 (which appears as final list, but it is important to note that the analytical framework was flexible, in the sense that indicators were added, changed and deleted throughout the entire research cycle).

In practice, I focused on key passages that emerged as relevant from the first phase of coding and examined how and to what extent the indicators (and hence what mechanisms of co-production) apply to the identified sociotechnical imaginaries. I used tools of thematic analysis proposed by Ryan and Bernard (2003) and was especially looking for repetitions, interesting transitions (the way in which topics shift in narratives), the use of metaphors and analogies, and linguistic connecting words such a ‘because’ or ‘since’ which indicate causal connections. I again used mapping as described in the first stage of analysis, which helped to trace why a tech-hedonist imaginary did not prevail in the humanitarian community, and why an imaginary of digital financial inclusion did. As such, mapping proved useful for finding the

similarities and differences across the cases to further specify the conditions under which mechanisms lead to the manifestation of sociotechnical imaginaries.

In the case of 'Better Shelter', I found that the interplay between the mechanisms of 'making discourses' and 'making representations' suggests why IKEA Foundation's vision for 'Better Shelter' successfully established in the public an imaginary of 'tech-hedonism'; however, the lack of establishing a shared identity, and the failure to embed its vision into an existing debate among humanitarians failed to manifest this imaginary within the humanitarian community. In the case of MasterCard, I found that the interplay between the mechanisms of 'making identities' and 'making discourses' turned MasterCard's vision into a collectively held imaginary of 'digital financial inclusion' among multi-mandated humanitarian organisations and international development institutions (such as World Bank) in support of merging humanitarian and development goals through economic approaches.

Through detailed comparison of the two case studies, I found two causal powers through which corporate visions manifested; first, by a narrative of freedom that accompanies a specific conception of what dignity and empowerment means for aid recipients, and second, by shaping and constructing relevant markets through the moral appeal of humanitarian technologies as commodities in a context of a fragmented and weakened society constructed as scattered markets.

I present the results of the individual case studies and discuss them in Chapters 6 and 7, and put them in a comparative perspective in Chapter 8. However, before moving to the results and findings, I reflect on the limitations of my study in light of what critical realism calls "judgemental rationality".

## LIMITATIONS OF STUDY AND REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity is a tool used in qualitative research to demonstrate “one’s awareness of the research problematics and is often used to potentially validate and legitimise the research precisely by raising questions about the research process” (Pillow 2003, 179). As such, reflexivity is usually used with a focus on researcher subjectivity in the research process; “a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis” (Pillow 2003, 176). Discussions address issues around a researcher’s ability to represent another. Thus, I must acknowledge my own interpretative practises as researcher: how can I be confident that I interpret my materials in the way I set out to do, and what if I miss an important causal mechanism to explain the phenomena I study?

While I must address such questions around my ability to represent and draw conclusions, it is simultaneously important to ask how ‘the other’ is influencing me. Investigating key narratives means engaging with a powerful elite—and multi-national companies can be described as such—and imposes specific challenges for me as a researcher: as more or less powerful groups might have unequal access to composing publicly available narratives, how can I be sure that businesses do not deliberately mask certain visions, those I am not supposed to identify? How do I account for White’s (n.d.) suggestion of paying attention “to the ‘not-theres’ as well as what is there”? Moreover, how can I overcome a potential ‘elite delusion’ when carrying out interviews, “the perception that elites are difficult to access and the researcher must be flexible and indeed grateful for any of their valuable time that is available” (Mason-Bish 2018, 2)? In addition, how do businesses restrict or enable me in accessing certain narratives and not others, as they might use “strategies to avoid answering through delivering a general consensual view” (Bergman Blix and Wettergren 2015, 693)?

Indeed, access was the main challenge I faced during the data collection process. The collection of documents turned out to be more straightforward in the case of the IKEA Foundation ‘Better Shelter’ than it was for MasterCard digital technologies. In the former, this was because of having clear key words (“Better Shelter” and “Refugee Housing Unit”) to use, but it was also ‘easier’ in terms of finding coverage across

multiple sources due to the widely known status of the shelter. Nevertheless, in regard to the collection of data for a humanitarian response to the shelter and IKEA Foundation's narrative, accessible documents about the 'Better Shelter' were mainly published by UNHCR – IKEA Foundation's partner and client of the product – while the narrative of humanitarian organisations using the shelter on the ground was predominantly retrieved from interviews, to which I turn in the next paragraph. In the case of MasterCard's technologies, it was more challenging to find clear information about the use and scope of the technologies, not only on humanitarian websites, but also on MasterCard's website itself. And while there exists multiple information on cash programming in humanitarian assistance, I found very little about how partnerships with financial service providers and the application of digital technologies work in practice. Moreover, the media did not cover MasterCard's humanitarian technologies in the same way it did with the 'Better Shelter', and hence, there was no public narrative to be analysed – a point which I take up again in the cross-case synthesis in Chapter 8.

Despite using documents as primary source of data, it was important to conduct interviews in order to enhance the reliability and validity of my data, and to apply a thorough retroductive research process which would meet the prerequisites of critical realism. However, it was especially challenging to access interview partners for the MasterCard case study. Here I faced multiple obstacles in arranging interviews, with problems including slow or no reply to requests, lengthy internal procedures, fading email exchanges, and the challenge of tracing people in a field where individuals move on quickly to the next humanitarian mission or organisation.

The obstacles regarding data collection have an impact on the quality of data, with limitations on the analysis. Particularly in the case of the MasterCard technologies, it would have been important to deepen the analysis with more personal encounters. However, thinking through the ontological map of critical realism and its implications on knowledge production allows, at least from a philosophical point of view, interpretations to account for the masked and unmasked, the observable and unobservable. In critical realism, observation is fallible (Easton 2010, 123). In fact, it is unlikely to reveal completely and lead to a full understanding of any social situation. As

discussed earlier in this chapter, critical realism claims that a world exists independently of our thoughts. This does not mean that “Critical realism should . . . be confused with empirical realism—equivalent to empiricism—which identifies the real with the empirical, that is, with what we can experience, as if the world just happened to correspond to the range of our senses and to be identical to what we experience” (Sayer 2000, 11). Instead, “critical realism proposes a way of combining a modified naturalism with a recognition of the necessity of interpretive understanding of meaning in social life” (Sayer 2000, 3). This relates to a fundamental differentiation of knowledge: an intransitive dimension of knowledge in the things we study, such as physical processes or social phenomena, and a transitive dimension of knowledge, which are the theories we generate about the objects we study. As Colliers (1994) plausibly argues, while rival theories have different presumptions about the world, the world—the intransitive dimension—remains the same, because otherwise they would not be rivals. In light of this, critical realism accepts that data is collected from social actors as well as from, and about, material things, and “that any explanations are necessarily fundamentally interpretivist in character” (Easton 2010, 124). As a consequence, when analysing data created by social actors, the researcher requires the inclusion of the researcher’s understanding of the subject’s understanding. This complexity is called the double hermeneutic (Woodside, Pattinson, and Miller 2005).

For this reason, critical realists consider it as more appropriate to ask whether an explanation is ‘acceptable’ rather than ‘good’ (Easton 2010, 124). Here, the concept of ‘judgemental rationality’ provides some suggestions what that means:

“Judgemental rationality means that we can publically [sic] discuss our claims about reality as we think it is, and marshal better or worse arguments on behalf of those claims. What we aim for is hence provisional judgements about what reality is objectively like, about what belongs to that reality and what does not” (Archer, Collier and Propora 2004, 2).

Hence, I acknowledge that the social world is an open system, and that social events are concept-dependent, intentional and get interpreted by people. However, the things that happens within it are not random. Instead, through the transitive

dimension of knowledge, I can try to identify the mechanisms to gain an understanding of, in Sayer's (2000, 11) terms, "what things must go together, and what could happen, given the nature of objects." However, I have to acknowledge that there is a "deep dimension of social reality, where mechanisms are located [in the domain of the 'real'] which ultimately generate the events in this reality in society" (Danermark et al. 2002, 34), a dimension which might not be accessible to me but nevertheless has an impact on the phenomenon under study. This helps to accept that issues around access to information, as in my case studies, must be seen as part of those mechanisms I try to explain to grasp the 'nature of objects'. The not-told and not-shared experiences are equally important as signs for dominant imaginaries at play as the accessible narratives. In fact, they imply an ambiguity around corporate technologies which will be an important aspect in the cross-case synthesis of this thesis, in Chapter 8, and in the conclusion chapter, Chapter 9.

# CHAPTER 6: IKEA FOUNDATION'S 'BETTER SHELTER'

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the first case study, namely, IKEA Foundation's 'Better Shelter'. Its aim is to introduce the humanitarian technology under analysis, present the results of my analysis, and discuss these in light of the analytical framework. I find how ambiguous the effect of IKEA Foundation's narrative of 'Better Shelter' has been in regard to the idea of humanitarian action. Since the formal launch of the shelter in 2013 and its wider distribution in 2015, IKEA Foundation's visions have been both opposed and resisted within the humanitarian community, but became simultaneously reproduced, self-sustaining and hegemonic in a wider public discourse. The shelter characterises myriad contradictions: it has become a symbol of a success story of how a corporate intervention transforms today's 'humanitarian crisis' through its technological innovation, but also a metaphor for how corporate engagement in humanitarian action can ignore a sector's own vision and humanitarian realities.

Both effects are generated by what lies underneath IKEA Foundation's narrative of progress: as I present and then discuss throughout the following sections, IKEA Foundation builds a narrative of progress on a vision which fixates on a mass produced, prefabricated technology, presenting it as a revolutionary and superior solution for humanitarian shelter. Its visions nourish an idea for simple, creative, aesthetic, affective technologies as answers to complex humanitarian situations, and fuels the impression that new products can fix abstract human problems, such as how to house displaced people. However, among humanitarian organisations, IKEA Foundation's narrative of progress has rather caused irritation and frustration, because they perceived that the sector's ideal of 'shelter as process' and of participatory and local shelter solutions has been undermined.

This chapter is structured in seven sections. This introduction is followed by a case description, where I introduce the context of humanitarian shelter in which the humanitarian technology has been developed, and then familiarise the reader with the technology itself. The next three sections present the results of my analysis. Firstly, I outline IKEA Foundation's narrative, describing its understanding, ideas and visions of progress for humanitarian action. Secondly, I show how little these visions resonate within the humanitarian narrative of organisations using the shelter on the ground. Thirdly, I describe how a public narrative absorbed IKEA Foundation's visions resulting in them becoming positively acclaimed. These three sections are organised according to the main themes that emerged out of my analysis and which I introduced in Chapter 5: IKEA Foundation's positioning within the humanitarian community and the perceptions of its involvement by others, interpretations of 'Building Back Better' in regard to the 'Better Shelter', and understandings of dignity through shelter.

The following section is a discussion, where I use the mechanisms of co-production to organise my reflections on the humanitarian community's resentment towards the 'Better Shelter' and the admiration of the wider public. The final section is a conclusion, where I elaborate the successful creation of a new sociotechnical imaginary which I name and unpack as the imaginary of tech-hedonism. This imaginary indeed affects the idea of humanitarian action, but mainly outside of the humanitarian community.



## CASE DESCRIPTION

### THE CONTEXT: SHELTER IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Following almost every disaster and crisis, shelter is regarded as a critical, life-saving need alongside, among others, health and protection (Global Shelter Cluster 2018, x). UNHCR (2015a, 1) states in its *Handbook for Emergencies*, “Shelter is likely to be one of the most important determinates of general living conditions and is often one of the significant items of non-recurring expenditure.” The right to shelter is backed up by the consideration of “shelter needs in conflict or post-disaster settings as a human rights issue” (Carver 2018, 15). Shelter as a human right is embedded in the right to adequate housing, first recognized in Article 25 (1) of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the right to adequate housing is further acknowledged under Article 11 of the Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (OHCHR and UN Habitat 2010). The UNHCR’s *Handbook for Emergencies* (2015a, 4) reminds us that the principle is applicable “in all stages of the displacement cycle – prior to, during and after displacement and is accessible to all people of concern, including women, girls, men, boys and children.” As such, Carver (2018, 16) points out, “The ‘right to shelter’ has no separate legal existence independent of the right to adequate housing. It is properly understood as an application of this right.”

UNHCR is mandated by the United Nations to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide (UNHCR n.d.). Providing shelter is one of UNHCR’s institutional priorities and its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. In its *Shelter and Design Catalogue*, UNHCR (UNHCR 2016b, 5) specifies:

“A shelter is defined as a habitable covered living space providing a secure and healthy living environment with privacy and dignity. Refugees and others of concern to UNHCR have the right to adequate shelter in order to benefit from protection from the elements, space to live and store belongings as well as privacy, comfort and emotional support.”

However, in a humanitarian setting, providing shelter is not a simple task and comes with many attendant questions. Sanderson (2018, 2) formulates the challenges which humanitarian organisations have to consider when providing shelter:

“What kind of shelter best meets the needs of these particular people? How long is it meant to be used for? Where should it be located? What are the materials, and who will build it? And there are more questions: what do we do when there is no land to build on (say in a dense city), or when people need shelter for years or decades (as in the case of refugees and other forced displaced people), or there is not enough money, or no political will?”

Moreover, there are more general issues that come with the provision of shelter. For example, consideration of what the shelter will be used for, and whether the occupants will run a business or work from it. As such, shelter is more than just keeping people “dry, warm and safe”, as Sanderson (2018, 2) reminds us: it is rather about “creating a home”. The answers to these questions are not universal. According to Ashdown (2011, 25), “providing adequate shelter is one of the most intractable problems in international humanitarian response.”

Against this background, there is what is described as traditional approach to shelter, which aims to deliver a ‘shelter product’ according to technical minimal standards and building guidelines as provided by the Sphere standards (Sanderson 2018). In fact, there exist multiple technical advice and guidelines, although with extensive duplications and some contradictory messages, as Davis and Parrack (2018) observe. Nevertheless, they (Davis and Parrack 2018, 10) state “there has been an almost universal acceptance of the Sphere Minimum Standards for Shelter in Humanitarian Response (released in 1998, with regular updates, not least the 2018 revision)”.

Over the last decade, a body of knowledge has been criticising this technical approach to shelter as limited in scope and not always an adequate response, mainly because it becomes increasingly acknowledged that “housing is about more than a physical shelter” (Sanderson 2018, 3). Saunders (2004, 171) particularly criticised the “typically prefabricated units or kits produced in developed countries for rapid deployment in post-disaster locations”, arguing that “many of these imported solutions fail to

maximize local enterprise opportunities or acknowledge cultural or contextual concerns, and reflect the relative lack of involvement of specifiers and end-users in the design and development process.” The call for a more process-based, participatory approach is not new, but dates back to 1978 with the publication *Shelter After Disaster* by Ian Davis (1978). The first principle in his work emphasises that “the primary resource in the provision of post-disaster shelter is the grass-roots motivation of survivors, their friends and families” (Davis 1978, 3). Nevertheless, complain Schofield and Flinn (2018, 33), “Despite some notable successes, the sector still struggles to know how best to assist self-recovery in a way that keeps the agency of disaster-affected people at its centre.”

One approach that sees disasters as windows of opportunity for change is called Building Back Better (BBB) (Stephenson 2018, 41). BBB dates back to the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and refers to a “response sought not just to reinstate what the tsunami had destroyed, but to leave the communities it had affected better, fairer, stronger and more peaceful than they had been before the disaster struck” (Fan 2013, 1). It was an approach promoted by former US president Bill Clinton and quickly became “the recovery effort’s mantra, guiding principle and enduring promise” (Fan 2013, 1). BBB has become widely-used “in disaster risk reduction and recovery, and has been featured in post-disaster recovery plans of several countries and the 2015 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction” (Maly 2017, 1). On the one hand, BBB allows a growing recognition of the involvement of communities (Kennedy et al. 2007). In fact, points Stephenson (2018, 41) out, “Calls to ‘Build Back Better’ (BBB) are found in all recovery policies and programme documents, representing a convergence of terminology if not a meaningful consensus on scope.” On the other hand, due to its broad set of aims, BBB has been criticised for becoming a vague umbrella term to describe a “variety of goals for recovery, ranging from broad integration of development ideas to specific improvements of structural safety” (Maly 2017, 1), and specifically, that the term is often used to narrowly describe safer construction without holistic reflection on what ‘better’ means for affected people (Flinn 2020; Maly 2017). Hence, there is an ongoing call for a clearer participatory, people-centred approach

that includes affected populations in decision-making processes (Lyons, Schildermann, and Boano 2010).

Amid the complexity and ongoing challenges of providing shelter, considerations of context and affected populations are today integrated into UNHCR various guiding documents, such as the UNHCR *Global Shelter Strategy* (2014) and the aforementioned UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies* (2015a). In its *Shelter Design Catalogue*, for example, UNCHR (2016b, 5) states that “Shelter should be adapted according to the geographical context, the climate, the cultural practice and habits, the local availability of skills as well as accessibility to adequate construction materials in any given country.” Hence, UNHCR (2015a) involves a combination of sheltering solutions such as kits, plastic sheeting, tents and cash assistance. In this sense, current sector standards highlight that shelter should be participatory where possible and contextualised to local needs and environments.

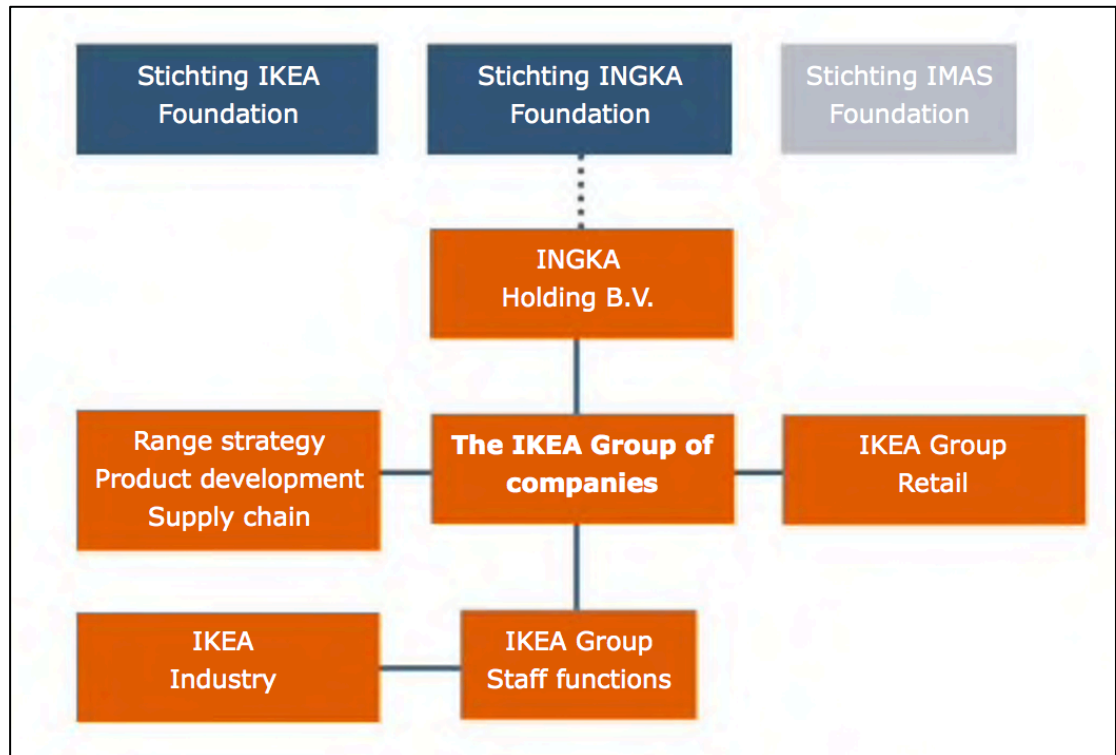
#### HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGY: THE ‘BETTER SHELTER’ (THE REFUGEE HOUSING UNIT)

The humanitarian technology examined in this case study is a shelter solution which emerged from a partnership between IKEA Foundation, UNHCR and Better Shelter RHU AB. The IKEA Foundation (full name: Stichting IKEA Foundation) was founded in 1982. As Figure 5 illustrates, the Foundation is the philanthropic arm of INGKA Foundation, the owner of the IKEA Group of Companies (IKEA n.d.).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For more information about IKEA Foundation, see: <https://ikeafoundation.org> (accessed July 13, 2020).

FIGURE 5: IKEA FOUNDATION INFORMATION. SOURCE: IKEA (N.D).



Better Shelter RHU AB is a Swedish social enterprise established and funded by IKEA Foundation to develop and manufacture temporary shelters.<sup>19</sup>

The development of the shelter started in 2008, when a group of independent Swedish designers began the project of the ‘Better Shelter’ at a today bankrupt institute called Formens Hus (Scott-Smith 2019, 512). The designers planned a new shelter to “improve the lives of forcibly displaced persons by providing affordable temporary shelter and a dignified, safer life away from home” (Better Shelter RHU AB n.d.). The group formed a small enterprise, called ‘Refugee Housing Unit AB’ (today ‘Better Shelter RHU AB’). The connection with IKEA Foundation developed gradually: The group of designers was in need of funding to develop the project further, and they contacted IKEA Foundation. At a similar time, UNHCR was looking for a new shelter design and contacted IKEA Foundation, which introduced the organisations. The UNHCR and IKEA Foundation partnership dates back to 2010, since when IKEA Foundation has made contributions to UNHCR’s operations worth over USD 166

<sup>19</sup> I will discuss more about IKEA Foundation’s motives for the establishment of a social enterprise in the next section. For more information about Better Shelter RHU AB, see: <https://bettershelter.org/about/> (accessed July 13, 2020).

million, making it UNHCR's largest private sector partner to UNHCR (2015b). Programme areas supported by IKEA Foundation include education, shelter, protection, camp management, health & nutrition, livelihoods and renewable energy.

In 2010, the 'Better Shelter' partnership project was initiated. Ikea Foundation invested in development, offering advice about manuals and flat packing (Scott-Smith 2019, 512). After an initial phase of testing materials and design, in 2013, the prototype was completed, and tests run in Ethiopia and Iraq. On June 20, 2013 – UN World Refugee Day – Ikea Foundation and UNHCR publicly announced their partnership and formally launched the new shelter (IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013). In 2014, the UNHCR Committee on Contracts approved a Waiver of Competitive Bidding for the establishment of a Frame Agreement with the 'Refugee Housing Unit RHU AB' for the period December 2014 to June 2016 for the purchase of 30'000 Refugee Housing Units at a cost of USD 1,150 (UNHCR 2016a). In 2015, the philanthropic foundation 'Housing for All' was formed with support and financial resources from IKEA Foundation and formally acquired RHU, renaming it 'Better Shelter' (Scott-Smith 2019). The Ikea Foundation contributed with funding to the social enterprise so that industrial manufacturing, sales and large-scale implementation could be undertaken (Dezeen, October 16, 2016). In the same year, large-scale production of the shelter units began, and the first 10,000 units were delivered to UNHCR. In 2017 and 2018, a new shelter, version 1.2, was launched.

**FIGURE 6: 'BETTER SHELTER' FLAT-PACKED AND ASSEMBLED. SOURCE: BETTER SHELTER RHU AB (N.D.).**



The shelter, in Figure 6 pictured in flat-pack boxes (left) and assembled (right). The 'Better Shelter' is a global shelter design aimed to be used as a post-emergency and transitional shelter solution (UNHCR 2016b, 6). This means its purpose is not to

provide permanent housing, but to replace the traditionally used fabric tents for temporary housing where alternatives are not possible. An example of a traditional fabric tent – an UNHCR self-standing family tent – is pictured in Figure 7.

**FIGURE 7: UNHCR SELF-STANDING FAMILY TENT. SOURCE: UNHCR (2016, 7).**



Ahead of the project, UNHCR formulated specifications that needed to be met by the new shelter (Better Shelter RHU AB 2015b):

- Have a standing height and lockable door to increase security.
- Take a few hours to assemble without tools.
- Withstand a range of harsh climate conditions: extreme cold, extreme heat, sandstorms, rain and powerful winds.
- Be well-insulated but also well-ventilated.
- Withstand an impact, flooding and heavy weight.
- Be equipped with minimal electricity: a solar panel to power a small ceiling lamp and a mobile phone charger.
- Last for three years.
- Comprise parts that can be used for other purposes once the shelter is disassembled.
- Weigh 100 kg.

According to UNHCR (2016a), “as a complete shelter package manufactured in controlled conditions the RHU represents a predictable, multi-year lifespan, rigid structure shelter solution for PoC [persons of concern].” The ‘Better Shelter’ is composed of several basic elements. It includes a lightweight steel frame, roof and wall panels produced from semi-hard and opaque polyolefin sheet; the total package weight is 160 kg. It has four windows and a lockable door, and an anchoring system and a floor covering made of tarpaulin. A solar energy system with photovoltaic panel provides electricity to power a lamp for 4 hours light a day and USB connector. The shelter arrives in two flat-pack boxes and with a hand manual, similar to how IKEA’s furniture arrives in flat-pack boxes. The shelter should be assembled on site without additional tools and equipment in four hours by four people. Once built up, the shelter covers 17.5 m<sup>2</sup>, has a minimum ceiling height of 1.84m and is designed to house a family of up to five people. It has an expected lifespan of 1.5 years without maintenance, and 3 years with maintenance. It also has a modular design, that means that they can be used and put together in different ways (Better Shelter RHU AB 2015a).

In the next section, I turn towards the narrative of IKEA Foundation, and elaborate its perceptions and viewpoints about its technology and humanitarian action, organised along the main themes that came up during the analysis.

## IKEA FOUNDATION’S NARRATIVE

### FROM PHILANTHROPIC GIVING TO DEVELOPING A HUMANITARIAN PRODUCT

IKEA Foundation’s narrative suggested that with the ‘Better Shelter’ project, its role in humanitarian engagement itself evolved. Traditionally, IKEA Foundation funded global programmes which aimed at alleviating children's health issues and lack of education (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in Dezeen, October 24, 2016). In 2016, for example, it was the largest private donor to UNHCR, and to both the UN Children Fund and UN Development Programme (IPS News, June 16, 2016). It had a strong focus on supporting various programmes that address children and families, mainly within two major themes: poverty and climate change. Within these two themes, IKEA Foundation (March 24, 2015) worked with various organisations in four areas of a child’s life: “a



place to call home, a healthy start in life; a quality education; and a sustainable family income.”

As a corporate philanthropic actor, this type of giving emerged out of IKEA’s corporate social responsibility policy, a position justified by the claim that being a profit-seeking company while simultaneously being engaged in humanitarian assistance would not exclude each other: “First of all, there is no conflict between making money and doing good”, stated Per Heggnes, CEO of IKEA Foundation (IKA Foundation, as quoted in IPS News, June 16, 2016). “If you look at IKEA Group, you will see that we care strongly about social responsibility and environmental responsibility—this is how they do business, how the business operates.” (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in IPS News, June 16, 2016). In an interview, a representative from the IKEA Foundation stated, “Our accountability for us as a foundation, primarily, legally, is towards the board . . . and the other accountability for us is in the IKEA customers and co-workers” (Interviewee 2, October 4, 2019). Put differently, contributing to humanitarian action was for IKEA Foundation a moral responsibility that corporations should all take seriously, and it saw itself as a leader in the engagement of the business world in humanitarian issues.

