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From humanitarian diplomacy to advocacy: a research agenda

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Introduction

Humanitarianism has historically emerged from advocacy campaigns for the protection of civilians in conflict (Dromi, 2020) and the abolition of slavery, amongst others. In recent decades, attention has shifted to what is now commonly referred to as humanitarian diplomacy, defined as ‘maximising support for operations and programs, and building the partnerships necessary if humanitarian objectives are to be achieved’ (Régnier, 2011). The work of humanitarian diplomacy has been described as

persuading decision-makers and opinion leaders to act at all times and in all circumstances in the interest of vulnerable people and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles. It encompasses activities carried out by humanitarian actors in order to obtain spaces from political and military authorities within which they can function with integrity. These activities include, for example, arranging for the presence of humanitarian organizations in a given country, negotiating access to civilian populations in need of assistance and protection, monitoring assistance programs, promoting respect for international law and norms, and engaging in advocacy at a variety of levels in support of humanitarian objectives. (De Lauri, 2020, p. 45, based on Minear and Smith, 2007)

Humanitarian diplomacy is grounded in international humanitarian law (IHL). It is the remit of humanitarian actors that claim space for their impartial, neutral and independent status to provide life-saving services and protection to people affected by crisis. Humanitarian diplomacy is increasingly under pressure (De Lauri, 2020). On the one hand, humanitarians today deal with many political players that are not signatories to IHL. These range from the Taliban and other authorities that are also conflict parties, are not recognized by or choose to stay outside of the international community of states, to new humanitarian donors like Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (Sezgin and Dijkzeul, 2015) that do not recognize humanitarianism as inde-

pendent from foreign policy. On the other hand, the traditional signatories of IHL are increasingly seen to be disrespectful of humanitarian space, that is, the space for humanitarians to access populations in need and operate according to their principles. The way in which the European Union, for example, has securitized migration and as a result deals with refugees that seek shelter in Europe is a case in point (Jaspars and Hilhorst, 2021). These pressures have led to calls to up the game of humanitarian diplomats, and recent years have seen several initiatives, for example by Harvard University, to better train humanitarians in IHL and the art of diplomacy.

While humanitarian diplomacy continues to evolve, this chapter wants to go back to the humanitarian tradition of advocacy in a broader perspective. It will argue that it will be increasingly important to develop a more diverse practice of humanitarian advocacy. Revisiting and revitalizing humanitarian advocacy is especially pertinent in view of three current changes in humanitarian action that can be summarized as a change towards resilience humanitarianism (Hilhorst, 2018). This comprises interwoven shifts that together de-centre classic humanitarian action: a broadening of service providers especially at national and local levels; more attention to the agency and roles of affected communities; and a focus on the nexus between humanitarian action, development and peacebuilding. It is also pertinent in view of changing practices in advocacy. First, there is a nascent practice of advocacy directed *at* humanitarian actors to influence their definition of who is eligible for aid and their course of action. Second, there has been an unfolding practice of humanitarian advocacy in relation to the solidarity crisis in relation to refugees and migrants in Europe. This comprises broader sets of actors, ranging from refugees, community-based initiatives, new groups of volunteer humanitarians and humanitarian actors; their advocacy is broader in scope with a focus on human rights more broadly (Brkovic et al., 2021; Jaspars and Hilhorst, 2021; Hilhorst, Hagan and Quinn, 2021).

To capture this broadening of advocacy beyond the sphere of humanitarian diplomacy, we define humanitarian advocacy as ‘the activities of affected communities and their advocates to articulate, advance, and protect their rights (i.e. entitlements to assistance and citizenship rights more broadly), needs, views, and interests’. This chapter argues that we need to shed new light on the idea of humanitarian advocacy in line with current trends in humanitarian action and advocacy, and proposes an agenda for research.

