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HUMANITARIANISM

Navigating between resilience and vulnerability[1]

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Humanitarianism and vulnerability

Vulnerability has always been a key notion for humanitarian action. One of the fundamental humanitarian principles concerns impartiality and dictates that aid must be based on needs alone. Vulnerability analysis is the way to establish needs. International humanitarian law also brings about entitlements to humanitarian services, in particular the refugee convention and the soft humanitarian law of the Internally Displaced Persons principles. This fundamental embrace of vulnerability has been eroded and obscured in the last few decades because of a change in approach towards resilience humanitarianism (Hilhorst 2018).

From classical to resilience humanitarianism

Humanitarian aid has long been dominated by a paradigm rooted in exceptionalism, grounded in the ethics of humanitarian principles, and centred on United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGO). In recent years this 'classical Dunantist paradigm' has been paralleled and partly overtaken by a radically different paradigm, which can be called the 'resilience paradigm'. Whereas the classical paradigm centres on principled aid, the resilience paradigm foregrounds building on local response capacities. Both paradigms have a strong logic that dictates a specific way of seeing the nature of crisis, the scope of the humanitarian response, the identity of humanitarian actors, and the nature of institutions and people in crisis-affected areas. They result in different bodies of practice that can be labelled 'classical humanitarianism' and 'resilience humanitarianism' (Hilhorst 2018).

The classical paradigm of Dunantist humanitarianism has dominated conversations among humanitarians for almost 150 years, despite contestation from concerned scholars and from within the domain (such as do no harm; listening projects; linking relief to rehabilitation and development; and the rights-based approaches that gained popularity in the 1990s but were largely silenced when the 'war on terror' began). For some years, however, a different discourse has gained momentum, which is a discourse based on resilience. It corresponds to real changes in aid that were enabled by technological innovations, such as the use of digital payment systems enabling the service of populations at a distance, but there has been an especially major change in the stories that international actors tell about the nature of crises, crisis-affected populations, and their societies, and ultimately about aid itself.

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. Disaster, rather than being a total and immobilising disruption, can become an event in which people seek continuity by using their resources to adapt. Resilience humanitarianism began in the realm of disaster relief, whereby the resilience of local people and communities and the importance of local response mechanisms became the core of the Hyogo Framework for Action in 2004. National players now take greater control of disaster response, a shift anchored in the recognition of the resilience of people and communities. International aid has retreated except in the case of mega-disasters.

Resilience humanitarianism has spilled over into other humanitarian concerns, including conflict and refugees. The refugee camp as an icon of aid is giving way to a notion that refugees are resilient in finding ways to survive.

Resilience, governance, and vulnerability

The shift towards resilience has major implications for humanitarian governance – relations between aid providers – that complicate the question of who decides about vulnerability and eligibility to aid. The classic tale of humanitarianism centred around international agencies that were assumed to be independent in their programming choices, even though the realities of aid provision involved many different types of actors. In recent years, humanitarians not only acknowledge but also espouse a shift towards much more variegated governance arrangements. They refer now to the humanitarian ecosystem, rather than the humanitarian system. National and local authorities, affected communities, and civil society are explicitly part of this ecosystem, and so are hitherto unusual humanitarian players such as the World Bank. Rather than viewing humanitarianism as a separate form of intervention, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit proclaimed the need to bridge humanitarian action to development and peacebuilding (Ban 2016). The question of how vulnerability and eligibility are determined therefore increasingly becomes a question of whose discourse dominates, who manages the information and who makes decisions.

The shift to resilience humanitarianism also has direct implications for vulnerability and eligibility – the relation between the do-gooders and their 'beneficiaries'. A key tenet of the new way of thinking of resilience is that crisis response is much more effective and cost-efficient when it takes into account people's capacity to respond, adapt and bounce back, coined 'the resilience dividend' by the president of the Rockefeller Foundation (Rodin and Maxwell 2014). Considerable attention is given to the resilience of refugees, with literature and policy briefs converging in their portrayal of refugees as economic agents (Betts et al. 2014; Betts and Collier 2017). This leads to a form of 'resilience humanitarianism' that 'responsibilises' refugees to govern and enable their own survival (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015). Today's 'policy speak' builds on continuity between crisis and normality, and UN reports now often refer to 'crisis as the new normality'. Furthermore, resilience humanitarianism can be recognised in recent international refugee policies, in particular the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (United Nations 2016) and the Global Compact on Refugees (United Nations 2018). Whereas the language of resilience takes over humanitarian action, this does not mean that the corollary term of vulnerability has been abandoned. There is always a residual group of people who cannot be resilient and need to be targeted for direct assistance. Vulnerability, then, becomes a status of eligibility that is increasingly scarce. In an era of resilience humanitarianism, being a refugee is no ticket for aid eligibility anymore, and additional vulnerabilities need to be established before aid can be provided. Rather than considering categories of people (such as refugees) as vulnerable or entitled to services, individual properties must be examined before assistance is given (e.g. to *very* vulnerable refugees).