The ‘Better Shelter’ project appeared as part of IKEA Foundation’s wider focus on children and their families, and matched “the spirit of IKEA” (IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013). However, with the ‘Better Shelter’, IKEA Foundation’s engagement included more than mere financial support. Firstly, it was involved in bringing the different partners together. At the beginning, it introduced a small Swedish foundation (the ‘Refugee Housing Unit’), consisting of a small group of engineers with a vision to develop an improved shelter for humanitarian purposes, to UNHCR representatives (IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013). It was then involved in the design and development process of the product, mainly through funding and management support (IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013). Moreover, the Foundation provided the time and expertise of its engineers: “IKEA engineers helped us to find the right materials and suppliers, to do the right thing in packaging and logistics, and to create instruction manuals of course” (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in Dezeen, October 24, 2016). The development process included the testing of different materials that would withstand harsh weather conditions such as sun heat, dust storms and sand attrition.

Furthermore, the engineers had to meet various shelter specifications UNHCR had formulated, as listed in the case description section. These included requirements in regard to transport volume, weight, price, safety, health and comfort, assembly time, and provision of electricity as outlined above. A prototype of the shelter was then tested in a laboratory controlling for these factors, followed by a pilot phase in Ethiopia and Iraq. Thirdly, because they struggled to find a company interested in manufacturing the shelter, IKEA Foundation also established a social enterprise, 'Better Shelter RHU AB' (again, introduced above) and provided it with capital. The founding of Better Shelter RHU AB provided the opportunity to continue development of the shelter and, at the same time, ensured that it was manufactured for as low a cost as possible. Per Heggnes (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in Dezeen, October 24, 2016) explained:

“It's probably the only not-for-profit venture that provides non-food items to the humanitarian sector. Everyone involved in the humanitarian sector are for-profit companies. And there is nothing wrong with that, because everyone needs to make a living. But in this case, we have the benefit and the luxury of setting up a social enterprise, so we can keep the prices as low as possible and ensure that as many people as possible have the benefit of the product.”

The driver for IKEA Foundation's engagement in the 'Better Shelter' was, Per Heggnes clarified, the Foundation's belief that the humanitarian and development sectors are in need of innovation (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in Dezeen, October 24, 2016). For IKEA Foundation, the example of the 'refugee crises' demonstrated that “The challenges society faces with the accommodation and integration of refugees are too complex for governments and humanitarian organizations alone” (IKEA Foundation, February 19, 2016). Hence, what was needed was corporations who step in and provide innovative solutions. IKEA Foundation stated that “The corporate sector must come together to support those caught up in one of the biggest displacements of people in history. It's not just up to governments and aid agencies. Businesses also have a responsibility to respond in their own way” (IKEA Foundation, August 18, 2016). For IKEA Foundation (August 18, 2016) this meant “It is all about collaboration, sharing of best practices, not only about providing financial resources. Business can also contribute valuable

experience and knowledge.” IKEA Foundation (June 20, 2013) was convinced that its focus on innovation was the right way to go, reminding us that it built part of the wider IKEA vision:

“Just as IKEA looks for innovative ways to create a better everyday home life for the many people, the IKEA Foundation is looking for ways to create a better everyday life for poor families who have lost their homes and everything familiar to them. By bringing together our partners and funding new technology, we can help make a tremendous difference to the world’s most vulnerable children.”

A major difference with IKEA Foundation’s traditional corporate financial giving was, however, that the ‘Better Shelter’ was a product that eventually got sold to humanitarian actors. For that product though, the humanitarian market seemed to have its obstacles. Per Heggenes explained the challenges of introducing a new product in the humanitarian realm as “a limited market – we’re not doing iPhones, we’re doing shelters that will be bought by the Red Cross, UNHCR or IOM. These companies not only need to embrace it, but they also need to buy it at a certain volume so that we can keep the business going” (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in Dezeen, October 24, 2016). Developing new technologies such as the ‘Better Shelter’ was therefore a risky project, but Per Heggenes admitted that “The cool thing about a foundation like ours is that it can take a risk on a project like this [the Better Shelter], a risk that a normal private-sector company would probably not take because the potential is not large enough for them financially” (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in Dezeen, October 24, 2016). IKEA Foundation emphasised that “we have always taken on risky projects regardless of their guarantee for success and will continue to do so because we believe this is the role philanthropy should play in working towards a better future for everyone” (IKEA Foundation, n.d.).

## BUILDING BACK BETTER AS “THE POWER OF DESIGN FOR SOCIAL RENEWAL”

In 2013, IKEA Foundation introduced the ‘Better Shelter’ with the story of how a few engineers had approached the Foundation with a vision of contributing to the motto of ‘Building Back Better’. An IKEA Foundation press release quoted Johan Karlsson, Project Manager at the Refugee Housing Unit: “The Indian Ocean tsunami was still a fresh memory, and ‘building back better’ was the motto among our humanitarian partners – meaning that humanitarian aid should not only contribute to saving lives, but also creating sustainable communities after disasters” (The Refugee Housing Unit, as quoted in IKEA Foundation, June, 20, 2013). The goal was hence “to create a shelter which would represent better value for money and at the same time significantly improve the lives of refugees and displaced people, as well helping communities be more resilient to disasters” (The Refugee Housing Unit, as quoted in IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013). The goal of the ‘Better Shelter’ was “to create better and safer homes for millions of people suffering in camps due to conflict and natural and man-made disasters” (The Refugee Housing Unit, as quoted in IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013) and included two aspects. Firstly, the shelter should be superior to and a replacement for traditional tents. The argument went that refugee children and their families are exposed to difficult and harsh life conditions in refugee camps. Specifically, normal tents only had a “life span of as little as six months” due to their exposure to the “sun, rain and wind.” These left “vulnerable families even more exposed to the challenges of life in a refugee camp” (IKEA Foundation *a*, June 20, 2013), and the shelter should bring “dignity and safety to the millions of refugees fleeing violence, armed conflict, persecution and natural disasters” (IKEA Foundation, March 24, 2015). Secondly, the tents were meant to be modular and a temporary solution. However, there was a vision that refugees could take the frame with them and use it to build their new homes:

“It's not intended to be permanent, it's a temporary solution. But, as it's assigned the way it is, a family could theoretically take it apart and take it home. If they can go home – if a conflict is over and they have the opportunity to return to their home country, which of course most refugees would like to

do – then they can take the whole lightweight steel construction home. They could then rebuild using local materials, and just use this as a framework.”

Within this context, IKEA Foundation’s narrative of the ‘Better Shelter’ linked a product-specific discourse with IKEA’s wider vision of how “design rebels” (IKEA Foundation, n.d.) fight with their creativity for a more equal and peaceful world. By introducing the vision of “power of design for social renewal” (IKEA Foundation, February 19, 2016), IKEA Foundation (August 19, 2016a) highlighted its “creativity and problem-solving skills”, emphasising that “Since we helped establish the Ingvar Kamprad Design Centre at Lund University’s School of Industrial Design, we have supported projects that transcend the usual scope of industrial design to put people first and let them enjoy safe, secure living environments.” This vision was most strongly accentuated in IKEA Foundation’s involvement with the ‘Better Shelter’ project, described as a “radical” way of engagement (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in Dezeen, October 24, 2016). The Foundation described the attitude it embraced when developing the ‘Better Shelter’ as “happy-rebel designers” (IKEA Foundation, n.d.), aiming “to revolutionise the refugee camp or at least to vastly improve it” (Better Shelter RHU AB, as quoted in IKEA Foundation *b*, June 20, 2013). IKEA Foundation used certain vocabulary to emphasise the creative, joyful character of its engagement in ‘Better Shelter’. For example, Per Heggenes compared the modular use of ‘Better Shelter’ to “like playing with Lego almost – you can put it together in different ways” (Dezeen, October 24, 2016). Moreover, IKEA Foundation used words and terms such ‘creating better lives’ (IKEA Foundation, 2013), being ‘inspiring’ and ‘unlocking potential’ in partners, introducing partners, bringing them together, and funding, organising, enabling and orchestrating collaboration, to highlight its creativity and importance (IKEA Foundation, June 23, 2013). Finally, the very name of the product – ‘Better Shelter’ – indicates a superiority over other shelter options.

The guiding principle for the development of the ‘Better Shelter’ was that of “democratic design” (IKEA Foundation, March 24, 2015), the meaning of which can be found within the corporate arm of IKEA. On the corporate IKEA website, this principle is defined as “combin[ing] form, function, quality, sustainability at a low price. We call it “Democratic Design” because we believe good home furnishing is for everyone”

(IKEA, n.d.). The wording was invented within IKEA in 1995 for internal use (Adweek, May 25, 2017). Today, IKEA organises an annual global press event under the theme “Democratic Design Days” with offers insights into IKEA’s product development. The ‘Better Shelter’ demonstrates, IKEA Foundation was convinced, how “Democratic design and innovation hold the promise of changing lives” (IKEA Foundation, n.d.). IKEA Foundation’s discourse of how creativity and design can have positive social impacts was supported by IKEA Foundation’s other engagements intended to animate the design world to contribute to humanitarian issues. In collaboration with UNHCR and What Design Can Do (an Amsterdam-based design platform advocating social impact of design), IKEA Foundation launched in 2016 a global design challenge focusing on refugees. The challenge invited “designers, creative thinkers and imaginative trouble-shooters from all corners the world” (IKEA Foundation, February 19, 2016) to develop design solutions to the ‘refugee crisis’. In particular, the goal was to find innovations that address questions of how to accommodate and integrate refugees in urban areas. “Design is a great tool to make things better. Let’s put it into use for somethings more than just doing things”, Marcus Engman, Head of Design at IKEA of Sweden, explained (IKEA Foundation, February 19, 2016).

## MORE DIGNITY THROUGH DESIGN BENEFITS

In identifying what views on aid recipients are present in IKEA Foundation’s narrative, I found that there are two aspects relevant to this study. Firstly, the Foundation’s narrative presented beneficiaries as central to the development process of the shelter, in the sense that they were testing a prototype earlier designed and developed by designers and engineers. Related to that, secondly, with the ‘Better Shelter’, IKEA Foundation embraced a clear idea of how a rigid shelter provided people with more dignity than simple fabric tents.

In IKEA Foundation’s narrative, beneficiaries played a key role in the development process of the ‘Better Shelter’. It claimed that after releasing the prototype, the shelter was tested and improved by 40 refugee families in Iraq and Ethiopia (IKEA Foundation, March 24, 2015). This was, according to IKEA Foundation, a ground-breaking example of democratic design (the principles guiding the development process which were

introduced in the previous section), as the families' experiences and needs had been at the heart of the development process. Per Heggnes reported on the importance of including the beneficiaries into the design process, because "in a laboratory – you can test for wind, water, weight and all of these things, but you can't test whether people actually like the product or whether they are actually able to put it together" (IKEA Foundation as quoted in Dezeen, October 25, 2016).

In IKEA Foundation's vision, an important theme was the lack of dignity beneficiaries face in traditional fabric tents, which do not offer any privacy: for example, they do not have a lock. The Foundation explained how aid agencies struggle with the "huge burden . . . [of] trying to create a more dignified life for millions of refugees" (IKEA Foundation, 2013). It was convinced, therefore, that the 'Better Shelter' would bring refugees dignity by providing "a home away from home" (IKEA Foundation, March 24, 2015). In a leaflet authored by Better Shelter RHU AB (2015a, 4), the shelter united "smart design, innovation and modern technology" and created a "safe base offering a sense of peace, identity and dignity". The designers were convinced that moving into a shelter means this could be home for a while. As a consequence, dignity resulted from feeling safe and having the chance to install oneself in this home, and to close and lock the door (IKEA Foundation, October 25, 2017). Märta Terne (Better Shelter RHU AB, as quoted in IKEA Foundation, October 25, 2017) from Better Shelter RHU AB elaborated what dignity looks like:

"To be able to then find a home, a safe space, even though it's temporary is very important. And you can see how they start using the shelters instantly. They start washing their clothes, they put blankets and pillows in the corners to make a little cosy area. You see that very clearly in these camps that people really want to have a safe, dignified spot that they can close the door to and just relax and have a moment of calm together with their families."

In other words, the conception of dignity according to the designers resulted from cutting-edge technologies, such as in the polyolefin foam used for the shelter, and design details which emphasised that design specifications are directly linked to the dignity and wellbeing of aid recipients.

Next, I present the results of how IKEA Foundation's vision resonates with other key narratives about the 'Better Shelter', namely, the humanitarian and the public narratives.

## THE HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVE

### 'A TOP-DOWN ENGINEERED SHELTER AND EXCLUSIVE PARTNERSHIP'

The verdict about the shelter varied between UNHCR and the humanitarian organisations who implemented and used the shelter. As Oliver Delarue, Lead UNHCR Innovation Initiative, explained, over 3.5 million refugees lived in tents and temporary shelter all over the world, and "one of the biggest needs and the most immediate need for these people is to provide a roof over the head." (UNHCR, as quoted in IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013b). However, Delarue continued, "For housing we use many types of temporary shelters, but mainly tents. But quite frankly, the tents have not much evolved over the years" (UNHCR, as quoted in IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013b). Problems arising with these tents included that they were hot during the summer and cold in winter, had a lifespan of only six months due to harsh weather conditions (despite refugees staying in camps for an average of twelve years), and lacked electricity and therefore had no light after dark for homework, sewing, cooking and eating (UNHCR, as quoted in in IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013b). To recall UNHCR's (2014, 2) mandate, its aim was to provide a safe and dignified shelter "that will allow [refugees] to meet their basic needs and improve their quality of life wherever they live in urban or rural setting."

Within this context, Delarue stated that UNHCR was looking for the creation of a new temporary shelter, which was also more modular and "easier to ship, easier to assemble and easier to live in" (UNHCR, as quoted in in IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013b). As Delarue emphasised in an IKEA Foundation press release from 2013, "Thanks to the IKEA Foundation, UNHCR is bringing an innovative approach to an old problem, giving refugee children and their families a safer place to call home" (UNHCR; as quoted in IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013b). UNHCR (Al-Mahdawi, October 23, 2015) admitted that the collaboration was a learning experience, where "The trajectory of the Better Shelter project – like any innovation project – is not a straight



path. It's more like entering a dark tunnel without knowing where the exit is." As Ammar Al-Mahdawi (October, October 23, 2015), Senior Technical Shelter Officer, continued, "The Better Shelter innovation project was a Research and Development project with an invisible future. We believed that even in the case of a failure, that failure is a success." Put differently, he insisted that learning was an important part of UNHCR's engagement in the 'Better Shelter' development. Nevertheless, Shaun Scales, Chief of Shelter and Settlement, UNCR, stated that "the refugee housing unit is an exciting new development in humanitarian shelter and represent a much needed addition to the palette of sheltering options mobilized [sic] to assist those in need" (IKEA Foundation, March 24, 2015).

The perception of humanitarian organisations using the 'Better Shelter' in the field was, however, different. Indeed, they welcomed the 'Better Shelter' with much less enthusiasm than UNHCR. The results of this research show that criticism circles around one main theme: the development of 'Better Shelter' represented for the implementing partners a top-down developed product and a humanitarian 'experiment' that did not account their points of view. The 'Better Shelter' was perceived by those who had to implement it as an engineered rather than social solution, in that its inventors did not look for consensus among the sector, and that it was developed in-house and then presented to the sector as a finalised product. One point made by a shelter and settlements technical advisor was that "[the 'Better Shelters'] are relatively expensive, they don't create a very conclusive living environment, they don't last for very long" (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019). Moreover, it was complicated to transport and when damaged could not be easily repaired with local materials, a point added in an interview (Interviewee 3, September 27, 2019). In addition, while four hours assembly time was proudly announced by IKEA Foundation and UNHCR, Kilian Kleinschmidt, a humanitarian practitioner, criticised this as too long: "It takes four hours to assemble, it doesn't have a groundsheet and it's not modular as it should be" (Kleinschmidt, as quoted in Dezeen, April 27, 2017).

However, a shelter expert (Interviewee 4, October 16, 2019) expressed the belief this may be an unfair judgement of the product, which was developed with clear specifications in mind and for a specific purpose, namely, as a temporary shelter.

Indeed, when there was a need for “very quick shelters when you don’t have any other resources, and you can’t do local procurement”, then ‘Better Shelter’ is useful, stated a senior advisor on shelter (Interviewee 1, September 27, 2019). In fact, tents were the sector’s last option, to be used only when no local solutions were possible, agreed a shelter expert (Interviewee 4, October 16, 2019). In this sense, Paul Currion, columnist and independent consultant to humanitarian organisations (as quoted in *The New Humanitarian*, May 25, 2015) reflected that “this looks like a good design within the constraints of the brief” and added that although it may be surprising that UNHCR came forward with a product that appeared contradictory to its own handbook for emergencies, which criticised prefabricated shelter as ineffective, “perhaps the arguments UNHCR presented against this approach – high unit transport costs, long production and shipping times and so on – have been solved . . . .”

Nevertheless, the critical view dominated the narrative of humanitarian organisations working with the shelter on the ground. In addition to this sceptical view of the ‘Better Shelter’, I also found some evidence of fatigue from within the humanitarian community when it came to partnerships with businesses in general, and in particular a level of frustration towards the partnership between UNHCR and IKEA Foundation. The ‘Better Shelter’ project had sustained engagement with the humanitarian sector, and has been able to meet specifications, a shelter expert suggested (Interviewee 4, October 16, 2019). Nevertheless, he resumed, the ‘Better Shelter’ became a metaphor for the engagement of businesses, as so many companies tried to develop the perfect shelter, despite there being no one-size-fits-all solution. The Better Shelter could not possibly meet all the expectations of the humanitarian community and became “a metaphor also for the frustration between our communities and an inability to synthesise productive action between them” (Interviewee 4, October 16, 2019). For example, humanitarian practitioners had different expectations from the corporate sector, and combined with a lack of a clear brief, it was nearly impossible for a business partner to develop a product that met all the different expectations:

“[The ‘Better Shelter’] became a symbol for the lack of communication between our respective sectors and activity and can cause a great anger on all sides. Academics say: Why is this shelter no good? Manufacturers say: Why

won't you buy it, we invested this much in developing it? And humanitarians say: Why don't you ask what shelter we want, rather than continuing offering solutions which are poorly informed?" (Interviewee 4, October 16, 2019).

Indeed, frustration towards the UNHCR-IKEA Foundation partnerships was expressed in interviews where the development process of 'Better Shelter' was described as naïve and IKEA Foundation as not knowing enough about the sector. However, due to its contractual commitments, UNHCR had to use and deploy these shelters, and obliged its implementing partners to use them too, even in situations when they felt it to be inappropriate. This was particularly perceived as "frustrating", as a shelter & settlements technical advisor stated (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019), causing tensions among colleagues within the sector, because "it kind of was embarrassing for us to face our UNHCR colleagues and not say, "What are you doing? This is crazy" (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019).

To be successful, a humanitarian technology requires a detailed understanding and expertise of the context in which it is aimed to be implemented and, as an interview partner pointed out (Interviewee 4, October 16, 2019), the 'Better Shelter' has been an important attempt to acquire this understanding. Nevertheless, this knowledge was often missing, as the following statement illustrates (Interviewee 4, October 16, 2019):

"Neither the private sector nor humanitarian spheres have created environments where they can sustain their understanding of the sector. So, you end up with new companies saying: hi, we want to contribute to a humanitarian shelter – and then six months later they look at something else. It takes more than a product development period to understand a market. No manufacturer would consider any other sphere of human endeavour to develop products for a market which is understood on the basis of six months engagement – and six months engagement of not actually meeting the users of the product . . . . There's a natural break between the private sector and humanitarian sector."

Different priorities and principles, and the lack of a shared language all contributed to this divide. As opposed to IKEA Foundation, humanitarian organisations involved in

implementing the 'Better Shelter' were accountable to affected populations and donors. This divergence caused risks and tensions for them around its use. A humanitarian technology such as the 'Better Shelter' inhabited an ethical risk, and the potential consequences of a failed "humanitarian experimentation" (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019). For one thing, it needed to be evaluated in light of the sector's 'Do No Harm' principle, and as a shelter and settlements technical advisor explained, one way to incorporate this principle into shelter activities would be to be transparent and engage those who were to use it from the beginning. As a consequence, "What you do find in communities, when you say we want you to be part in this research, they actually feel that we show a lot of respect, and that we are respecting their capacity, and listen to them, and this is a level of dignity that you provide, and the response is really good and positive" (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019). Moreover, there was a reputational risk for humanitarian organisations in working with businesses introducing new technologies to vulnerable populations: "If one had private sector companies working [in] camps for the wrong motives, who didn't respect human rights or protection needs, that would be extremely problematic and would seriously undermine the UNHCR's ability to ever work with the private sector again" (The CS Monitor, June 19, 2013). Furthermore, there was a risk of losing funding as implementing partner, as became apparent during the testing phase of the 'Better Shelter' when some design and durability issues arose. These occurred during an independent analysis in Ethiopia in 2014; however, they were left out of a report by the NGO responsible for the pilot programme for fear of losing funding (Dezeen, April 29, 2017). UNHCR was unaware of the claims, and of an NGO partner being involved in reviewing the shelters when they were tested (UNHCRS, as quoted in Dezeen, April 29, 2017).

What was needed seemed to be a convergence of thinking, which enabled the various actors to develop and maintain a shared understanding: "The way to bridge that is to bring everyone together and to discuss an agreed direction forward . . . so that the innovation can produce solutions that are useful", a shelter expert stated (Interviewee 4, October 16, 2019). Similarly, as a Shelter and Settlement Technical Advisor mentioned (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019), "I think we do it all the time [working

with the private sector] whether we like or not . . . . But we should do more to build up that collaboration. It's a lot about getting to know each other."

### BUILDING BACK BETTER AS 'SHELTER AS PROCESS'

It is crucial to remember that within the debate of 'Building Back Better', the concept of 'shelter as process' and not as product started to become established. To recall from the context section, the idea of shelter as a process was not new, and already introduced in the late 1970s (Davis 1978). Nevertheless, this idea was still "tough to sell" (The New Humanitarian, May 25, 2015) as it involved highly political questions, in particular how host governments wanted to deal with for forcibly displaced people. A study by Kennedy et al. (2007, 28–29) reflected that thirty years after Davis' notion of shelter as process, the vision was still rarely implemented. In fact, transitional settlement and shelter was still seen as being part of non-food item distribution, rather than an ongoing process in supporting people.

As such, a shelter and settlement technical advisor (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019) explained, the shelter sector was only just developing "from a position of shelter as a product, as a building, to the idea that it is a process, it is always unique . . . shelter is a continuum, it's never one thing. You have to move, stay for a bit, stay for a bit longer, then you move again, maybe move back where you come from. The whole thing is fluid and involves incremental changes." Hence, the debate was merely about moving towards the idea of shelter as a process, where people should be supported "to take responsibility for their own lives", as a senior advisor on shelter stated (Interviewee 1, September 27, 2019). This would put individual needs of families and their self-recovery capacities, resources and priorities in focus; 'Building Back Better' therefore was interpreted as making sure affected people were knowledgeable and equipped to make their own informed decisions.

As a consequence, as one interview partner stated, "'Better Shelter', when it emerged, kind of flew in the face of a lot of shelter thinking and philosophies and ideas . . . . It was counter to the current shelter thinking . . . . The reaction was very negative to it without even thinking about it, saying this is not the way we want to go" (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019). As such, IKEA Foundation's claim to deliver a shelter that would

reflect 'Building Back Better' was criticised, as the 'Better Shelter' is seen as 'fix' product, a senior advisor on shelter stated (Interviewee 1, September 27, 2019):

"The Better Shelter is basically a rigid tent; it folds in a very similar category. It's a slightly more durable, rigid tent" (Skype Interview, October 4, 2019). In this sense, "it's actually unhelpful for IKEA to refer to what they're doing as building back better, because it kind of mixes things up. It's confusing and should be kept apart."

#### MORE DIGNITY THROUGH SELF-RESILIENCE

My results show that self-resilience was an important aspect of dignity reflected in the humanitarian vision of 'shelter as process'. To recall the UNHCR Emergency Handbook (2007, 5), aid recipients should build their own shelter whenever possible, with appropriate technical, organization and material support. The Handbook recognised that this increased the sense of ownership and self-resilience, as well as reducing costs and construction time.

Looking for local solutions could involve using existing materials and resources, respecting traditions and methodologies, and integrating local communities in the decision-making process. This implies a different understanding of innovation to the one IKEA Foundation puts forward. For IKEA Foundation, as I have shown, innovation as new product, such as the 'Better Shelter', lay at the heart of how to transform people's living situation, to empower and provide them with dignity. Quite to the contrary, a Shelter and Settlement technical advisor argued the term innovation as used by IKEA Foundation is misunderstood: innovation should be interpreted as being resilient, "able to be absorptive, adaptive in a changing world" (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019). Innovation, then, must be participatory and inclusive, whereas "top-down engineered solutions" (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019) were unlikely to be successful. In fact, products like 'Better Shelter' "don't generally involve the beneficiaries in every sense at all. Beneficiaries remain very passive; you say: there's your tent" (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019). An inclusive approach, in contrast, could mean: "bring together a community, a carpenter, and the best people you know in that community, lay out everything we got, all resources in front of us, . . . and ask what can we produce from

this? Doing that together in a collaborative effort has much better results and long-term impact” (Interviewee 3, October 4, 2019). Dignity means, a senior advisor on shelters specified, using a “process to encourage people to build their houses a bit stronger, using very simple techniques . . . [and] technologies that have been around for centuries” (Interviewee 1, September 27, 2019).

An understanding of dignity which could be achieved through a prefabricated product did therefore not comply with my interviewees’ idea of how the shelter sector should develop towards the idea of shelter as participatory process. However, if local materials were unavailable, and integrating people into the shelter process is impossible (in other words, the conditions UNHCR outlined as key in its vision to prioritise local, participatory solutions were not in place), then a prefabricated solution such as the ‘Better Shelter’ was a last option, as I showed above.

## THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE

### “INNOVATIVE, HUMANITARIAN, AND IMPLEMENTED”

Despite the negative judgement of humanitarian organisations, the ‘Better Shelter’ generated an immense interest among the media and from within the design and architecture communities. It was enthusiastically introduced as “the next-generation refugee dwelling from the Ikea Foundation” (Curbed, March 23, 2015). Generally, the coverage in newspapers and magazines reproduced what IKEA Foundation communicated through its narrative, and the reactions echoed the Foundation’s ideas of how the ‘Better Shelter’ filled a much-needed gap within the humanitarian landscape of shelter. The typical features of the shelter, namely, the prefabricated components which arrived in flat-packed boxes together with a manual, were emphasised. For example, an architecture and design magazine praised a “psychologically sophisticated detail, a lock on the door. “Getting hold of a bunch of keys again is equivalent to regaining their privacy and a vague sense of security” (Abitare, July 20, 2018). Similarly, the advantages of a rigid over a fabric tent in terms of costs, durability, space, and assemblage are reinforced (Designboom, July 2, 2013). Some magazines underpinned the story with figures about the number of ‘Better Shelter’ deployed during the ‘refugee crisis’, although they vary and differ from official

numbers. For example, “Since 2013”, stated ArchDaily (January 27, 2017), “nearly 65 million of the shelters have since been distributed worldwide”, while Abitare (July 20, 2018) counted more than 30,000 throughout the world.<sup>20</sup>

In 2015, the shelter had to be redesigned following fire safety concerns brought up by the city of Zürich, Switzerland (The Guardian, December 19, 2015). Nevertheless, this event had no significant effect on the popularity of the shelter. In fact, it became even more known to a wider public when it was named the 2016 Beazley Design of the Year: ‘Better Shelter’ was the winner of the architectural category and also of the overall design prize. The jury stated how “Better Shelter tackles one of the defining issues of the moment: providing shelter in an exceptional situation whether caused by violence and disaster . . . . It shows the power of design to respond to the conditions we are in and transform them. Innovative, humanitarian and implemented Better Shelter has everything that a Beazley Design of the Year should have” (IKEA Foundation, January 30, 2017). The award was given to the project that fulfilled the criteria of design that ““promotes or delivers change,” “captures the spirit of the year,” “enables access,” and “work that has extended design practice.”” (ArchDaily, January 27, 2017). Scott-Smith (2017, sec. 1), who studied the ‘Better Shelter’ phenomenon, quotes a juror stating that the shelter was an obvious winner because “IKEA shelter was high profile, it had featured widely in the media, it was a positive story with a clear social purpose, and it offered a practical solution to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’.

The media agreed that the award was well-deserved, echoing the positive effect the ‘Better Shelter’ had on the situation of people in need of help. For example, The Guardian (January 27, 2017) stated that the ‘Better Shelter’ “has already changed the lives of thousands of refugees around the world . . . .” (The Guardian, January 27, 2017). Similarly, The Architectural Digest (January 27, 2017) agreed that “London’s Design Museum awarded the coveted Beazley prize to a flat-pack structure that ingeniously addresses a real-world crisis.”

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<sup>20</sup> According to a press release by Better Shelter RHU AB (2020) , UNHCR and Better Shelter RHU AB have delivered 50’000 units in more than 50 countries since 2015. In 2018, UNHCR estimated that globally, over 70 million people were fleeing war, prosecution or conflict (UNHCR 2019).



## MORE DIGNITY THROUGH A PREFABRICATED MASS-PRODUCT

Not only did the corporate narrative of the 'Better Shelter' find its way into a public narrative through the media, but the shelter itself became a popular art object, displayed in various museums to illustrate the 'refugee crisis' and the dimensions of migration flows. This section presents three exhibitions which all show a 'real' version of the 'Better Shelter' and which can be described as significant art events addressing a wider public, namely, Design Miami/Basel 2015, the Beazley Design Awards at the Design Museum in London, 2016, and as part of the exhibition "Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter" at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York.<sup>21</sup>

Firstly, in 2015, the 'Better Shelter' was featured at Design Miami/Basel 2015. Under the theme "Design at Large", the annual art event presented "large-scale works of historical and contemporary design that transcend the traditional gallery booth." (Design Miami/Basel, 2015). In a statement, Rodman Primack, Executive Director at Design Miami/Basel, said about the 'Better Shelter' display (Design Miami/Basel, 2015):

"We are both excited and honoured to collaborate with Better Shelter on this year's Design at Large Program at Design Miami/Basel. Their work is crucial to the survival of so many people in dire situations, whether the result of natural or manmade disasters, and mirrors a core belief of Design Miami/Basel, which is that great design can change lives."

This statement clearly re-emphasises IKEA Foundation's point that designs offer tangible solutions to humanitarian issues, and reminds its visitors of this, by using almost the exact same wording as IKEA Foundation (February 19, 2016), namely, the "power of design for social renewal."

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<sup>21</sup> The 'Better Shelter' is also displayed as part of the "Aid Workers: Ethics Under Fire" exhibition at Imperial War Museum North in Manchester, between October 2020 and May 2021. However, this exhibition started after data collection had finished for this thesis and is therefore not included in this study.

FIGURE 8: 'BETTER SHELTER' AT DESIGN MIAMI/BASEL 2015. SOURCE: DESIGN MIAMI/BASEL (2015).



FIGURE 9: 'BETTER SHELTER' AT "DESIGN AT LARGE". SOURCE: DESIGN MIAMI/BASEL (2015).



In 2016, the Design Museum in London installed a 'Better Shelter' outside South Kensington Underground station, West London, close to the Design Museum location at Kensington High Street. Nominated for the Beazley Design of the Year, the 'Better Shelter' was then exhibited inside the museum alongside other nominees. In a statement, the curator took up the public narrative again: "This project sums up Beazley Design of the Year and shows how the design industry can use their skills and

knowledge to solve a real and pressing issue – that of temporary shelter for displaced people” (Dezeen, November 14, 2016).

**FIGURE 10: ‘BETTER SHELTER’ INSTALLED IN LONDON. SOURCE: DEZEEN (NOVEMBER 14, 2016).**



**FIGURE 11: SOUTH KENSINGTON UNDERGROUND STATION. LONDON. SOURCE: (DEZEEN, NOVEMBER 14, 2016).**



In 2017, ‘Better Shelter’ was included in MoMA’s permanent collection and also shown during an exhibition called “Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter.” The exhibition was part of “Citizens and Borders”, an art series of discrete projects at MoMA related to works in the collection offering a critical perspective on histories of

migration, territory and displacement (Moma, 2016b). The Better Shelter's gallery label from the exhibition (MoMa, 2016a) states:

“[O]ffering greater privacy and security than the common tent, the 188-square-foot shelter can house a family of up to five people. It comes disassembled in two flat boxes that also include tools and instruction manuals, and takes a four-person team four to eight hours to build, depending on experience and local conditions. Because of its modular and flexible design, the shelter can be rapidly dispersed to conflict zones and modified to serve as, among other things, an administration center, a clinic, or a rest stop.”

This description highlights the same design properties introduced by IKEA Foundation as advantages and repeated variously in the media: increased privacy and security, delivery in two flat packed boxes and easy assemblage due to the included tools and instruction manuals, and the modular and flexible design leading to the unit's potential multiple use. In this sense, the gallery's labelling of the shelter, similar to the other two exhibitions, restated the 'facts' about it without problematising the critical points raised by the humanitarian narrative, despite the exhibition claiming to offer a critical perspective on humanitarian issues.

FIGURE 12: 'BETTER SHELTER' AT "INSECURITIES: TRACING DISPLACEMENT AND SHELTER". SOURCE: MOMA (2016A).





FIGURE 13: 'BETTER SHELTER' AT MOMA. SOURCE: MOMA (2016A).



What follows next is a discussion which unpacks the contrary reaction to the 'Better Shelter' and what it means for the idea of humanitarian action in light of my analytical framework.

## DISCUSSION

In this section, I discuss the results through the lens of my analytical framework with a focus on the ambiguous reception of the shelter.

### MAKING IDENTITIES: SHAPING THE IKEA MARKET

In Chapter 4, I formulated the assumption that corporate companies create understandings about the humanitarian community and being 'humanitarian' that translate through technologies into a new sense of humanitarian identity. I found that the 'Better Shelter' case showed that IKEA Foundation indeed built certain connotations what shelter stands for by incorporating the humanitarian debate of Building Back Better and created specific views on aid recipients. These connotations indeed became dominant, albeit only in the public, and not the humanitarian narrative. Next, I talk about the embodiment of a humanitarian debate and the representations that were created, focusing on whether and how IKEA Foundation's narrative had an effect on making identities. Interestingly, I found that IKEA

Foundation's narrative constituted a successful attempt to remake its own identity and to claim its legitimacy in both the existing and potential market of IKEA furniture through the means of a humanitarian technology, but with little impact on the humanitarian identity itself. Actually, I found that shaping the humanitarian identity was not a priority for IKEA Foundation. This can only be understood if we recall towards whom IKEA Foundation sees itself accountable, namely, the IKEA board and IKEA customers.

IKEA's Foundation's success in dominating the public narrative can be understood in the context of growing pressure on corporate companies to reframe and reposition themselves, happening against the background of the global financial crisis, which for many scholars has been a turning point for neoliberalism. Businesses started to come under the spotlight of increased criticism for their mere profit-making. For example, Duménil and Lévy (2011), in *The Crisis of Neoliberalism*, examine the global economic collapse of 2007-2010 as an inevitable outcome of the rise of neoliberal economics. As a consequence, Martin Jacques, who in the 1980s heralded the emerging dominance of neoliberalism in the West, in 2016 predicts its 'death' (2016). Even business-leaning newspapers, such as the cautious Financial Times (September 19, 2019b), have been calling in 2019 for a re-branding of capitalism and for businesses "to reset the button" in order "to act on a new corporate purpose." This call for a re-invention of businesses is seen to become more urgent as a new generation of future customers in Western countries have matured into their prime spending years, namely, the 'millennials', born between 1980 and 2000, and are seen as today's most important consumers (Madrigal Moreno et al. 2017). In contrast to former generations, typical millennials are described looking for meaningful brand experiences to make them feel happy (ZenithOptimedia 2015). Moreover, the notion of fun and rebellion through consumption is an important part of that experience and transfer into their identity, state Francis, Burgess and Mingyuan (2015). As such, they make their shopping decisions not necessarily on a brand's name because "this generation is incredibly sceptical of governments and big corporations"; instead they prefer to buy "what they can feel and trust" (Financial Times, June 6, 2018). At the same time, technology and innovation are deeply entangled with this customer segment, in that technology plays

not just a dominant but also an inevitable role in daily habits and is further embodied as tech-optimism (Madrigal Moreno et al. 2017). Put differently, a belief that technological innovations are crucial to the social issues of both today' and the future, paired with a desire for emotive consumption, may be reflected in why IKEA Foundation's narrative, with its 'Better Shelter', upholds a vision of humanitarian aid being based in the logic of making consumerism purposeful, fun and rebellious.

IKEA Foundation's self-description as happy and rebellious designers 'shaking up' humanitarian action can be seen as an attempt to maintain relevance as a corporate company in what Gramsci refers to as a 'war of position'. In this sense, what IKEA Foundation aims for in terms of legitimacy is acceptance and validation by external stakeholders, resulting in the accumulation of resources and the attraction of customers, clients and investors (Drori and Honig 2013, 346–47). Behind the Foundation's narrative of progress lies an image that stresses the fun and creativity around humanitarian engagement, aimed at pleasing the expectations of a new generation of potential IKEA customers who wants to 'feel and trust'. As a consequence, it seems inevitable that this narrative emphasises how pleased IKEA Foundation's humanitarian engagement (and the technology resulting from it) 'makes you feel'. Following this logic, the narrative turns the criticised aspects of capitalism into something post-neoliberal: attractive and acceptable, and promoting a vision where corporations offer the solutions – corporate technologies with a social purpose – to today's humanitarian problems. Both aspects of this narrative rely on the driving force of technology behind the vision at play: a vision which mirrors the trust so many people uphold towards technology, while trying to fill (these *per se* empty) technologies with a purpose that justifies both existences: humanitarian technology as commodity, and that of the company which invents and sell it.

These findings show that IKEA Foundation's narrative of progress has been rooted itself in the public awareness. It has built an imaginary that is a powerful enabler of corporate engagement in humanitarian aid because not only does it legitimise corporate technologies, it also reinforces the logic of consumerism as inevitable. Referring to UN agencies and humanitarian organisations as 'companies' operating in a 'market' where IKEA Foundation is doing 'business' underpins what the literature

review has already shown to be the marketisation of the humanitarian realm. According to this logic, humanitarian issues can be tackled by commodified products. However, it is also in this logic where the ambivalent success of IKEA Foundation's vision becomes apparent. I introduced what Suchman (1995, 585) called cognitive legitimacy, a form of legitimacy which is hard to manipulate, but, once established, appears subtle, profound and self-sustaining. While the vision which developed around the 'IKEA shelter' became dominant among the public, the case of 'Better Shelter' also illustrates how different legitimacy claims may conflict or even become incompatible (Black 2008, 152). This only really becomes apparent when we examine how the humanitarian community responded to the 'Better Shelter', where the same narrative created expectations that collided with the sector's ongoing debate around shelter. Despite its original aim, namely, to design a temporary shelter, the IKEA Foundation was unable to square its grand claims with the final product, as the humanitarian discourse assessed it against a debate on permanent housing. In addition, social cohesion is not dependent on coercive control exercised by a small elite, as Gramsci pointed out, but rather works through coalitions, compromises and building alliances which create shared and mutual interests. However, as the findings have shown, it seems that within the framework of sheltering there were only few shared interests and shared sense of identity between IKEA Foundation and implementing humanitarian organisations, which eventually led to the dismissal of the 'Better Shelter' by the humanitarian community.

#### MAKING DISCOURSES: A CUSTOMER GAZE AND THE CO-OPTION OF A HUMANITARIAN DEBATE

In the analytical framework, this thesis formulated the assumption that corporations are gatekeepers of technologies through which they hold a discursive power to frame the way the humanitarian community thinks and talks about humanitarian action. I found that IKEA Foundation successfully co-opted the humanitarian debate on Building Back Better and re-interpreted it against the humanitarian vision. While this caused resentments and opposition from within the humanitarian community, IKEA Foundation's visions made it into a public discourse of admiration, where the shelter



was praised for its innovative character and social purpose, and celebrated as ‘change-maker’.

In the result sections, it became apparent how humanitarian organisations lamented the lack of a shared understanding between IKEA Foundation and implementing humanitarian organisations. When identifying what discourses dominated within the humanitarian community, it becomes clear that the aspirations and visions driving the creators of clashed with the sector’s own visions. In fact, the discourse faced resistance and disagreement from within the humanitarian community, and despite the humanitarian technology meeting the technical specifications for the particular humanitarian purpose of a temporary shelter, it nevertheless did not receive the moral approval of humanitarian actors.

Specifically, when the product was announced by IKEA Foundation to be contributing to ‘Building Back Better’ processes (IKEA Foundation, June 20, 2013), the effects of the ‘Better Shelter’ on communities and the interpretation of ‘sheltering’ as put forward by IKEA Foundation were in question. Here, humanitarian organisations problematised the Foundation’s expansive language and (mis)interpretation of what ‘Building Back Better’ stood for. Rather than acknowledging the ongoing ideological shift within the shelter sector – from shelter as product towards shelter as process – IKEA Foundation promoted the idea of a prefabricated solution. Nevertheless, a public discourse enthusiastically celebrated the ‘Better Shelter’ as an example of successful corporate engagement in humanitarian action. As such, it became known to a wider audience and received recognition from the public. In fact, IKEA Foundation’s discourse about the ‘Better Shelter’ was not only reproduced in, but the innovation itself was critically acclaimed by the wider media, ranging from broad newspapers to niche magazines from the art, design and architecture communities.

This thesis traces this success in dominating the public discourse back to discursive choices made by IKEA Foundation. Not only did the Foundation adjust the language of shelter to make it relatable to by a public, which is an important aspect of problem-solving and naming new phenomena (Jasanoff 2004, 40–41). Returning to the question ‘Who speaks?’ as posed by Foucault, it is interesting to how little an extent the actual

humanitarian voices are represented in the public discourse. Indeed, we find a few examples where humanitarians raise their concerns about the shelter, either by bringing up design failures (Dezeen, April 29, 2017) or questioning whether the “hype” the shelter received was justified (Dezeen, April 27, 2017). However, it seems that the public narrative, as illustrated by the Beazley design award given to the ‘Better Shelter’ in 2016, wants to believe in the good of IKEA Foundation’s vision of a simple, corporate answer to the ‘refugee problem’, with a humanitarian technology as presented by IKEA Foundation as the result of a happy, joyful and meaningful commercial activity. The catchy slogan, “the power of design”, as repeatedly used by IKEA Foundation and underpinned by its democratic principles, works as a strong selective use of language, not only to establish the Foundation’s visions, but also to devalue the understandings and needs of humanitarian organisations by simultaneously persuading others to believe in new ones (Jasanoff 2004, 41). A powerful effect of the mechanism of discourse here is that for the general public, humanitarian criticism of the ‘Better Shelter’ seems simply not to matter – the humanitarian discourse appears as a niche conversation that the public narrative ‘overhears’ or is simply not aware of. Instead, the IKEA Foundation discourse resonates with a public imagination of overfilled refugee camps, and at-need people who will be grateful for the ‘Better Shelter’.

While Gill and Wells (2014) showed how the donor gaze is a central component in how discourses are constructed, the example of ‘Better Shelter’ indicates how IKEA Foundation chose instead a customer gaze, to adapt its message to a wide audience rather than a specific humanitarian one. This is understandable if we consider again that the accountability claims IKEA Foundation responds to are those of IKEA customers. An interesting point arising out of this is by Sezgin and Dijkzeul (2016) who state that shaping discourses is an important part of constructing the legitimacy of who is considered to be ‘a humanitarian’. As the example of IKEA Foundation shows, through its discourse of the ‘Better Shelter’, it shaped a public discourse which acknowledges the Foundation as a valuable and competent humanitarian actor, illustrated by the fact that museums include, seemingly almost automatically, a ‘Better Shelter’ as part of any exhibition about humanitarianism.

In the next section I take up this point, and discuss how through the mechanism of representations, IKEA Foundation's assumptions about beneficiaries and their dignity transformed the meaning of the 'Better Shelter' into a successful myth, but also led to a failed product from a humanitarian point of view.

#### MAKING REPRESENTATIONS: THE SUCCESS OF A MYTH, THE FAILURE OF A PRODUCT

In Chapter 4, I formulated the assumption that corporate visions of humanitarian technologies build on persuasive representations of crises and disasters and aid recipients to create particular versions of humanitarian action that serve the commercial purpose of their technologies. In fact, the 'Better Shelter' itself had, since its introduction in 2015, come to represent a collective hope upheld by potential and existing IKEA costumers in the West. My analysis shows that the development of the 'Better Shelter' not only led to specific meanings about humanitarian crises and those they affected; simultaneously, the technology itself has become a representation for how the West can deal with 'the refugee crisis'.

The underlying idea of the "power of design for social renewal" (IKEA Foundation, February 19, 2016) and its use for humanitarian purposes received great interest from a wider audience, as became apparent throughout this chapter. Specifically, it seems to be the effects of the recontextualization of the 'Better Shelter' itself within the institutions of the art and museums that manifested IKEA Foundation's narrative of progress. I recall here Gramsci's (1971) elaboration on how visions and ideas are manifested in art, and can hence create a collectively shared understanding about the world.

When we look at how recontextualisation of the 'Better Shelter' takes place in the art and design exhibitions presented above, this fact-making becomes apparent in several ways. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, in only one of the exhibitions is the shelter rearranged or substituted by any other elements not intended for the 'original' shelter but is built in actual size and with all its parts. In fact, except for the temporary exhibit on the street, the London Design Museum only included a gabled end panel in their actual exhibition. In the other exhibitions, the reconstructions seem to aim 'real' representations of a 'Better Shelter' and to create an experience that is as realistic as

possible. However, what we can clearly see here is how a main element has been excluded; the end users of the 'Better Shelter' – the aid recipients – are missing. Each exhibition deals with questions of the 'refugee crisis' – for example, the figure over 60 million people on the move is frequently used to contextualise its theme – but the 'Better Shelter' stands by its own in a museum hall or on the street, and it is the art consumer who is supposed to engage with the shelter. This engagement includes looking at the shelter, passing it (either as a conscious action, in the case of Design Miami/Basel, or as a necessity in the case of Design Museum's street installation), or walking through it, in case of the installation at MoMA. As one review (Hyperallergic, December 12, 2016) about the MoMA exhibition summarises, "Visitors are invited to walk through it and imagine daily life for a family of five. In this context, . . . the object appeals to empathy more than technical curiosity. Rather than seeing it as a prototypical triumph of design, museumgoers experience the space with the knowledge that millions of others might sit within an identical set of polymer walls." In other words, visitors create a meaningful, sensual experience through the consumption of art.

The 'Better Shelter' is also so popular because it makes an abstract topic tangible. Scott-Smith (2017, sec. 1) reflects that with the 'Better Shelter', many people "can connect it to a problem that concerns us all: how to house the millions of refugees we see on the news." The fascination, it seems, hangs particularly together with the fact that for many people, the 'Better Shelter' is a familiar solution to the 'refugee crisis', as nearly all individuals in the West had at some point in their life purchased a bookshelf or dining table from IKEA. IKEA products can be seen as potential metaphor for "cultural homogenisation on a global scale" (Garvey 2017, 1), and because the experience of unpacking and assembling a piece of furniture is so familiar to many, the 'Better Shelter' as humanitarian solution may appear so simple and convincing: "Just like the coffee table or nightstand sitting in your home, the IKEA shelter is flat-packed, requires no tools to assemble, and can be taken apart and rebuilt again elsewhere." (The CS Monitor, June 19, 2013). Put differently, IKEA stands for an accessible Scandinavian lifestyle and aesthetics, and a design philosophy formulated as an egalitarian solution for the purchasing masses that everyone can rely on (Garvey 2017,

1). The 'Better Shelter' became a myth in the Barthesian sense, inheriting a logic of how to ease humanitarian suffering through a Western mass product that reassures, meets expectations and makes certain assumptions to become 'true': that refugees feel at home when they have access to an IKEA mass product in flatpack boxes, and that people all over the globe are equal and connected in their experience of studying an IKEA manual.

However, these interpretations involve an understanding of 'refugees' and of sheltering them which distorts – even disturbs – a humanitarian community's own debate and shift of vision, as elaborated in the previous sections. Tents only become used when the sector's ideal for local and participatory solutions is unfeasible, however, "It's easy to hear "refugee" and immediately think "refugee camps," but tents—or even Better Shelters—are still a last-ditch solution for people displaced by conflict or natural disaster" (Wired, February 19, 2006). In fact, figures by the UN suggest that only 31% of refugees live in camps, while the majority stays with family or friends, in a hotel, or live informally in cities and towns.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, the narrative around the 'Better Shelter' appeared assertive, confident in its ambitions, but its actual use, and the implementation by humanitarian organisations on the ground was more restricted than what the narrative might suggest. Nevertheless, the connotations used by IKEA Foundation and the public media, as well as physical representations of the shelter by museums, are powerful modes of naturalising an idea of humanitarian aid that underpins the relevance of 'Better Shelter'.

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<sup>22</sup> For more detailed information on alternative refugee living, see UNHCR (2017).

## CONCLUSION: THE CREATION OF AN IMAGINARY OF TECH-HEDONISM

IKEA Foundation is not only UNHCR's biggest single financial donor, and therefore able to be described as a buyer from UNHCR of various humanitarian programmes; it simultaneously co-produces the 'Better Shelter', a humanitarian commodity advertised and sold to humanitarian organisations – such as UNHCR. In this sense, as well as creating a humanitarian commodity, the Foundation also steers (albeit indirectly) the demand side of its product by increasing the financial resources it makes available to UNHCR. This makes IKEA Foundation also a seller of humanitarian products. The interesting aspect is, however, that IKEA Foundation is actually targeting two markets: the humanitarian market, where the actual 'Better Shelter' is sold (although here the Foundation does not experience the same financial pressure to succeed), as well as the 'common' market of existing and potential IKEA customers, where the idea of the 'Better Shelter' is advertised. What does this particular role of IKEA Foundation mean in terms of what imaginaries dominate humanitarian aid?

In defining the research gap, Chapter 2 suggests that if traditional visions of humanitarian action have been exposed as utopic or even harmful, then we have critically to ask what new myths become constructed, as these generate significant real-world consequences for actors within the humanitarian realm. The current literature examines business engagement in humanitarian action in light of a neoliberal imaginary which has emerged at the expense of a traditional imaginary. My analysis of IKEA Foundation's vision of 'Better Shelter' provides an example of how a business follows its purpose of re-enforcing the legitimacy of profit-seeking corporations in society more broadly. The impact of its narrative on the idea of humanitarian action appears to be an instrument in this attempt to manifest its own position in its 'home' market of furniture. Here, IKEA Foundation has very successfully built an imaginary on the foundation of what a neoliberal imaginary promises in terms of how individual happiness is based on consumption. I call this sociotechnical imaginary a tech-hedonist imaginary.

The corporate narrative of progress develops this imaginary of tech-hedonism utilising the hopes and expectations of a wider public regarding commodified technologies,

with corporations as society's moral and intellectual leaders and enablers of such technologies. This imaginary makes sense when we remember that although engaged in a humanitarian market, IKEA Foundation upholds accountability claims different from those of its humanitarian counterparts, oriented towards their customers and stakeholders outside of the humanitarian community. It is driven by a tech-hedonism which stimulates connotations about humanitarian crises and those affected, rooted in the logic of consumerism and which simultaneously meet the tech-optimism of modern life. The fascinating aspect of this imaginary is that it promotes a humanitarian vision that is only slightly shared by the humanitarian community itself. While a tech-hedonist imaginary serves legitimacy claims from existing and potential consumers, it simultaneously causes a lack of shared identity and understanding among humanitarians. This ultimately led to the resistance to IKEA Foundation's narrative of progress within the humanitarian community.

IKEA Foundation's discourse may not have been successful within the humanitarian community. Nevertheless, it became popular among the public, a finding of my comparative study which proposes that corporate visions which are resisted, even rejected from within the humanitarian community, can still become a collectively shared sociotechnical imaginary outside the humanitarian community through the mechanisms of making *discourses* and *representations*. While the partnership and the product became perceived by the humanitarian community as a paternalising intervention, by bringing in an engineered, top-down enforced product, the Foundation was simultaneously and successfully building up moral legitimacy among the wider public. This result was similar to Smith's comment (2009, 462) that there are "always multiple imaginaries at play in a society and within institutions." Indeed, IKEA Foundation's narrative may not have become hegemonic within the humanitarian community, where an imaginary of shelter as process is an important part of the community's self-identity. Nevertheless, its visions were successfully embedded in a public discourse and stimulated representations relating to what in the media was at that point called the 'refugee crisis'.

In fact, the embedding of visions, recalls Jasanoff (2015b), also occurs through group reflection "on remembered pasts and desired futures" (Jasanoff 2015b, 327) and the

creation of myths. Felt (2015) demonstrates that Austria's technopolitical identity is based on how myths construct convincing pictures of a future which serves the interests of those with political power. Similarly, IKEA Foundation discursively generated hopes and expectations in regard to the 'Better Shelter' by suggesting a tangible solution to how to gain control of the somehow abstract 'refugee crisis'. From this perspective, IKEA Foundation's engagement in the development of 'Better Shelter' is not unlike Williamson's (2018) research into how companies shape the American education system by investing billions of dollars in educational technology, while at the same time creating their own alternative schools. Likewise, IKEA Foundation's 'Better Shelter' project can be described as successfully feeding the public perception of what shelter means, what the relevant questions are in a crisis, and how its product offers solutions to these issues.



# CHAPTER 7: MASTERCARD AID NETWORK AND PREPAID CARDS

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## INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter has shown how IKEA Foundation's visions around the 'Better Shelter' was established as a successful imaginary in the public, while simultaneously being rejected from humanitarian organisations working with the shelter. In this chapter, I look at the results of the second case study, namely, the analysis of key narratives about MasterCard Aid Network and MasterCard prepaid cards. As with the last chapter, this chapter's aim is to present these findings, and examine them in light of the three mechanisms of co-production introduced in my analytical framework, in an attempt to unpack potentially collectively shared sociotechnical imaginaries.