New directions in humanitarian action: resilience and localization

Humanitarian action has traditionally been associated with external interventions by international agencies into exceptional crises, guided by humanitarian principles. It was driven by the intention to save lives *for* people, rather than *with* people. Humanitarian agencies comprise the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), yet has usually been seen as a separate domain from, on the one hand, the political bodies of the UN and, on the other, civil society and social movements. There have, however, been significant changes in recent years in the discourses of humanitarian action that can be summarized as a profound shift to resilience humanitarianism. This becomes apparent in a number of interlocking trends in relation to affected populations, national and local service providers, and the scope and boundaries of aid.

Resilience of affected communities

After roughly 150 years of top-down, principled, internationally oriented humanitarian action, there is a competing paradigm (Hilhorst, 2018). The resilience paradigm rests on the notion that people, communities and societies (can) have the capacity to adapt to – or spring back from – tragic life events and disasters. Resilience programming began in the realm of disaster management, whereby the resilience of local communities and the importance of local response mechanisms (ranging from self-help groups to authority-driven action and civil society initiatives) became the core of the Hyogo Framework for Action in 2004. In the past few years, resilience humanitarianism has spilled over to conflict areas and refugees. New trends can usually be pinpointed to a hallmark crisis, in this case the Syria crisis, where 90 per cent of refugees in the region lived outside camps. Humanitarian actors at the beginning of the Syrian crisis operated strictly on the basis of offering their assistance to people in camps but had to quickly adapt their services to this situation. The refugee camp as an icon of aid is giving way to a notion that refugees are resilient in finding ways to survive.

A key tenet of the new way of thinking of resilience is that crisis response is much more effective and cost-efficient when it builds on people's capacity to respond, adapt and bounce back, known as 'the resilience dividend', a concept coined by the president of the Rockefeller Foundation (Rodin, 2014). It is found in all key international policies today, including the report of the United Nations General Secretary of the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) of

2016, the 2016 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), and – to a lesser extent – the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

Focus on the nexus between humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding

Whereas humanitarian action was designed on the premise of a strict separation between crisis and normality (hence the *status aparte* of humanitarian actors), resilience humanitarianism builds on continuity between crisis and normality. UN reports now often refer to ‘crisis as the new normality’, for example, in reference to areas where climate change and other factors have resulted in semi-permanent crises. This profoundly changes the core of how humanitarian aid is conceptualized. Rather than viewing humanitarianism as a separate form of intervention, the 2016 WHS proclaimed the need to bridge humanitarian action to development and to peacebuilding and the resolution of crisis (Ban, 2016).

Localization

The humanitarian principles of independence and neutrality were often translated into an aversion to work with institutions, including civil society actors, local NGOs and local authorities that were present in the landscape of intervention. Humanitarian actors would either have a blind eye for those institutions, assuming war had stripped society from functioning institutions, or they would be wary in the assumption that all institutions were caught up in the political economy of war.

After decades of critique on this mindset of humanitarianism, coming from within and outside the sector and much evidence about the crucial role played by local and national actors in the survival of and care for people affected by conflict or disaster (see Anderson and Woodrow, 2019), these assumptions have been eroding and humanitarian action has changed its narrative. This is in line with the resilience paradigm, as a consideration of crisis as the new normality brings along that these should as much as possible be dealt with in the country. National authorities are given more central importance in humanitarian programming and national and local state and non-state actors such as NGOs providing relief and capacity development to communities are often seen as crucial service providers. Humanitarian action is set to ‘localize’ and become as ‘local as possible, as international as necessary’ (see e.g. Schmalenbach et al., 2019; Patel and Van Brabant, 2017; Gingerich and Cohen,

2015). An elaborate agenda has evolved that should shift power, funding and capacities to national and local humanitarian players.