The next two sections will elaborate on these two changes: changes in governance relations that lead to complexities in defining vulnerability, and changes in aid relations that lead to restricting access to the 'vulnerability status'.

Aid governance in the disaster–conflict nexus

The increasing variation in humanitarian governance makes it difficult to identify common global discourses and practices around vulnerability. It is therefore fruitful to theorise and analyse such discourses and practices at an intermediate, meso-level for contexts that bear resemblance to each other in key aspects. The power of intermediate analysis of humanitarian praxis will be exemplified for cases where disasters meet conflict. Humanitarian action in these situations needs to improvise and navigate the conditions of operations when disaster occurs. Although it could be argued that every single case is unique, it is possible to distinguish different scenarios where certain cases are grouped together, namely high-intensity, low-intensity, and post-conflict scenarios. The following sections introduce the disaster–conflict nexus, elaborate on the idea of scenarios, and then identify for each of the scenarios how humanitarian actors deal with coordination, local actors, and vulnerability and resilience.

The disaster–conflict nexus

Every year, there are typically around 400 disasters triggered by natural hazards, mostly in lower and middle-income countries. A large number of these strike in countries affected by conflict (Peters and Budimir 2016). However, in the academic and policy fields looking at disaster, humanitarian aid, or conflict, little attention has been paid to the *nexus between disaster and conflict*. There is evidence that conflict areas are disproportionally struck by disaster. Spiegel et al. (2007) revealed that 90 per cent of conflict areas experienced one or more disaster triggered by natural hazards, a finding that corresponds with analyses of 140 events from 1998 to 2002 (Buchanan-Smith and Christoplos 2004). From 2004 to 2014, 58 per cent of disaster-related casualties were in the 30 most fragile states (Peters and Budimir 2016). There is also evidence that the impact of disasters is intensified in conflict-affected situations. Most deaths caused by disasters occur in conflict-affected and fragile states (Peters 2017), and the impact of a disaster on people's livelihoods is greater in conflict-affected and fragile contexts (Hilhorst 2013; Wisner 2012).

Conflicts are obviously caused by social processes, and this is also true for disasters. Research on disaster has overwhelmingly confirmed that the disaster outcomes of natural hazards result from processes in the socio-political context (Blaikie et al. 1994). Social processes generate unequal exposure to risk by making some people more vulnerable to disaster than others, and these inequalities are largely a function of the power relations operative in every society (Hilhorst and Bankoff 2004). Conflict can compound vulnerability and weaken the response capacities of people and communities (Wisner 2012). It also complicates responses to disasters, such as international or national relief programmes, and makes it extremely complicated to pursue disaster risk reduction activities (Mena and Hilhorst 2020).

Whereas conflict affects disasters, disasters are also seen to increase conflict risks or alter the dynamics of conflict. In a 185-country study spanning almost three decades, Brancati (2007) showed that earthquakes increased the likelihood of conflict, especially in low-income countries with a history of conflicts (see also Nel and Righarts 2008). Disasters tend to aggravate the military, socio-political and socio-economic effects of conflict (Billon and Waizenegger 2007). They can affect the military balance between parties, and relief operations can prompt additional military engagement from within or outside the country (Frerks 2008). Many conflicts have evolved or deepened because disasters evoked social protest or led to social-political change (Pelling and Dill 2010; Drury and Olson 1998).

Conversely, there is also evidence that disasters can have positive effects on conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding, or related processes. The differentiated effects of the Asian tsunami of 2004 have generated a great deal of scholarship on this issue (De Alwis and Hedman 2009;Gamburd 2010; Billon and Waizenegger 2007; Waizenegger and Hyndman 2010; Gaillard, Clavé, and Kelman 2008). While conflict in Sri Lanka intensified following the event, the tsunami accelerated the peace process in Aceh. A body of literature has developed around the idea of disaster diplomacy, exploring how disaster-related activities

can induce cooperation between enemy parties at the national or international level (Renner and Chafe 2007; Kelman 2011).