This chapter is organised in six sections. After this introduction, I familiarise the reader with the case, first by presenting the context in which MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards have been developed, that is, in an ongoing rise of cash and voucher assistance across all sectors in humanitarian action. Next, I introduce the technologies in terms of how they work, how they were developed and who is applying them. The next two sections focus on the results of my analysis, first by presenting MasterCard's narrative and then contrasting these results in terms of how MasterCard's visions resonate within a humanitarian narrative. These two result sections are thematically organised, following the major themes that emerged during my analysis: financial inclusion in light of shifting expectations against humanitarian action, the role of digital payment systems within a broader debate about CVA, and the meaning of dignity and empowerment for aid recipients through the provision of access to digital CVA.

In the following section, I offer a discussion of the results in light of my analytical framework and discuss how MasterCard integrates its commercial interest successfully into the humanitarian narrative through a vision of financial inclusion, becoming itself

a legitimate actor within the humanitarian community with the consequence that humanitarians have to prove their appropriateness to deliver CVA. This switch in identity is based on the dominant discourse which promotes CVA by following a logic of consumerism. This logic also underpins the view of beneficiaries as consumers, where MasterCard's digital technologies and ideas of digital identity are key to understanding the powerful effect of digital CVA on the representation of people in need. In the concluding section of this chapter, I unpack MasterCard's visions as a force to build an imaginary of digital financial inclusion within the humanitarian community, where the humanitarian market appears as a global, digital space that redefines its participants and goods.

## CASE DESCRIPTION

### THE CONTEXT: THE RISE OF CASH AND VOUCHER ASSISTANCE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Traditionally, crisis-affected people have been supported with physical supplies, such as packages of food, water, hygiene kits, blankets and shelter; however, this is steadily changing (Bailey and Harvey 2017b). In recent years, Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) has become a growing form of aid in humanitarian settings. Instead of food or other essential items, recipients are provided with an envelope of cash, a prepaid plastic card or an electronic money transfer to a mobile phone, with which they can purchase what they need: food, clothing or medical treatment (Barder et al. 2015, 7).

CVA is defined as:

“where cash transfers or vouchers for goods or services are directly provided to recipients. In the context of humanitarian assistance, the term is used to refer to the provision of cash transfers or vouchers given to individuals, household or community recipients; not to governments or other state actors” (CaLP 2018a, 7).

The delivery of cash can be unconditional or conditional, the latter meaning that the beneficiary has to fulfil certain criteria (such as attending school, building a shelter, attending nutrition screenings, undertaking work, training) in order to receive assistance.

CVA has been sporadically used as a modality to deliver humanitarian aid since many decades. For example, Drèze and Sen (1989) described the history of its use as part of famine response in places such as India and Botswana. However, it slowly but steadily gained traction since the publication of the CHS Alliance’s humanitarian accountability report (2005) in 2005. This report argued that CVA could be used effectively to meet humanitarian needs. This argument was picked up by the Cash Learning Platform (CaLP), established in 2005 by Oxfam, Save the Children UK, Norwegian Refugee Council, Action Against Hunger, and the British Red Cross specifically for its promotion (Smith 2019). After that, a gradual growth in interest in CVA was observed, and today

CaLP has over 80 members, including UN agencies, the IFRC, local and international NGOs, and donors and private sector companies (such as MasterCard). Various publications have highlighted the opportunities provided by CVA for the humanitarian community, a key one being the *High-Level Panel Report on Cash Transfers in Humanitarian Assistance* (2015), which outlined recommendations to increase the scale, efficiency and quality of cash transfers. The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 picked up on these proposals as well as the growing interest in CVA (CaLP 2018b, 26). In an attempt to express and stimulate the support for cash, the Grand Bargain was a result which emerged from the World Humanitarian Summit, where over 30 of the biggest donors and aid providers formally committed to gearing up cash programming, formulated in Goal 3: “Increase the use and coordination of cash-based programming.”<sup>23</sup> As a consequence, donors and aid organisations of all sectors now routinely consider cash as option when evaluating their response. Another indication of a more visible, strong support for CVA is the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations’ (ECHO) 10 Principles for increasing the adoption of multi-purpose grants. This no longer supports aid siloed into different sectors or needs but focuses on cross-sectoral CVA (ECHO 2015). Put differently, there is an increasing acceptance and use of cash-based humanitarian approaches within the humanitarian sector as a means to support the basic needs of those affected by conflict, disasters and chronic emergencies.

It took a decade for CVA to become established as a mode of humanitarian aid, partly because cash has for a long time been seen as an inherently risky modality, especially in terms of fraud, and also because of the view that aid beneficiaries could spend their money irresponsibly. However, these risks, argues the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers are not unique to CVA nor higher than those attendant on in-kind distribution (Barder et al. 2015). These days, Jan Egeland, Secretary General at the Norwegian Refugee Council stated in the foreword of *The State of the World’s Cash Report* (2018, n.p.), “the overall argument is won . . . . There is no longer serious dispute about whether cash can significantly improve humanitarian aid.” In 2016,

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<sup>23</sup> For more information, see, for example: <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861> (accessed November 13, 2020).

however, CVA still accounted for only approximately ten per cent of humanitarian assistance (CaLP 2018, 3): “In 2016, we estimate that \$2.8bn in humanitarian assistance was disbursed through cash and vouchers, up 40% from 2015 and approximately 100% from 2014.” However, from 2016 to 2018, global volumes of humanitarian cash and voucher assistance grew by 68%, to a total of USD 4.7 billion (CaLP 2019).

Despite strong commitments to scale up CVA, and the figures mentioned above which demonstrate its dramatic increase, the amount of aid distributed in this manner is not evenly distributed within the humanitarian community, but concentrated within a few organisations: “Over two-thirds of total aid disbursed as CTP [CVA] in 2016 came from just two organizations – the World Food Programme (WFP) (\$880 million distributed to beneficiaries), and UNHCR (\$688 million distributed to beneficiaries)” (CaLP 2018b, 29). From April 2020 on, however, ECHO contracted a new partner to run a CVA project providing about 1.6 million refugees in Turkey with monthly cash allowances worth €500 million. Formerly run by the UN World Food Programme, the lead will go to the IFRC, making the organisation one of the biggest players in CVA delivery (The New Humanitarian, October 24, 2019). The new contract between ECHO and IFRC is remarkable, echoing as it does the new bidding process ECHO and the Department for International Development (DFID) set up for CVA projects (The New Humanitarian, February 20, 2017). Formerly, various donors would engage different UN agencies and humanitarian organisations, which then partnered again with financial service providers to deliver cash. Under the new bidding scheme however, donors will choose a single aid organisation to manage cash transfers through a single financial service provider. A separate independent contractor will monitor the implementation process.

Within this context of an uninterrupted interest and donor push in the scaling-up of CVA in humanitarian settings, private-public partnerships with financial service providers are key to the delivery of financial aid in multiple ways. Financial technology companies such as MasterCard, Visa, Red Rose, PayPal or Western Union provide the digital and electronic technology by which the humanitarian community is able to deliver CVA. They also help developing innovations – such as blockchain and

biometrics – enabling digital CVA to evolve at a high speed and which should also address ongoing security concerns such as fraud.

#### THE HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGY: MASTERCARD AID NETWORK AND PREPAID CARDS

This case study examines a humanitarian technology which cannot be simply described as a single product, but which rather involves a set of different digital services that MasterCard offers under the umbrella term ‘Humanitarian Aid Solutions’: MasterCard Aid Network, prepaid debit cards, and MasterCard Send™. Together, these build a digital infrastructure for CVA in humanitarian settings with the aim of enabling beneficiaries to access aid from different humanitarian organisations through a single account (MasterCard, May 23, 2016). The Humanitarian Aid Network and MasterCard prepaid cards play dominant roles in MasterCard’s humanitarian engagement; I focus my analysis on MasterCard’s narrative that builds on these two services, and only briefly introduce MasterCard Send™ here as disbursements technology that allows money to be sent, for example, to mobile wallets, bank accounts and ATMs. Next, I explain the different MasterCard Humanitarian Solutions. I first outline how the technology service works, and then contextualise the innovation in terms of what intentions MasterCard publicised when the technology was developed and launched. Finally, I present examples of when humanitarian organisations used the technology in the field which appear to be significant for the development of the innovation and are relevant to this study.

#### MASTERCARD AID NETWORK

In 2015, after a development phase of two years involving humanitarian organisations such as Mercy Corps and World Vision, MasterCard Aid Network was launched. It is an end-to-end, non-financial commercial service designed to streamline CVA aid distribution in remote areas and in the absence of a payment and telecommunications infrastructure. In short, the technology works with a chip-enabled card which can be pre-loaded with a parcel of eligible physical goods such as food, medicine and shelter, and distributed to populations in need. Participating merchants are equipped with terminals. “Beneficiaries then need to dip their card, select the desired items, such as

weekly groceries, by tapping the corresponding photos on a screen, and enter a PIN to confirm their transaction and receive the goods”(MasterCard, September 24, 2015).

FIGURE 14: MASTERCARD AID NETWORK. SOURCE: MASTERCARD (SEPTEMBER 24, 2015)



Since its launch in 2015, the MasterCard Aid Network has been applied in multiple private-public partnerships between MasterCard and humanitarian organisations, including Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee, Mercy Corps and World Vision (Musser and Kapadia 2017, 108). Two main partnerships appeared to play a particular important role in the development and establishment of the technology. Firstly, Save the Children has applied the service in Yemen (Save the Children, November 5, 2015). Here, over half of the population – 14.4 million people – are food insecure (Save the Children, June 12, 2016). Originally, electronic vouchers were piloted in Save the Children’s emergency food security and livelihood programming, and then expanded into other technical sectors (Save the Children, November 5, 2015). Prior to the launch of the new e-voucher scheme, Save the Children distributed traditional paper food vouchers to beneficiaries on a monthly basis (Save the Children, June 12, 2016). Secondly, MasterCard partnered with World Vision to test MasterCard Aid Network in the Philippines to “help micro-entrepreneurs rebuild businesses after Typhoon Haiyan”(MasterCard, April 4, 2016). World Vision also began using MasterCard Aid Network in Nepal following an earthquake, to deliver different services, food assistance and equipment (MasterCard, April 4, 2016).

## MASTERCARD PREPAID CARDS

The second technology forming part of the MasterCard's Humanitarian Aid Solutions is the prepaid card service. In fact, resumes MasterCard, it is "the prepaid technology that has made the biggest impact on supporting the needs of refugees" (Musser and Kapadia 2017, 108). The way prepaid cards work can probably be best described by using examples of CVA programmes, as the setup and implementation vary depending on the partner organisation and crisis situation. For example, since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis in mid-2012, the World Food Programme (WFP) has been providing food assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. In Lebanon, electronic food voucher programmes were introduced in a partnership with MasterCard in 2012. In Jordan, the transition from providing hot meals in Za'atari refugee camp when it opened in July 2012 to e-vouchers happened within two years. First, the provision of hot meals was followed by the distribution of dry food packages. Then, in September 2013, these were replaced with paper food vouchers which refugees could use in shops. Shortly afterwards, in January 2014, the transition to e-vouchers began and all UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees received a MasterCard-branded prepaid card which they could use in local shops. This 'digital food' programme has been implemented through a partnership with MasterCard and the local Jordan Ahli Bank (JAB). WFP transfers the voucher value directly to the e-voucher on a monthly basis through the partner bank. "When making a purchase in the supermarket, refugees must present their e-vouchers together with their matching UNHCR refugee identification card and input their four-digit security code – the same process used for regular credit and debit cards" (Luce 2014, 72).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Today, new identification technologies such as biometrics and blockchain exist and are used in various humanitarian settings. In Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, for example, refugees no longer need a pin code but can pay for items at the camp supermarket by scanning their iris (Euromoney, September 18, 2018).



FIGURE 15: A MASTERCARD PREPAID CARD. SOURCE: MASTERCARD (JUNE 20, 2016)



Another example of MasterCard prepaid card use is in a partnership with Mercy Corps. In February 2016, Mercy Corps launched a pilot programme in partnership with MasterCard and the Serbian Ministry of Labour to distribute prepaid debit cards to eligible refugees travelling through Serbia (Musser and Kapadia 2017, 109). The cards were pre-loaded “with the estimated funds families would need to buy essential supplies and obtain shelter over the 72-hour period typically spent in Serbia” (Mercy Corps, February 3, 2016). Similarly, Mercy Corps and MasterCard implemented an unrestricted CVA programme in Greece in March 2016. The programme began on the islands of Lesbos and Leros, and was expanded to five camps on the mainland in Greece (Musser and Kapadia 2017, 109). Here, the cards could be used in any shop where MasterCard is accepted.

Against this background, the aforementioned ‘bundle’ of technology services represents the case study relevant to this thesis. It is important to reiterate that digital payment services are in fast development, with new technologies being rapidly introduced. As mentioned earlier, blockchain and biometrical identification already play an important role in the delivery of CVA. These developments certainly have a role in this case study; nevertheless, in an attempt to limit an otherwise endless enquiry, my analytical focus is on the narratives about humanitarian technologies for CVA delivery launched specifically by MasterCard. This focus happens with an awareness that this analysis provides only a snapshot in time, given the fleeting nature of digital trends and ever-changing advancements in the digital sector, but

nevertheless (and hopefully) demonstrates the significance of a digital transformation affecting the idea of humanitarian aid.

What comes next is the presentation of the results from my analysis of MasterCard's narrative of MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards.

## MASTERCARD'S NARRATIVE

### "WE ARE ALL HUMANITARIANS": MERGING COMMERCIAL, DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN GOALS IN THE NAME OF FINANCIAL INCLUSION

When it came to its self-positioning, MasterCard's narrative clearly suggested a self-image as a member of the humanitarian community. In an interview taking place after the WEF in 2019, Tara Nathan, Executive Vice President Public-Private-Partnerships at MasterCard, stated that "We are all humanitarians . . . We all care about humanity, we all want people to move from poverty to prosperity" (The New Humanitarian, January 28, 2019). A few days earlier, during an event convened in Davos on the opening day of the WEF annual meeting, Nathan had articulated that "I would love to see a world in which we all just consider ourselves humanitarians" (MasterCard, as quoted in The New Humanitarian, January 24, 2019). Both statements emerged from MasterCard's understanding of private-public partnerships in humanitarian settings as being neither philanthropic nor one of corporate social responsibility. Instead, at the core of its engagement lay the question of "how we can leverage our core competencies as a company to accomplish developmental and social outcomes in a way that's commercially and operationally sustainable" (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, April 4, 2016). In search for such commercial and operational sustainability, scaling up was a crucial factor; the disadvantage of corporate philanthropy was, according to Nathan, precisely that it could not scale (MasterCard, as quoted in The New Humanitarian, January 28, 2019). To overcome mere philanthropic giving, Nathan believed:

"We should seek new models of deep partnership where the private sector can leverage commercial approaches, and where they can work hand in hand with humanitarians and donors to test and scale those approaches. We need to

create the tactical, legal, operational, and commercial constructs that incentivise private sector actors to engage” (MasterCard, as quoted in *The New Humanitarian*, January 28, 2019).

Talking about the partnership with the humanitarian organisation World Vision, for example, Nathan stated that “It’s hopefully going to be a good model for how the PPP [purchasing power parity] space can evolve” (MasterCard, as quoted in *PYMNTS*, April 4, 2016).

MasterCard’s claim of overcoming corporate philanthropy and linking commercial profit with developmental and social outcomes was justified by a report published by the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing (2016), formed by the then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Walt Macnee, Vice Chairman of MasterCard and President of the MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth, was a member of the UN High-Level Panel. In a blog entry, Macnee (Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, May 20, 2016) highlighted two aspects of the report which explain MasterCard’s self-understanding as a humanitarian within the humanitarian community. Firstly, the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing (2016, vi) stressed the “power of businesses”, specifically, “Business is still a modest factor in humanitarian activities, yet, has the creativity and capacity at scale to provide new solutions to risk management, support aid delivery, create jobs, and modernise transparency and accountability”. In regard to this point, Macnee (Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, May 20, 2016) recalled that traditional CSR is not the way to move forward, as “this does not refer just to money” and declared its own leadership in terms of offering skills, expertise and customised services to the humanitarian community. Similarly, Nathan (MasterCard, as quoted in *Forbes*, August 30, 2017) argued in an interview:

“Instead of episodic engagement, we need to focus on creating lasting change through infrastructure and sustainable platforms . . . . If we believe we’re going to have scalable, sustainable impact on the public sector, the key is leveraging private sector technologies and capabilities.”

Nathan pointed out that in a new understanding of partnerships, trust between traditional humanitarian organisations and MasterCard (or corporate companies more

generally) had an important role to play. There was a “positive trajectory” in the relationship between the private and humanitarian sectors, with a growing discussion around engaging the private sector, especially at the senior level. However, turning those high-level discussions into action on the ground is a challenge. For Nathan, overcoming the “the misconceptions and suspicion between the sectors and build trust” therefore remained crucial (MasterCard, as quoted in *The New Humanitarian*, January 28, 2019).

Secondly, MasterCard used another aspect of the High-Level Panel report as evidence for its self-positioning, namely, the goal of bridging the humanitarian-development gap (High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing 2016, 6-7). Macnee (MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth, May 20, 2016) explained that “The panel believes the world’s scarce resources of official development assistance (ODA) should be used where it matters most: in situations of fragility.” This could only be achieved, so argued the Panel (2016, v), through a joint analysis, so that the short-termism of annual—and retrospective—fundraising could be overcome.<sup>25</sup> Macnee pointed out that bridging the humanitarian-development gap vitally resonates with the company’s vision of financial inclusion (MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth, May 20, 2016).

Financial inclusion was generally defined as the goal of “adults worldwide to have access to a transaction account or an electronic instrument to store money, send and receive payments, recognizing financial access as a basic building block to managing an individual’s financial life” (The World Bank Group, April 17, 2015). Financial inclusion did not only refer to having a bank account with deposits, but also implied inclusion in terms of credit, insurance, savings and payments for all bankable people and enterprises (United Nations 2006); it had become particularly pushed since 2005 under the UN Year Of Microcredit that built on the idea that financial inclusion is an important part of development and alleviating poverty (United Nations 2006). The

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<sup>25</sup> One effort that considers this is a new UN-led reform policy; called the “New Way of Working” (NWOW): “Proponents see it as a way to unlock new sources of funding for humanitarian response from multilateral sources who have previously stayed out of crisis settings, for example the World Bank” (*The New Humanitarian*, June 9, 2017).

vision of financial inclusion was an expressed goal of MasterCard's humanitarian engagement.

In 2015, MasterCard "made a bold commitment to financial inclusion – to reach 500 million people previously excluded from financial services by 2020" (MasterCard, April 17, 2015). According to Nathan, driving financial inclusion globally was a key corporate objective because "exclusion is one of the root causes of humanitarian need and we're working to put an end to it" (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, April 4, 2016). At the core of MasterCard's vision lay the belief that many humanitarian crises were rooted in poverty and a lack of formal economy, and hence could be solved by including as many 'unbanked' people as possible as part of the formal economy.

This view dovetailed with other global networks and financial donors to humanitarian organisations who had all publicly committed to financial inclusion as an important development priority (Bateman and Chang Ha-Joon 2012). Examples include the Better than Cash Alliance (BtCA) (a lobbying and advocacy organisation established by the World Bank), the International Finance Corporation (IFC) (a sister organisation of the World Bank and member of the World Bank Group, the largest global development institution focused on the private sector in developing countries), national governments such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and private-sector foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. As such, the commitment to financial inclusion was shared by the "World Bank Group and a broad coalition of partners – including multilateral agencies, banks, credit unions, card networks, microfinance institutions and telecommunications companies" (The World Bank Group, April 17, 2015), putting forward that financial access was key to helping "poor families escape poverty and afford essential social services such as water, electricity, housing, education and health care" (The World Bank Group, April 17, 2015).

Financial inclusion was MasterCard's vision for bringing together humanitarian, development and commercial interests through the use of technologies. For example, in the case of MasterCard Aid Network, Kapadia explained that "It's about seeding the market. For example, in Mozambique, we had a large-scale project covering 70,000

households that was looked after by a large consortium of NGOs. But at the time, we had not a single credit, debit or prepaid card in the country. So [sic] our first foray there was through an aid delivery tool.” (MasterCard, as quoted in Diginomica, August 10, 2017). In order to ‘seed a market’, MasterCard’s entry point was a digital payment service technology that humanitarian organisations find useful to use, a point which overlaps with MasterCard’s focus on evolving private-public partnerships. Tailored services which meet the needs of humanitarian organisations are therefore crucial. Talking about the MasterCard Aid Network, MasterCard (September 24, 2015) explained that “We spent the past two years working with humanitarian organizations to develop a solution that works for everyone involved – populations in need, aid organizations, local merchants and donors.” Through its ‘consumer-centric design’ MasterCard emphasises the communication element between the various actors involved, which is so important to improving services: Musser and Kapadia (2017, 108) recalled that

“Instrumental to our success has been the ability to provide flexible solutions tailored to meet our partners’ needs in a variety of contexts. During our consultations with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), we heard about the difficulty to reach recipients in an effective and efficient way.”

According to Musser, “to sit across the table and talk about the real pain points and how do we make an incremental difference” (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, May 23, 2016) was in MasterCard’s understanding a crucial aspect of successful partnerships. Again, it became apparent how MasterCard’s narrative framed private-public partnerships: as neither a product of philanthropy nor of traditional corporate social responsibility, but a business model. In line with MasterCard’s strong self-positioning as a humanitarian, as presented in the previous section, the company found that commercial, humanitarian and development goals worked together organically, and saw no trade-off between seeking profit and humanitarian purpose, a point which was clearly articulated. According to MasterCard, one identity was complementary to the other, for example, when Nieuwoudt, leading Mastercard’s Global Product Development for Public Sector & Humanitarian Solutions, emphasised that “I don’t ever feel as if I need to shy away from that question [of whether we are

making money out of this]. I'm building a sustainable business model. That's what I'm doing" (MasterCard, as quoted in EY Beacon Institute, May 24, 2018).

#### A "WORLD BEYOND CASH": PUSHING FOR DIGITAL CVA TO SEED A GLOBAL MARKET OF FINANCIAL INCLUSION

MasterCard's narrative of progress for humanitarian action is built on the vision of financial inclusion which I presented in the previous section, a vision closely related to the idea of humanitarian action in 'a world beyond cash', where digital infrastructure was seen as key to leading the way for future aid. One important argument here was that digital payment technologies for CVA were not only important for financial inclusion, but a crucial step to building a marketplace to connect potential and existing MasterCard consumers globally.

Generally, MasterCard commented positively on increasing role of cash in humanitarian settings. Peter Musser, Vice President of International Development at MasterCard, said "that the humanitarian community is recognizing that it's empowering to be able to tell a person, "I trust you to buy what you need" and provide them with cash rather than things" (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, May 23, 2016). However, several disadvantages were clear to Mastercard, explained Shamina Singh, President of Mastercard's Centre for Inclusive Growth, including "that you are not allowed, or you don't have the ability, to securely save and transact" (MasterCard, as quoted in EY Beacon Institute, May 24, 2018). The consequences of this as a private person or small business led to a lack of economic independence which would enable growth. Furthermore, the argument went on, cash had hidden costs for printing, storing and transport, and facilitated crime within the informal economy. For financial inclusion therefore to be truly successful, efficient and effective, the move away from cash towards electronic or digital payments, or as the company labelled it, "a world beyond cash", was inevitable (MasterCard, April 23, 2015). MasterCard (May 20, 2015) saw digital payment technologies over cash as preferable. For example, with the MasterCard Aid Network technology, MasterCard (September 24, 2015) declared the pursuit of several goals, such as simplifying aid programmes with minimal training required, reducing costs and risks for staff and

beneficiaries as cards are only distributed once, eliminating the counting of paper vouchers and record-keeping and enabling aid organisations to speed up processes, enhanced transparency as aid organisations are able to track what products a beneficiary purchased with their voucher and review merchant reports, eliminating concerns of voucher fraud, and finally, empowering beneficiaries with technology and leading them towards financial inclusion. As such, MasterCard argued that “Driving financial inclusion relies heavily on the innovative use of technology. Cash remains a major barrier to financial inclusion but through technology we can help to create a world beyond cash” (MasterCard, May 11, 2016).

For MasterCard, therefore, the use of CVA in humanitarian settings was just the start of a journey towards full financial inclusion. As Nathan explained: “Cash-based assistance is a critical tool to generate needed efficiencies in the sector and empower affected populations by giving them choice. But it’s a first step.” (MasterCard, as quoted in *The New Humanitarian*, January 27, 2019). The technology of MasterCard Aid Network was illustrative of what such a next step looked like, as Nathan outlined (MasterCard, as quoted in *The New Humanitarian*, January 27, 2019):

“If this beneficiary is in a rural farming community, she can use the platform to receive vouchers for agriculture subsidies to rebuild her farm and livelihood. The technology can ultimately connect her to a market of agriculture buyers, bringing price transparency and cutting out the middlemen, thereby allowing her to grow her income.”

This logic became also visible in how MasterCard applied a vision of a world beyond cash to refugees in camps. In a white paper, *Smart Communities. Using digital technologies to create sustainable refugee economies*, published in collaboration with Western Union (MasterCard and Western Union 2017), the two companies assessed the financial lives and needs of refugees in two Kenyan refugee settlements. The financial service providers (2017, 2) stated that “the infrastructure, and particularly the banking, payments and remittances systems, in these settlements remains inadequate” while recognising that their financial needs were complex. It went on to propose a digital infrastructure model focusing on mobile money, digital vouchers and card-based



systems, its goal being that “Digital infrastructure can start to advance refugee camps [sic] economic systems in a way that grows communities. Implementing a digital, scalable infrastructure that fits the reality displaced people and their host communities face is the logical economic solution for all stakeholders in this crisis” (MasterCard and Western Union 2017, 2-3). Where there was no connectivity, MasterCard’s Aid Network would still work offline and allowed the programme to be effectively monitored. For the companies, it was clear that “At its core, the model for digital infrastructure addresses the need for technology to enable the growth of marginalized communities.” (MasterCard and Western Union 2017, 8).

Building and expanding digital payment systems in humanitarian contexts was therefore an important step in MasterCard’s vision of turning a humanitarian setting into a connected market: “One of the most important things was building financial infrastructure and managing financial data to reach communities that need it most”, Nathan explained (Forbes, August 30, 2017). In this sense, MasterCard’s humanitarian solutions were developed with “an eye towards everything being, at the point of intervention, a continuum in the sense of a leave-behind infrastructure that fosters the actual development and reconstruction of those nations and economies” said Nathan (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, April 4, 2016). She explained that MasterCard Aid Network had a significant role here, as it worked offline and in remote areas: “One thing MasterCard found to be interesting from a products and service perspective and “incredibly impactful to the service deliverers and the end beneficiaries” was the ability within a digital infrastructure to remotely provision of aid” (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, April 4, 2016). Nathan stated that with MasterCard Aid Network, offering an offline payment platform, prepaid cards, digital financial identification and point-of-sale systems for local merchants, “We've essentially created a digital version of the paper voucher” (Forbes, August 30, 2017).