Localization comes with old and new problems

The profound shift in the narrative of humanitarian action is apparently hard to internalize for many international humanitarians. Reports addressing the extent to which organizations localize in practice commonly express disappointment (Van Brabant and Patel, 2018; Stephen and Martini, 2019). The superior way in which many international humanitarians related to local actors in the past (the so-called white saviour syndrome) has not changed overnight. International humanitarians have to redefine their roles and are less willing than proclaimed to give up their implementing capacities. Whereas they commit to localizing humanitarian action, they can be reluctant in handing over, often with the argument that their partners lack capacities to provide services according to standards. Another trend observed is that international actors may use language respecting national society in general, but may express suspicion once individual agencies claim a role (e.g. through applying for funding), because the agency is considered to be too much embedded in local realities and politics. Twijnstra found, for example, that a donor programme specifically meant to support national entrepreneurs in South Sudan, never got off the ground because none of the eligible companies passed the test of scrutiny and suspicion (Twijnstra and Hilhorst, 2017).

There are also new problems with the trend towards resilience and localization. In policies aiming to localize humanitarian action, there is little eye for a critical reading of what is happening in the settings of humanitarian crisis and to differentiate the local. The 'local' in localization is often translated as the government, even though in most humanitarian crisis settings governments have authoritarian tendencies, while the space for civil society and human rights is shrinking worldwide at an alarming pace. In addition, there is an ongoing debate about international NGO offices at country level taking up roles as local actors, arguably squeezing out more locally rooted organizations, even competing with them for funding and access to policymakers (see e.g. Mathews, 2021).

From humanitarian diplomacy to advocacy

The notion of humanitarian diplomacy is part of the classical humanitarian paradigm. It remains important, especially in areas of high-intensity conflict

where access to people in need is crucial. However, humanitarian diplomacy concerns advocacy by humanitarian actors to obtain access, and hence has a limited gaze. It is focused on negotiation of access, whereas humanitarian advocacy may also be directed elsewhere and with different objectives, for example in relation to the international community to secure funding. It also has no eye for other actors involved in advocacy. This makes the idea of humanitarian diplomacy too narrow to reflect the changing paradigms and realities towards resilience and localization as discussed in the previous section. For this reason, we focus on a notion of humanitarian advocacy, which comprises humanitarian diplomacy, yet is broader in scope and sets of actors involved.

As explained, we propose to define humanitarian diplomacy as the activities of affected communities and their advocates to articulate, advance, and protect their rights (i.e. entitlements to assistance and citizenship rights more broadly), needs, views and interests. This definition expands on classic humanitarian diplomacy in four ways. First, it broadens the scope of advocacy to comprise not only the needs of affected people but also their rights, views and interests. It is in line with the idea of recognizing people's agency and entitlements, and evolving ideas on accountability (Van Zyl and Claeyé, 2019). Second, by focusing on the activities of affected communities and their advocates, the definition opens the possibility to direct our gaze at advocacy activities of affected communities themselves (cf. Schramm and Sändig, 2018). Bottom-up advocacy or activism is rarely considered in humanitarian studies. Studies in accountability, for example, usually focus on invited spaces for accountability rather than claimed spaces (Hilhorst et al., 2021). Third, it enables researchers to direct their focus on other actors than those agencies that label themselves as humanitarian. People in need are being serviced by a large range of actors, including local and national service providers that may or may not identify with humanitarianism *per se*. Yet, they may also speak out and advocate about people's needs in very effective ways. When these advocacy efforts remain invisible, this forfeits the possibility for humanitarians to join efforts and work together with these actors in realizing more effective advocacy. A final important difference with more restricted views on humanitarian diplomacy is that our definition is open to the possibility that humanitarian agencies can themselves be a target of advocacy. In the context of their interventions, humanitarian agencies are usually powerful players, who may be thought of as duty-bearers (Gready and Ensor, 2005), as they often assume governance functions (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2012). People seeking to influence humanitarian programming – by means as varied as holding up their hands, to breaking into a warehouse, to rallying in the streets – can be seen as actors advocating with humanitarian agencies. A striking example is the case of the Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas (Displaced

Women's League). This Colombian organization started a campaign for food aid based on their own research and succeeded to convince the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme to provide food assistance. They later also sued the Mayor of Bogotá for having failed to implement a municipal plan to assist internally displaced persons (Sandvik and Lemaitre, 2013, p. S46).