Two major threads running through the disaster and conflict literature point to the importance of context and response. Firstly, the effects of disasters are related to previous conflict histories, especially the resilience of a state's institutions to crisis (Omelicheva 2011). Secondly, how disasters are handled mediates their effects on conflict. The impacts disasters have on conflict and stability depend on the way a government responds (Olson and Gawronski 2003; Ahrens and Rudolph 2006), to which we may add that this also depends on the responses of other actors, including the humanitarian sector. This is especially the case when we consider how conflict unfolds at different scales, showing different but inter-related dynamics. Community-level conflicts are influenced by conflict at other levels but have their own dynamics. A seven-country survey among stakeholders of the Partners for Resilience programme found that competition over natural resources and social inequality intentions are often among the factors creating disaster risks and that it is likely that these factors are further affected by disaster response, putting an additional burden on response programmes to do no harm (Hilhorst et al. 2020b).

Dealing with context: different conflict scenarios

From 2016 to 2020, the author coordinated a research team of the When Disaster Meets Conflict research programme.[2] The existing literature on disaster governance offered limited insights into the connections between disaster and conflict: studies consisted either of large-N statistical studies that treated conflict as a single category, or single case studies that treated conflict as wholly context-specific. In other words, it tended either to lump all conflicts together – whether looming conflict, full-blown war, or places where peace agreements had been signed – or it was so specific as to make it difficult to generalise the findings and be relevant to wider audiences (van Voorst and Hilhorst 2017). To deal with this conundrum, the programme worked with case-based scenarios.

The contextual realities of conflict are very diverse (Demmers 2012). The programme thus had to refine what the conflict cases represented, or as Ragin and Becker (1992) asked: what would our cases be cases of? For this, the researchers chose to embed their cases in broader 'scenarios'. In science, scenarios are usually associated with the construction of possible future developments in a known situation (Hajer and Pelzer 2018). However, scenarios are also used in training and education. For example, scenarios feature in disaster or emergency management drills in which people simulate the circumstances of an emergency so that they have an opportunity to practise their responses, ranging from fire alarm-drills in schools to multi-day exercises with detailed simulations of terrorist attacks. In these drills, participants are presented with a type of emergency and are continuously fed new pieces of information derived from a complex scenario that the organisers have assembled from real cases.

Case-based scenarios are thus theoretically constructed yet have the advantage that they maintain a realistic level of complexity and context-specificity. In doing so, they can enable communities of policy and practice to reflect on their assumptions, decisions, and impact in these types of settings. The programme constructed three conflict scenarios – high-intensity, low-intensity, and post-conflict – in a similar vein. The scenarios are researcher constructs, combining empirical properties with analytical lenses, and as such 'concerned as much with creating usable "mental models" as it is with reflecting reality' (Wood and Flinders 2014: 153). The aim is analytical and empirical generalisation concerning core disaster processes in a specific type of conflict and disaster governance.

Our three scenarios built on a small number of cases enabled an analysis of disaster governance and could connect similar cases for the sake of policy and practice. Nine country cases, three for each scenario, were selected. Each scenario involved four months of qualitative fieldwork in three case countries. The countries were South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Yemen for the high-intensity conflict scenario (Mena 2020); Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe for low-intensity conflict (Desportes 2020); and Nepal, Sierra Leone, and Haiti for post-conflict (Melis 2020). As the work of analysing disaster response in conflict cases progressed, the programme used the findings for diverse research uptake activities that aimed to make communities of policy and practice aware of key aspects of different conflict scenarios, associated dilemmas and decisions, and their consequences. Through these research uptake activities, feedback loops were created, and insights from practice were iteratively integrated in the scenarios. Adopting this approach helped strike a balance between case-specific contextualisation and generalisation and facilitated the uptake of findings among communities of policy and practice. The latter could use the research to fine-tune disaster response in specific types of conflict.