However, for MasterCard, their technologies serve the commercial purpose of private-public partnerships in humanitarian aid, namely, accessing new markets and building financial inclusion. In explaining the motivation for the partnership with World Vision, Nathan stated: “while it’s easy to get enamoured with the “whiz-bang” of the purely technical aspects of innovation, the World Vision partnership actually aligns more

appropriately with MasterCard's pursuit of innovations on the business model side and the go-to market strategy side of things" (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, April 4, 2016). Similarly, when talking about its partnership with WFP in the 'digital food' programme, Ann Cairns, MasterCard's President of International Markets, stated that "At MasterCard we believe that technology has the power to unlock innovation in food aid delivery, enabling a greater impact and helping achieve the vision that a world beyond cash builds a world beyond hunger" (MasterCard, October 10, 2013).

#### DIGNITY THROUGH DIGITAL IDENTITY: "[REFUGEE] CARDHOLDERS ARE LIKE ANYBODY ELSE HAVING A DEBIT CARD"

For MasterCard, the provision of digital payment systems to enable digital CVA in humanitarian action was closely related to a specific understanding of dignity and empowerment of beneficiaries. The overall goal of MasterCard prepaid cards was, in its own words, formulated "to provide refugees with mobility, flexibility and dignity" (MasterCard, June 20, 2016). As outlined in the context section, this aim was embedded in a wider belief that CVA in humanitarian settings should be prioritised over in-kind distribution – a point which I take up again when I present the humanitarian narrative.

Dignity was, in MasterCard's understanding, closely related with being connected to digital payment systems: "The key aim of the MasterCard cashless assistance program is to provide the capacity for people to act independently . . . . It gives people the ability to spend money on what they need – anywhere throughout the world – with dignity and more control" (MasterCard, June 20, 2016). More specifically, the argument stated that personal dignity comes with financial inclusion, because having access to and using electronic or digital payments empowers the user to win control over their lives and reducing poverty (Mastercard, May 11, 2016). Although in this understanding, dignity referred to a per se abstract thing as having access to a digital financial system, MasterCard was convinced of its concomitant concrete materiality, which found its expression in the simple act of holding a MasterCard card. Here, the idea was that beneficiaries could be made to look like any other consumer. In that logic, by appearing like a 'normal' customer in a shop using a prepaid card and

becoming indistinguishable from anybody else, the stigma of being an aid recipient dissolved, empowering and dignifying people in need. Nina Nieuwoudt, who has led Mastercard's Global Product Development for Public Sector and Humanitarian Solutions, stated in an interview that "the mere fact that people had a card made them feel as if they were somebody . . . . So we go beyond just the financial impact to them. It is also about dignity and the respect for another human life" (MasterCard, as quoted in EY Beacon Institute, May 24, 2018). For example, in 2013, when WFP and Mastercard implemented the "digital food" programme in Lebanon and Jordan, prepaid cards distributed to refugees were branded with the MasterCard logo (Musser and Kapadia 2017, 108), therefore appearing to be 'normal' debit cards. Similarly, in the cash programme in Greece in 2016, Mercy Corps distributed unrestricted cash to refugees by using prepaid debit cards not branded with Mercy Corp's or any other donor logo. As a consequence, Paul Musser, Senior Vice President of Humanitarian, Development & Donors at Mastercard and Sasha Kapadia, Director, International Development, in Mastercard's Public Private Partnerships division, argued that the "refugees were indistinguishable from any other payment card holder, providing the dignity of interacting in the local market as locals would do" (Musser and Kapadia 2017, 109). Another example that demonstrates how the materiality of holding a card can lift people's dignity was stated in the example of the MasterCard Aid Network, which "empower beneficiaries with technology. The chip cards offer a first step towards financial inclusion by providing experience with a payment tool" (MasterCard, September 24, 2015).

In emphasising the increased dignity for beneficiaries that came with digital payment systems and increased financial inclusion, for MasterCard, this was strongly interlinked with having a digital identity. The narrative highlighted the importance for individuals of having a digital identity, as only this would allow them to be fully financially included. In a humanitarian context specifically, Nathan urged that a lack of digital identity was seen as "a principled driver of their [at-need populations] social, economic and political exclusion" (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, April 4, 2016). Hence, digital identity was the most critical element on the aid recipients' path towards financial inclusion, not only because it met basic human needs through

humanitarian assistance but, like the first step on the ladder of financial inclusion, as Nathan puts it, in the long run, it also integrates people into the economy where they can see the possibility of their employment and participation in commerce.

In MasterCard's narrative, the term 'digital identity' and 'identity' appeared to be interchangeably used. MasterCard's stated:

“A child born today will not have a bank card, hold a passport, or carry cash. Her first payment device might be her phone, a watch, or an item of clothing. Her signature might be a thumbprint, face scan, or her voice. Ultimately, her ID will be herself.”

A digital ID, according to MasterCard, was a characteristic that differentiated people from the 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' world and was another step towards making people indistinguishable from other consumers, an important aspect of the company's understanding of dignity. For example, Nathan explained, “Identity is something that we take for granted in the developed world” (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMTNS, April 16, 2016). In another example, she shared experiences from a study run by UN Women with civic groups to discuss the impacts of lacking digital identity, recounting (MasterCard, as quoted in PYMNTS, April 4, 2016) that “Basic things [paying remotely for school fees and receiving remittances] that we take for granted [in the developed world] are, for these women . . . a fundamental part of their daily existence — and one that they in many cases are lacking.” In MasterCard's narrative, identity defined as one's digital self appears also in a more implicit way, for example, in the report on digital solutions within refugee camps, published by MasterCard and Western Union (2017), introduced in a previous section. To recap, the study intended to picture the life of a refugee by analysing how refugees deal with banking and remittance – for example, how they pay for health care, education, livelihood and so on. The study puts forward a typology of refugees which is not further explained, but which seems to be dependent on the individual's financial potential to engage in banking transactions. The typology consists of three groups: impoverished new arrivals, the intermediate group, and the economically active. The study (MasterCard and Western Union, 2017, 8) envisioned the establishment of a digital infrastructure

within these camps that would unlock the potential of refugees and eventually enable financial inclusion (and thus sustainable growth) of both the refugee and host communities: “The Mastercard and Western Union digital payments and transaction ecosystem empowers recipients through a streamlined payments and disbursements process, facilitating access to additional services.”

While MasterCard was envisioning a humanitarian future where every beneficiary is financially included, ‘digital identity’ was in fact a central theme in a much broader vision the company holds. In 2019, MasterCard published a document entitled *Digital Identity. Restoring Trust in a Digital World* which “presents a vision of how digital interactions will evolve. It describes the role that trust will play in those interactions and explains why Mastercard views digital identity as fundamental to that trust” (MasterCard 2019, 1). In this paper, digital identity was defined as a “collage of data that defines the individual” (MasterCard 2019, 6) and which may include information such as name, date of birth, address, biometrics (e.g., fingerprint, face, voice), attributes (e.g., passport number, social security number), certification (e.g., doctor, pilot, university degree) and dynamic data from interactions (e.g., financial institutions, retail, mobile). Trust was needed because, according to MasterCard, not merely have the physical and digital world merged, but real people and their digital representations have become one too. Digital interactions have thus become an essential part of modern life: “Increasingly the interaction is digital, and our identities are used not only by ourselves, but the plethora of devices acting on our behalf.”

MasterCard elaborated the MasterCard Principles of Digital Identity where, in short, “the individual owns their identity and controls their identity data” (MasterCard 2019, 7). Data protection and full control over identity management needs to be guaranteed in a decentralised way through an external platform, powered by Microsoft.

MasterCard seemed to approach digital identity from the perspective of consumers; the purpose of MasterCard’s digital identity “is not just to identify somebody, but more importantly to confirm their entitlement to access a service or perform a certain task” (MasterCard 2019, 7). As a consequence, the main concern of MasterCard’s focus on data protection and security lay with compliance with legal frames that protected consumers from commercial abuse. MasterCard saw its role in a vision of decentralised

data ownership as “enabler, not unlike the way that we currently enable consumers, merchants, and financial institutions to transact and interact in a secure, convenient, and trusted manner” (MasterCard 2019, 1).

In the next section, I turn towards the humanitarian narrative, and present what and to what extent MasterCard’s visions can be considered to be shared ideas about a desirable future for humanitarian action.

## THE HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVE

### FINANCIAL INCLUSION AS A HUMANITARIAN PRIORITY?

So far, I have shown that in its narrative, MasterCard refers to the term ‘humanitarian’ when talking about any type of organisations involved in humanitarian action.

Simultaneously, the narrative interprets the meaning of being a humanitarian as a profit-seeking actor. Private-public partnerships in humanitarian settings are conceptualised as business strategy on the way towards global financial inclusion, a vision backed up by influential global networks including, among others, the World Bank. However, after having contrasted MasterCard’s understanding of such a humanitarian identity and the purpose of private-public partnerships with voices from within the humanitarian community, my results show that the reaction is complex.

There was not the ‘one’ shared humanitarian understanding of what being humanitarian included. However, it seems that the definition put forward by MasterCard was picked up by those humanitarian organisations, networks and institutions pushing for an extended interpretation of humanitarian action which were more dominant than the voices of organisations who cared about humanitarian action in a narrower sense. CaLP, for example (which I introduced at the beginning of this chapter as a global network that promotes CVA and releases guidelines and standard-setting procedures), described its members as “a global partnership of humanitarian actors engaged in policy, practice and research within [CVA].” This description matches with MasterCard’s idea that “We are all humanitarians”, and depicted an idea of the humanitarian community that characterised its members mainly through an organisation’s will and enthusiasm to engage with CVA. I have also mentioned actors

such as the World Bank, which traditionally has been more engaged in developing aid but which also plays an increasingly important role as donor for the humanitarian community. At the same time, it is important to recognise that certain humanitarian organisations are actually multi-mandate organisations, engaged in both humanitarian and development realms, while others are solely engaged in humanitarian action. There existed some critical reflections, raised by single-mandated humanitarian organisations, on financial inclusion and whether it should be considered a humanitarian priority at all; however, these voices seem dominated by a sector-wide unbroken and shared enthusiasm for digital CVA, following the strong narrative put forward by MasterCard and its allies.

The aspiration of closing the development-humanitarian gap, which MasterCard took as justification of a vision of financial inclusion, was not supported unanimously. As mentioned above, on the one hand, MasterCard's partners included in this study (Mercy Corps, Save the Children, World Vision, WFP) all carry multi-mandates aside from mere humanitarian action. Like MasterCard, these actors saw digital CVA as an important step for beneficiaries towards gaining financial inclusion, with positive impacts going beyond humanitarian goals. For example, Save the Children emphasised how digital technologies for the delivery of CVA had helped to stabilise and boost local markets (Save the Children, June 12, 2006). Mercy Corps, similarly, reflected that "In recent years, one of the most promising correlations for humanitarian and development work has been the relationship between access to financial services and poverty alleviation." (Mercy Corps, November 27, 2018). Hence, financial inclusion technologies were seen as a promising tool, able to bridge humanitarian and development aims. On the other hand, organisations with a primary focus on humanitarian action reflected that such long-term intentions constitute, from a humanitarian point of view, misplaced priorities. For example, the ICRC (2018, 6) concluded in a report on CVA in Kenya that financial inclusion did not constitute life-saving assistance and should not therefore be seen as an example of humanitarian urgency, emphasising that the main focus should be on getting cash to those in need as quickly as possible to alleviate suffering.

In addition to this critique, some evidence produced within the humanitarian community or by humanitarian think tanks challenged the assumption that digital CVA programmes had positive effects on financial inclusion at all. For example, in a synthesis report on digital CVA and financial inclusion, Bailey (2017, 1) stated that “Delivering humanitarian cash transfers through mobile money creates potential opportunities to connect recipients with broader digital financial services, but does not automatically lead to widespread or sustained uptake.” Similarly, Soursourian (June 12, 2017, para. 3) observed that beneficiaries “are more likely to withdraw the entire amount of the transfer without building up any savings.” One way to improve this situation, Soursourian (June 12, 2017, para. 7) stated, was for humanitarian organisations to “partner with providers that have robust acceptance rates and strong liquidity management or be prepared to make investments in these areas. But if transfers were made to debit cards or mobile money accounts that local merchants do not accept, then recipients’ “failure” to use these services is completely rational.” The author thus argued it would be important for humanitarian organisations to partner with globally established financial service providers, whose debit cards are widely accepted, to deliver CVA in humanitarian settings. This would help to successfully build financial inclusion.

While MasterCard promoted the idea of its being a (profit-seeking) humanitarian, my analysis has shown that this self-positioning does not solve practical challenges with its technologies, as a humanitarian practitioner pointed out. This became apparent when reflecting about the everyday experiences in the field using MasterCard’s digital technologies. A humanitarian practitioner based in Lebanon (Interviewee 1, December 20, 2019) explained that they rely on hands-on support: “You cannot just hand out the devices and that’s it. You need one of [MasterCard’s staff] in the field with you, who offers service delivery support.” However, this service support component in the field is often missing, which the interviewee assumed is precisely because of how MasterCard, as a corporate company, is forced to operate, namely, under different political and structural restrictions and regulations than their humanitarian counterparts. For example, businesses have to respect global financing regulations: “When a country is sanctioned by the UN, a company cannot go into this country like



we as a humanitarian organisation can do, and hence they cannot provide the support service we would need” (Interviewee 1, December 20, 2019).

Corporate companies such as MasterCard were therefore found to be guided by different organisational routines, project life cycles and interests than their partners, and respond, as a consequence, to other accountability claims. For example, the interviewee explained, MasterCard still seemed to prioritise brand protection over humanitarian goals, as they are accountable to their customers and shareholders. This is understandable, the humanitarian practitioner acknowledged, but “If you worry about your brand, and what light it sheds on you if the wrong guys get to hold your card, then either don’t put your logo on the card or you are not really ready to operate in a humanitarian setting” (Interviewee 1, December 20, 2019). Nevertheless, resumed the interview partner, MasterCard was generally a well-trusted partner, consisting of enthusiastic people to work with, and offering crucial expertise and important technologies to distribute CVA.

#### A “REVELATION”: UNITED IN ENTHUSIASM FOR DIGITAL CVA

My results showed that MasterCard’s narrative of ‘a world beyond cash’ strongly resonated with its partners. MasterCard Aid Network and e-vouchers were seen to provide NGO’s with the accurate equipment needed to deliver CVA in a much more convenient way than the distribution of cash and paper vouchers. Save the Children, for example, described humanitarian organisations having to overcome multiple logistical obstacles in order to deliver food, medicine and other essentials. Mustafa Ghulam, FSL program director in Yemen (Save the Children, June 12, 2016) portrayed the challenges with cash as follows:

“Prior to the launch of the new e-voucher scheme, our Programming Teams used to distribute the traditional paper food vouchers to beneficiaries on a monthly basis. This has always proved extremely labour intensive and cumbersome, both for our programme teams as well as our hard-pressed Finance colleagues who often struggled to keep on top of the huge piles of paperwork associated with the requisite reconciliation and audit processes. The paper-based system also resulted in huge crowds congregating at collection

points for their vouchers, putting the lives of both beneficiaries and those of our staff at a greater risk given the ongoing conflict in the country and in particular the possibility of airstrikes.”

He did not mention the possible risks that accompany the delivery of digital CVA but emphasised how e-vouchers work for everyone involved, beneficiaries, aid organisations, local merchants and donors. The introduction of MasterCard Aid Network has been described as a “revelation” (Save the Children, June 12, 2016). Sara Netzer, Director for Emergency Food Security and Livelihoods at Save the Children, wrote that the advantages of digital payment technologies for Save the Children are various: more efficient, secure, cost-effective, and able to be rapidly deployed and easily monitored (Save the Children, November 5, 2015). Likewise, for Mercy Corps an important positive aspect of digital payments was that the e-card programmes were flexible and mobile and could easily be moved to other locations; also, any money that did not get used was not lost but could be reallocated for other purposes at a later time (Mercy Corps, February 3, 2016). The mobility and flexibility of the programme was similarly seen as advantage at World Vision. George Fenton, Director of Humanitarian Operations Services of World Vision, explained: “Our staff, vendors and aid beneficiaries were able to quickly adopt and use the system . . . . It also gave our field staff the ability to quickly add or restrict items depending on the type of intervention, saving us time and cost.” (as quoted in MasterCard, September 24, 2015). Similarly, WFP (Luce 2014) stated that the introduction of digital prepaid card brought multiple important benefits to both Syrian refugees and the agency itself. These included administrative and logistical costs decreasing, it being easier for WFP to scale-up aid for the increasing number of refugees, and the need not to print a voucher month, again saving money and time.

While these statements were made by MasterCard’s partners, the results show that the overall optimism for CVA more generally was expressed widely within the humanitarian community. As outlined in the context section of this chapter, the push towards CVA to replace in-kind goods distribution came from donors and various platforms, such as the World Humanitarian Summit, and by crucial financial donors of humanitarian organisations, such as ECHO. In light of this shift, humanitarian

organisations across all sectors increasingly prioritised CVA over goods (CaLP 2018). However, while the food security and livelihoods, and shelter sectors, among others, were widely experienced in implementing CVA, others were in their early stages of integrating CVA as a standard practice (CaLP 2018, 40). This was, for example, true for the WASH sector (Juillard and Opu 2014). Although there were several examples of market support activities combined with in-kind delivery (such as support to water vendors and water kiosks), CVA had only just started to become part of the regular WASH toolbox. In 2007, CVA for WASH was formally discussed in a review by the United Children’s Fund (UNICEF) leading the Global WASH cluster: “Cash will not be an appropriate alternative for all of UNICEF’s core interventions in emergencies, such as . . . the provision of . . . safe water and sanitation” (Jaspars and Harvey 2007, 3). One strong concern circled around quality standards, such as clean water (CaLP 2018, 41). By 2016 however, a shift towards CVA in WASH could be observed. UNICEF (2016, 17) stated in its *Strategy for WASH 2016-2030*: “UNICEF will encourage and support the large-scale use of new and innovative financing mechanisms including . . . the use of cash transfers for WASH (in both emergency and development contexts) . . .”

This shows that some humanitarian organisations may have been hesitant about the overall uptake of CVA in some areas but changed their position and started to express their commitment towards CVA. No account in my data suggested a fundamental criticism of CVA per se, although some statements thematised the practical challenges of digital technologies for implementing CVA. One such pitfall, a humanitarian practitioner (Interviewee 1, December 20, 2019) elaborated, was MasterCard’s lack of proper awareness and in-depth knowledge about how a humanitarian setting works. This caused some challenges with the implementation of MasterCard’s technologies:

“The trick to make a humanitarian technology truly work is a profound knowledge about how humanitarian organisations operate. Companies should spend at least one year sitting with us in the field and observe. The field is chaotic, unpredictable, and dangerous. Sometimes you run a program and then an armed group attacks and you have to leave immediately. You need a technology that works in these complex situations.”

This illustrates the point that entering and developing a global marketplace in a humanitarian setting did work under circumstances different to those which MasterCard was used to. What this interview statement underpinned was that humanitarian organisations have to deal by themselves with the practical challenges of delivering digital CVA in what is usually an extreme humanitarian aid environment. Another aspect that emerged from the humanitarian narrative was a dilemma between an understanding of dignity and empowerment that strongly resonates with the idea of digital CVA, and the implications of potential risk to the safety and privacy of beneficiaries that come with a digital identity. I turn towards this point next.

#### A HUMANITARIAN DILEMMA: DIGNITY THROUGH DIGITAL CVA VS. THE RISKS OF A DIGITAL IDENTITY

Overall, MasterCard's partner organisations and the humanitarian community more widely shared the company's understanding of what empowerment and dignity meant to beneficiaries, namely, that their dignity was reflected in the ability to consume based on their individual preference and make their own choices. A quote by Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, in the Foreword of "The state of the World's Cash Report" (2018), illustrated the logic behind this assumption:<sup>26</sup>

"Imagine that you had to flee your home with your young children and elderly parents. That you had to leave everything behind. At long last, an aid organization arrives in your displacement camp. They come from far away and know neither you nor your heritage. Fortunately, they ask a question first: 'Would you like us to give you boxes containing what we think you need, or would you like to receive cash and decide for yourself?' Which one would you choose?"

Here, it was specifically the aspects of being cash-free and having access to a digital payment system in an uncomplicated and flexible way that provided a person with

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<sup>26</sup> It would be relevant to examine to what extent beneficiaries share MasterCard's and humanitarian actors' understanding of 'dignity', but neither the actual outcomes of organisations' activities nor beneficiaries' perceptions are the focus of my PhD project. However, a report by Mosel and Holloway (2019), for example, explores what dignity means to beneficiaries in different cultural contexts.

more independence, control and dignity than traditional in-kind aid and cash distribution. For example, about prepaid cards Mercy Corps (February 3, 2016) stated: “We believe cash assistance is the most rapid, efficient and dignified manner of providing humanitarian aid”. Alan Glasgow, Mercy Corps Director of the European Migration Response, added how digital CVA improves refugees with more autonomy and dignity to choose what they need (Glasgow, 2017). Likewise, WFP brought up a point made by MasterCard, that appearing like a ‘normal’ customer in a shop is crucial for one’s dignity, and prepaid cards “allow the beneficiaries to spend their entitlements in multiple visits to the shops and are also more discreet and therefore less stigmatising” (Luce 2014, 72).

According to MasterCard’s vision, digital CVA came hand-in-hand with a digital identity that replaces the real self. Here, it was apparent in my analysis that the humanitarian community felt uncomfortable with this topic. Kilian Kleinschmidt, former UNHCR manager for Jordan’s largest refugee camp, Za’atari stated: “Any discussion around financial inclusion always comes back down to ID . . . . There seems to be no common ground among aid workers who register refugees, governments that process them, and those that regulate the financial services system, as to what ‘security’ means when it comes to ID” (Kleinschmidt, as quoted in Euromoney, September 18, 2017). This was a dilemma for humanitarians who had to deal with financial inclusion, namely, how to financially include vulnerable populations with a digital identity, and simultaneously protect them and their data.

On the one hand, with an increasing number of migrants crossing borders and entering new countries there was a realisation that regulations around identity and customer due diligence had to evolve to include the many actors involved: banks, humanitarian organisations, beneficiaries, governments, and businesses (Euromoney, September 18, 2017). UNHCR (2018), for example, acknowledged that over one billion people lack any formal identification, but that the meaning of identity in the twenty-first century is no longer paper-based. Without proof of legal identity, access to services and socio-economic participation (including employment opportunities, housing, a mobile phone, and bank account) was likely to be hindered. This could be especially problematic for migrants, asylum seeker and refugees, who rely on legal recognition

for special protection and access to aid. UNHCR (2018, 2) recalled that “States have the responsibility to provide for the digital inclusion and identity of their citizens and those living on their territory.” In that sense, the agency (2018, 2) went on, “UNHCR assists member states in ensuring that refugees and asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other forcibly displaced are – digitally speaking – not left behind.” Moreover, digital identification systems have become an international development priority, in order to achieve legal identity for all by 2030, which is one of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (McCann and Zoric, June 1, 2017).

On the other hand, as much as leaving no one behind in the digital age has become an increasingly guiding credo for the humanitarian community (despite critical humanitarian voices, as discussed in a previous section on how humanitarian narratives disagree on financial inclusion as a humanitarian priority), so has the principle of ‘Do No Harm’. It is here where the dilemma for humanitarians begins, and my results show that concerns from a humanitarian perspective in regard to CVA and digital identity were about how to protect beneficiaries from misuse of their data, and how to adapt protection policies in a way that kept up with the rapid technological change.

Responsible data management was among the most pressing areas which came up in regard to digital CVA. A discussion paper on *Data Protection, Privacy and Security for Humanitarian & Development Programs* by World Vision (Lutz et al. 2017) noted that from a humanitarian perspective, ensuring the highest possible data protection of affected people was a great responsibility for humanitarian agencies. However, the complexity of a humanitarian context, the complicated flow of data throughout a programme’s life cycle, a lack of staff, funding or time, and the involvement of various types of organisations such as corporate companies or governments made it difficult to implement a coherent responsible data management system that fully addressed beneficiaries’ privacy and security of personal data (Lutz et al. 2017, 10–11). E-cash transfer programmes posed particular risks with the collection and handling of beneficiaries’ personal data; specific challenges included the multiple use of data such as for potential commercial use, questions of data ownership and privacy, data minimisation, the potential for security breaches, and the impact of technologies such

as blockchain, which have been used in CVA programming in Jordan and elsewhere (Kuner and Marelli 2017, 111).

As such, the strong trend towards scaling up digital CVA programmes emphasised the need for humanitarian agencies to think about what type of data is collected, stored and shared with partners. Over the last few years, there has been an increasing awareness of the sensitivity and urgency of data protection within the humanitarian community. Several attempts have been made by humanitarian agencies and organisations to develop data protection guidelines, policies and toolkits to put into practice.<sup>27</sup>

Despite these efforts, however, there seemed to remain some significant concerns. Firstly, there was a certain concern about “the risk of de-humanising aid” (MSF 2019, 8), which resulted from the discussion about digital ID and protection being a tech-centred debate. Beneficiaries of financial aid are not, however, a homogenous group, and responsible data management therefore had different implications for especially vulnerable groups such as children and women (Secret Aid Worker, as quoted in The Guardian, June 13, 2017). Digital CVA in particular could lead to harmful inequality, depending on a beneficiary’s literacy, genre, age and status. Here, it was important that humanitarians ensured that aid recipients are familiar with the technology, and fully informed about the personal and societal implications of it (MSF 2019, 9). A challenge emerging from that was around what choices beneficiary would have if they refused consent. Secondly, the data controller/data processor relationship played a pivotal role in responsible data management (Kuner and Marelli 2017, 115-117). What was often not clear, however, was how humanitarian organisations defined and set out the specific purposes for and means by which data are processed in agreement with third parties. “When we partner with other organizations, we need to be very, very, very careful about what that data sharing agreement looks like”, summarised

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<sup>27</sup> Examples include: OCHA’s (2019a) *Data Responsibility Guidelines*, ICRC’s (Kuner and Marelli 2017) *Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action*, the ICRC’s (2019) *Policy on the Processing of Biometric Data*, the CaLP’s (2013) *Principles and Operational Standards for the Secure Use of Personal Data in Cash and E-Transfer Programmes*, World Vision’s (2017) *Data Protection, Privacy and Security for Humanitarian & Development Programs*, WFP’s (2016) *Guide to Personal Data Protection and Privacy*, and the Mercy Corps-hosted Electronic Cash Transfers Learning Network (ELAN) (jointly led with MasterCard and PayPal, which offers training kits for NGOs on data protection in digital CVA).

Chris Earney, innovation service head, UNHCR (UNHCR, as quoted in Devex, March 15, 2019). My research has found no reliable data to explain how MasterCard and its partner organisations addressed issues such as data minimisation, and how additional purposes that may have been involved in data processing by or of commercial interests were negotiated. Data protection, however, was about protecting beneficiaries not only from commercial abuse but also from governments and enemy groups that could put certain beneficiaries at risk (MSF 2019, 9).

The following section turns to the discussion in the context of the analytical framework.

## DISCUSSION

This section brings together my findings in light of my analytical framework and discusses how the different mechanisms work together in establishing MasterCard visions about digital CVA technologies as shared meaning of humanitarian action.