Towards a research agenda on humanitarian advocacy

There has been research on possibilities and practices of advocacy that can speak to the above, concerning advocacy in areas of crisis or conflict and beyond, but this research has rarely been brought into conversation with debates on humanitarian action. Drawing on this research, this chapter aims to bring about a research agenda that can capture a large diversity of advocacy activities by affected communities, civil society actors, and (international) humanitarian agencies. We sketch this research agenda from five angles, providing illustrations and examples of potential questions.

Actors and their collaborations

Research about advocacy has been skewed towards work led by INGOs. There is little research on advocates in national and sub-national contexts, in particular outside of 'aid chains' involving (mostly Northern-based) donors, INGOs, and country-based civil society organizations (CSOs) in contractual relations. We therefore know little about the spectrum of actors that could be involved in humanitarian advocacy. Publications on national and sub-national-level advocacy in areas of crisis or conflict thus far still focus mainly on funded, formal and relatively professionalized CSOs (Katyaini et al., 2021; Syal et al., 2021; Van Wessel et al., 2021). However, these same publications do suggest important roles for informal forms of civil society, such as social movements and community-based organizations (CBOs), with which more formal and professionalized organizations work, as supporting allies and as sources for agendas and understandings of issues. It would be important to study these relations further, including their tensions and complementarities, and explore the more autonomous roles of social movements – taking these two questions as connected. Studying CBOs and social movements is not only completing the picture, it may also change the picture. Formal, professional civil society organizations often have limited accountability relations with the people they work with, and they cannot be taken as proxies for the people they work with. Such organizations may have various ways in which they can in some (specific

and limited) way represent groups (Katyaini et al., 2021). In these roles, they can be supportive and facilitate forms of inclusion in various ways, but often also seek to protect their own relatively privileged positions (Katyaini et al., 2021). A second reason for focusing on CBOs and social movements is their potential capacity to articulate emergent needs and issues, less tied than many formal, professionalized CSOs are to contractual relations with states and donors defining work focus for years ahead, and may therefore be more closely rooted in local and group-specific understandings and priorities (Van Wessel et al., 2021; Rajeshwari et al., forthcoming). It would be important, however, not to simply assume that CBOs and movements provide a voice for populations, as is often claimed, but also questioned (Betancur, 2021).

Looking beyond these actors, informal leadership, which may be individual or collective (Potluka et al., 2021) may also shape important advocacy roles for, for example, religious leaders or individual activists. Such roles may be rooted in various forms of legitimacy and recognition such as activism, knowledge, religious authority, sacrifice or age (Verkoren and van Leeuwen, 2014; Sengupta, 2012).

Complementary roles between these national and sub-national actors deserve further attention, as well as between them and international agencies (Van Wessel et al., 2020). Recent research of a Cordaid programme for strengthening social contracts in fragile settings brought out that domestic advocates saw important and diverse roles for international advocates, within their country settings and beyond. However, these roles would have to become much more facilitative, supporting country-based advocates in their national- and international-level advocacy in various ways (e.g. by coaching them in strategizing and using their connections to help gain access to decision-makers) (Van Wessel, 2021).

Newly emerging research questions are, for example: what types of actors have, or could be supported to take up, roles in humanitarian advocacy? What are their various capacities to address affected populations' rights, needs, views and interests? Based on what types of relations with these populations? Through what types of collaboration?

Political contexts

Advocacy literature commonly assumes stable advocacy targets to influence – primarily states, multilateral institutions and multinational corporations. The same literature also commonly assumes a liberal state, except for two small subfields of study of constraints on advocacy in authoritarian/hybrid

and fragile settings. When it comes to advocacy in humanitarian settings, such assumptions may not hold. Targets may or may not be stable and/or open to civil society advocacy, depending on context, with important consequences for engagement of advocacy targets. Recent research in India, where the national government is relatively stable and increasingly authoritarian, indicates that many CSOs doing advocacy on disaster governance invest much energy in building relations with government agencies on the basis of their performance and ‘play along’ with official policies and projects as a way to survive and pursue their agendas to the degree possible (Syal et al., 2021). In more fragile contexts, where authority and executive power are more dispersed, CSOs may spend more energy on building working relations with a wider variety of authorities, state and non-state (such as competing power holders and religious authorities) and be closely involved not just in advocacy but also the shaping and implementation of interventions together with state agencies and other non-state actors. Advocacy and service delivery can then closely be intertwined (Van Wessel et al., 2021).