	Violence	*Authorities*	*Aid dynamics and major challenges for aid actors*	*Local institutions*
High-intensity conflict scenario	Violence widespread, dynamic, but uneven in space and time Casualties: 1000+ per year Primary weapons: physical violence High involvement of government in conflict	National government has reduced or no effective control over (large parts of) the country Complex governance arrangements and de-facto authorities	International actors restricted by security situation Hard to get access to populations: solutions sought in remote control aid No guarantee to monitoring and accountability	Economic crisis or disruption Increased poverty and vulnerability of local populations due to long-term state neglect and violence

Low-intensity conflict scenario	Violence less intense, more sporadic or in stalemate; violence returns over extended periods of time, cycles of repression Fewer casualties Primary weapons: policies and discourses politics of inclusion and exclusion	Government functional in large parts of country Government may be involved (civil war) or outsider of conflict Voids in governmental power and space for parallel governance Competing political structures, factions and civil society groups Government responds to conflict with 'firm grip'	International actors are restricted by authoritative government Humanitarian principles hard to maintain vis-à-vis strong state Relief operations take place on the ground State structures are primary interlocutors	Structural inequalities, marginalisation and discrimination have contributed to violence
Post-conflict scenario	Political settlement has been formally or informally reached Lingering conflict Risk of renewed conflict	National government pushes 'agenda of change' Aid to 'build back better'	Support often explicitly called upon by state High density of aid actors: risk of overwhelming with aid and undermining state agenda Non-state actors balance state's agenda and capacities with formal role of state in response	Socio-economic recovery may be uneven; humanitarian needs continue long after conflict Weak institutions, poverty and large availability of weapons may lead to high crime levels

Source: Hilhorst et al. 2019

Differentiating humanitarian discourse

Given the variety in conflict, it is not surprising that humanitarian discourses and approaches likewise vary in these different scenarios. Moreover, dealing with disaster in a conflict situation is essentially a matter of improvising, as there are no international policies available. Response models to disaster typically assume that there is a functioning government to deal with disaster response, and international policy guidelines generally do not provide guidelines on how to deal with

the conflict–disaster nexus. International Humanitarian Law focuses exclusively on conflict, whereas the standing guidelines on disasters, the Hyogo Framework for Action (UN/ISDR 2007), and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (United Nations 2015) do not refer to conflict. Disaster response policies are thus of little help to deal with disaster situations where the government is incapable or unwilling to act, and where the risk of aggravating conflict is high. There are marked differences between the approaches in the different scenarios. These differences could partly be explained by the diversity in conditions on the ground but also have to do with how discourses shape the ways in which humanitarians act.

Decision-making and coordination

With regard to decision-making and coordination, it might be expected that this is informed by assessments of vulnerability and resilience, but the reality is much more complex. Deciding whether to respond, where, with whom, and for whom is socially negotiated between multiple aid and society actors at different levels (national, institutional, and local), and 'real' disaster governance evolves from these processes. In high–intensity conflict (HIC) settings, the state is usually contested, and stakeholders feel legitimised to circumvent it. This does not mean that agencies follow their needs assessments. Aid action tends to be locked into path-dependent programming. Agencies tend to stay and work in the same areas and sectors over time, rather than moving to locations where aid is needed most. There are many factors that play into this, including operational challenges, inflexibility of humanitarian financing, the influence of local actors, and the roles of private companies in aid delivery (Mena 2020). Low-intensity conflict (LIC) settings often have a strong state with authoritarian tendencies where the state effectively determines what happens, often to the detriment of minorities or the regions that are home to political opposition. Governance structures are characterised by significant levels of state control and apparent collaboration between multiple aid and state actors. Tensions abound under the surface, however, with aid actors navigating bureaucracy and aiming to service people in need while avoiding confrontation with the state (Desportes 2020). In post-conflict (PC) settings, disaster response gets intertwined with the objectives and programmes of state-building. Aid actors tend to align with objectives of state-building and seek to validate the central role of the state. At the same time, they bypass state aid actors at different levels because they perceive the state to have limited capacities for coordination and implementation. Tensions often abound between disaster response delivered by humanitarians and ongoing development programming (Melis 2020).