### MAKING IDENTITIES: MASTERCARD'S INTEGRATING STRATEGIES IN THE DIGITAL (HUMANITARIAN) PAYMENT SERVICE MARKET

The humanitarian payment service market is a lucrative but competitive new market for financial service providers. As outlined in the context section, new bidding schemes by ECHO and DFID locate the concentration of a greater influence over CVA with fewer humanitarian organisations and financial service providers. MasterCard's narrative can be understood through Gramsci (1971, 233) who elaborates that because hegemony is always unstable, actors find themselves in a constant "war of position" that leads to a longer-term strategy across various bases of power, in order to gain influence in the wider society, develop structural power, and to win new allies in order to build a hegemonic bloc. This becomes understandable when examining how a financial service provider makes profit within this market, and what competition exists. The digital payment service market can be described as a network of interconnected individual accounts, as dos Santos and Kvangraven (2017, 211–12) explain:

"Its operation is defined by a number of conventions allowing payment flows to take place. These include conventions about the technological forms (hardware



and software) in which network links or ‘edges’ connect accounts, and with which users access their accounts or network ‘nodes’; a convention on the specific unit of account for balances; and agreements on procedures and policies for effecting, verifying, securing and adjudicating problems with transfers. These conventions give rise to ‘network effects’, since the addition of a user to a network increases the value of the services it provides to all other users.”

Put differently, it was of vital interest to MasterCard that as many merchants as possible in humanitarian areas accepted its cards as a mode of payment, and that as many individuals as possible possessed a MasterCard card and became active within the network by purchasing services and goods through it. Nevertheless, MasterCard is not the only provider, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: Visa, Red Rose, PayPal (to name a few) are also competing for the humanitarian market.

However, from an economic perspective, network effects can lead to inefficient market outcomes, as payment systems have very high fixed costs and very low marginal costs. These costs make it hard for a small number of suppliers to grow and dominate the industry: “The outcome of market competition will in such cases reflect not price or quality advantages of dominant suppliers, but advantages gained by their incumbency, barriers to entry, or other non-competitive, contingent factors increasing use of the dominant product” (dos Santos and Kvangraven 2017, 212). Indeed, this study has identified that MasterCard is fully engaged in two main strategies to enable its growth, and manifests its position in a humanitarian payment service market which can be summarised by Fairclough’s statement (2013, 61): “Hegemony is about constructing alliances, and integrating rather than simply dominating subordinate classes, through concessions or through ideological means, to win their consent.” My analysis supports the assumption formulated in my analytical framework, namely, that corporate companies create understandings about the humanitarian community and being ‘humanitarian’, which translate through technologies into a new sense of humanitarian identity.

Firstly, MasterCard is establishing cohesion through alliances on a global level. Its narrative of progress does not stand alone, but rather is successfully interweaved into a web of coalitions with other influential actors in the humanitarian and development realms. In building alliances with the World Bank, UN agencies and the Great Bargain, which have a powerful effect on humanitarian funding and policies, MasterCard as financial service provider gains influence through an understanding of humanitarian complex crises which are seen as results of poverty and inequality caused by financial exclusions in fragile and developing states. According to MasterCard, the solutions to these issues are the instruments of financial inclusion – banking unbanked people and including them into the formal economy and building a digital infrastructure to facilitate digital payment systems. These are designed to bring about economic and social stability, an idea which was successfully established as humanitarian goal, despite critical voices within the humanitarian community. Through these alliances, MasterCard's engagement is illustrative of the increasingly inevitable role financial service providers play in humanitarian aid by developing financial services for the delivery of cash in the name of financial inclusion, and which leads towards a cognitive legitimacy among the humanitarian community.

Secondly, MasterCard is building trust and thus cohesion on a local level with implementing partner organisations, by integrating them through dialogue. Such an integrating strategy can be observed in the way the MasterCard Aid Network was developed, as the inclusion of humanitarian organisations into the process contributed to their positive verdict that they felt respected. Another strategy was that the company offers adaptable, 'dynamic' services rather than a fix, static product. For example, the set-up of prepaid cards can be changed depending on the humanitarian programme. Similarly, the MasterCard Aid Network is an adjustable service for organisations which work remotely and can be customised to the needs and situation of the programme. This allows MasterCard flexibility to evolve its services and customise itself to its partners, giving humanitarian organisations a 'say' in how these technologies are used. These strategies allow MasterCard's commercial aspirations to be morally backed up not only through its alliances on a global level, but also on the local level of the market itself. This way, MasterCard manages to generate a definition

of partnerships as business models which merge different operational principles and logics of humanitarian engagement in favour of its own position in the humanitarian market.

#### MAKING DISCOURSES: STREAMLINING THE DEBATE ABOUT CVA IN FAVOUR OF BUILDING MARKETS

MasterCard's success in weaving into the humanitarian narrative its vision of financial inclusion and digital CVA, and the importance of its own position for and within the humanitarian community, is not just apparent through the mechanism of making identities, but also works through discursive choices and their effects. As Chapter 4 elaborates, the assumption I hold is that corporations are gatekeeper of technologies and hold a discursive power to frame the way the humanitarian community think and talk about humanitarian action. In the case of MasterCard's digital technologies, this is happening through streamlining a humanitarian debate that defines what can and cannot be said about CVA, and digital CVA in particular. Such streamlining appears in mainly two ways.

Firstly, MasterCard's discourse utilises the momentum of CVA within the humanitarian community as a starting point for its own vision of financial inclusion through digital infrastructure, with the eventual aim of expanding its market in the name of poverty reduction. Its intentions are mainly commercial, which the company is transparent about, but as Tara Nathan, Executive Vice President Public-Private-Partnerships at MasterCard, stated, and as I have shown earlier, a challenge for Mastercard is that of gaining trust from within the humanitarian community and convincing it that the company is doing good. While the previous section discusses integrating strategies as a means to build cohesion, a successful discursive way to gain that trust is through simple but effective catchphrases such as "we are all humanitarians" (The New Humanitarian, January 31, 2019). The implication is that MasterCard and humanitarian organisations are in the same boat, pursuing the same goal of doing good.

Secondly, what manifests MasterCard's visions and ideas of humanitarian futures further are the institutionalised ways through which the positive discourse of digital CVA being superior to traditional humanitarian aid becomes naturalised. The claim

that individuals are empowered and dignified through digital CVA is a strong, undisputed argument appearing as fact. The resulting discourse of free choice through the adoption of CVA is constantly being reproduced, and is socialised into and embodied by actors from within the humanitarian community. As I have shown, while some practical challenges exist with the use of MasterCard's technologies, the dominant positive perception of digital CVA is nevertheless the fundament of the humanitarian discourse: overall, it is seen as dignified and empowering for beneficiaries as it provides choices; moreover, it is a successful tool to stabilise local markets and address poverty; and it is further praised for being more secure, faster, more flexible and mobile. It is an example of how a discourse can work as powerful tool which lends legitimacy to hegemonic groups, and in the case of MasterCard, appears not to be openly challenged. A reason for this might be because doing so would be seen as too disruptive.

The interesting question is, however, why this discourse becomes reproduced, and why it would be disruptive to challenge it. Here, it is worth recalling Krause's (2014) thoughts on how the competition for donor money affects language and terminology. Under pressure to demonstrate their suitability to potential investors by competing in the humanitarian marketplace, humanitarian organisations have indeed to follow the shift towards digital CVA. The 'donor gaze', as Gill and Wells (2014) called it, fully applies here. In light of an overall change in conditions for donor money, namely, the prioritisation of digital CVA over in-kind aid, the positive discourse on digital CVA appears as a structure that imposes itself on humanitarians' reality and operates as a set of rules about what can and cannot be said and done. The most visible values and symbols displayed in such a discourse are about dignity and empowerment, which underpins the logic of marketisation and consumerism. Interestingly, MasterCard as a profit-oriented company does not need to justify its engagement in humanitarian CVA, but rather, humanitarian organisations have to prove their appropriateness to run CVA programmes. This demonstrates how the discourse about CVA (specifically MasterCard's technologies) governs the humanitarian community and can be seen as an example where "[discourses] constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and

conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (Weedon 1987, 108).

As mentioned earlier, the discourse of digital CVA is underpinned by the logic of consumerism. The next section looks at how this logic creates specific views on and representations of aid recipients, which accompany MasterCard’s digital technologies.

#### MAKING REPRESENTATIONS: BANKING AID RECIPIENTS - FROM NOBODY TO CONSUMER

Hand-in-hand with MasterCard’s discourse that links digital technologies with the dignity of the beneficiary is how the latter is viewed and represented. It is interesting that digital technology and human identity merge together in MasterCard’s narrative in a digital, abstract space. I found that my assumption from the analytical framework, namely, that corporations’ representations build on persuasive representations of war and disasters, aid recipients and others to create particular versions of humanitarian action which serve their commercial purpose of their technologies, becomes supported.

For MasterCard, a digital identity is not merely something people have or do not have but defines their existence. This appears not as vision, but as fact; being ‘banked’ does not appear to be a choice, but rather is essential to being part of the world – that is, the developed, advanced, modern, progressing world. Hence, digital identity is not only an enabler to accessing every basic human need, as MasterCard formulates it; it is also a door opener for people to cross from a ‘developing’ to a ‘developed’ world, to transform from a ‘nobody’ to a ‘somebody’ by acquiring a digital avatar. In this way, the debate intersects with the ‘modernisation’ models of linear development that a vision of financial inclusion puts forward, and is widely backed up by actors such as the World Bank and MasterCard’s implementing partners, and other multi-mandated humanitarian organisations.

Aid recipients transform not just into consumers, but also into data points, commodified packages of information with value to the company. This transformation can be understood by using van Leeuwen and Woday’s thoughts (1999, 96) of

recontextualization, as my analytical framework suggests. Recontextualization can include deletion, as often not all the aspects of a social practice can be represented. However, the interesting point emerging from my analysis is that deletion happens simultaneously with inclusion through the digital representation of aid recipients: digital identity aims to include as many aspects of an individual as possible. This point is, as became apparent in the results sections, a sensitive issue between MasterCard – and financial service providers more generally – and humanitarian organisations. There is a trade-off between those actors who minimise data collection versus those who collect as much as possible, and, as we have seen, by arguing either that keeping as little data as possible protects aid recipients from exploitation, or that more data ensures transparency and control. In this sense, the individual seems to become removed and rearranged by a one-dimensional digital representation. The digital identity itself and the data it consists of becomes a commodity, with its 'use' by different organisations negotiated and traded between the actors involved.

Furthermore, recontextualisation may happen through substitution, where details and complexities can be replaced by generalisations or abstractions. This can be observed in MasterCard's narrative. For example, its typology of refugees in its white paper seems to work by abstraction: although there is little explanation of how the categories are formed, the main differentiating variable appears to be a refugee's financial resources and their potential to engage in financial transactions (2017, 4). These categories seem broad and the beneficiaries appear as one homogenous group without details about, for example, age and gender. MasterCard's focus on economic transactions leads to a generalisation of beneficiaries represented as abstract idea rather than a tangible person. This is what some humanitarians feared, as I showed in the findings: a process of dehumanising aid, which leaves out contextual factors, and ignores the interplay of intersectional variables which have been demonstrated to be crucial to understanding the particular and unique life situations and needs of beneficiaries (Amacker et al. 2017).

As such, what this further materialises is a reinterpretation of the ideal type of aid, namely, delivering CVA through digital payment systems. This is seen as ideal because beneficiaries are made into consumers, no different to any other consumer from the

West, free to make rational choices and following their individual preferences. This representation of beneficiaries “as normal consumers”, which emerges from an understanding of dignity and empowerment as having free choices to consume, is widely shared by the humanitarian community, as statements from my data presented above – for example by Mercy Corps (February 3, 2016; Glasgow 2017) and WFP (Luce 2014) – have shown.

## CONCLUSION: THE CREATION OF AN IMAGINARY OF DIGITAL FINANCIAL INCLUSION

This second case study is an example of building a new sociotechnical imaginary within the humanitarian community. It emphasises how a corporate company plays a complex role in the provision of a humanitarian technology which in turn opens up opportunities to act as sociotechnical gatekeeper in establishing its visions.

MasterCard’s role cannot be described in Krause’s (2014) terms of being simply a buyer or seller of humanitarian programmes. It is involved in the regulation of the market structure itself, by its engagement in various decision-making networks and platforms concerned with CVA, and by building the digital infrastructure which allows the implementation of CVA in the first place. My findings lead to the suggestion that MasterCard’s rebuilds and shapes the humanitarian market *per se*, through the successful establishment of what I call here an imaginary of digital financial inclusion. I would say that such a ‘making of the market’ is happening in the sense of Çaliskan and Callon (2010) who, to recall here, argue that the market is a sociotechnical arrangement, shaped by competing narratives and discourses. This arrangement organises the conception, production and circulation of goods by delimiting and constructing a space of confrontation and power struggles. The authors also emphasise that being successfully in charge in a market requires access over technical devices and specific competencies. Neglecting the material and technical dimensions, Çaliskan and Callon (2010, 4) warn, would hinder “the explanation for the soundness of markets and for their objective reality.” I would add that exerting power over technologies may not only help to be in charge, but actually facilitates the defining of the market, its participants and its rules. One consequence is that to some degree,

MasterCard's interpretation of private-public partnerships and the introduction of new digital technologies appear to work successfully for all parties involved – for MasterCard, which improves its game in Gramsci's 'war of position' through new allies and partners such as World Bank on a global level, and for implementing organisations on a local level, who are enabled to implement CVA programmes in ways they consider effective and efficient.

As such, I have identified that a sociotechnical imaginary of digital financial inclusion goes beyond both a traditional and a neoliberal imaginary. This became apparent in mainly two ways. Firstly, my findings made clear that a use of a traditional humanitarian idea which would indicate pity, compassion or altruism as motives for humanitarian engagement, is missing. Instead, humanitarian action is seen to mean supporting 'entrepreneurial subjects' by investing in human capital to release individual capacity to pursue economic potential. Secondly, as the literature review has shown, organisations usually justify their humanitarian engagement by referencing corporate social responsibility, along with employees' satisfaction and customers' expectations. In MasterCard's narrative, however, it became apparent that these points are explicitly rejected. Instead, MasterCard introduces a new understanding of private-public partnerships as a profit-seeking business model with a social justice bent. In this sense, its narrative does not use the elements of a traditional imaginary, nor can it be simply categorised into what the literature describes as neoliberal imaginary. Rather, the imaginary of digital financial inclusion builds on the logic of the marketisation of humanitarian aid, and introduces digital technologies as key for providing beneficiaries with dignity, which in this imaginary only happens through the materiality of holding a prepaid card.

Against this background, Chapter 8 provides a cross-case synthesis which brings the previous findings together and asks what we can learn from the two case studies.



# CHAPTER 8: CROSS-CASE SYNTHESIS

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## INTRODUCTION

A main goal of applying a comparative research design to my research questions was to explain the different ways mechanisms of co-production work, and to better understand the variation and similarities in how corporate visions about technological progress and humanitarian action become collectively shared sociotechnical imaginaries. In the last two chapters, two main findings became apparent. Firstly, in the case of 'Better Shelter', I have shown that vital elements of IKEA Foundation's visions, namely, to revolutionise the shelter sector through a typical IKEA prefabricated product, led to collectively held interpretations of humanitarian action being manifested among the public as an imaginary of tech-hedonism, while simultaneously being energetically rejected from within the humanitarian community. Secondly, in the case of MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards, MasterCard's aspirations of financial inclusion through digital technologies successfully manifested as an imaginary of digital financial inclusion. This resonated with those allies and partners on the global and local levels within the humanitarian community who embrace a wider interpretation of humanitarian action as also being development aid.

The cross-case synthesis in this chapter brings these individual case study results together in light of my research questions, by clarifying why these sociotechnical imaginaries gained traction in the sites they did, how they are attributable to the mechanisms of making identities, discourses and representations, and how they work in more detail. The aim of this chapter is to carve out how the co-production of technology and society work together to improve knowledge about the role of humanitarian technologies in creating meaning about humanitarian action, while striving to move the current academic debate about businesses in humanitarian action forward.

With this in mind, this chapter consists of four sections. The section after this introduction asks what enabled the establishment of two sociotechnical imaginaries in different social sites. In particular, I identify that an imaginary of tech-hedonism (in the case of IKEA Foundation) and of digital financial inclusion (in the case of MasterCard) are a result of two causal powers. Firstly, it has been possible because a neoliberal imaginary, which I identified in Chapter 2, provides the moral fundament to nourish an emotionally appealing interpretation of humanitarian technologies as commodities, and emerging out of that, a narrative of freedom which underpins both imaginaries. Secondly, I discuss how IKEA Foundation and MasterCard hold the capacity to both construct and to penetrate markets relevant to their business in a fragmented and weakened society – the former a market of regular IKEA customers, the latter a humanitarian market of digital payment systems.

The following section elaborates why sociotechnical imaginaries manifest among humanitarian organisations and how they work in more detail. In Particular, I discuss that whether a humanitarian technology is seen as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ by the humanitarian community tends to be influenced by the dominant imaginary at play – and the case of MasterCard shows that whichever imaginary that is, it can be manipulated when a corporation is capable of creating a shared identity and discourse with humanitarian organisations that can strengthen the humanitarian impression of trust and inclusiveness.

In the fourth and final section, I conclude that there is an inherent ambiguity within the humanitarian community in terms of the perception of partnerships with corporate companies, and the validation of new humanitarian technologies in regard to humanitarian principles. Although they might be compromised by engaging in a partnership, principles do not tend to be a necessary condition for humanitarian actors to accept or reject a humanitarian technology. The indication here is that an imaginary of principled aid has been eroding in the aftermath of neoliberalism, and the case of MasterCard suggests that this process is accelerated when corporations are the originators of shared visions.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF IMAGINARIES OF TECH-HEDONISM AND DIGITAL FINANCIAL INCLUSION

This section addresses the research question to what extent and why do sociotechnical imaginaries of tech-hedonism and digital financial inclusion transform or reinforce particular conceptions of what humanitarian action stands for in the realms where they have prevailed, and what are these conceptions. I have identified two causal powers through which corporate visions tend to become manifested imaginaries, namely, (1) a powerful narrative of freedom which underpins the commodification process of humanitarian technologies and transforms the view on aid recipients through a logic of consumption, and (2) the shaping of relevant markets, which can be understood in light of a critical assessment of imbalanced co-production processes, existing in a fragmented and weakened society as a result of a neoliberal imaginary.

### THE NARRATIVE OF FREEDOM: AID RECIPIENTS AND COMMODIFIED HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES

IKEA Foundation's and MasterCard's visions gained popular traction because they build on the affective and emotional appeal of freedom. Specifically, the idea of *freedom* must be understood as being at the core of the neoliberal imaginary which, as I outlined in Chapter 2, has been infused into the humanitarian community and provides the legitimacy for corporate engagement in humanitarian action. As Hopgood (2008, 15) has put it, corporate money can "enter a previously hallowed space, legitimizing itself by claiming that allowing the free play of market forces advances real freedom." The idea of this *real* freedom is also an integral part of corporations' narratives about technological progress in humanitarian action and has generated the establishment of new imaginaries. Here, Brown (2019) offers a reading of Friedrich Hayek, the intellectual father of neoliberalism, which is helpful to understand the appeal of freedom in these narratives. She (2019, 97) shows that Hayek defines freedom as the "uncoerced capacity for endeavour and experimentation within codes of conduct generated by tradition and enshrined in just law, markets and morality." With this in mind, this definition applies to my case studies too, where 'experimentation' in terms of developing humanitarian technologies is legitimised by a spirit of freedom

transported through corporate visions. IKEA Foundation uses the ‘freedom of creativity’ when it draws the picture of itself as rebellious designer revolutionising humanitarian shelter and liberating refugees through a mass product, and MasterCard promotes the ‘entrepreneurial subjectivity’ of aid recipients, which comes with the individual freedom of choice through digital cash transfers.

To assess in more detail how a narrative of freedom enabled in my case studies the establishment of imaginaries of tech-hedonism and of digital financial inclusion, it is worth looking at Krause (2014). She pointed out that beneficiaries are part of a humanitarian programme sold to donors, observing that today, as a result of the marketisation of humanitarian aid, people in need and their suffering have become part of a commodity advertised to donors. The way aid recipients are seen and to what extent they actually become part of that commodity has not been fully picked up by the literature, as my findings suggest. In fact, both case studies demonstrate that corporate technologies play an explicit role in manifesting assumptions as they enforce a particular view on beneficiaries. This view promotes an idea of ‘dignity’ and ‘empowerment’ which contributes to those fully developed imaginaries which serve the corporation’s own interests.

In the case of ‘Better Shelter’, this shows that a tech-hedonist imaginary promotes an idea of beneficiaries and an understanding of ‘empowerment’ and ‘dignity’ which ordinary people can relate to, and which I have already pointed out in the discussion section of Chapter 6. For the regular IKEA customer, their own experience of empowerment – by managing, for example, to set up an IKEA flat-pack bookshelf in their own living room (Garvey 2017) – makes the aid recipients more tangible, relatable, and one of ‘us’. This is a relevant part of the message of a tech-hedonist imaginary: when it comes to IKEA products, we are all individuals but united in the same experience of consumption. This can also be described as what Chouliaraki (2010, 20) considers the political culture of communitarian narcissism: “a sensibility that renders the emotions of the self the measure of our understanding of the sufferings of the world at large.” Illouz (2007, 36–39) calls this the modern “homo sentimentalis”, a sensibility which favours a public culture of private emotionality and indulgent self-inspection. Such self-inspection is increased by promoting the ‘Better

Shelter' as an art object at exhibitions, when visitors are invited to explore their own feelings and connect emotionally with refugees when they walk through a 'real' 'Better Shelter'. However, while this egalitarian spirit of mass consumption is one of the reasons why IKEA's narrative has become so successful among its customer base and contributes to the fascination for the 'Better Shelter' among the wider public, it is precisely this lack of acknowledgment of contextual and cultural differences which attracted so much criticism from within the humanitarian community.

Similarly, the imaginary behind MasterCard's successful vision of "a world beyond cash" focuses on the individuality of beneficiaries. In fact, the response of CVA to humanitarian crises alters the expectations of what humanitarian action should achieve, as the view of aid recipients changes within a dominant narrative of 'dignity of choice' (Bailey and Harvey 2017a). As I discuss in the literature review, in the more traditional sense of Henry Dunant, people in need have been imagined in their victimhood, vulnerability, poverty or helplessness (Dubois 2018). The hungry child, helpless mother and homeless refugee are seen as pitiful and requiring help; however, the 'image of suffering' became increasingly criticised as patronising (Kennedy 2009). With the increased availability of CVA, aid recipients themselves have become represented as clients to whom deliverables are provided (Barnett 2005, 725). In fact, Duffield (2019) observes that solidarity with communities at need has been replaced with conditional empathy, while humanitarian crises have become a positively connotated developmental opportunity to change the behaviour of aid recipients in order to maximise their social reproduction – as my findings show, an understanding which is propagated by an imaginary of 'digital financial inclusion'. In fact, perceiving people in need as 'clients' or 'customers' of a service rather than encounter them as 'victims' with pity and human compassion in Dunant's sense can be seen as fundamental shift in terms of what humanitarian aid stands for and what it should bring to people, namely, less 'aid' and pure survival, and more a 'service' to enhance their 'dignity' and liberate their (economic) potential in life.

As such, and in line with a neoliberal logic of consumerism, a person's dignity is reflected in the ability to consume, based on individual preference, as Chapter 7 shows. As consumers, aid recipients are supposed to express their preferences in order

to evaluate and choose products. However, as became apparent in my findings, there is no such thing as a free market in humanitarian aid where aid recipients could easily switch 'provider' and choose another 'product' (for example, if they were unhappy with prepaid cards from MasterCard, or with the collection of their personal data). While I agree with Davies' (2007) point that in a neoliberal view, consumer power is in part exercised through choice, which does not apply in terms of humanitarian aid, I only partly agree with his explanation. He (2007, 12) argues that "in crisis zones there is usually no choice of provider – aid agencies have a monopoly." As my findings discuss, there is indeed a risk of market distortion in the area of CVA, but this dominance is not characterised by humanitarian organisations. Instead, we need to acknowledge the power of financial service providers to shape this market according to their interests.

The connection between the IKEA Foundation's imaginary of tech-hedonism and MasterCard's imaginary of digital financial inclusion is that despite the claim of empowering aid recipients in their individuality and agency, the logic of consumption reduces them to a homogeneous group lacking the relevant commodities. This is done by assuming either that they (1) have the same preferences in regard to what 'home' means as the 'normal', mass-consuming IKEA customer in the West, or (2) only become somebody through holding a prepaid card and digital identity which makes them look like a 'normal' client in a shop. My analysis of the commodification of humanitarian technologies adds, however, a layer of complexity to this point. In its discussion of the research gap, Chapter 2 argued that scholars are either overly enthusiastic about the positive impact of technologies on humanitarian action, or ignore the corporation's role as sociotechnical powerholder in the making of humanitarian ideas. For example, in Currion's (2018) account of a networked humanitarianism he argues that new information and communication technologies would put beneficiaries more at the centre of the action and reshape more profoundly the relationship with them. However, both of my case studies suggest that while the technologies themselves may be 'value-neutral', it is the social process of how they are put into place which potentially constrains the agency of aid recipients. Put differently, because beneficiaries are an integral part of humanitarian technologies as

commodified products (which are also regulated, produced, sold and demanded by corporations), there is a risk that their role remains passive, even colonised, despite all claims on the part of the corporate sector to have overcome traditional humanitarian activities so heavily criticised and precisely for their paternalism. This supports what Scott-Smith (2016, 2240) calls the risk of “innovation without representation”, where new humanitarian technologies may fuel a disconnect between aid workers and people at need. This point will be crucial again when I discuss the implications of this study in Chapter 9.

#### “IN THE RUINS OF NEOLIBERALISM”: SHAPING RELEVANT MARKETS IN A FRAGMENTED SOCIETY

My discussion so far has shown that even when a technology has been resisted from within the humanitarian community, corporate visions nevertheless manifest into imaginaries. IKEA Foundation and MasterCard have both been successful in terms of how their corporate visions shape the meaning of humanitarian action; both humanitarian technologies have been approved, it seems, by an audience which is relevant to them. In the case of ‘Better Shelter’, IKEA Foundation failed to convince the humanitarian community, but still reached a wider non-humanitarian audience of existing and potential IKEA customers, important for IKEA’s success through its capacity to create a myth of IKEA products as universal solution to humanitarian suffering. In the case of MasterCard, humanitarian organisations, essential for MasterCard in seeding these new markets, approve MasterCard digital technologies through the company’s capacity to homogenise a humanitarian identity as profitable business model looking for financial inclusion of the poorest. This may be the reason why MasterCard’s visions did not, in contrast to the first case study, occur within a public narrative. With a focus on a new customer base in humanitarian settings, in order to expand the digital payment systems market, MasterCard’s narrative was addressing the humanitarian community, not a public. Put differently, both corporations have been successful in establishing imaginaries in the market relevant to them. But if both corporate actors have successfully established their visions, albeit in different social realms, what does that tell us about the relevant context in which a

particular mechanism of co-production can take effect and result in a collectively held imaginary?