In such political contexts, boundaries between state and society, and formal and informal structures shaping governance, may be more open and less relevant than in settings where a strong state is in control (Verkoren and van Leeuwen, 2014). How advocacy and governance relate can then become an important issue. The instability of the state in such contexts, in addition, looms large in such contexts, easily threatening whatever hard-won gains were made (Van Wessel et al., 2021). New research questions on these issues are, for example: what role can humanitarian advocacy play in various types of political context, given dimensions such as instability, lack of security, or constrained civic space? To what extent can international allies provide support given questions of civil society autonomy and risk, and what kind of support?

Spaces

Given the potentially informal and fluid nature of much civil society organizing in humanitarian settings, it is also important to consider the spaces in which advocacy takes shape, and is conducted. Granting importance to questions of accountability also suggests shifting the study of advocacy more to the stage of organizing and articulation of voices in the various spaces in which this may happen. This can be at tea stalls, mosques, community health centres, or Twitter, to name just some possibilities. But also the ways in which more formal and professionalized organizations relate to the emergence of voices is of critical importance. This may also help to address the problem that country capitals and international arenas invite attention to advocacy in formalized policymaking arenas, whereas rural spaces and the voices that can be heard or

potentially organized there may remain out of view. Research questions that emerge here are, for example: what spaces turn out particularly relevant or potentially for humanitarian advocacy and why? How can ways of engaging various spaces support engagement of the needs, rights, views and interests of diverse and especially potentially marginalized populations?

Strategies

Given the political context in which advocacy takes place, advocacy strategies will vary depending on the status of civic space as well as the ways different CSOs engage with this space. A recent small study of advocacy in fragile contexts brought out that the development of advocacy strategies took shape there through close readings of the varied and fluid contexts in which it was to happen, drawing closely on sophisticated capacities of local actors to seek out who can be influenced how and when, and by what means, making use of varied relations and ambiguity of rules and roles (Van Wessel et al., 2021). Strategizing was thus attuned to the fragility of the context, and rooted in advocates' interpretations of the possibilities and constraints they faced given the instability and insecurity of these contexts, while also identifying opportunities. Important here is that context specificity of selected strategies does not apply uniformly across actors in a given context. For example, in India, social movements still vigorously protest government actions and inactions, while CSOs collaborating with the government are often careful not to disturb their carefully nurtured relations with authorities. This may not only impact the extent they dare to be critical of these authorities but also, for example, their selection of partners. Such self-censorship can be strategic, as trusting relations with the state can open up spaces for CSOs to insert their agenda points, be it without rocking the boat too much (Syal et al., 2021).

Relatedly, service delivery roles within authoritarian settings can provide spaces for advocacy, as the shaping of such services can go beyond the implementation of pre-defined and imposed objectives. Research questions that emerge here are, for example: what forms of strategizing can be identified as important in humanitarian advocacy? How can nurturing of relations be done while safeguarding the objectives of protection of vulnerable populations? How do humanitarians strategize to address the fluidity and multiplicity of relations and authorities involved? Or are forms of strategizing more comparable to other types of settings?