Implementing arrangements

Decisions on whom to target for assistance are layered. They are to some extent taken at central levels, yet the nitty-gritty of who gets assistance is also largely

decided by the implementing (national) agencies and/or local authorities. In the HIC scenario, fractured national governance systems result in a scattering of largely autonomous regional and local level systems of governance. Aid actors may not always operate through these systems, finding it challenging to fully understand and navigate evolving 'real' governance arrangements. This is further impeded when international political factors, including anti-terrorist legislation, prevent aid actors from working with armed opposition groups. In the HIC scenario, local actors often implement a large part of the response but are not part of central decision-making. They provide and deliver the vast majority of humanitarian and disaster aid, including disaster risk reduction (DRR), but have little or no say over funding and coordination, resulting in contradictory approaches to targeting assisted populations. In the authoritarian LIC scenario, collaboration with local actors is often centrally controlled through legal and bureaucratic regulations. LIC dynamics often mean that only civil society actors that align with the state are acceptable, while the space for others, especially those working with or advocating support for ethnic or religious minority groups, is restricted. Local actors face great difficulties working in a restricted civil space, yet this is often framed by international actors as 'local actors lacking capacity'. In the PC scenario, tensions abound between different levels and domains of the state, each seeking to expand its mandate and financial power. The central state is often far removed from the affected populations and local authorities. Aid actors may find themselves subject to the push and pull of intra-state competition.

Hence, in all three scenarios, in different ways, major cleavages within aid-state and central-local aid relations impede bottom-up informed choices and decisions regarding vulnerability, resilience, and targeting. Trust is a major issue. Humanitarian action in HIC scenarios is often cloaked in the language of 'remote management'. This means that local actors face the most serious security risks (the ethics of 'outsourcing' security risks is a major issue), while central actors remain insecure about their motivations and allegiances and hence seek to remotely control all their actions. In the LIC scenario, local actors are often represented as biased and partisan, even when raising legitimate concerns about the rights and needs of communities. In the PC scenario, national and local NGOs are considered implementing partners but are not always accepted in state-aid coordination mechanisms. Frames abound among centrally positioned humanitarians about the weak capacities or corruption of both local NGOs and state institutions, while ignoring comparable problems with their own integrity and relying on a limited definition of 'capacity'.

Politicisation and instrumentalisation

Disaster response inevitably becomes part of the politics of conflict. Actors use the disaster in their struggle for control and legitimacy. The state may instrumentalise or even 'weaponise' the disaster response to achieve political goals.

It can prevent aid from reaching certain areas to weaken an area held by armed opposition groups (as seen in HIC settings), or further marginalise a minority group (as seen in LIC settings). In the PC scenario, disaster response and state-building intertwine. Disaster response can play into – helpfully or not – legislative processes (for instance, accelerating the new constitution in Nepal) or can be exploited for electoral gain, as was seen in Haiti and Sierra Leone. On the other hand, disaster response can also de-escalate conflict dynamics, such as through DRR programmes in Afghanistan, or be framed as a neutral and technocratic space enabling collaboration, such as in the LIC contexts of Ethiopia and Myanmar. In the LIC scenario, non-state actors find it difficult to openly challenge state-led response systems. Most non-state actors opt for a non-confrontational, self-censoring approach – navigating around challenges rather than tackling them head-on and refraining from speaking out. In doing so, aid actors run the risk of reinforcing power imbalances as well as contributing to shrinking humanitarian and civil society space and effectively ignoring the needs of communities unfavoured by the state (Desportes and Hilhorst 2020).

Resilience and vulnerability

The language of resilience and vulnerability is likewise politicised and instrumentalised. In HIC scenarios a language of resilience is often used, when in fact it is the inability of aid agencies to reach people in need that matters. Labelling areas out of reach as resilient is comforting for aid actors (Walkup 1997, Jaspars, this volume) and convenient for policymakers. In LIC scenarios, definitions of resilience and vulnerability are to some extent subject to the politics of national authorities. Authoritarian governments tend to downplay vulnerabilities in order to maintain their appearance of control. Aid agencies need to self-censor their reports, for example, avoiding the word 'cholera' where this is deemed unacceptable, or becoming dependent on the information made available by the government on harvests and nutrition (Desportes et al. 2019). In PC scenarios, it was often found that central aid actors frame populations as resilient while maintaining a strong discourse about institutional vulnerability vis-à-vis state and non-state actors.