I propose that we have to understand the emergence of a tech-hedonist imaginary and an imaginary of digital financial inclusion, in light of the critical assessment of the dynamic of co-production processes between technology and society. Specifically, I argue that my case studies mirror a broader phenomenon which may have emerged out of “In the ruins of neoliberalism”, to use the title of Brown’s book (2019). The capacity to shape relevant markets through the moral appeal of humanitarian technologies as commodities, underpinned by the narrative of freedom, led to a society which has become increasingly fractured and weakened due to a neoliberal doctrine. My case studies show a consequence, I suggest, where a neoliberal imaginary has paved the way for corporations to manifest their visions through humanitarian technologies in a fragmented society which is constructed as scattered ‘markets’.

One could argue that the prominence of neoliberal restructuring processes, enabled by a neoliberal imaginary in humanitarian action, confirms Schumpeter’s (1942) thoughts on ‘constructive deconstruction’ to explain how corporate power and capitalism evolve and persist through the constant invention of new markets, such as the humanitarian market. In Schumpeter’s (1942, 83) terms, constructive deconstruction refers to the “process of industrial mutation . . . that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new structure. This process of creative destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.” However, my case studies allow me to argue that the concept of co-production between society and technology tends to underestimate how a neoliberal imaginary has shaped ‘society’ over the last three decades – with a crucial impact on the ‘co’ in co-production.

Brown’s (2019) thoughts on neoliberalism are a useful point of departure to understand this impact. She elaborates how neoliberalism has altered the political imaginary of ‘society’, focusing on democracy to explain that ‘society’ can be seen as a normative democratic ideal, held together by a sense of togetherness and collective fate, which reminds us of Anderson’s (1983) imagined communities. Brown argues that



the idea of the *demos* – a Greek word which can be translated as ‘the people’ – has been systematically demonised by a neoliberal imaginary, with severe negative consequences on ‘the people’. Establishing the neoliberal’s credo of the marketisation of every aspect of human life in the name of individual freedom, society has become fragmented, weakened and shattered into individual entrepreneurs in pursuit of their own survival and responsible for their wellbeing and happiness. Medovoi (2019, para. 4) interprets the implications thus: “Tear down “society” in the name of individual freedom and you have quashed the capacity for people to imagine themselves as a collectivity [sic] deserving popular sovereignty.” Put differently, a neoliberal imaginary has weakened people’s sense of togetherness, as well as their capacity to work as *demos* to control power to limit or control a market.

While Brown uses her observations to explain political and socioeconomic consequences in Western democracies, I suggest that her thoughts are also fruitful in elaborating the success of corporate visions which latch on to humanitarian technologies. Co-production processes cannot be seen simply as an equal interplay between ‘society’ and ‘technology’, but must be recognised as an imbalanced process which favours technological powerholders. In the context of humanitarian action, where marketisation processes have reshaped the landscape into markets, these powerholders are corporate companies with the means and resources to develop such technologies, and able to impose their visions through new technologies on to those social fragments relevant to them – social fragments which are then reconstructed and imagined as markets.

The consequences of a fragmented society emerge in my case studies. There is the humanitarian community, swamped by decades-long restructuring processes of professionalisation, marketisation, commodification and individualisation, all in light of an emerging neoliberal imaginary, as Chapter 2 shows. The humanitarian community appears weakened by its absorption in a constant fight for legitimacy, faced by questions of efficiency and effectiveness and obliged to compete for organisational survival in the humanitarian market (Krause 2014). Among such “ruins of neoliberalism” (Brown 2019), it is possible to observe one implication of being such a weakened community, as both corporations impose their visions and ideas about

humanitarian aid, aided by their fluid and powerful roles as buyers and sellers of humanitarian technologies, as policymakers, and as private donors connecting the commercial and humanitarian realms.

In the case of the 'Better Shelter', for example, IKEA Foundation shapes a market for IKEA products by successfully imposing its visions of 'Better Shelter' and conceptions of humanitarian action, as seen through the customer's gaze and the co-option of a humanitarian debate about what shelter means, where humanitarian voices are mostly neglected or ignored. Moreover, IKEA Foundation is UNHCR's most important and biggest private financial donor, while simultaneously selling shelters to UNHCR. In the example of MasterCard's digital technologies, MasterCard has a vital interest in strengthening its position in the humanitarian market of payment services. The relevance of manifesting its market position can be understood when one recalls that market domination in the financial service market is not necessarily defined by price or quality but by non-competitive, contingent strategies, as outlined in Chapter 7. As such, market competition often leads to the dominance usually of one or two competitors. In the US and most European markets, for example, retail electronic payments have been effectively dominated by Visa and MasterCard; some consequences of a duopoly can be understood by checking the track record for anti-competitive behaviour. Mastercard has been confronted with numerous antitrust cases. For example, in 2019, US antitrust authorities investigated the accusation that Visa and MasterCard "separately, and together with certain banks, violated antitrust laws and caused merchants to pay excessive fees for accepting Visa and Mastercard credit and debit cards" (PYMNTS, November 19, 2019). Similarly, MasterCard was fined by the EU for restricting competition (Financial Times, January 22, 2019a). While these investigations happen in the relatively well-regulated markets of the US and EU economies, dos Santos and Kvangraven (2017) raise concerns about MasterCard's likely behaviour in the less-regulated markets of developing countries, alongside the similar question of their performance in humanitarian markets in fragile, weakened states.

## SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES AND PERCEPTION OF ‘GOOD’ AND ‘BAD’ HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES

This section addresses the research questions of to what extent and why some of corporate visions appear to become hegemonic sociotechnical imaginaries within the humanitarian community, and how these imaginaries shape humanitarians’ perceptions of new humanitarian technologies. I discuss how social cohesion with corporate visions is generated among humanitarians, and how hegemonic sociotechnical imaginaries provide social actors with what Taylor (2003) called that ‘sense of legitimacy’ to perceive what the ‘right’ humanitarian action is and what a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ humanitarian technology is, that is, why it is socially accepted, or not, by the humanitarian community.

### SOCIAL COHESION WITH CORPORATE VISIONS THROUGH SHARED IDENTITIES AND DISCOURSES

A finding from a comparison of the two case studies is that social cohesion with corporate visions can be explained by the interplay of two main mechanisms: making identities and making discourses. These mechanisms are crucial in the generation of a collectively held sociotechnical imaginary within the humanitarian community and affect the positive validation of humanitarian technologies.

In the case of MasterCard’s imaginary of ‘digital financial inclusion’, one of the key points is that humanitarian action should be a profitable, long-term business, engaging banking aid recipients and integrating them into the formal economy through CVA. Prevailing in this idea is the assumption that humanitarian crises can be solved by financial inclusion and by investing in digital payment infrastructures. This understanding is not just dominant in MasterCard’s narrative, but is also popular among influencing global actors such as World Bank and implementing partners with a multi-mandate which aim to connect humanitarian with development goals, as my analysis in Chapter 7 has shown. Indeed, this imaginary seemed successfully interpolated into the humanitarian community’s self-understanding, and promoted and manifested in the agenda-making, decision-making, implementing and evaluation levels of digital CVA. As such, MasterCard’s narrative has been demonstrated to be

successful in shaping identities about how to prioritise cash-based programmes as a means to stabilise local economic markets – relevant markets for MasterCard – and not just reduce immediate suffering. This can be seen as an homogenisation process of visions, and supports Smith’s (2009) research on the Rockefeller Foundation as non-state actor controlling the agenda for developing and implementing new technologies, as well as her emphasis that its involvement in rice research is much more than an agricultural modernisation project, but must be understood as a socio-political project “that extends particular modes of governance through homogenization and paternalism” (Smith 2009, 461). Such paternalism becomes visible, for example, when Nathan declared during the panel at the WEF in 2019 and sitting next to Peter Maurer, President of the ICRC (as described in Chapter 2, whose foundation dates back to 1863 and Henry Dunant, hence, with a long-standing history in humanitarianism and deeply rooted in humanitarian principles) that “We are all humanitarians” (MasterCard, as quoted in *The New Humanitarian*, January 28, 2019). In the same panel, Nathan also explains to the humanitarian community that it needs to create “tactical, legal, operational and commercial constructs” which offer incentives for businesses to engage in humanitarian action (MasterCard, as quoted in *The New Humanitarian*, January 28, 2019).

While being engaged in networks seemed to be an important part in building up cohesion from humanitarian actors, establishing a discourse which relates to a humanitarian debate was another crucial mechanism for the successful embedment of MasterCard’s vision of a ‘world beyond cash’ into a collectively held sociotechnical imaginary within the humanitarian community. This is parallel to what Sadowski and Bendor (2018) observed when talking about corporations strategically establishing sociotechnical imaginaries of the smart city to obtain corporate benefits, by creating a narrative which does not totally break with existing ideas. The authors (2018, 5) state that “The success of new sociotechnical imaginaries relies on their fit with existing cultural norms and moral values, social structures and material infrastructure, political institutions and economic systems, and hopes and aspirations.” Similar to the use by IBM and Cisco of a narrative of the smart city which is both conservative and progressive, depicting a near future that replicates and conserves existing

sociopolitical structures, MasterCard too creates a narrative about digital infrastructures and financial inclusion which is successfully embedded in the existing humanitarian discourse about CVA, while forging a bridge between humanitarian, development and commercial goals, as Chapter 7 shows.

As such, MasterCard managed, through identity shifting and embedding its visions into an existing discourse, to navigate its way in a complex dilemma of complying with – where they exist – state regulations on data collection and sharing, following its own commercial interests while respecting humanitarian calls to protect the vulnerable. This dilemma does not sound unfamiliar when we recall Smith’s study on Syngenta’s role as corporate originator of an imaginary of biotechnology and global governance of golden rice (2015). Syngenta’s decisions and negotiations over ownership and control of Golden Rice happen in light of a corporate’s dilemma “with regard to sharing information and technologies, ‘doing right’ conflicted with the potential harm of negative publicity” (2015, 272). Smith (2015) concludes that the relevant question appears to be not only what companies are responsible for, but who has the power to decide upon those responsibilities. The question of who should (and actually can) make such decisions around humanitarian technologies is a theme of the last chapter of this thesis.

In contrast to MasterCard’s narrative, that of IKEA Foundation did not manage to create a shared identity or discourse for the ‘Better Shelter’ from within the humanitarian community, but instead caused resentment. While the Foundation’s partnership with UNHCR, and the ‘Better Shelter’ itself, appear ‘high profile’ (in the sense that both the partnership and the product are highly visible and attractive in terms of IKEA’s branding and in light of its existing and potential customer base), the humanitarian community dismissed the latter for precisely these features. In fact, IKEA Foundation’s ‘Better Shelter’ narrative failed to connect with a humanitarian identity or ongoing discourse. Although the shelter met the technical specifications formulated by UNHCR, the Foundation co-opted the debate on shelter and turned it into an expansive, utopic discourse which did not account for the internal shifts and particularities about meaning and aspirations of humanitarian shelter. As Chapter 6 shows, the interpretation of what shelter means – a social process which ideally

integrates local populations and solutions and not a product that merely meets technical standards – has been an issue of controversy within the humanitarian community for some decades. In addition, a lack of dialogue and being out of touch with implementing humanitarian organisations in the field has resulted in a global-local divide, fuelling among aid workers resistance to and resentment against the shelter, which they perceived as a top-down, imposed and exclusive product.

#### VALIDATION OF TECHNOLOGIES IN LIGHT OF SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES

The previous findings show that if a corporation can successfully establish a sociotechnical imaginary within the humanitarian community through the mechanisms of making identities and discourses, then this does not only increase social cohesion with corporate visions, but also affects the humanitarian perception of what is perceived as good or bad technology.

In fact, my analysis suggests there to be several supporting criteria that enable a corporate technology to become perceived as ‘good’ from within the humanitarian community; these are listed in Table 6. Firstly, *inclusiveness* refers to communication between corporation and humanitarian partners beyond the decision- and policy-making levels, and integrating field-based practitioners at the implementation and street-levels into development-process is an important aspect to overcoming the global-local divide. The second criterion refers to *trust*, which is fuelled by a shared understanding of roles and views on aid recipients to confirm expectations about partnership and clarify goals of technology, as otherwise partnership and technology may be prone to resentment and resistance. The third criterion is *technology as a service*. Being designed as a service rather than a fix product enables a humanitarian technology to be adjustable and is perceived by humanitarians to meet local context and needs. A final criterion is a *partnership that goes beyond deployment*. Technical and service delivery support from corporations to humanitarian partners during the implementation period increases the improvement of and familiarity with technology, both preventing poorly designed technologies and building the confidence of humanitarians to be able to deal with a technology.

**TABLE 6: CRITERIA FOR POSITIVE VALIDATION OF HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Description</b>
Inclusiveness	Integrating field-based practitioners into development-process.
Trust	Shared understanding of roles and views to confirm expectations about partnership and clarify goals of technology.
Technology as Customised Service	Humanitarian technology designed as service to be adjustable to humanitarian contexts and needs.
Partnership beyond deployment	Technical and service delivery support beyond development stage and during implementation of technology.

However, the positive validation of a humanitarian technology, as might have become clear throughout this chapter, does not happen against a set of objective thresholds. Rather, the perception of to what extent these criteria are met occurs in light of the dominant sociotechnical imaginary at play, which provides orientation, a sense of legitimacy and guidance. It is therefore not surprising, when we recall the discussion in the previous subsection, that all these criteria can be traced back to the question of whether a sense of shared identity and a shared discourse between corporations and humanitarian organisations have been built. As such, it is important to point out again that these criteria do not represent neutral facts but must be understood in light of the questions of “how particular imaginaries become the best, most appropriate, or even inevitable—and how they become hegemonic while seeming apolitical or value-neutral”, as Smith (2009, 463) emphasises. These criteria may appear value-neutral; however, perceptions of trust and inclusiveness are precisely influenced by a shared sense of identity and a shared discourse – which are crucial mechanisms of co-production required to establish a sociotechnical imaginary within the humanitarian community. As the case of MasterCard shows, these mechanisms can be significantly influenced by a corporation’s narrative of progress. In this sense, the dominant sociotechnical imaginary influence whether these criteria are perceived to be fulfilled, and hence, whether a corporate technology is seen as good, wanted or needed.

## CONCLUSION: HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND CORPORATE TECHNOLOGIES – THE EROSION OF A TRADITIONAL IMAGINARY OF AID

The main research question of this thesis is how multi-national companies impact on the idea of humanitarian aid and how this affects a traditional imaginary of principled aid. What can be taken from both case studies is that there is an inherent ambiguity within the humanitarian community, as the perception of partnerships with corporate companies and the validation of new humanitarian technologies happens in the light of an eroding traditional imaginary.

The scholarly discussion on humanitarian principles and private-public partnerships circles mainly around the disadvantages humanitarians face in entering partnerships with corporate companies. As discussed in Chapter 2, Kent and Burke (2012, 17), among others, point out that humanitarian actors are prone to feeling a need to compromise on humanitarian principles, which grows out of the pressure to engage with corporate companies. Similarly, Hoxtell, Norz, and Teicke (2015, 14) state that humanitarian actors compromise on humanitarian principles as a result of difficult circumstances and the need to engage with corporations, while businesses ignore these principles in the drive to make higher profits. In fact, Binder and Witte (2007, 16) observe that corporate companies are often unaware of humanitarian principles. In line with Binder and Witte (2007), Hopgood (2005, 4) states that “profit-oriented companies are less concerned about humanitarian principles than [humanitarian organisations]”.

While these scholars provide important thoughts on the debate, I conclude from my cross-case discussion that we must recognise humanitarians’ own making of what humanitarian aid stands for, as there is yet another layer of complexity to this topic. Indeed, there exists an ambiguity within the humanitarian community itself about the idea of humanitarian action, resulting from a shift from a vanishing traditional imaginary of principles towards visions that manifest themselves as a new moral baseline in the aftermath of a neoliberal imaginary. This becomes visible when we look closer at the four criteria I identified as supportive for the positive validation of a



corporate technology, with humanitarian principles playing a minor role in such validation.

I have named four criteria through which MasterCard's technology has been so positively acclaimed within the humanitarian community, while IKEA Foundation's 'Better Shelter' has been resisted. Overall, they emphasise the importance of a shared identity and discourse. To restate the criteria, these are inclusive dialogue, trust, technology as service, and partnership beyond deployment, in the context of which it is striking that humanitarian principles play a minor role in the validation of a corporate technology by the humanitarian community: As Chapter 6 and 7 demonstrate, humanitarian principles were not explicitly expressed by IKEA Foundation nor MasterCard as drivers behind the development and use of 'Better Shelter' or MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards – but neither was this explicitly condemned by the humanitarian community.

To be clear, in the case of 'Better Shelter', humanitarians pointed out that the 'Better Shelter' project felt like a humanitarian experimentation, and they worried that a prefabricated shelter could do harm rather than help by neglecting local needs and solutions. Its lack of acceptance, however, seemed less rooted in an absence of clear commitment to humanitarian principles by IKEA Foundation. Rather, the reason can be found in IKEA Foundation's grand rhetoric and co-option of a humanitarian debate about shelter, which was perceived as inappropriate by many humanitarian organisations.

In the case of MasterCard's digital technologies, too, concerns were expressed when it came to the protection of personal beneficiary data in light of the humanitarian principle of 'Do No Harm', and doubt arose (mainly from single-mandated humanitarian organisations) as to whether a vision of financial inclusion should be seen as a humanitarian priority at all. Nevertheless, MasterCard's partnerships and digital technologies were overwhelmingly seen as important improvements in how CVA could be delivered. Moreover, MasterCard's openly expressed goal was accessing new markets through humanitarian settings. The humanitarian community welcomed MasterCard's technologies as they improved, in this narrative, the safety and feasibility

of CVA delivery, even to remote areas, thus allowing the humanitarian sector to move forward on a path towards stabilising local markets through digitalisation. The overall narrative was positive and welcoming to MasterCard as a trustworthy partner.

With this in mind, what is interesting is that there is indeed an awareness among humanitarians that humanitarian principles may be compromised through the use of new humanitarian technologies, which confirms the observations made by the aforementioned literature. However, the explicit acknowledgment of humanitarian principles in private-public partnerships, or throughout the design, development, testing and implementation phase of a humanitarian technology, appeared not to be a necessary condition for humanitarians to positively validate a new technology. Moreover, while the only principle raised was the one of DNH, other humanitarian principles, which lie at the core of a traditional imaginary of principled aid, have not been brought up at all. These include questions of whether partnerships between IKEA Foundation and UNHCR, and MasterCard and its various implementing partners and their activities may hurt neutrality, impartiality and independence because of the way and where they operate. Scholars like Andonova and Carbonnier (2014) and Carbonnier and Lightfoot (2016) have pointed out that the privilege of large business companies may hurt precisely these principles.

While the humanitarian community recognises that humanitarian principles could be at risk through the adoption of new corporate technologies, the case studies presented here suggest that this view does not tend to be key in forming perceptions about whether a corporate technology is seen as 'good', regardless of whether a company's vision turned into a sociotechnical imaginary within the humanitarian community or not. The indication here is that a traditional imaginary of humanitarian aid has already been eroding in light of neoliberal restructuring processes over two decades, resulting from an institutional isomorphism, a development I discussed in Chapter 2. To recall, isomorphism refers to the blurred boundaries between humanitarian organisations and private companies, while humanitarian organisations behave increasingly similar to their for-profit counterparts in terms of their interests and procedures, as various authors note. To restate some of these arguments, Cooley and Ron (2002, 13–14) find that humanitarian organisations copy "[corporations']

structures, interests and procedures.” Similarly, Fiori et al. (2016, 13) observe that neoliberal ideas have been absorbed by humanitarian organisations and shaped their culture, objectives and practices. Likewise, Vincent (2011, 897) states that the degree to which humanitarian organisations identify themselves through their humanitarian mission is in decline.

The case of MasterCard highlights that corporations can shape the humanitarian perception by establishing collectively held imaginaries through the mechanisms of making identities and making discourses, together accelerating the fading of a traditional imaginary of principled aid. Moreover, my findings clearly underpin more generally the wider relevance of sociotechnical imaginaries. These are powerful in enabling specific ways of seeing and perceiving the ‘right’ idea of humanitarian action, and creating apparently ‘neutral’ conceptions of what good humanitarian action looks like. Put differently, it is important to state that the humanitarian community has always been incorporating and embodying different imaginaries, and hence shaping the ‘imagined community’ of humanitarian action itself.

What do these findings tell us more generally about corporate companies in humanitarian action, and the interplay of businesses and humanitarian organisations? In the final chapter of this thesis, I conclude that in light of an eroding traditional imaginary of principled humanitarian action, we should reconsider how we investigate private-public partnerships, as they may impose new priorities and moral standards on to humanitarian action that bring up new questions for the accountability of corporate technologies in terms of practice and research.

# CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

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## INTRODUCTION

Against the background of the previous findings in Chapters 6 and 7, the cross-case synthesis in Chapter 8, and in concluding this study, the aim of this chapter is to consolidate this thesis. There are three more sections to follow. In the following section, I recapitulate the purpose and findings of my study in light of the research objectives and questions formulated in Chapter 1. I restate how the empirical research relates to the literature and what we can learn about corporations' capacity to establish sociotechnical imaginaries, namely, their powerful role in modifying conceptions of humanitarian action in a fragmented society through the commodification of humanitarian technologies and the narrative of freedom. What may appear to be value-free perceptions about what is right and wrong in humanitarian action is in fact influenced by the dominant sociotechnical imaginary at play, imprinted into the materiality of social life.

In the next section, I identify two main contributions which emerged from the analysis. Firstly, this study has methodological relevance. I showed that a critical realist research position can enhance our knowledge about the relationship between meaning-making and technologies through causal explanation rather than pure interpretation or positivist generalisation. Thanks to this, the real-life consequence of a vanishing traditional imaginary cannot merely be described but the mechanisms behind that process identified, which helps us not just to understand a timely topic in humanitarian aid, but to refine the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries. Specifically, this means to acknowledge more thoroughly the aspect of power imbalances present in the study of technology and society. Secondly, the findings have conceptual relevance. To understand the complex, multiple roles of companies within humanitarian aid, and perceptions on the part of humanitarian organisations regarding partnerships with corporate companies and new humanitarian technologies, in light of the fading relevance of humanitarian principles, I suggest a move beyond the current

types of private-public partnership. These are unable to fully grasp the complexity and consequences of business engagement in humanitarian aid. Instead, I suggest working with the term of 'hybrid organisations' in order to investigate how they build their own identity and operational priorities. This offers a fresh angle by which to examine the emergence of new 'organisms' in a changing landscape of humanitarian action, and a more systematic way to understand changing principles.

I end with the implications of my thesis for further research. One area for potential research lies in more empirical applications of the concept of hybrid organisations, to better understand how corporate technologies are developed and embedded within humanitarian action amid sociotechnical power imbalances. Finally, I see my thesis as an urgent reminder that the process of humanitarian technologies is a social one, which opens up timely questions about power and the accountability of humanitarian technologies which could be further investigated.

## RECAPITULATION OF PURPOSE AND FINDINGS

This thesis investigated the social process of meaning-making behind humanitarian technologies to better understand how multi-national companies impact on the idea of humanitarian action, and how their technology affects a traditional imaginary of principled aid. The idea of humanitarian action and what it stands for are not set in stone – neither are which actors and practices are favourable over others in the delivering of aid. The literature reviewed widely described, observed, evaluated and judged the pressure on the humanitarian community to reinvent, reimagine, reformulate and reform itself and humanitarian aspirations (Chapter 2). It became apparent that a traditional meaning of humanitarian action, including its actors, have undergone a fundamental legitimacy crisis in the light of a restructuring process of the wider society since the 1990s. A traditional imaginary of compassionate, altruistic aid to relieve suffering has been increasingly seen as outdated and paternalistic, and overall depicted as a utopic ideal. Instead, a significant transformation in favour of a neoliberal imaginary occurred, and visions of marketisation and professionalisation of humanitarian action to improve efficiency and effectiveness gained popularity. New interpretations of what is ‘good’ humanitarian action and who is seen as a legitimate actor in the provision of humanitarian action, emerged; corporate companies have become welcomed partners and while they provide expertise, skills, and other recourses such as personnel and financial support, the development of humanitarian technologies is an especially crucial aspect of their engagement.

The literature provides a wide range of definitions and criteria regarding private-public-partnerships in humanitarian action, while simultaneously stipulating three types of partnerships: philanthropic giving, non-commercial implementing partnerships, and commercial implementing partnerships. However, it does not offer an explanation as to how corporations engage through technologies that may transform the meaning of private-public partnerships themselves. While business in humanitarian action is a prominent field of research, this thesis has identified that studies remain limited on the performative aspects of private-public partnerships, or circle around normative questions about the ethics of for-profit companies in humanitarian aid. The question of what new ideas and aspirations will be introduced

and may become the guiding sense of legitimacy for what is perceived as 'right' in humanitarian action through corporate technologies has been left untouched. This, however, could have dramatic implications for principled humanitarian action.

As such, the objective of this thesis has been threefold. Firstly, it provides new insights into the phenomena of how meaning is infused and produced in humanitarian action through corporate visions. Secondly, it shed new lights on how corporate technologies, developed and provided by multi-national companies, carry visions which have the ability to change the idea of what humanitarian action stands for. Thirdly, I investigated what new sociotechnical imaginaries mean for a traditional imaginary of principled humanitarian aid in terms of partnerships and practices. Against these research aims, the argument of this thesis is that corporations are sociotechnical powerholders over humanitarian technologies, with their own visions and ideas about the future of humanitarian action and holding the capacity to alter or reinforce certain conceptions about the meaning of humanitarian action through their technologies. This thesis has therefore been guided by the question of *how do corporate companies impact on the idea of humanitarian action, and how does that effect a traditional imaginary of principled aid?*

Critical voices may ask why this thesis was concerned with ideas rather than 'facts', with visions rather than 'outputs', and what such fantasises could tell us about the state of humanitarian action. At its core lies the belief – based in the ontology and epistemology of critical realism – that a world exists independent of our thoughts, and that ideas are not mere mental constructs but built into the materiality of the social world, becoming themselves objective facts, which enable or constrain experiences and interpretations. Such a manifestation and embodiment of visions can be approached through the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries, which has provided the theoretical underpinning for my analytical framework (Chapters 3 and 4). The main assumption behind this concept is that when individual ideas and visions become collectively held imaginaries, they provide that guiding sense of legitimacy enabling a judgement about what and who is 'right' or 'wrong'. Such a manifestation of vision is driven by the co-production process of society and technology; society cannot exist and evolve without technology, and technology develops through social ideas and

visionary aspirations. My analysis followed three mechanisms of co-production: making identities, making discourses, and making representations. A comparative qualitative research design was applied to answer the research questions (Chapter 5). I used the 'method of difference for critical realism' to select two humanitarian technologies developed by corporate actors, namely, IKEA Foundation's 'Better Shelter' and MasterCard's Aid Network and prepaid cards. Applying a thematic narrative analysis to oral and written documents, collected through the method of snowball sampling, I was looking for main themes, and shared visions and ideas.

