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Intermediaries in humanitarian action: a questionable shortcut to the effective localisation of aid?

Over the last decade, international humanitarian agencies have endeavoured to develop effective ways to localise their practices of intervention in areas receiving forced migrants or stricken by conflict or disasters. ‘Localisation’ is an umbrella term referring to all approaches to working with local actors, and includes ‘locally-led’ projects which refers specifically to “work that originates with local actors or is designed to support locally emerging initiatives” (Wall 2016).

Local-international partnerships have received much rhetorical attention as a more acceptable face of the humanitarian programming designed in the global North. Nonetheless, there is evidence that northern funding and organisational structures still give preference to implementers from the global north (Ramalingman, Gray and Cerruti 2012). In this framework, the middle space, spanning from international donors to local implementers, is of crucial importance in shaping decision-making processes related to humanitarian funding, practices and policies. In this framework, I would like to advance my considerations on the international humanitarian system that presently places special emphasis on the role of intermediaries in crisis-stricken settings, or contexts that are proxies to crisis.

On November 14 2018 I participated in a roundtable organised by the Overseas Development Institute which aimed to evaluate the role of intermediaries in humanitarianism. In this context, several London-based humanitarian professionals expressed the need to define the role of the intermediary figure in humanitarian action, and to rely on the latter's support to access local and refugee communities in the targeted areas. By contrast, academic literature which seeks to map such a 'middle space' is scant (Kraft and Smith 2018). Based on these observations, what are humanitarian actors trying to bypass, remove, enhance or achieve by emphasising the importance of intermediaries in their sector? With the following considerations, I intend to shed light on how intermediaries may be problematically employed as a shortcut to localisation and as a logistic facilitation strategy to not further contextualise policies and practices which are often designed in the so-called global North.

The first observation I would like to make is related to the layered social identity of intermediaries. Indeed, it is a common belief that intermediaries are mostly local or regional residents with strong connections and networks in the areas targeted by humanitarian programmes. If the line of separation between the 'international' and the 'local' is unavoidably blurred, it is important to note that some segments of local middle classes – generally those employed in the humanitarian system to manage crisis – are as unfamiliar with other social strata of their own country as many international workers with whom they share common lifestyle standards. As a result, from a relational and emotional perspective, some local professionals may not necessarily be any closer to the people they address. At the same time, however, intermediaries are believed to be well placed to manage local politics, such as corruption, inefficiency or reluctance to comply with external norms and requests. Can such a social figure ever exist? In this respect, the research I conducted from 2011 to late 2013 in Lebanon (Carpi 2015) demonstrates a promiscuous intentionality of the international humanitarian apparatus: on the one hand, the desire to avoid local politics and its discontents, but, on the other, the need to rely on intermediary figures who are able to prepare beneficiary lists and can provide contextual knowledge to enable humanitarian actors to rapidly and safely access local and refugee groups. However, as my research has shown, by doing so international humanitarian agencies often end up recognising local authorities as key actors of the humanitarian machine. In my field experience, the moral impact of what I may call an 'unintended alliance' between humanitarian internationals and local gatekeepers was particularly relevant when local residents and refugees expressed their desire to get rid of intermediary figures operating between them, the humanitarian system and the central government. Intermediary roles were predominantly covered by local state officials and delegates (*makhahir* and *mandubin* respectively) and other local informal leaders (*zu'ama*). In sum, the necessary entrance of formal and informal local authorities into the international humanitarian labour chain produced a substantial impact on humanitarian workers who must deal with local politics and its contextual configuration.

The second issue that I would like to analyse is the excess of intermediaries in the contemporary humanitarian sphere. Looking at the intermediary role as a relational and performative process rather than a clear-cut sociological mission, it is possible to identify unorthodox configurations of “intermediariness”. Even though it is mainly conceived as local actors, –networks, individuals, diaspora groups or formal organisations that occupy the middle space between initial donors and final implementers, intermediaries can sometimes be epitomised by INGOs and UN agencies. For instance, the humanitarian corridors that currently take Syrian refugees from Lebanon to Italy and France across the Mediterranean are a suitable case in point. As a local aid worker recounted in an interview in Beirut in March 2017, in order to retrieve personal data and carry out an initial selection of the refugee groups who better suit the Italian and the French labour markets, the INGOs in charge of organising the humanitarian corridors rely, in turn, on other INGOs and UN agencies that can provide them with a contact database. This modality of selection is believed to avoid a costly and time-consuming door-to-door strategy. In this case, needs assessment is viewed as a bureaucratic hurdle rather than an effective way of identifying needs and protection and their changing nature. Likewise, another aid practitioner working for an INGO in a village of northern Lebanon affirmed that individual and family eligibility to cash transfers was determined through the UNHCR central database, rather than independent field visits and assessments (interview in Halba, February 2017). These two anecdotes show how intermediaries operating in the humanitarian middle space are at times excessive.

My third observation concerns bureaucracy. Enhancing and institutionalising the role of intermediaries may sort out the difficulty of pinning down sociological figures in changing contexts and of managing institutional trust *versus* informal society. By this token, we may think that the role of intermediaries should therefore be professionalised. However, the institutionalisation of the intermediary role might instead add complexity and slow down the already hyper-bureaucratized system of international humanitarianism and development. The same system has long been accused of being poorly responsive to context-sensitive needs (Belloni 2005) and de-humanising war and disaster victims (Pandolfi 2002). In this regard, Lebanon offers the meaningful example of the Municipal Support Assistant (MSA). This professional figure, appointed by local municipalities, has been created to work with local authorities and international humanitarian actors and acts as a local government administrative assistant. In the case of Lebanon, the MSA needs to be fluent in Arabic and English to be able to develop double communication strategies. As a municipality representative of Sahel az-Zahrani reported in a 2016 study conducted by UN-Habitat and the American University of Beirut, the MSA has presumably been created to enhance coordination between the local and the humanitarian systems of governance (Boustani, Carpi, Hayat and Moura 2016). However, considering the formal ways of working that the MSA needs to comply with, bureaucratic impediments are practically enhanced. In other words, if bureaucracy is enhanced to achieve greater coordination, I would be wary to believe that actual coordination can soon see the light.

The very aims of the ongoing efforts towards an “intermediary-sation” of humanitarian action need to be clearly motivated and contextualised. From a personal perspective, considering the provisional presence of many international humanitarians and researchers in the areas where crisis management is needed, we continue missing historical continuity. Short field visits are in fact unlikely to trace the local history of human relations, contextual power dynamics and assistance mechanisms. Should the international humanitarian system not find the radical determination to develop physical and moral proximity towards the populations it endeavours to serve, I hence envision intermediaries only as everyday researchers who conduct “reality

checks” whenever accurate humanitarian assessments of outreach, programming, policies and local specificities are needed.

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