The importance of framing: refugees in and around Europe

Two conclusions can be derived from the scenarios of disaster and conflict. First, general trends in resilience and vulnerability are translated very differently in scenarios with differing politics and governance. Determining the eligibility for humanitarian assistance is not just in the hands of humanitarians, but highly depends on other actors and factors. Second, the way in which resilience and vulnerability is determined is only partly related to actual conditions of need. They are also derived from images or frames that decisive actors have about situations and people. This can be clearly illustrated with yet another scenario, concerning the situation of migrants that came in large numbers to Europe in 2015 (Hilhorst

et al. 2020a, Jaspars and Hilhorst 2021). The discursive reading of the situation in this case is highly contradictory, starting with the terms used for the crisis and people involved. Politicians tend to talk about the 'European migration crisis', disregarding the fact that most of the migrants came from war-affected countries and should be labelled as refugees. Humanitarians therefore tended to talk about a 'refugee crisis'. Volunteers and activists, on the other hand, pointed out that the crisis might be more aptly labelled as a 'solidarity crisis'. These frames are void of references to the actual vulnerability of the people involved. Many of the people trying to come to Europe have mixed motivations, from running away from war to finding better life chances elsewhere. By the time they arrive at European borders, however, their destitution and trauma (whether rooted in their country of origin or their journey – e.g. encountering violence, sexual exploitation and death in crossing the Mediterranean) has usually brought about a high state of vulnerability, which seems to be of no consequence for their entitlement to assistance or refuge. The politicisation of resilience and vulnerability, in this scenario, centres on ideas of deserving and undeserving migrants, where migrants as well as the people daring to come to their assistance are subject to criminalisation (Pusterla 2021).

Everyday politics of vulnerability

Whereas shifts in humanitarian governance and discourse have profound implications for eligibility of aid, it remains important to scrutinise how humanitarian agencies deal with vulnerability in practice. A lot of attention has focused on the shift towards resilience; however, the flipside of resilience continues to be vulnerability. It is vulnerability that dictates where assistance gets allocated. Vulnerability is increasingly invisible in resilience humanitarianism and there is little attention to the technologies by which vulnerability is determined. Major questions about this can be derived from Science and Technology Studies. They concern historical and contemporary production, embedded forms of knowledge, and the organisation of humanitarian technologies and their impact on vulnerable people. The last section of the chapter will discuss three issues of everyday politics that are pertinent to the identification of vulnerability and will need further research in the years to come (Sandvik et al. 2014).

Manipulating indicators of vulnerability

People's eligibility for assistance depends on their vulnerability, but what happens when too many people are vulnerable? This conundrum is all too familiar to humanitarians, who often find themselves in situations where vulnerability outweighs their ability to respond. Susanne Jaspars (this volume) provides evidence on how humanitarian agencies in Sudan maintain a story of resilience, even though it is unfounded, to fabricate a story line of diminished vulnerability that can legitimise the reduction of aid rations. A striking example of manipulating

indicators of vulnerability was related by an aid worker in Lesbos, who told the author that:

> After the Turkey deal, UNHCR had to establish the vulnerability of people to decide who could be transferred to the mainland of Greece and in turn assign a procedure. When they found out that almost all residents of Moria would fit the criteria, a new category was invented of the *very vulnerable.* Only these very vulnerable, with much stricter criteria, became eligible for transfer to the mainland.[3]

The author was not able to confirm this with UNHCR, but the concept of *very vulnerable* is often used in humanitarian reports. Humanitarian advocacy, as found in countless reports, calls upon donors to provide more funding in view of the widespread vulnerability of their populations of concern. A recent report by the Danish Refugee Council, for example, provides ample evidence on how COVID-19 has increased the vulnerability of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. While advocating support for vulnerable people, they make nonetheless a distinction between vulnerable and very vulnerable people. It is not clear what the difference is between these two categories, and hence it remains unclear how agencies manage eligibility and decide on whom to assist, and what this means for people who are not being assisted because they are merely vulnerable instead of *very* vulnerable (DRC 2021).

Categorisation

A second issue concerns the everyday politics of categorisation. Despite the idea of humanitarian assistance to focus on vulnerabilities at an individual level, questions of scale and timeliness drive humanitarian action to work with preconceived categories in practice. However, these categories may incorporate implicit bias. One example is the conception of disabled people as vulnerable. A refugee I met in Turkey in 2016, was moving around with difficulty in a wheelchair, paralysed from the waist down. He had found it relatively easy to get access to a monthly relief payment. It was not enough to sustain his family but at least enabled him to rent a room where the family could stay. On the other hand, people with less visible problems, such as disease or mental health issues, faced much more difficulty in obtaining such access.