I presented the results according to the main themes that emerged during my analysis and discussed the research findings by following the three mechanisms of co-production to contrast corporate visions with other key narratives. In doing so, I was able to demonstrate why and to what extent corporate visions turn into collectively shared imaginaries and modify certain conceptions about humanitarian action. The first case study on the 'Better Shelter' (Chapter 6) showed that IKEA Foundation's narrative about its mass-produced shelter product was resisted by the humanitarian community and criticised for a lack of sensitivity and knowledge in regard to the sector's attempts to move away from seeing 'shelter as a product' towards 'shelter as a process'. IKEA Foundation failed to establish a shared identity; indeed, the humanitarian community perceived its partnership with UNHCR and the shelter it produced as an intrusive, top-down engineered solution which did not take local realities of shelter into consideration. Nevertheless, IKEA Foundation's narrative became a successful imaginary of tech-hedonism in the media and among the wider public. Its confident discourse about the creative force of IKEA designers to revolutionise the humanitarian sector has been widely and overwhelmingly positive acclaimed by the public and led to the winning of prizes for the design of the shelter. By establishing an imaginary of tech-hedonism, the shelter itself became a metaphor for people's hope and optimism in a Western mass-produced technology ability to obtain 'control' of humanitarian 'problems'.

The second case study on MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards (Chapter 7) demonstrated how MasterCard's narrative of digital infrastructure for a 'world beyond cash' successfully embedded within those actors on a global and local level of the



humanitarian community in favour to bridge humanitarian and development objectives. It established an imaginary of digital financial inclusion promoting private-public partnerships as a business model by which to stabilise local markets, with the long-term effect of banking unbanked people in need. This presents a vision of humanitarian action which stands in contrast to a traditional understanding of altruistic, principled and immediate aid, focused on saving lives. This imaginary emerged from a shared identity built on MasterCard's multiple alliances and partnerships at various levels of CVA decision-making and implementation. It also built on a discourse about progress through digitalisation which was successfully embedded into an existing, enthusiastic debate about CVA within the humanitarian community.

To shape and penetrate markets relevant to their core business characterises the capacity of both IKEA Foundation and MasterCard to make their visions into collectively held imaginaries (Chapter 8). These were identified as a tech-hedonist imaginary in a market familiar to both the existing and potential IKEA customer, and an imaginary of digital financial inclusion in digital payment service markets of humanitarian settings. This capacity was enabled by a neoliberal imaginary, which reduced society as a fragmented and weakened construct of markets, and the simultaneously emotionally appealing connotations that the commodification of humanitarian technologies inhabits. This becomes especially visible in the way aid recipients are viewed and framed by a narrative of freedom that lies at the core of humanitarian technologies as commodities, a narrative characterised by an egalitarian spirit of mass-consumption. Both imaginaries are based on the powerful conception of freedom that comes through such consumption: freedom can be achieved through the possession of (the right) commodities, and this freedom brings empowerment and dignity. In the case of IKEA Foundation's 'Better Shelter', a flat-packed product, of the type so well known (and loved) by many in the West, should restore dignity to people who have lost their home, while holding a MasterCard prepaid card in one's hand is expected to bring people at need the dignity to buy and choose what they really want.

This thesis has discovered that corporations hold a powerful position indeed, able to generate dominant sociotechnical imaginaries through their technologies. This thesis also confirms observations that a traditional imaginary of principled aid has already

been eroding within the humanitarian community in the aftermath of neoliberal visions. This process can be accelerated by a corporation's ability to create a shared identity with humanitarian organisations and a discourse with them, thus establishing its visions as hegemonic imaginary, as the case of MasterCard demonstrates. In that sense, what may appear to be objective perceptions about right and wrong in humanitarian action, and a neutral validation of humanitarian technology, are in fact influenced by the dominant sociotechnical imaginary at play, imprinted into the imagined community of humanitarian aid which work as a stable and stabilising sense of legitimacy by which judgement is built.

## KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis has provided a deeper insight into how the meaning of humanitarian action is competed, influenced and modified by two multi-national companies, and offers two main contributions to the existing debate on the role of technologies in humanitarian action:

### A CRITICAL REALIST STANCE TO REVISE THE CONCEPT OF SOCIOTECHNICAL IMAGINARIES

This thesis has methodological relevance. By holding a critical realist position towards the research subject, this thesis moved the theoretical discussion on sociotechnical imaginaries forward. Chapter 5 criticised applications of the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries for being mainly interpretative. This thesis provides empirical evidence which moved from mere interpretation to explanation, as the analysis about the development and embedding of imaginaries is based on causal mechanisms and identifying demi-regularities. An important result from extracting the mechanisms through which certain corporate visions become collectively held imaginaries, is the laying bare of the tendency towards over-simplification of the assumptions behind the co-production processes of society and technology. Of course, and as discussed in detail in Chapter 8, my findings support the observations made by previous scholars (Sadowski and Bendor 2018; Smith 2009, 2015; Williamson 2018) on how corporations feed into the life-cycles of sociotechnical imaginaries: as places of origin, corporations are important holders of visionary ideas about the future of humanitarian action.

Through their technologies, they further embed visions into collectively held imaginaries, but become also resisted. My findings also agree with this literature in showing that parallel imaginaries exist, as in the example of IKEA Foundation's tech-hedonist imaginary that stands in sharp contrast to the ideas of the humanitarian shelter community.

However, the power of corporations in terms of the establishment of sociotechnical imaginaries usually appears implied, as a consequence of co-production processes rather than cause. A critical realist analysis stands out from the aforementioned studies precisely because it treats corporations as entities with powers that might be activated in specific conditions and combinations of mechanisms. In fact, one weakness with the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries is that it neglects the aspect of power, and tends to be vague about the underlying unequal distribution of power within the relationship between technology and the social order.

The theoretical founder of the concept, Jasanoff (2015b, 321), emphasises that knowledge, materiality and power lies at the centre of interpretation, better explaining why "societies follow the paths they do and why some formations endure while others weaken and wither." Hilgartner, Miller and Hagendijk (2015, 5) also pointed out that the process through which technologies are developed and fitted into the wider world is a social process, as are the practices that shape technological change and impact on how society is organised. And yet, based on the thoughts which emerged from Chapter 8, the question of how power can be thoroughly integrated into the analysis of such a co-production process is not solved (and is perhaps even hindered) but is seen as simple, single process of technology and social order, as suggested by Jasanoff (2014). What my analysis in the field of humanitarian action showed is that there is an imbalance in favour of corporations, precisely as a result of a hegemonic neo-liberal imaginary, and impacts on the nature of the co-production process itself. Corporate power tends to take multiple routes within co-production: corporations can either provide or hold back resources, set the conditions under which and what technology is developed, as well as greatly influencing a scattered society, by shaping which technology is perceived as favourable for development.

This becomes visible when one looks at the many roles of IKEA Foundation and MasterCard in the market of humanitarian technologies, where they can be described as a buyer and seller of technologies and hold a crucial power in the making of markets according to their corporate priorities, that shift the view on humanitarian aid. What this shows is that there is an inherent risk in the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries to being blind to the complexity of power. The analysis of this thesis offers a point of departure by which to develop the understanding of co-production further, which, in my opinion, starts by choosing a research position favouring contextual causal explanations of a real existing world over mere interpretation or positivist generalisations.

#### FROM PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIPS TOWARDS HYBRID ORGANISATIONS

How do the previous findings inform existing concepts of businesses in humanitarian action? A key outcome of retroduction is the modification, support or rejection of existing concepts about the world, to provide the most accurate explanation of reality. This thesis contributes a new understanding about how corporate visions become hegemonic through corporate technologies, with which we can modify existing literature on private-public partnerships in humanitarian action.

#### ‘PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIPS’: A LIMITED AND INCONSISTENT CONCEPT

This thesis has uncovered a major drawback with the literature examining the work of businesses in humanitarian action. It lacks conceptual strength in the sense that it usually applies itself to mere description or is used as an evaluative tool to measure performance aspects. In fact, the contributions are characterised by an inconsistency or even disagreement in definitions of how to best grasp to this increasingly important phenomenon of private-public partnerships in the humanitarian sector.

To recap, there is no single used term. Terms such as ‘business-humanitarian partnership’ as a subtype of ‘private-public partnership’ (e.g. Andonova and Carbonnier 2014) or ‘public-private partnership’ (e.g. Hoxtell, Norz, and Teicke 2015) are in use to refer to business in humanitarian action. Moreover, the level of detail in definitions used describe the phenomenon varies greatly, as I have shown. On the one hand, for example, Zyck and Kent (2014) use, for example, a broad definition which

refers to any form of business engagement in relief activities. On the other, Hoxtell, Norz and Teicke (2015) apply two definitions to business engagement in humanitarian response, differentiating between commercial and non-commercial engagement. The former refers to businesses contracted or subcontracted directly by a donor or a humanitarian organisation to implement humanitarian services; the latter refers to voluntary and collaborative partnerships where businesses help implement humanitarian activities or design new products but exclude philanthropy.

In addition to inconsistent labelling and definitions, only three types of partnerships are either implicitly or explicitly covered by the literature, summarised as philanthropic, non-commercial implementing, and commercial implementing partnerships. However, these are based on partly contradicting criteria, which presents scholars of businesses in humanitarian action with a vast and rather confusing number of categories and characteristics, some of which oppose each other. A more detailed discussion and summarising table can be found in Chapter 2, but to restate here, the most common differentiation is made between commercial and non-commercial business engagement, while non-commercial engagement is usually used as a synonym for philanthropy (e.g. Nurmala, de Leeuw, and Dullaert 2017). However, others, such as Hoxtell, Norz and Teicke (2015) explicitly exclude corporate philanthropy from non-commercial engagement, as businesses do not involve themselves in implementing activities. Another common variable for differentiation is the form of business contribution: some scholars differentiate in a rather simplistic way between financial support and in-kind donations (Kent and Burke 2012); other focus on cash, goods and services (e.g. Nurmala, de Leeuw, and Dullaert 2017), while other distinguish between resource mobilisation, operational collaboration and joint advocacy (e.g. Andonova and Carbonnier 2014), or use a more nuanced list of non-commercial partnerships, including resource mobilisation partnerships, implementation partnerships, advocacy partnerships, system coordination initiatives, and innovation partnerships (e.g. Hoxtell, Norz, and Teicke 2015). Furthermore, categories are built dependent on the number of actors involved, an engagement's duration, or the stage of disaster/crisis at which a business gets involved (Andonova

and Carbonnier 2014; for example: Binder and Witte 2007; Nurmala, de Leeuw, and Dullaert 2017).

The existing literature considers various forms of business engagement, such as cash donations, resource mobilisation; however, the importance of technologies as the defining and driving force of partnerships rather than simply a result of them is not sufficiently acknowledged. The literature review showed only one contribution explicitly accepting the role of businesses in developing technologies as own form of business engagement; Hoxtell, Norz, and Teicke (2015) acknowledge corporate technologies by creating their own category of 'innovative partnerships', where technologies result. In fact, the authors (2015) use MasterCard's prepaid cards and IKEA Foundation's development of durable tents for refugee camps as illustrative examples of innovation partnerships, stating that "Drawing on the knowledge and expertise of involved partners, these partnerships develop and implement technologies and instruments that can either help to address a specific problem or improve work processes within relief organizations" (Hoxtell, Norz, and Teicke 2015, 28). To be clear, and as discussed in the literature gap, the importance of business expertise, innovations or technologies is often implicitly or explicitly recognised. In particular, I discussed Kent and Burke's (2012) reference to the importance of specific technical skills and capacities to contribute to humanitarian action, as well as Cabonnier and Lightfoot's (2014) observation of the emerging role of business innovations in all stages of humanitarian programmes.

However, there is to date no type of partnership used in the literature which would account for the complexity of the role of businesses in the development of humanitarian technologies, as both case studies have revealed. IKEA Foundation's and MasterCard's involvement may at first look like what Hoxtell, Norz and Teicke (2015) describe an 'innovative partnership', and yet the analysis showed that this does not fully describe their commercial interest in the technologies. In case of MasterCard, the business does not just provide technical advice or expertise, nor do the technologies emerge out of a partnership. Instead, MasterCard's digital technologies lies at the core of how it does business, and, recalling a statement by Nathan, humanitarian engagement is always about 'leveraging skills'. Hence, these technologies constitute

evolving and customised digital services enabling CVA and are not an end product of a partnership. As such, MasterCard's Aid Network and prepaid cards are drivers behind partnerships established to make profit. In a similar way, IKEA Foundation has, as shown earlier, not just provided skills for the development of 'Better Shelter' but, as became clear in one of Heggenes' statements, there is still a certain commercial interest (mainly in their home furniture market) to make the shelter sufficiently profitable to "keep the business going" (IKEA Foundation, as quoted in Dezeen, October 24, 2016).

Despite their interest in the commercial success of corporate technologies, it falls also short of describing the engagement of MasterCard and IKEA Foundation as 'commercial' in the commonly used sense suggested by the literature (for example, Johnson 2009; Nurmala, de Leeuw, and Dullaert 2017). Kent and Burke (2012, 19) specify this category as "direct commercial engagement within the sphere of humanitarian response, crisis prevention or reconstruction (as contractors or otherwise)." Neither IKEA Foundation nor MasterCard, however, seem directly contracted or sub-contracted to implement programmes in this sense (for example, as a company contracted to remove debris). In addition, Kent and Burke (2012) suggest a category which they describe as direct commercial engagement outside the sphere of humanitarian response, crisis prevention or reconstruction, where for-profit business ventures into crisis-affected or politically unstable contexts. However, while MasterCard has clearly expressed a long-term goal of staying in post-crisis markets, the company is simultaneously engaged in refugee camps and operates within the humanitarian sphere through partnerships. Put differently, neither the partnership resulting in the 'Better Shelter' nor the networked partnerships behind MasterCard's Aid Network and prepaid cards can be categorised by using either type of partnership in a satisfying way without overly simplifying them.

In addition to these conceptual tensions, the evidence presented throughout this thesis attempts to reflect upon what we can learn from the case study analysis in light of new interpretations of the meaning of business engagement in humanitarian action which attends the new sociotechnical imaginaries, and of the multiple roles of business in developing corporate technologies as commodities. Chapter 8's conclusion

identified an inherent ambiguity within the humanitarian community concerning the perception of partnerships with corporate companies and the validation of new humanitarian technologies developed by businesses. In both case studies, the real-life consequence of a vanishing traditional imaginary can be observed in a paradox regarding the relevance of humanitarian principles. Although the potential harm caused by corporate technologies is discussed, humanitarian principles played only a minor role as moral fundament in their rejection or acceptance. As such, the current definitions and categories used in the literature cannot fully grasp the complex interplay between corporations and humanitarian organisations which occur through the development of technologies. At this point, I suggest we step away from the term 'private-public partnership' and use instead the concept of hybrid organisations.

#### HYBRID ORGANISATIONS: LIBERATING A TERM FROM POSITIVIST STUDIES

'Hybridity' is a popular and well-used term among scholars of private-public partnerships, where the term hybrid organisation is commonly used to define organisations which combine multiple, different institutional logics (Battilana and Dorado 2010). Through the lens of this concept, 'hybrid organisations' can be found in the fields of scientific and technological innovation, poverty alleviation, public health, education and environmental sustainability, among others. Examples are mission-driven businesses, social enterprises, cross-sectoral collaborations and public-private partnerships of various kinds (Jay 2013). Within this debate, institutional logics are described as "taken-for-granted social prescriptions that represent shared understandings of what constitutes legitimate goals and how they may be pursued" (Battilana and Dorado 2010, 1420). Hybrid organisations are by nature arenas of contradiction, as their institutional logics are often very distinctive and conflicting (Pache and Santos 2013). As a matter of fact, hybrid organisations need to find ways to address the dilemmas within they operate caused by the multiple external and internal demands to which they are exposed. For example, social enterprises are caught between a market logic and social welfare logic; a microfinance organisation faces logics of markets and charity; a biotechnology firm is confronted by a market and academic science logic. The literature on hybrid organisations is predominantly concerned about how hybrid organisations cope with the scripts for action and



schemata provided by the multiple institutional logics at play. The question in such studies is 'who wins' among competing logics or suggests the establishment of a hybrid culture that enables a more dynamic and innovative balance between logics (Battilana and Dorado 2010).

However, such use of the concept of hybrid organisation and idea of 'institutional logics' in just that sense creates unease in me as a critical realist. The focus of this discussion on private-public partnerships is closely connected with the term 'governance', generally understood as "institutionalised modes of social coordination and negotiation between actors" (Benz and Dose 2010, 21) or, similarly, as "the modes of social coordination by which actors engage in rulemaking and implementation and in the provision of collective goods" (Börzel and Risse 2010, 114). These definitions refer to the significantly dominant narrative of positivist studies, which entails a combination of neo-institutionalism and the rational choice theory of governance. Specifically, this academic debate attributes governance to formal and informal structures and processes, whereas interdependent state and non-state actors (such as firms, interest groups, non-governmental organisations) compete and negotiate as autonomous, well-informed and rational actors in new governance arrangements such as quasi-markets, partnerships and networks. These arrangements appear "as a complex set of institutions and institutional linkages that are defined by their social role or function" (Bevir 2013, 24). However, as the methodology chapter discusses at length, critical realism rejects positivism because of its defining feature of law-like generalisations in material or social settings that provide the basis for both explanation and prediction. Furthermore, institutions are however, as I have elaborated in Chapter 3 on the theoretical fundament of this thesis, manifested expressions of sociotechnical imaginaries that underpin what is approved and valued as right or wrong. Using 'institutional logic' in such rigid way does not therefore help to understand how meaning is actually created.

Yet, I suggest using the idea of the hybrid organisation as conceptual starting point by which to understand the phenomena of private-public partnerships in humanitarian action. Indeed, my critical realist investigation has shown there is no law to explain how corporate narratives use technologies to establish their visions in shared

imaginaries, but discovered the ‘tendency’ that a dominant imaginaries within the humanitarian community is a result of whether a shared identity and discourse have been created. It seems plausible to ask what impact sociotechnical imaginaries have on the very character of private-public partnerships. In fact, if we use the term hybrid in the most basic sense (as in its field of origin, namely, biological evolution), it is “the offspring resulting from combining the qualitative of two organisms of different breeds, varieties, or species.” The implication is that we are indeed dealing with a sort of new ‘organism’ and should investigate more closely how hybrid organisations operate in the field of humanitarian action.

#### INVESTIGATING HYBRID ORGANISATIONS IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION: SHIFTING PRIORITIES AND NEW ROLES

I suggest using the term ‘hybrid organisation’ to grasp precisely the contextuality of how private-public partnerships transform and operate within humanitarian action. What, however, are the dimensions which allow us to investigate the extent to which ‘private’ or ‘public’ aspirations and ideals merge to become hybrid, and how would such a new ‘organism’ in humanitarian action look? Based on my findings, I suggest here two dimensions which appear useful to the investigation, based on my findings on how sociotechnical imaginaries establish in the humanitarian community:

1. Identity: dominant ideas about purpose of hybrid organisation and meaning of its members
2. Discourse: dominant operational priorities within a hybrid organisation

In regard to the first dimension, meaning-making emphasises that we should ask about the dominant goals and its members which characterise the hybrid organisation’s identity. Sociotechnical imaginaries do not only shape what humanitarian action stands for, as discussed earlier; they can also lead to a changing understanding of a hybrid organisation’s goals. With IKEA Foundation, the partnership with UNHCR seems to be driven by an attempt to increase external legitimacy within its customer base outside of the humanitarian community (and with success, as the praise levied on the product by public exponents such as the media and awarding bodies shows). Nevertheless, IKEA Foundation’s understanding of partnerships goes beyond simple

CSR. The connotation of operating in a humanitarian market becomes apparent with the Foundation's reference to humanitarian organisations as 'companies' and 'customers' of the 'Better Shelter' product. However, the humanitarian community is clearly far from perceiving such partnership with IKEA Foundation as hybrid. It depicts the partnership between IKEA Foundation and UNHCR as a top-down, engineered intervention. However, the case of MasterCard is different. MasterCard is not only embedded in a network of alliances, platforms and forums with other global influencing agenda-setting and decision-making actors (such as CaLP, Cash Alliance, WEF), but also engages directly with various humanitarian organisations through private-public partnerships formulated as business models. MasterCard declares every actor in humanitarian aid to be 'humanitarian' and partnerships to serve a profit-seeking purpose. At the same time, my data has produced little evidence that such understanding of partnership would be criticised per se by the humanitarian community; rather, the opposite has been shown to be true.

Hence, while the two case studies demonstrate that both corporate actors blur the goals and purpose of private-public partnerships in their narratives, as well as the meaning of being a corporate and humanitarian actor, there is an approval of MasterCard's understanding. The reasons for this differing perception have been explored in previous sections but can be brought down to IKEA Foundation's failure to establish cohesion among humanitarians, through the lack of an inclusive dialogue, the existence of mistrust, and the very nature of the technology as prefabricated product. The case of the MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards, however, indeed shows an emergence of hybrids: private-public partnerships are business models with the aim of meeting commercial, humanitarian and development goals. Put differently, what this case study shows is, in the case of MasterCard's Aid Network and prepaid cards, a successful reinterpretation of goals and members.

The second dimension asks what operational standards and priorities dominate hybrid organisations. In my case studies, as discussed above, there is no evidence that would suggest that the conceptions of humanitarian principles dominate the development of 'Better Shelter' nor MasterCard Aid Network and prepaid cards as operational priorities. IKEA Foundation, for example, although emphasising the revolutionising

character of its product for many people in need of shelter, roots its technology in IKEA's democratic principles and not humanitarian principles. Similarly, for MasterCard, despite declaring its role as a humanitarian actor; humanitarian principles do not play any significant role in developing the technologies. The lack of humanitarian awareness on the part of both corporations has not left unnoticed, as my studies have shown. Both have been criticised for their lack of awareness in humanitarian contexts and the risk they encounter of violating the humanitarian credo of 'Do No Harm'. For example, with its 'Better Shelter' product, IKEA Foundation has been described as being too far away from the 'real' problems that humanitarian organisations face, neglecting the internal sector debate about sheltering, and the importance of local contexts to respond to people's needs. In the case of MasterCard too, as highlighted by one interview partner, the corporation has been criticised for prioritising its brand reputation over humanitarian priorities. And yet what my findings show is that the acknowledgement of humanitarian principles in partnerships and in the development and implementation of technologies seem not necessary condition for humanitarians to reject or accept a humanitarian technology.

To sum up, this study has freed the concept of hybrid organisations from the dominant use of positivist studies and used it as a starting point from which to look at the very character of private-public partnerships in humanitarian action. An examination of hybridity is not only a fruitful way to move forward from mainly descriptive types of private-public partnerships towards a more engaged study about the changing landscape of the imagined community of humanitarian action. It also offers a way out from the literature that circles around the importance of humanitarian technologies without referring to their origins to find causal impacts. As outlined in the research gap in Chapter 2, despite the excellent work that has been done in an attempt to grasp the dramatic transformation within humanitarian action through technologies, these origins remain vague or speculative. Currion (2018), for example, foresees a networked humanitarianism based on new information and communication technologies without asking where they come from; other scholars remain similarly unprecise in questioning the location of the gatekeepers of technologies (e.g. Kent and Burke 2012). This research contributes to a timely discussion by merging two field of research and

offering a new Science and Technology Studies angle on private-public partnerships in humanitarian action, to show that corporations play a powerful role in changing what humanitarian action stands for through their visionary technologies and technological visions.

## IMPLICATIONS: POWER AND ACCOUNTABILITY(IES) BEHIND HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES

This thesis inspires numerous questions that I believe are relevant for further research in humanitarian studies and which would have a direct impact on the humanitarian community.

One avenue for further study would be research into hybrid organisations and their production of humanitarian technology. This thesis has shown that conceptualising private-public partnerships as hybrid organisations is a promising way to understand the changing landscape of humanitarian action by acknowledging that new entities – hybrids – can emerge, characterised by new sets of aspirations, goals and operational standards. More empirical evidence is needed however, to deepen the understanding about the evolving character of hybrids, and how they influence the development patterns of humanitarian technologies. For example, important questions address why the development of certain humanitarian technologies is seen as favourable over others, and how hybrids manage prioritisation processes? On a more abstract level, this would lead to another possible area for further investigation, which includes more conceptual work on the dynamic between technology and social order. A more in-depth elaboration is needed of how to incorporate the aspect of power and overcome the assumption that co-production is a single process; otherwise, the concept carries a risk of tautological description. Such conceptual development would benefit from more applications rooted in critical realism. This research philosophy is a promising way for further case studies to be designed to understand variations in how power is carried out in multiple ways throughout the co-production processes. This would add significant new knowledge to an important debate in times of rapid digital technological progress.

Another aspect for further research – arguably the timeliest and most pressing one – which emerges from my engagement with literature on private-public partnerships in humanitarian action, is that the debate has yet to evolve towards an understanding of humanitarian technologies in light of accountability. It became apparent throughout this thesis that there exist different and competing accountability claims in regard to corporate technologies – towards customers, partners in private-public partnerships, at-need populations, and donors. However, it is neither clear nor transparent how accountability mechanisms work when it comes to new humanitarian technologies. To restate an example from Chapter 6, in the case of ‘Better Shelter’, media reports revealed that the shelter needed to be redesigned after safety-risk concerns were brought up by the Zürich authorities, a potential buyer of the product. In addition, the media uncovered that design flaws during the testing phase in the field were not properly reported to UNHCR by humanitarians who feared a loss of funding. This raises questions about what mechanisms exist to uncover errors in the first place. Yet another example can be taken from Chapter 7, where agreements about the use and sharing of beneficiaries’ data between MasterCard and its partners remain unclear, raising questions of how responsibilities are distributed within hybrid organisations more generally, and towards whom they tend to be most accountable.

These examples indicate that private-public partnerships must be discussed, beyond the question of whether they are compatible with principles such as ‘Do No Harm’. This thesis contributes to the debate about humanitarian principles in the sense of whether and to what extent the importance of principles vanishes through hybrid organisations, while simultaneously, new priorities and aspirations for humanitarian action emerge. This is a useful starting point to further unravel the social process in which meaning about corporate technologies is created. A crucial point is who can be held accountable in case aid recipients come to harm throughout the development, testing and implementing process of new humanitarian technologies. Diverse scholars emphasised over the last decade that humanitarian technologies do not deliver inherently more accountable humanitarian aid to people in need, criticising that this is often implicitly assumed (e.g. Jacobsen 2015; Sandvik et al. 2014; Scott-Smith 2016). However, while accountability and humanitarian technology are often discussed in

terms of how technologies can be used as accountability tools for reporting better feedback, the focus needs to be more on how humanitarian technologies themselves can be accountable to people in need. In connection with partnerships between humanitarian organisations with corporate companies, the relevant questions seem to be: who can be made accountable for a 'failed' technology? Who can be made accountable for errors in a pilot testing phase? And whose accountability claims in hybrid organisations, which as we have seen may compete or even conflict in light of traditional humanitarian principles, are considered the most important?

My research is a reminder that the development and implementation process of humanitarian technologies is per se a social one. The emergence and dominance of new imaginaries in light of a commodification of technologies set new expectations for humanitarian action and open up timely questions of how accountability of technologies is negotiated. These seem pressing areas for further research, and questions which need to be addressed if the humanitarian community wants to put aid recipients at the centre of the action.

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## INTERVIEW

Interviewee 1 (December 20, 2019). Humanitarian Practitioner, via Skype.