Aims

In the study of advocacy, influencing the agendas and decisions of policymakers is often central. Advocacy largely seems to centre on drawing attention to issues, defining of issues in certain ways, and the selection of certain types of solutions. These are different stages where formal, professionalized CSOs seem to have the most important roles, and these are also the stages most reported on in literature. The stages before and after agenda-setting and policy development receive much less attention: articulation of views and interests to be advocated for, and implementation of the policies and services as decided on. For the study of humanitarian governance, all 'stages' of policymaking or service delivery may be relevant. Considering accountability in the context of shifting and unclear relations between affected populations and actors taking decisions, articulation of views and interests of affected populations requires prominent attention. There is a need to research to what extent and how aims of civil society advocacy are or can be rooted in interaction with constituencies, and what sources of legitimacy, and in whose eyes, CSOs build and draw on in this (Saward, 2010).

An additional domain of interest is the stage of implementation. As a stage of policymaking, implementation is widely problematized (O'Toole, 2000). Much policy does not reach the stage of implementation, and much implementation differs in important ways from 'what was originally decided'. Both divergences are fraught with politics and may be for the better or worse when it comes to the question of how they relate to peoples' views and interests. For humanitarian action, however, implementation is evaluated, perhaps, but often not assessed and accounted for in interaction with affected populations. The fact that the implementation stage is where advocacy impact on people finally becomes concrete is more reason to pay close attention to it. This can also move away from the technocratic understanding of implementation, and embrace a more political view, including not only accountability for past actions, but also, for example, the opportunities this stage offers for including affected populations' rights, views, needs and interests in the final shaping of a policy or service, for example by the final identification and selection of individuals, groups or localities.

Relatedly, temporal horizons of humanitarian advocacy come in, ranging from present-focused addressing of immediate needs, to advancing long-term objectives of transforming structural human rights conditions. As Vandevordt and Fleischmann (2021) show, defining focus can be determined by circumstances and involve important dilemmas, given that working with short- or

longer-term temporal horizons can have important implications for advocates' legitimacy, scope of action and transformative potential.

When it comes to aims, it is also important to acknowledge that not all civil society actors seek to influence or advance humanitarian principles. For a part, civil society, reflecting dividing lines in society, may be 'uncivil' (Belloni, 2009), seeking to undermine the rights of certain populations, delegitimize their views, interests, or recognition of their needs, or contribute to deterioration of security. Considering this, advocacy can be seen not just as articulation and channelling of societal inputs to work with in humanitarian governance, but as a (partial) reflection of diversity and conflict in humanitarian settings, and as offering a site where these are to be engaged.

Research questions that may emerge on these issues are, for example: what sections of affected populations manage to articulate agendas for humanitarian advocacy, and what groups less so? How do agendas then reflect the rights, needs, views and interests of certain sections rather than others, and why? In what stages of policymaking or service delivery can humanitarian advocacy play what kinds of roles? How are temporal horizons of advocacy defined, with what consequences for that role and potential contributions of humanitarian advocacy?

Conclusions

This chapter has aimed to revitalize a broad conception of humanitarian advocacy beyond classic humanitarian diplomacy, as the activities of affected communities and their advocates to articulate, advance, and protect their rights (i.e. entitlements to assistance and citizenship rights more broadly), needs, views and interests. This notion is in line with trends in humanitarian action around the roles and resilience of affected communities, the nexus between humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding, and localization. It is cognizant of current trends where humanitarian agencies are often the target of advocacy, as they are in their context often powerful actors and duty-bearers, as well as current practices evolving around the solidarity crisis in Europe in relation to migrants and refugees. Our notion enables the study of advocacy practices of different actors aiming their messages at different targets.

This chapter has proposed a research agenda that is open to discover the meaning of advocacy in a bottom-up manner by exploring actors and their collaborations, political contexts, spaces, strategies and aims. An open question is

how such an agenda can be realized in a world where funding for research is still predominantly flowing from governmental institutions, especially from countries in the North.¹

NOTE

1. This chapter was written with funding received from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 884139). A preliminary version of the chapter was presented at the *International Humanitarian Studies Conference* on 3 November in Paris and the authors are immensely grateful to the fantastic comments of Antonio de Lauri, pointing to the continuity of new forms of advocacy with historical advocacy campaigns. The authors also thank Gabriela Villacis for her valuable input.

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