Ascribing categorical vulnerability is nowhere more apparent than in the domain of gender (see also Bradshaw, this volume). Charli Carpenter (2005) coined the one-word notion of 'womenandchildren', to express how women are automatically boxed into vulnerability categories together with children. In the Syria crisis, many relief programmes were only eligible for women. Men were expected to be able-bodied and self-reliant. However, without a work permit and without protection against exploitation, men could find themselves destitute.

This categorisation of vulnerability was related to responsibilities of care that many women have and was reinforced by imagery depicting women as innocent and deserving of our compassion. Men, on the other hand, represented danger. They were seen as a danger to their partners, whom they beat, oppress or rape, and as a danger to society, as they were associated with violence or even terrorism. However, the vast majority of (young) men who run away from violence are vulnerable victims. Men can be forcibly recruited, tortured, molested, shot, or castrated, but their involvement in psycho-social support projects is rare. When these projects reach out to men, it is usually to engage them for the cause of women and make them advocates to stop violence against women. While the number of women abused by men is staggering in many conflict-affected societies, this should not lead to lumping all men together and excluding them from the humanitarian gaze.

Using algorithms to identify the vulnerable

Another area of technology begging more in-depth research is the use of algorithms in humanitarian action. Deciding whom to assist with cash relief increasingly relies on algorithms and, as Paul Currion (2016) cautioned, 'these algorithms are not just powerful – they're also opaque'. The use of cash relief has soared in humanitarian action; it is seen as more dignified and vastly more effective than traditional forms of food distribution, and it does not centre on camps where people are concentrated to enable their survival. Whereas a lot has been written about its advantages (Harvey 2007, Heaslip et al. 2016), the nitty-gritty of how families are selected for relief can be opaque, and stories abound of people that are perplexed that their neighbours received cash relief and they didn't, even though they live in similar circumstances.

The same issues apply to the new approach of anticipatory humanitarian action. This means that funds usually reserved for response can be released before a disaster happens when an impact-based forecast – i.e., the expected humanitarian impact as a result of the forecasted weather – reaches a predefined danger level. Anticipatory action is potentially pathbreaking and is well-suited to resilience humanitarianism. A review states: 'There is a growing consensus that anticipatory humanitarian action, where it is possible, can be faster and cheaper. And because it empowers people to protect themselves on their own terms, it is more dignified' (Moser 2021). The danger of technology-driven assistance and possible accountability deficits beg scrutiny in the years to come (Bierens et al. 2020). As Currion (2016) noted, it is the responsibility of humanitarians 'to make sure that the algorithms reflect their values, rather than leaving key moments of micro-decisions on the criteria of inclusion to app developers'.

Another concern about the automation of selecting the most vulnerable for assistance is about privacy and the use of personal data. In order to avoid cheating with cash relief, humanitarian agencies increasingly use biodata, for example,

through an eye scan. This requires the highest standards of data protection, but a recent scandal showed this may not be the case. Investigations of Human Rights Watch revealed that UNHCR has shared biodata of 850,000 Rohingya refugees with the Government of Myanmar, the regime responsible for their expulsion from the country. The consequences of this are yet to unfold (HRW 2021).

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed issues pertaining to the use of the concept of vulnerability in humanitarian action. We live in an era of resilience humanitarianism, and at first sight it seems that vulnerability has been relegated to the back burner. In an increasingly scattered and changing humanitarian landscape, with different constellations of governance, multiple sets of ethics, and extensive accountability relations, it is important to analyse how humanitarian actors deal with vulnerability.

Firstly, it has been elaborated how shifts in humanitarian governance complicate the question of who decides about vulnerability and eligibility to assistance. Using case-based scenarios (such as high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict, post-conflict, or European migration) may underpin in-depth insight into how humanitarian actors deal with resilience and vulnerability under specific conditions. Secondly, it has called attention to the importance of the everyday politics of humanitarian technology. In the nitty-gritty of how vulnerability conceptions are applied in practice, it is found how humanitarian action can affect people's chances to survive and co-shape the relations between them. Humanitarians become increasingly strict in recognising vulnerability with reference to resilience. In doing so, they risk abandoning large numbers of people whose vulnerability is the only entitlement they have for minimal survival.

Notes

2 https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/when-disaster-meets-conflict
3 Interview aid worker, July 2019.

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